Culture



Starring in "The Post," pictured from left to right are Tom Hanks (Ben Bradlee), David Cross (Howard Simons), John Rue (Gene Patterson), Bob Odenkirk (Ben Bagdikian), Jessie Mueller (Judith Martin), and Philip Casnoff (Chalmers Roberts). (© Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation and Storyteller Distribution Co., LLC/Niko Taverise)



by Rose Pacatte

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December 2017 is turning out to be a month that honors the U.S. Constitution's First Amendment, which guarantees freedom of the press. First, HBO released its homage documentary to legendary Washington Post executive editor Ben Bradlee with "The Newspaperman: The Life and Times of Ben Bradlee" and is currently re-airing the 1976 film about Watergate and the Washington Post: "All the President's Men." On Dec. 22, Steven Spielberg's new film "The Post" is released, detailing the paper's publisher Katherine Graham's challenging decision to move forward with the publishing of part of the Pentagon Papers.

In the late 1960s, the U.S. was mired in Vietnam fighting communist leader Ho Chi Minh and his army of "insurgents," so that all of Vietnam could be a united, free country — or so American citizens were led to believe.

Daniel Ellsberg (Matthew Rhys), who had been on the ground in Vietnam for the Rand Corporation (a non-profit think tank), travels home from Vietnam with Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara (Bruce Greenwood) who asks him if he thinks things are better or worse for Americans in the conflict. Ellsberg says that he is impressed at "how much things are the same." McNamara agrees but says things are actually worse. Then, upon landing at home, he tells the press that military progress over the last year is impressive.

Dan is ill-impressed with how things are going and at McNamara's dissimulation and begins to copy McNamara's "academic report" on the history of U.S. involvement in Vietnam that would become known as the Pentagon Papers. It takes him months to copy the thousands of pages. Though the papers are categorized "Top Secret – Classified," the Rand Corporation did have a copy. These papers trace and reveal U.S. involvement in Indochina beginning in 1950, when President Harry Truman gives $10 million to preserve peace. But it is how presidents Truman, Dwight D. Eisenhower, John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson decide to assure world peace that leads up to sending thousands of U.S. troops to the region, that is, Vietnam, that is the problem. That, and the lies to keep it going into Richard Nixon's administration.

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Cut to 1971, when Katherine Graham (Meryl Streep), publisher of the Washington Post, is preparing to take the company public. Though she had worked for the paper for years, she was not a natural choice to lead the paper. Her father, Eugene Meyer, had handed its management over to her husband, Philip Graham, in 1946. But with her husband's illness and consequent suicide in 1963, Katherine, who loved the paper, assumed control as publisher and, later, president.



Meryl Streep stars as Kay Graham in Twentieth Century Fox's "The Post." (© Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation and Storyteller Distribution Co., LLC/Niko Taverise)

The Washington Post found itself at the center of a perfect storm. The New York Times began publishing the Pentagon Papers and were forced to desist by an injunction from the Department of Justice. At the same time, someone anonymously delivered a shoebox filled with classified pages from the Pentagon Papers. The Post,

led by Bradlee (Tom Hanks), went to work with his team to derive as many stories from the pages as they could before deadline. Meanwhile, the Post's legal team and board hounded Graham, who had to make the final decision whether to publish or not. They were facing many charges, including treason, by publishing. Additionally, New York Times Co. v. United States was headed to the Supreme Court, and the financial backers of the Post's public offering were within their time limit to pull out of the deal if the Post put its own future at risk by publishing the papers.

"The Post" tells a compelling story about the fight to preserve the freedom of the press and one that highlights Graham's character and personality at a critical time. Streep plays the intelligent woman in a role she never imagined for herself. She seems to lack confidence, but has a firm backbone as she navigates the ethics and practical consequences of the situation (her own close friendship with McNamara), her love for her father's legacy, and what it means to be a woman in a world dominated by men.

The film compresses the time line of events, and I don't recall hearing any of Bradlee's legendary bad language. What is true about "The Post" is that it shows the evolution of Graham as a woman in a man's world, reaffirms the importance of the First Amendment, and reveals that American presidents manipulated the public and lied systematically to the American people and to Congress about U.S. involvement in Vietnam. Why?



Meryl Streep, director Steven Spielberg and Tom Hanks on the set of "The Post" (© Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation and Storyteller Distribution Co., LLC/Niko Taverise)

In the words of the March 24, 1965, confidential memo from Assistant Secretary of Defense John T. McNaughton to McNamara that became part of the released Pentagon Papers: "70% — To avoid a humiliating U.S. defeat (to our reputation as a guarantor; 20% — To keep SNV [South Vietnam] and the adjacent territory from Chinese hands; 10% — To permit the people of SVN to enjoy a better, freer way of life. ALSO — To emerge from crisis without unacceptable taint from methods used. NOT — to 'help a friend,' although it would be hard to stay in if asked out."

This was the "annex-plan of action for South Vietnam."

The lesson of all this, according to the film, is that the president cannot run the country, even foreign affairs, by himself without the help of Congress and the press is to serve the governed, not the government.

"The Post" builds the tension very well and is an award-worthy film of great importance to democracy and the American public.

By the way, Ellsberg's son Robert is the eminent author, editor-in-chief, and publisher of Orbis Books, the publishing branch of Maryknoll. Social justice and publishing runs in the family.

[Sr. Rose Pacatte, a member of the Daughters of St. Paul, is the director of the Pauline Center for Media Studies in Los Angeles.]

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