

Bridge of Spies (2015)

Rated R. Running time: 2 hours 15 min.

Our content ratings (1-10); Violence 4; Language 3; Sex /Nudity 1.

Our star rating (1-5): 5

The righteous walk in integrity—happy are the children who follow them!

Proverbs 20:7

Show yourself in all respects a model of good works, and in your teaching show integrity, gravity,

Titus 2:7

After seeing this film I want to say, “Make room on your pedestal, Atticus Finch. There’s a new lawyer in film equal to you in integrity—and he also is endangered by it, perhaps more than you were, even when you were spat in the face by that angry father.”

Lawyer Finch was the target of a Southern racist, and Lawyer James Donovan bore the brunt of Americans’ hatred of Communists. Plus, in Steven Spielberg’s “inspired by a true story” film, he has to take the risk of traveling to East Berlin to match wits with Soviet and East German officials as part of a spy exchange deal that is so hush-hush that the U.S. government will not admit that he is representing them. Spielberg is in as fine a form as ever, giving us a stirring film about a man of principles who will yield neither to domestic nor foreign pressure when freedom is at stake. This is one of those wonderful films that ought to make American viewers proud of their heritage.

Early in the film we see the man destined to cross paths with Donovan, changing both of their lives forever. He is Rudolf Abel (Mark Rylance), an older, mild-looking man engaged in painting and drawing. In a park he removes a nickel stuck beneath his bench. Back in his studio apartment he opens up the coin, unfolds a tiny piece of paper, and reads the number-coded message. Soon, however, Federal agents raid his apartment, revealing that his artistic endeavors were just a cover for his spying for the Soviet Union. He is Col. Vilyam "Willie" Fisher, one of the Soviet Union's top agents.

Tom Hanks plays James B. Donovan, a claims lawyer at a prestigious law firm. Before he can go to his office one morning in 1957 his secretary tells him that the head of the firm, Thomas Watters (Alan Alda), wants to see him immediately. There is a government official with the boss, the pair revealing that the U.S. government wants a top lawyer to defend the newly captured spy so that no one, ally or enemy, can say that the accused did not receive an open and fair trial. Watters, laying on the table the thick sheaf of indictment papers, says that he is suggesting Donovan for that honor because in the past he practiced criminal law. Of course, Donovan, hesitating to pick up the papers, realizes it is not exactly an honor, that the sensational case will receive wide publicity, and given the atmosphere of hatred for all things Soviet or Communist, the defense lawyer will become as hated as the accused spy.

To the dismay of his outspoken wife Mary (Amy Ryan) when he comes home, Donovan does accept the case because he holds a deep reverence for the U.S. Constitution and its concern for the rights of all, even those accused of a heinous crime. (He corrects those who say that Rudolf Abel is guilty of treason by pointing out that the man is not a U.S. citizen, and thus cannot be considered a traitor.) During the next few weeks as he gets to talk with Abel he never asks if he is guilty. He does not want or need to know. He believes that guilty or

innocent, the Constitution decrees that the man deserves the best defense possible.

Although Abel might indeed be a sworn enemy of his country, Donovan comes to respect the man as they meet numerous times before the trial. Abel refuses to say anything about his activities, and he turns down an offer for leniency if he will cooperate with the CIA and reveal what he knows. Several times as Donovan is telling his client about his possible fate, he asks if this doesn't worry him, to which Abel always replies, "Would it help?" During one of their conferences Abel tells the story of a man he had known during his childhood. "This man, my father's friend, he was beaten. Every time they hit him, he stood back up again. They hit him harder, still he got back to his feet. I think because of this they let him live." He respectfully calls Donovan that standing man.

As you will see as this story unfolds, *Standing Man* would have been a good title for this film.

Donovan certainly lives up to the name. When the jury pronounces Abel guilty, Donovan visits Judge Byers (Dakin Matthews) at his home. At the very beginning of the trial the jurist had revealed his bias against the defendant, but Donovan makes a plea for life imprisonment rather than the death penalty. Part of his argument is that the time might come when the Soviets have captured an American spy, so that Abel can be used in negotiating for an exchange. The judge dismisses his arguments, later in the courtroom handing down the death sentence.

