Steven Spielberg's *Bridge of Spies*: An episode from the Cold War

David Walsh
24 October 2015

Steven Spielberg's *Bridge of Spies* deals with an episode from the Cold War: the arrest of Soviet spy Rudolf Abel in New York City in June 1957 and his subsequent exchange for U-2 spy plane pilot Gary Powers some five years later.

Lawyer James Donovan represented Abel in court and played a major role in the eventual spy trade in early 1962. The film's script, co-written by British playwright Mark Charman and American filmmakers Joel and Ethan Coen, is based in part on Donovan's 1964 memoir, *Strangers on a Bridge: The Case of Colonel Abel and Francis Gary Powers* .

An opening title explains that the film begins in 1957, at the height of the Cold War. Rudolf Abel (Mark Rylance), under surveillance by the FBI, goes about his business in Brooklyn, which includes amateur painting and retrieving hidden messages. FBI agents raid his apartment—quite illegally as a matter of fact, as they have no search warrant or "probable cause."

James Donovan (Tom Hanks), a prominent New York attorney whom we first see defending a life insurance company against a legitimate claim, is called on by the local bar association to represent Abel. He protests that his criminal law days are far behind him, but his sense of duty is appealed to and he accepts the task. "Everyone will hate me, but at least I'll lose," he quips. Donovan is selected in part because of his role in the Nuremberg war crime trials, where he served as an associate prosecutor on the staff of Supreme Court Justice Robert H. Jackson, and as general counsel to the OSS (forerunner of the CIA) during World War II.

Abel makes an instantly favorable impression on Donovan. (In his memoir, the lawyer wrote that the Soviet agent "was an extraordinary individual, brilliant and with the consuming intellectual thirst of every lifetime scholar. He was hungry for companionship and the trading of thoughts." Donovan was Abel's only visitor during his imprisonment of almost five years.) Abel is calm, collected and highly intelligent. When Donovan notes that "You don't seem terribly alarmed," the Soviet spy replies, "Would it help?" This line will recur several times.

Donovan's reasoning holds that Abel is not a traitor, like Ethel and Julius Rosenberg (executed a few years earlier as Soviet spies), because he is not a US citizen, but merely an honorable "soldier" working for his homeland.

Meanwhile, the CIA has developed the U-2 spy plane and a group of former Air Force pilots have been brought in to fly the aircraft, including Gary Powers (Austin Stowell). The U-2 flies at high altitudes, CIA officials explain, and takes pictures with its large-format cameras. The pilots are instructed to go down with their planes and are provided with poisoned needles that will kill them instantly.

Back in the US, the argument for Donovan's defending Abel is that America needs to show that every accused individual, even a "communist spy," will receive due process. In fact, as Donovan quickly learns, this is far from the case. The judge, Mortimer Byers (Dakin Matthews), makes it evident in conversations with Donovan and the prosecutor that he expects and plans to facilitate a rapid conviction. He dismisses Donovan's argument that the FBI raid was illegal and generally ensures the case goes smoothly for the government. When Donovan's eventual appeal, on the grounds that evidence had been seized in violation of the Fourth Amendment, reaches the US Supreme Court, it is rejected in a 5-4 decision.

Donovan urges Byers not to sentence Abel to death (the first count, conspiracy to transmit defense information to the Soviet Union, was a capital offense), on both humanitarian and practical grounds—a US agent might be captured at some point and Abel alive would be a bargaining chip. In the end, the judge sentences the Soviet spy to decades in prison.

While Abel is serving time in Atlanta federal penitentiary, Gary Powers is shot down over the USSR in 1960 and interrogated. In a Soviet courtroom, he is sentenced to three years in prison and seven years hard labor. (American officials mistakenly believed that at an altitude of 70,000 feet the U-2 would be out of range of Soviet radar and ground-to-air missiles. They were wrong on both counts. Moreover, they stupidly sent Powers on a spy run on May 1, a holiday, when there was much less air traffic than usual.) The CIA becomes anxious that Powers will spill the beans.

