

Steven Spielberg's *The Post*: To reveal government secrets and lies or not?

By Joanne Laurier
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Directed by Steven Spielberg; screenplay by Liz Hannah and John Singer

Steven Spielberg's new film *The Post* recounts the internal struggle at the *Washington Post* over whether or not to publish the Pentagon Papers in June 1971.

The 7,000-page, 47-volume document was a Department of Defense history of American imperialist involvement in Vietnam from 1945 to 1966. It revealed that successive administrations, Democratic and Republican, had systematically lied for decades, with devastating consequences, including the death of millions of Vietnamese and tens of thousands of Americans.

At the center of *The Post* are a series of disputes that took place over the advisability of making public the explosive government secrets, including between *Washington Post* publisher Katharine Graham and her financial and legal consultants, and between Graham, on the one hand, and managing editor Ben Bradlee and his reporting staff, on the other. In addition, Graham and Bradlee each undergoes an internal conflict during the crisis.

Spielberg's film conscientiously and intelligently represents these events and brings out a number of critical questions, including freedom of the press, the right of the population to know what the authorities are up to, and the dangers of presidential dictatorship.

The Post begins in 1966 with a semi-prologue. Daniel Ellsberg (Matthew Rhys), a military analyst, is on a fact-finding mission in Vietnam for Lyndon B. Johnson's Secretary of Defense, Robert McNamara (Bruce Greenwood). Concurring in private with Ellsberg that the war is going terribly, McNamara sings a different, optimistic tune in front of the American media.

Ellsberg has served as a Marine, spent two years working in Vietnam with the State Department, and has been involved in the writing of a document, commissioned by McNamara in 1967, blandly entitled "History of U.S. Decision-making in Vietnam, 1945-66," which eventually gains notoriety as the "Pentagon Papers."

In 1969, increasingly disillusioned by the war and disgusted at government falsehoods, Ellsberg and his colleague Anthony Russo (Sonny Valicenti), both employed at RAND Corporation, begin clandestinely photocopying all 7,000 pages of the Pentagon Papers.

On June 13, 1971, *Washington Post* editor Ben Bradlee (Tom Hanks) and publisher Katharine Graham (Meryl Streep) are caught off guard when the *New York Times* starts publishing portions of the top-secret document, which Ellsberg had leaked to *Times* reporter Neil Sheehan (Justin Swain). Bradlee is frustrated by Sheehan's blockbuster scoop.

On June 15, Attorney General John Mitchell tells the *Times* they are violating the Espionage Act, and the Nixon administration gets a court order to stop the *Times* from continuing to publish the papers. "If the *Times* shuts down," Bradley says, "we're in business."

"Anyone else tired of reading the news instead of reporting it?" he asks angrily and rhetorically, charging national editor Ben Bagdikian (Bob

Odenkirk) with tracking down the source of the leak. When Bagdikian figures out it is Ellsberg, a former colleague at RAND, he goes to Boston, meets the anxious whistleblower, and returns to Washington with a trove of 4,400 photocopied pages.

The *Post* now possesses the material. The debate over whether or not to publish it pits Bradlee against the paper's legal team, bankers and potential investors. Graham and her business advisors are in the midst of launching the newspaper's first public stock offering worth millions of dollars. Criminal charges could destroy the paper and potentially land Graham and Bradlee in prison.

Bradlee argues: "The only way to assert the right to publish is to publish." Furthermore, he argues: "We have to be the check on their power. If we don't hold them accountable, who will?" As the debate rages between the editorial and legal departments, additional pressure is brought to bear on Graham by her friend Robert McNamara. In a private conversation, however, she reminds him that her son fought in Vietnam and that she has an obligation to expose the heinous character of the war and government lies, including his own. In reply, McNamara vehemently warns her: "Nixon hates you, and if there's a way to destroy your paper, he'll find it."

The first *Washington Post* article making use of the Pentagon Papers appears on June 18, despite threats from the Justice Department, which insists (via a phone call from then assistant attorney general and future chief justice of the US Supreme Court, William Rehnquist!) that the paper has—like the *Times*—violated the Espionage Act.

On June 26, 1971, the Supreme Court hears the *Post* and *Times* cases together, and on June 30, issues a 6-3 decision, supporting the papers' right to publish. *The Post* ends with the onset of the Watergate scandal in 1972, whose working out would bring about the resignation of Richard Nixon in disgrace two years later.

