

Hollywood's "The Post". "We Live in a Dirty and Dangerous World"

A Review of Steven Spielberg's "The Post"

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"We live in a dirty and dangerous world. 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." Washington Post publisher Katharine Graham, Langley Virginia, 1988.[1]

Steven Spielberg's tribute to *Washington Post* publisher Katharine Graham and modern American journalism is a major Hollywood endeavor marshaling the industry's premier talent. As of this writing *The Post* has been nominated for dozens of awards throughout the film community.[2] The movie itself, however, comprises a sort of tortured historical confirmation on exactly how the news media would like to view themselves and their industry. It does so by mixing verifiable truths alongside careful omissions to reinforce a deeper set of myths concerning notions of American press freedom and the Vietnam War era.

On a more immediate level, *The Post* was produced in under six months, and was at least partly motivated by the political allegiances of its creators, who seek to analogize the Richard Nixon administration's pursuit of a court injunction against the US press' publication of the Pentagon Papers to President Donald Trump's bellicose attitude toward a corporate news media that has arguably become an increasingly partisan political force following Trump's defeat of his Democratic Party rival.

Spielberg renders Katharine Graham (Meryl Streep) as a somewhat awkward and isolated widow and among the first female publishers in the predominantly male-dominated business of newspaper publishing. Left unmentioned is the fact that Graham was the daughter of Eugene Meyer, one of the country's most powerful bankers, who bought the *Washington Post* in 1933 while serving as head of the Federal Reserve.

The Post's narrative revolves around the paper's publication of the aforementioned Rand Foundation's exhaustive study of US military involvement in Southeast Asia commissioned by the Lyndon Johnson Administration. In 1971 the document was leaked to the *New York Times* and later the *Washington Post* by CIA operative and Rand staffer Daniel Ellsberg. The *New York Times* was initially enjoined by the Nixon Justice Department to cease further publication of the report, which leads to the internal conflict within *The Post* on whether to challenge an already hostile administration through subsequent publication of document excerpts.

The film's expert cinematic design reaches its crescendo with *Post* managing editor Ben Bagdikian's (Bob Odenkirk) little-known efforts to secure a copy of the study from Ellsberg—an account related in Bagdikian's notable 1997 autobiography, *Double Vision*. Thereafter Graham and *Post* chief editor Ben Bradlee (Tom Hanks) embark on a tightrope walk over whether to publish portions of the study in the midst of the administration's prior restraint order, a fledgling public offering of *Post* stock, and strong counsel against publication by the paper's corporate board and attorneys.

In many ways *The Post* disingenuously serves as clever historical propaganda for the younger generations, informing its audience that Washington's foreign policy was safely under the guidance of civilian leaders eventually brought to heel by a vigilant press. For example, in a scene where Katharine Graham confronts former Secretary of Defense and longtime friend Robert McNamara (Bruce Greenwood), who commissioned the Rand study and is embarrassed at its disclosure, McNamara begs Graham for her forgiveness in light of the document's misleading conclusion that previous administrations blindly forged ahead in Southeast Asia while recognizing how such engagement was "hopeless." [3]

Looming over the internal company struggle and Katharine Graham's indecision on publication is Phillip Graham—the *Post*'s original publisher whose name and presence are eerily invoked throughout, yet left entirely unexamined, as if Phil's death at a mere 48 years of age was due to a terminal illness or traffic accident. In fact, if Hollywood was truly concerned with calling attention to unjust wars and renegade administrations, as is suggested in *The Post*'s strident narrative, Phil Graham's turbulent life and tragic, untimely demise might be among the most fruitful to excavate.

In an apparent effort to keep this colorful Cold Warrior's ghost at bay, the filmmakers conveniently pigeonhole over two decades of important history, offering in its place a historical apparition wherein the country's most influential media executives were hoodwinked into supporting the Southeast Asian nightmare. In so doing they exonerate the news media for their widescale support of the US occupation of Vietnam while preventing any potential consideration of the Grahams' well-documented ties to the US intelligence community that contributed to such journalistic misconduct.

With the aid of Katharine and Phil's close personal friend, intelligence veteran and Operation Mockingbird maestro Frank Wisner, Phil arranged for *Washington Post* journalists to function as CIA media assets abroad. The relationship between the Graham family, the *Post*, and the Agency included regular dinner parties hosted at the Grahams' DC residence. Spielberg heroine's vehemently denied the associations, "[b]ut Phil Graham's tie to the CIA—so cavalierly dismissed by his widow—is more plausible, given the times in which he operated," notes Katharine Graham biographer Carol Felsenthal.