Act II takes place in Berlin, where Donovan is sent by the CIA, although in an unofficial capacity, to negotiate with the Soviet and East German governments for the exchange of Abel for Powers, as well as the release of an American student being held by the East German Stalinists. The local CIA operatives hover over Donovan as he carries out his diplomatic effort. The East Germans cause difficulties for both the US and USSR, as they want the Americans to recognize their state as a sovereign nation. It is not giving anything away, since the events are part of the historical record, to reveal that Donovan succeeds in his mission, which ends on a bridge connecting West Berlin and East Germany.

There are entertaining and admirable qualities in *Bridge of Spies*. Rylance is truly excellent at conveying Abel's intelligence and steadfastness. The film is most substantive and least trite in scenes where he is present.

By the time of his arrest, the real Abel had been through a good deal. He was born William August Fisher in the UK in 1903 (perhaps named after Wilhelm Liebknecht and August Bebel?) to ethnic-German Russian revolutionary émigrés. His father was a collaborator of Lenin at one time. The family returned to the USSR after the revolution and Fisher-Abel went to work for Soviet intelligence in 1927.

He barely survived the great purges of the late 1930s. His brother-in-law was accused of being a Trotsky supporter and Fisher-Abel was dismissed from the NKVD for a time. During World War II, he participated in significant intelligence operations against the Germans. In 1948 he was sent to preside over Soviet spying in the US. Following his arrest, he refused to cooperate with the FBI, or tell them anything, in the face of charges that carried the death penalty.

Hanks as Donovan is less successful, because the role is conceived in a more conventional and less insightful manner. Hanks here is directed to be

the middle-class American Everyman, pursuing a common sense course through rough seas. His performance is perfectly pleasant, but does not especially have the ring of truth. James Donovan's name was not picked out of a hat. He was an influential, well-connected (to Wall Street, to the intelligence apparatus, etc.) figure, who later ran for the US Senate as the Democratic Party candidate in New York. Video available online shows him to be a crafty and probably fairly ruthless figure.

The American elite itself, in the Kennedy era, had a somewhat different relationship to the traditions of the country. While pursuing its imperialist ambitions implacably, the political and media establishment still had the confidence to uphold, or at least pay lip service to certain democratic norms. Donovan, in his memoir, observes that his decision to defend Abel, supposedly the most hated man in America, was generally supported by his colleagues, "business friends and lawyers all over the United States." A former president of the American Bar Association, for example, wrote him: "Defense of an unpopular cause is one of the things that make our profession a calling."

Donovan concluded his brief to the Supreme Court in the following words: "Abel is an alien charged with the capital offense of Soviet espionage. It may seem anomalous that our Constitutional guarantees protect such a man. The unthinking may view America's conscientious adherence to the principles of a free society as an altruism so scrupulous that self-destruction must result. Yet our principles are engraved in the history and the law of the land. If the free world is not faithful to its own moral code, there remains no society for which others may hunger."

There is no need to paint Donovan as either a saintly defender of the Constitution and Bill of Rights in the face of a lynch-mob popular mood, which the film tends to do, or as a cynic merely going through the motions as part of a secret plan laid out by the CIA and the American state. Donovan was, it seems, both a defender of American elite interests and a sincere believer in a defendant's basic constitutional rights.

As is often the case with a Spielberg film (especially about American life), subtle and sharp scenes, where characters and situations are presented in an unsentimental and genuinely objective fashion, alternate with sequences shot as though through a Norman Rockwell painting, which exude a debilitating complacency and national-patriotic glorification that are both unpleasant and unconvincing.

