

## ***Intelligence in Public Media***

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### ***Bridge of Spies***

Directed by Steven Spielberg, screenplay by Matt Charman, Ethan Coen, and Joel Coen, 2015, 141 min.

### ***Reviewed by James Burrige and John Kavanagh***

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In *Bridge of Spies*, Steven Spielberg and the screenwriters have brought us a stylish and suspenseful film, the merits of which have been recognized by an Oscar nomination for best picture and for three other categories. One might further praise the film for sustaining suspense about outcomes already known, but in this case the events were so long ago (1958–1962) that few viewers probably did know, walking into the theater, the story they were about to hear.

The film shows us how a KGB sleeper agent in New York City and a CIA U-2 pilot ended up being swapped for each other in February 1962 on a bridge between East and West Berlin. The film begins with the arrest of the Soviet, KGB Colonel Rudolf Abel. The depictions here of operational activities are both generically truthful and detailed; particularly noteworthy is Abel's tradecraft while under FBI surveillance. The stunningly filmed sequence showing his movement through Grand Central Station at rush hour illustrates the challenges of surveillance team management and maintaining line of sight contact with a target.

James Donovan, an insurance litigation specialist and partner in a prominent Manhattan law firm, is asked by the New York Bar Association to defend Abel, and he reluctantly accedes. Interestingly, the selection of Donovan—as opposed to an experienced criminal lawyer—is never explained, either in the film or in his memoir.

At this point—August 1957—the film introduces Francis Gary Powers as an applicant for the CIA U-2 program. Once Powers is introduced, the film toggles back and forth between Powers and Abel. In the face of social and professional hostility, Donovan mounts a vigorous defense of Abel, mostly on procedural grounds. Abel is convicted and sentenced to 30 years, but Donovan appeals all the way to the Supreme Court, which narrowly affirms the conviction by a 5-4 vote in March 1960.

Powers was shot down on 1 May 1960, convicted of espionage, and sentenced to 10 years on 20 August 1960. In the next scene, Donovan is discussing a possible swap with DCI Allen Dulles, prompted by a letter Donovan received suggesting Soviet interest in such a transaction. Dulles asks Donovan to go to East Berlin as a private citizen and negotiate the trade. The negotiations are complicated by conflicting East German and Soviet equities and the status of an American graduate student held by the East Germans on espionage charges, but in the end all three are released.

In this brief telling, the film is a straightforward Cold War spy story, lacking the moral ambiguity or political implications so prevalent in the modern spy genre. But there is symmetry in the portrayals of Powers and Abel: they are both essentially pawns who did what their governments asked and ended up in prison. Abel, played by Mark Rylance, is a charming and courtly Old World gentleman—by far the most sympathetic character in the film. He is completely apolitical, and there is no subtext to describe the Stalinist regime he served for more than 30 years before his conviction. (Rylance won the 2016 Academy Award for best supporting actor for his portrayal of Abel.) Powers is also a sympathetic character, although he comes across as somewhat whiny.

Powers was convicted in a three day show trial. The film also portrays Abel's legal proceedings as a show trial, presided over by a biased judge. In a completely improper pretrial conversation, he urges Donovan to simply go through the motions and get it over with: "C'mon, counselor, let's not play games on this." This scene is completely fabricated. Another fabrication involves the judge, Homer Byers, who is portrayed in the film as completely biased against Abel, interested only in going through the motions to secure a guilty verdict and death sentence, whereas Donovan's memoir provides the opposite assessment of Byers as "highly regarded as an independent

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thinker.”<sup>a</sup> It is unfortunate that Spielberg used the judge’s true name, effectively slandering the man without cause.

Both men are also scorned by their own governments after their release. Abel tells Donovan just before the swap that if the Soviets simply shove him into the car without embracing him, it will be a signal that he will be punished. He is not embraced. Powers is snubbed by the senior CIA officer present and by unidentified US military officers on the plane from Berlin to Frankfurt. There is no basis in fact for either of these scenes.

The film also greatly exaggerates the hostility towards Donovan and his role as Abel’s attorney. The screenwriters included a drive-by shooting of Donovan’s home that nearly kills one of his children. They also depict Donovan’s senior partner as urging him to forgo an appeal: “The man is a spy. The verdict is correct, and there is no reason to appeal it.”

When Donovan persists, the partner punishes him by taking him off an important case. None of this happened—not the shooting, not the shouting crowds outside the courthouse, and not the retaliation by his firm. In fact, the firm supported Donovan through the Supreme Court appeal.

The film’s portrayal of Donovan as a lone wolf in Germany is also patently false. Donovan received considerable support from CIA Berlin chief of base. At one point Donovan met with State Department Deputy Chief of Mission E. Allan Lightner and Special Presidential Representative Lucius Clay.

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a. James B. Donovan, *Strangers on a Bridge* (Scribner, 1964; reissued August 2015), 25-26.

So we have here two superpowers that put their pawns in play, let them rot in prison, and leave it to a heroic private citizen to bring them home. Both states have corrupt judiciaries as well. And, for good measure, neither the general public nor the legal profession in the United States understands or supports the Constitutional right to counsel and a fair trial. We have definitely crossed into the land of moral equivalency. We have arrived in the territory of le Carré, in which Smiley asks Karla in *Tinker, Taylor, Soldier, Spy*, “Don’t you think it’s time to recognize there is as little worth on your side as there is on mine?”<sup>b</sup> One cannot make a credible case that a director so scrupulous about historical accuracy in his earlier films (*Saving Private Ryan*, *Flags of Our Fathers*, and *Lincoln*) would rewrite history to this extent simply for dramatic effect.

The question of whether such misrepresentations matter is too complicated to address here, but we commend to the reader John McLaughlin’s compelling argument in *Studies* that public perceptions about intelligence do matter.<sup>c</sup> For the opposite view, see *New York Times* film critic A.O. Scott’s view that only “certified intellectuals” are dumb enough not to understand that every movie (excluding documentaries) is a work of fiction.<sup>d</sup>

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b. John le Carré, *Tinker, Taylor, Soldier, Spy* (Knopf, 1974), 204.

c. John McLaughlin, “Introduction,” *Studies in Intelligence* Vol. 53, no. 2 (Summer Supplement 2009—Intelligence in Contemporary Media: Views of Intelligence Officers), 3.

d. *New York Times*, 8 January 2016, C14.

