

The Fight

Anyone at all interested in civil rights and constitutional issues knows that legal challenges to them invariably involve the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), especially around First Amendment cases. This New York-based organization, about a century old, has been particularly busy in the last four years, ever since the days right after the 2017 Trump inauguration, when impassioned Americans gathered at airports across the country to protest the Muslim ban. The aftermath of that action was the legal challenge brought by the ACLU to fight that ban in federal court, one of several battles in the new documentary “The Fight.”

Though not exactly a reclusive organization (it openly discusses and publicizes its cases), the ACLU has never granted access to its offices, even as its battles concerning immigration rights, abortion rights, LGBT rights, and voting rights—have become more urgent and significant than ever. The filmmaking team of Eli B. Despres, Josh Kriegman, and Elyse Steinberg (makers of 2016’s award-winning doc “Weiner”) were granted that access and followed four distinct and inspiring attorneys, all handling landmark cases in their areas of specialization.

Brigitte Amiri works on ACLU’s Reproductive Freedom Project. She is currently litigating numerous cases and is featured here challenging the Trump administration’s ban on abortion for unaccompanied immigrant minors. Dale Ho directs the Voting Rights Project and supervises voting rights litigation. His focus in the film is challenging the Commerce Department’s inclusion of a citizenship question on the 2020 US Census, a case we hear him arguing in the film.

Lee Gelernt works on immigrant issues, and here he takes on high profile challenges to the Trump Administration’s immigration policies, including its family separation dictates. Joshua Block is a senior staff attorney working on Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Projects and, together with Chase Strangio, they contest *Stone v. Trump*, the Union’s challenge to the administration’s attempt to ban transgender people from serving in the military.

Each lawyer is given roughly equal time in this smartly and briskly edited film, allowing complex cases to be delineated clearly while keeping up the tension. Though the four are nerdish workaholics, their humanity also comes through. To get that rounded view of brilliant individuals, the filmmakers show a bit of their goofy side, too, as when Gelernt panics trying to charge his cell phone, and Ho clumsily practices his Supreme Court speech at his bathroom mirror.

Shot in the period 2017 to 2020, the picture traces the ups and downs of litigation that eventually climaxes in signature Supreme Court and high court arguments. The Supreme Court sequences include live audio accompanied by striking animation. First Amendment protections are essential to ACLU's work, and while it is seen as a "liberal" organization, the movie also makes space for its filing on behalf of the "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville in 2107, showing its First Amendment zeal to all sides of the political spectrum.

While we are used to the media and popular culture showcasing preening lawyers, "The Fight" instead introduces us to a quartet of doughty, spirited attorneys who put their clients and cases first and struggle to make our system better. It is a pleasure to see them in action.

(This film is rated "PG-13," runs 96 minutes, and opened July 31 on demand.)

(July 2020)