The scenes in prison between Abel and Donovan, along with a number of the courtroom sequences, as well as the CIA training sessions for Powers and his fellow pilots, are played realistically and accurately. Here Spielberg's genuine sense of pacing and overall film rhythm and composition come into play. The filmmaker, however, finds it difficult to resist idealizing and falsifying middle-class family life. Whenever Donovan returns home, his wife's occasional complaints notwithstanding, the spectator is encouraged to bathe in the warmth of the imagery. The work comes to a halt, artistically speaking.

Moreover, in general, the first half of *Bridge of Spies* is immeasurably stronger than the second. The filmmakers paint Abel in very sympathetic colors. Presumably they then felt the conscious or unconscious need to compensate for their audacity in depicting a Soviet spy as a complex human being by composing a banal and stereotyped picture of East Berlin and Soviet and East German officials. These scenes are something out of a propaganda film. Every border guard is a menacing brute. Every official is sly or cruel, or both. The film's coloring changes to somber greys and blacks in East Berlin (only to brighten up when Donovan is back in New York, where the trees are suddenly and unaccountably adorned with leaves, although it is February!).

Numerous films made during the Cold War—including *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*, *The Ipcress File*, *Funeral in Berlin*, even Alfred Hitchcock's *Torn Curtain* and *Topaz*, not among his more creditable works, and others—were more skeptical about America's "free world" claims than *Bridge of Spies*. The filmmakers should be ashamed of themselves for miseducating a younger generation.

As a result, *Bridge of Spies* sheds relatively little light on a critical epoch. It chooses not to go near any of these questions: What was the Soviet Union, and why did it elicit such loyalty and devotion as Abel's? What was the real character, beneath the superficial, self-serving phrases, of the Cold War? What were the contradictions of American liberalism, and what has it come to today?

The legacy of anti-communism still weighs heavily on these social layers. Artistic and intellectual progress will be difficult until such prejudices and the social views bound up with them, the defense of the so-called free enterprise system in the US and its geopolitical interests around the world, are broken from.

Spielberg's film points toward the present as well as the past. In fact, the filmmakers' concerns in *Bridge of Spies* about contemporary American life become obvious first. The FBI and CIA act thuggishly, the judge has no interest in elementary democratic rights, the media stirs up backwardness and fear.

Although he appears guilty, Abel is essentially railroaded to prison. As law professor Jeffrey Kahn observes, in *The Case of Colonel Abel*, by the time of his indictment in August 1957, "Abel had been held by federal agents in solitary confinement and total secrecy for forty-eight days, two thousand miles from the place of his initial arrest, without meaningful access to counsel, and without having appeared before any judicial officer for any reason."

Spielberg and Hanks make clear in interviews that the "war on terror" and the treatment of detainees at Guantanamo and elsewhere are on their minds. Hanks told an interviewer from film website Collider.com: "As soon as you start torturing the people that we have, well then you give the other side permission and cause to do the same exact thing and that's not what America stands for. … As soon as you start executing anybody you think has gone against your country, well, you're not that far removed from the KGB and the Stasi. That's not what America was about. This is what Donovan took with him from the get-go. You can't deny it."

Spielberg explained to *Entertainment Weekly* that he had only recently learned about the existence of "a man named James B. Donovan, who was an insurance attorney but formerly an associate prosecutor at the Nuremberg trials, who was called into service to show the world that we represent everybody. Everybody gets a fair shake. Those moral themes resonated with me, especially having come off *Lincoln* ."

Torture, police-state measures, militarism, violations of constitutional norms, state violence are precisely what official America is about today. The filmmakers are distant from the realities and their anxieties, while no doubt sincere, are all too tepid. The situation has advanced very far.

Likewise no doubt, although tensions had not reached their present level when *Bridge of Spies* was being prepared, the issue of US-Russian relations weighs heavily on the writers and director. The film is an appeal for cooler heads to prevail, for negotiations and diplomacy, for compromise. Again, the concerns are genuine, but there is a severe underestimation of the depth of the social and economic forces driving the American ruling elite toward its rendezvous with disaster.