Many a lawyer would have gone on then and returned to his normal practice, but not James Donovan. He believes that there are good grounds for an appeal because the FBI had not obtained a search warrant when they raided the spy's apartment. Others are appalled at this, pointing out that Abel, not being an American citizen, doesn't deserve our Constitutional protections. Donovan strongly disagrees,

declaring that we ought to be an example to the world for a concern for the rights of all. At home Mary is very upset that he will continue with the case. His children also are confused and concerned. At the office his boss also is apprehensive about his appealing the case. Far more virulent is the public reaction against him. On the subway fellow passengers, most of them with newspapers that feature the story of the trial and appeal, look back and forth from his newspaper picture to the man who looks uncomfortable in the seat opposite them. One night a car draws up in front of their house, its unseen occupants firing several times into the Donovan home. Their teenage daughter Jan (Eve Hewson), sitting alone, falls screaming to floor, but is not hit. Atticus Finch's South might have its KKK, but the North also has its hate groups. Despite all of this Donovan argues Abel's case before the Supreme Court and wins for Abel a reprieve from the death penalty, Chief Justice Earl Warren, offering his praise at the trial's conclusion.

A parallel story that the film switches back and forth to concerns a small group of Air Force crack aviators who volunteer to work for the CIA by piloting the highly secret U-2, a spy plane so light and technically sophisticated that it can fly above 70,000 feet, at that time beyond the reach of any Soviet interceptor plane or anti-aircraft missile. Equipped with state of the art high-resolution cameras, vast areas of a country can be surveyed with each flight over it. One of these volunteers is Francis Gary Powers (Austin Stonewall).

As part of their training the men are told that if their plane is hit, they should activate its self-destruct mechanism, and if they are captured, they should use the tiny poison coated prick embedded in a silver dollar to kill themselves, lest they should be tortured into revealing secrets. Unfortunately for Powers, the Soviets had developed a new missile, which damages his plane. As it falls, he is unable to activate the

destruct mechanism, so he bails out. He is captured, tried, and sentenced to ten years in a Soviet prison. Thus Donovan had been right in his prescient argument for sparing Abel's life.

It is several years after the trial when Donovan is called on again by CIA Director Allen Dulles (Peter McRobbie) to serve his country, the last part of the film taking Donovan and us to East Berlin. His mission is to negotiate with a Soviet official the exchange of the two prisoners. However, we soon see a third, though shorter, story unfold, that of the American graduate student Doug Forrester (Billy Magnussen). He is trying to get his German girlfriend out of the Eastern Zone before workers can finish the wall that will make escape to the West almost impossible. However at the checkpoint he is stopped, the guard not believing his story about studying economics in the East. The girl friend is able to slip away, but Forrester is arrested on spy charges. He becomes a bargaining chip for the East German government. The U.S. has refused to recognize it as legitimate government, so they hope to gain this by joining his case to that of Powers.

Donovan's CIA handlers are adamant that he negotiate only for Power's release, arguing that the student's case can be dealt with later. Too much of a realist to believe that the US would bother with such a lowly case, Donovan proves what a standing man he can be. During the series of negotiations, which are a sort of political game of poker, the American lawyer shows that he has the savvy for sizing up his opponents of a Cool Hand Luke. Despite the claims and threats of the Soviets and East Germans, Donovan insists that the young American be a part of one deal. Both sides want their man back because they fear that the longer they are in captivity, the more the possibility that they will crack and give up the secrets they are hiding. So why, Donovan's handler keeps insisting, jeopardize the mission by insisting on the freedom of the young American?

This is a good question, one that any real politik apparatchik would ask. But he is dealing with a man who adamantly stands for the Constitution, a charter of freedom based on the idea that everyone, from the highest to the lowest, is precious—and equal. He does not want to let the opportunity for obtaining the young man's freedom to slip away. Thus that nighttime moment on the Glienicke Bridge, connecting East and West Berlin, becomes as suspenseful as it is dramatic. At both ends the two sides with their exchange prisoners stand facing each other. As you probably have seen in the previews snipers from each side take aim with their rifles in case the other side should open fire. But Donovan will not give the word for the exchange to go forward until he hears word from another site that the East Germans are releasing Doug Forrester at the same moment.

The script by Matt Charman and the Coen brothers no doubt adds some fictional elements, as well as simplifying and condensing Francis Gary Powers' story. (For example, if we didn't know better, we would think Powers was a green pilot when he volunteered for the U-2 program, when in reality he was a veteran of numerous reconnaissance missions. How I love the easy access of Wikipedia and other Internet sources!) This really does not matter. They, and director Spielberg and his talented cast, have given us an inspiring story of courage and tenacity. The film could be used as a teaching tool for what our Constitution stands for, and the necessity of standing up against those claiming to love this country but fail to understand what it really is about. I will always love Atticus Finch, but now have one more lawyer of integrity to look up to. Best of all, James B. Donovan was a real life person, one who served well not just his own country, but all of humanity.

This review with a set of discussion questions is in the Oct. issue of VP.