Spielberg's movie honestly and entertainingly sets out to depict the details and personalities of a major moment in American history. Its strongest element is a genuine democratic sensibility. Perhaps the most oft-repeated line in the film is "They lied," referring to the various administrations. Graham and Bradlee are truly perturbed by the actions of particularly the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. Each has been personally close to officials in both.

Furthermore, *The Post* demonstrates that the interests of the population stand in opposition to those of the authorities. It argues for the press to be independent of and skeptical toward government pronouncements. It that sense, it is a rebuke and condemnation of today's mainstream media, which has become little more than a propaganda arm of the White House, CIA and Pentagon.

The Post is Spielberg's filmmaking at his most effective: coherent, well-told, engaging. The entire cast performs with a degree of urgency and commitment. Special mention must go to Hanks, Odenkirk and Greenwood. The filmmakers successfully integrate snippets from Nixon's infamous, mafia-like audio tapes over the image of a shadowy figure in a

White House window. Moreover, the movie's rhythm and intensity provide a sense of the real rhythm and intensity of the earth-shaking events in 1971.

Support for this effort comes from the score by John Williams, and the script by co-writer Josh Singer who also co-wrote the screenplay for *Spotlight*, a 2015 exposé of the Catholic Church. Singer presumably has a hand here in doing what he did for that film, creating an unglamorous, "secondary" character who seems entirely devoted to uncovering the truth: in *Spotlight*, the indefatigable lawyer, Mitchell Garabedian (Stanley Tucci), and here, Odenkirk's Bagdikian.

Above all, *The Post* directs the attention of contemporary audiences to a momentous episode. The movie's production notes point out that the Pentagon Papers "would set off shattering shockwaves that continue to this day. The document...uncovered a dark truth: that vast, wide-ranging deceptions about the deadly war in Vietnam had spanned four presidential administrations, from Truman to Eisenhower, Kennedy to Johnson.

"The Pentagon Papers revealed that each of those Presidents had repeatedly misled the public about U.S. operations in Vietnam, and that even as the government was said to be pursuing peace, behind the scenes the military and CIA were covertly expanding the war. The Papers provided a shadowy history loaded with evidence of assassinations, violations of the Geneva Convention, rigged elections and lies in front of Congress."

In an interview, Singer said that *The Post* script had foreseen some present-day parallels under Donald Trump to the era depicted in their film. "It was remarkable how more and more relevant the first amendment theme became as we were in production," remarked the scriptwriter. "It's one of the reasons why Steven [Spielberg] wanted to make the movie now."

The comment is no doubt sincere, but it points in a contradictory fashion to some of the movie's limitations.

The authentic feeling for the First Amendment and constitutional rights is expressed in a film that, first of all, also offers a highly idealized portrait of its central characters. *The Post* itself makes mention of the many connections of Graham and Bradlee to the political establishment. McNamara, one of the chief war criminals of the day, was Graham's close personal friend.

The movie's feminist coloration is off the mark. The script apparently originated with the desire of screenwriter Liz Hannah "to tell the story of Katharine Graham, the former *Washington Post* publisher who became the first-ever female CEO of a Fortune 500 company ... As Hannah was writing the first draft, the symmetry between Graham and presidential candidate Hillary Clinton seemed to be the most obvious parallel to the present. (She sold the script just 10 days before the election.)" Fortunately, the screenplay evolved from that narrow beginning to take up broader questions. Nonetheless, the emphasis on Graham's "pioneering" status as a female CEO remains. The filmmakers take for granted this is something to celebrate.

As an antidote to the worship of Graham-Streep, it ought to be remembered that one of the most notorious union-busting operations of the 1970s took place when the publisher set out to break the pressmen's union at the *Post*, provoking a strike in October 1975 that ended with mass firings and the frame-up of 15 workers on charges related to slightly damaged equipment in the printing plant. The *Post* strike is widely considered one of the preludes to the Reagan administration's destruction of the air traffic controllers union, PATCO, in 1981.

In the *Washington Monthly* in January 1976, in an article sharply critical of Graham and her activities, the same Ben Bagdikian who hunted down and helped see to the publication of the Pentagon Papers wrote that the *Post*'s going public in 1971 marked the "transformation of the daily newspaper in the United States from a family enterprise to a corporation with an obligation to its stockholders to 'maximize' profits."