"Kay was there, during the friendship with Frank Wisner, and that with CIA chief Allen Dulles; newsmen and CIA types mixed effortlessly at those Sunday suppers at her house. Her calling the alleged connection a 'fantasy' and dismissing the possibility out of hand is dishonest." [4]



Phil Graham was also an early supporter and personal friend of John Kennedy, who during his administration tapped him to lead the newly-formed Communications Satellite Corporation. By this time, however, and especially following Frank Wisner's suicide in 1961,

Phil Graham was otherwise becoming an outsider. For years Phil had struggled with manic depression and alcoholism.

Washington Post publisher Philip Graham (Source: dailymaverick.co.za)

These conditions combined with his relationship to US intelligence figures and adoration of his friend John Kennedy made him a potential loose cannon for both the CIA and Kennedy administration. This was more and more concerning in early 1963, when Phil's apparent mental illness reached an acute stage.

Though an insider in Wisner's Operation Mockingbird, Phil's imbalance caused Kennedy to exclude him from what author Deborah Davis describes as "the two most significant intelligence operations of his presidency, those called MONGOOSE and Special Operations CI [counterinsurgency]." The former involved cultivating an indigenous Cuban insurgency to overthrow Fidel Castro while the latter "was assigned the task of designing a war, so to speak, in reaction to the failure of MONGOOSE." These joint presidential-CIA projects included CIA director John McCone, Attorney General Robert Kennedy, national security adviser McGeorge Bundy, and former CBS Vice President Edward R. Murrow, who was included in the administration's nod to "mediapolitics"—engaging the media industry to gear public opinion in favor of the impending Vietnam war.[5]

With the knowledge of Murrow's involvement in this regard Phil Graham's alienation further fueled a cynicism toward his own profession. He started discussing the CIA's "manipulation of journalists. He said it disturbed him. He said it to the CIA," Davis observes. His fellow journalists practiced the unspoken code of "keep[ing] Phil's insanity 'out of the papers' as he had kept stories 'out of the papers' for his friends; but now the word was that Phil Graham could not be trusted, and his friends began to see very little of him." [6]

In early 1963 Phil strategized on how to seize control of the newspaper from Katharine while his mental state deteriorated further, repeatedly revising his will to give his mistress Robin Webb "a controlling interest in his estate. All through the winter and spring of 1963, Katharine was both devastated and humiliated by the entire course of events," yet at the same time "determined to prevent the *Post* from falling into Phil's control and ownership, even if it meant she had to have Phil declared insane." [7]

In early 1963 Phil Graham flew out to Phoenix Arizona for a multi-month bender. While there he was informed of an important convention of newspaper publishers and editors to which he was not invited. Phil crashed the event and proceeded to condemn the newsmen as frauds who all-too-often pulled in their sails instead of truly confronting the day's most important issues and events. "Phil interrupted a banquet speech by Benjamin McKelway, editor of the *Washington Star* and a member of the [Associated Press] board of directors," Felsenthal explains,

and seized the lectern to tell his peers that they were fat, stupid cowards who wouldn't know the truth if they sat on it. And, he said, "he wouldn't wipe his ass with their papers." The thunderstruck audience stared in disbelief, but Phil was just warming up. He singled out various publishers and began to revile them. Newsmen who had stayed behind in New York and Washington were soon abuzz with vivid descriptions of Phil's "around the bend" but "brilliant" performance. "He went through everybody," recalls Arnaud de Borchgrave, "including Otis Chandler of the Los Angeles Times, berated every one of them

for their lack of balls. Nobody knew how to stop him.” He was “devastating and brilliant and accurate, [and] did beautiful caricatures of each of the big shots present.”

Phil continued to inform those assembled on “who in Washington was sleeping with whom, and that he might as well start at the top with John Kennedy, who was sleeping, in the White House, with Mary Meyer.”[8]

A journalist in the crowd telephoned President Kennedy, who after conversing with Katharine ordered a military jet to Phoenix with Phil’s personal psychiatrist in tow to forcibly retrieve Graham, straightjacket and all. Following his return to DC Phil asked for Katharine’s forgiveness; she agreed to take him back provided he seek treatment. On June 20, 1963, for a second time within one year, he was admitted to the Chestnut Lodge psychiatric facility. He received daily visits from Katharine until August 3, when his condition improved enough for the staff to grant him a day’s stay with Katharine at the Grahams’ Glen Welby country estate.

