

The Post

Steven Spielberg's last DC-based movie was a triumph: "Lincoln" in 2012. It featured a stirring historical moment, showing, in the Congressional battle for the 13th Amendment, the best ever cinematic treatment of the legislative process. Come 2017, and Spielberg presents another DC movie with historical import, this one more current but also momentous. "The Post," just arrived for Christmas, dramatizes the decision by the *Washington Post* to publish the Pentagon Papers, an act threatening the paper's very existence. The movie recreates that moment with consummate skill and suspense.

"The Post," co-written by Liz Hannah and Josh Singer (the latter wrote the superb "Spotlight" of two years ago), begins with a Vietnam War episode, wherein young RAND consultant Daniel Ellsberg (Matthew Rhys) comes face-to-face with the realities of the war and makes the crucial decision, together with other colleagues, to purloin a copy of a classified Pentagon study on America's historical involvement in Vietnam—later named "The Pentagon Papers"—then to duplicate it, and then seek to have it published. The documents eventually find their way to *The New York Times*, which publishes excerpts June 13, 1971, only to be served with an injunction initiated by the Nixon Administration from publishing further material.

The Post, exasperated by the *Times*' coup, seeks out its own copy of the Papers, and, through a connection *Post* reporter Ben Bagdikian (Bob Odenkirk) has with Ellsberg, comes into possession of the collection (which requires its own seat on Bagdikian's flight home). For a time, the dilemma whether to publish or not vexes the publisher Katherine (Kay) Graham (Meryl Streep), executive editor Ben Bradlee (Tom Hanks), their staff and their legal team, presenting the possibility of contempt of court charges and even jail time. On their decision hangs the fate of the newspaper—and the truth.

This First Amendment thriller plays out in roughly a week of June 1971, and Spielberg and company keep the tension up, even though the action is mainly people hollering at each other in offices and pressrooms. Luckily, that hollering consists mostly of swift and smart dialogue delivered by a bunch of seasoned players like Odenkirk, as well as Tracey Letts, Carrie Coon, Bradley Whitford, Sarah Paulson, Michael Stuhlbarg, David Cross, among others. Bruce Greenwood, a stalwart in political dramas (he played JFK in "Thirteen Days" in 2000), is a forceful yet conniving Defense Secretary Bob McNamara, trying, through his good friend Kay, to quash the Papers, which he commissioned.

The true dynamic, of course, is the interplay between Graham and Bradlee, the latter urging the former to give the OK for journalistic, legal, and even personal reasons. It's the crusty, ink-stained scribe testing his retiring, aims-to-please boss thrown into a role for which she has been little prepared.

Hanks doesn't much look like Bradlee, but he gets the man's energy and growl mostly right and delivers his lines with pungency and urgency; a big cat on a chain. The contrast with Streep's Graham is stark. We see her first in sweet hostess mode, a woman allergic to confrontation and censure. The dramatic arc Streep must undertake to become a decision-maker is glorious to watch, achieved in timely increments and

facial signals rather than with fancy flourishes. Symbolizing that transformation in her comes when she delivers the thunderous decision to “publish” on the phone in a party dress. Another good example of her evolution comes in an intimate sit-down with the irascible McNamara. He pleads against the Post’s publishing, to which she responds: “I’m asking your advice, Bob, not your permission.”

Typical of DC movies these days, “The Post” barely uses our city (most of it was shot in White Plains, New York and in a Brooklyn studio). Local shooting basically incorporated the standard monuments as backdrops to show the dramatic delivery of the Papers. Thus, we see bound copies of the Post being curiously dumped off trucks at sites where no papers are **ever** delivered, like the front of the Capitol, at the White House fence on Pennsylvania Avenue, and random sites near the Washington Monument and the Lincoln Memorial. For Capitol Hill locals, the strangest drop is right onto East Capitol Street flanking the Folger Library, just to get that Capitol dome in! (I was witness to the East Capitol filming, and that one shot took about a day to set up)

(Note: Spielberg adds a lovely homage at the end, which shows the discovery of the Watergate break-in in a sequence which imitates the opening shots from that other great journalistic DC movie “All the President’s Men,” suggesting a “sequel.”)
(The film is rated “PG-13” and runs 116 mins.)

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