As for Bradlee, his history may be even more sordid. This Cold War liberal from a Boston Brahmin family, and an intimate friend of John and Jacqueline Kennedy, worked covertly for the CIA in Europe in the 1950s. His sister-in-law in 1971 was Mary Pinchot Meyer, formerly married to Cord Meyer, a high-level CIA official, involved in countless agency operations.

Christopher Reed in a 2014 *Guardian* obituary detailed how Bradlee had "spent many years undercover as a counter-espionage informant, a government propagandist and an unofficial asset of the Central Intelligence Agency." Among his credits, according to Reed, included promulgating "CIA-directed European propaganda urging the controversial execution of the convicted American spies Ethel and Julius Rosenberg" in 1953.

As noted above, *The Post* offers a romanticized version of Graham and Bradlee as heroes of democracy, and that is not to the filmmakers' credit. Moreover, Spielberg's rush to shoot and release the film by the end of 2017 apparently had a great deal to do with Trump's coming to power and his own support for the Democratic Party.

This is not the first time in history of course that a Hollywood movie has shaded the truth about the lives of its central figures. But that has not prevented a host of biographical and historical films from shedding light on important matters. That's the case here too. *The Post* has an impact and implications that go beyond the immediate ideas and intentions of the filmmakers.

Spielberg's film dramatizes, with some insight, the outlook and physiognomy of a bourgeois layer who still retained in 1971 some attachment to and also fear about the abandonment of democratic principles. After all, only one year after the mass protests over the killings at Kent State, what if the Pentagon Papers had gotten beyond the control of the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*? In any event, Graham and Bradlee showed a certain amount of courage and principle in contrast to their counterparts today.

The whole ruling elite has moved dramatically to the right. Graham herself said in 1988 in an address to the CIA: "There are some things the general public does not need to know and shouldn't ... I believe democracy flourishes when the government can take legitimate steps to keep its secrets and when the press can decide whether to print what it knows."

In November of 2010, at the height of the revelations published by WikiLeaks of US actions in Iraq, Afghanistan and other countries, former *New York Times* executive editor Bill Keller published a piece stressing that in considering whether or not to disclose state secrets, the *Times* engaged in "extensive and serious discussions with the government. Keller wrote: "We agree wholeheartedly that transparency is not an absolute good. Freedom of the press includes freedom not to publish, and that is a freedom we exercise with some regularity." There would be no publication of the Pentagon Papers in our day.

It is inconceivable that the 1971 Supreme Court decision allowing the *Times* and *Post* to publish the documents would be handed down today. The courts now routinely rule that the government has the right to suppress information and spy on everybody in the interests of "national security."

The Post cites a passage from Justice Hugo Black's 1971 ruling. It is worth quoting at greater length:

"In the First Amendment the Founding Fathers gave the free press the protection it must have to fulfill its essential role in our democracy. The press was to serve the governed, not the governors. The Government's power to censor the press was abolished so that the press would remain forever free to censure the Government. The press was protected so that it could bare the secrets of government and inform the people. Only a free and unrestrained press can effectively expose deception in government. ... In my view, far from deserving condemnation for their courageous

reporting, the New York Times, the Washington Post, and other newspapers should be commended for serving the purpose that the Founding Fathers saw so clearly.”

The fate of Daniel Ellsberg, who never went to jail and was even widely honored, was far different from that of Julian Assange, Edward Snowden and Chelsea Manning. In 2011, an 80-year-old Ellsberg, commenting on the 40th anniversary of the release of the Pentagon Papers, wrote: “What we need released this month are the Pentagon Papers of Iraq and Afghanistan (and Pakistan, Yemen and Libya).”

In an interview with CNN at that time, Ellsberg noted that the crimes committed by the Nixon administration against him 40 years ago could now be carried out under the cover of law by the Obama White House.

The list of crimes “includes burglarizing my former psychoanalyst’s office... warrantless wiretapping, using the CIA against an American citizen in the US, and authorizing a White House hit squad to ‘incapacitate me totally’ (on the steps of the Capitol on May 3, 1971),” Ellsberg said. “But under George W. Bush and Barack Obama, with the PATRIOT Act, the FISA Amendment Act, and (for the hit squad) President Obama’s executive orders,” those crimes “have all become legal.”

To whatever extent Spielberg, Singer and company are aware of the vast decay of American democracy, it is the most vital feature that the discerning viewer will take away from *The Post*.

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