As new information comes to light the sequence of events leading to Phil’s violent death contradict each other. Deborah Davis and Carol Felsenthal convincingly argue in each of their Katharine Graham biographies that Phil’s death was a suicide attributable to his mental illness. Recent research by clinical psychologist and author Peter Janney sheds new light on the episode. As early as 1992 Davis explained in an interview “that she ‘got a call from a woman who claimed that she knew for a fact that it [Phil’s death] was murder.’”

According to Felsenthal, after “‘a happy morning together’” on August 3, Phil declared that he was going bird hunting. He proceeded to a bathroom on the first floor and allegedly committed suicide with a small caliber shotgun wound to his right temple. Given his alienation and erratic behavior Phil Graham’s friends and associates readily concluded that Phil had outsmarted his caregivers and carefully planned his suicide all along.[9]

Katharine Graham’s 1998 account of Phil’s death excludes any discussion of hunting. The couple were having an early afternoon nap when “‘[a]fter a short while Phil got up, saying he wanted to lie down in a separate bedroom he sometimes used. Only a few minutes later, there was the ear-splitting noise of a gun going off indoors. I bolted out of the room and ran around in a frenzy looking for him. When I opened the door to a downstairs bathroom, I found him.’”

William Wadsworth Smith was the longtime caretaker of the Graham’s Glen Welby estate in 1963. According to a second-hand account of Smith’s granddaughter Barbara L. Smith, on the afternoon in question Katharine requested the caretaker’s aid in moving Phil’s body to Glen Welby’s first floor. “Mrs. Graham had called on Barbara’s grandfather ‘to go upstairs and bring this man [Phil Graham] downstairs. She called to him and he went up and put him in ... he took him in his arms and brought him down’ after he had allegedly shot himself.”[10]

Phil Graham’s alleged suicide and obscure place in American journalism history remains a mystery carefully avoided in *The Post*. His death came just fourteen weeks before John Kennedy’s assassination and one year prior to the Lyndon Johnson administration’s Tonkin Gulf false flag inaugurating the Vietnam War. If he lived would Phil Graham have raised uneasy questions concerning Kennedy’s death? Would he have uncritically accepted the Warren Report’s “lone gunman” conspiracy theory of JFK’s assassination proffered by his old

friend Allen Dulles? In light of the above, was there a possibility that Phil's self destructiveness was exacerbated by the infamous CIA Technical Services Staff, whose tactics for "committing suicides" and administering aggressive cancers came to light in the 1975 Church Committee Congressional hearings? Hollywood seldom ponders such historical "What ifs?" that may provide for much more interesting narratives, yet at the same time prompt moviegoers to reexamine the lies they've been told in the classroom and the continuing miseducation of corporate media.[11]

Though erratic and suffering, Phil at once demonstrated his brute honesty and unpredictability before the intelligence community and news industry where he once figured prominently. Following his death Katharine took over the *Post* without hesitation, and for the next seven years her editorial staff almost unquestioningly supported the United States' "hopeless" brutalization of Southeast Asia. "Washington Post Company president Katharine Graham counted among her best friends some of the key architects of the Vietnam War, including Defense Secretary Robert McNamara (who later joined the board of directors of the Washington Post Company," observe authors Martin A. Lee and Norman Solomon. "President Lyndon Johnson appreciated all the gung-ho editorials about the war that *Post* editor Russell Wiggins was writing. As an apt reward a presidential appointment made Wiggins the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations [in] the last few months of 1968-'a plum from Johnson to a loyalist'." [12]

Through careful cinematic artifice and historical license *The Post's* broader takeaway echoes the dishonest and shallow ethos still reverberating through so many journalism school curricula-that the Fourth Estate prevailed over a belligerent administration's attempts at censorship while it held the US government accountable for waging an illegal and immoral war. Moreover, particularly given the present historical moment, the film misses an important opportunity to transcend its hostility toward the US incumbent and rather inform the geopolitical tension and broader threat to human survival evident in the US-NATO's aggressive encirclement of the Russian Federation.[13]

Unsurprisingly, the political science catechism offered in Spielberg's opus is mundane, parochial, and fundamentally misleading: the Pentagon Papers, so gallantly published by the *Times* and *Post*, reveal a continuity in Indochina foreign policy extending back to the Harry S. Truman administration. In this way, and alongside the inscrutable treatment of Phil Graham's confusing legacy, the film seeks to strengthen the myth of an American free press while its narrative further buries any trace of the road President Kennedy actually paved toward world peace in the months before his assassination.



Indeed, Kennedy's palpable move toward détente was evident in the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty forged with Moscow in the summer of 1963. As author James Douglas argues, Kennedy's important plea for world peace in his June 10, 1963 speech at American University marked a potential turning point in the Cold War that current US statesmen would be well-served in heeding.

The suffering that the Russian people [in World War II] had already experienced was Kennedy's backdrop for addressing the evil of nuclear war, as it would affect simultaneously the U.S, the U.S.S.R., and the rest of the world: "All we have built, all we have worked for would be destroyed in the first 24 hours. In short," he said, "both the United States and its allies, and the Soviet

Union and its allies, have a mutually deep interest in a just and genuine peace and in halting the arms race.” ...

John Kennedy, portrayed by unsympathetic writers as a man with few feelings, had broken through the feelings of our Cold War enemy, not only the ruler Nikita Khrushchev but an entire people decimated in World War II. What *about* the Russians? Kennedy’s answer was that when we felt the enemy’s pain, peace was not only possible. It was necessary. It was as necessary as the life of one’s own family, seen truly for the first time. The vision that John F. Kennedy had been given was radically simple: Our side and their side were the same side.

“For in the final analysis,” Kennedy said, summing up his vision of interdependence, “our most basic common link is that we all inhabit this small planet. We all breathe the same air. We all cherish our children’s future. And we are all mortal.”[14]

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This article was originally published on the blog of [James F. Tracy](#).

Notes

[1] Speech given in 1988 at CIA headquarters, Langley Virginia, to senior CIA staffers. Stephen L. Vaughn, *Encyclopedia of American Journalism*, New York: Routledge, 2008, 201. Cited in Peter Janney, *Mary’s Mosaic: The CIA Conspiracy to Murder John F. Kennedy, Mary Pinchot Meyer, and Their Vision For World Peace*, New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 2013, 269.

[2] The Post: Awards. <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt6294822/awards>

[3] The suggestion that the country’s decision-making power is almost entirely exercised by its civilian leaders is contradicted by the November 22, 1963 veto of President Kennedy’s efforts at détente with Russia and drawdown of US military commitment in Vietnam indicate otherwise, examined in more detail below. See James W. Douglas, *JFK and the Unspeakable: Why He Died and Why It Matters*, New York: Touchstone, 2008; L. Fletcher Prouty, *JFK: The CIA, Vietnam and the Plot to Assassinate John F. Kennedy*, New York: Birch Lane, 1992.

[4] Carol Felsenthal, *Power, Privilege and The Post: The Katherine Graham Story*, New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1993, 372.

[5] Deborah Davis, *Katherine the Great: Katherine Graham and the Washington Post*, Bethesda MD: National Press, 1987 (1979), 160.

[6] Davis, 161.

[7] Janney, 252.

[8] Felsenthal, 215-216. As Peter Janney compellingly argues in *Mary’s Mosaic*, in early 1963 Kennedy’s mistress figured centrally in transforming the president’s stance on US relations with the Soviet Union. Mary Meyer’s sister Tony was the sister-in-law of *Washington Post* editor Ben Bradlee (Sarah Paulson). *The Post* fails to elaborate on these relationships.

[9] Felsenthal, 216, 217, 218.

[10] Quoted in Janney, 266, 267.

[11] “By the early 1960s, the Technical Services Staff within the CIA, headed by the infamous Dr. Sidney Gottlieb, had a huge arsenal of drugs and other substances that could be clandestinely administered to unwitting victims to create such states as suicidal-depression, brain tumors, cancer, or death from natural causes, leaving no trace of any foreign toxins in the body.” Janney, 267. Though beyond the scope of this essay, it is notable that Phil and Katherine Graham’s son, William Graham, a successful lawyer and philanthropist, committed suicide with “a self-inflicted gunshot wound” just two days before *The Post*’s premier, on December 20, 2017. “William Graham, Son of Washington Post Publisher, Dies in Apparent Suicide,” FoxNews/Reuters, December 26, 2017, <http://www.foxnews.com/us/2017/12/27/william-graham-son-washington-post-publisher-dies-in-apparent-suicide.html>

[12] Martin A. Lee and Norman Solomon, *Unreliable Sources: A Guide to Detecting Bias in News Media*, New York: Lyle Stuart, 1992, 107.

[13] Vladimir Putin, Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly, March 1, 2018, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/56957>

[14] Douglas, *JFK and the Unspeakable*, 43; JFK Commencement Address at American University, January 10, 1963, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, <https://www.jfklibrary.org/Asset-Viewer/BWC7I4C9QUmLG9J6I8oy8w.aspx>

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