

BRIDGE OF SPIES

Directed by Steven Spielberg
Produced by Steven Spielberg, Marc Platt, and Kristie Macosko Krieger
Distributed by Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures
Released in 2015

While there has been much revisionist talk about moral equivalency in the Cold War, and it is considered sophisticated to posit that the Soviet Union was legitimately concerned about American intentions in Europe and was merely attempting to set up a defensive perimeter, let us not forget a couple of choice facts. First, in 1945, with WWII complete, the United States, possessing nuclear weapons, suddenly found itself the most powerful nation in history. It could have threatened every country with decimation in a bid for world hegemony. Instead it shared its nuclear secrets with Great Britain and set about rebuilding Germany and Japan. Second, the United States ceded control over the areas it had liberated and permitted free elections. The Soviet Union did not, despite promises to the contrary. Instead, the USSR deployed 100,000 rampaging militiamen to throw the 1947 Polish elections to the Communists, threatened West Berliners with starvation between 1948 and 1949 (necessitating the Berlin Airlift), and flattened freedom fighters in Budapest in 1956. So it is with welcome relief that *Bridge of Spies* presents to a new generation a reasonable interpretation of the history of this period. It makes some legitimate points: There's great hypocrisy in deeming a foreign power's spying to be immoral when we ourselves do the same thing. (The real problem is when a spy betrays his own country.) Also, blind hatred of Communism in America promoted gross hostility to our fellow citizens (Donovan's house getting shot at), and an abandonment of the legal-system protocols that we take for granted. Even if an enemy benefits accordingly, the resolve to remain loyal to one's country and to honor promises should be lauded. The key moment in the film establishing that the two systems are not morally equivalent comes when Donovan is riding the train back to West Berlin after he is interrogated. He and other passengers are horrified to witness two young people gunned down in cold blood while trying to scale the Berlin Wall. It's a surprising moment, not because that kind of thing did not happen, but because the film has taken great pains up to this point to remain above the fray—there is no protagonist-nation, just a lonely protagonist, caught up in the middle of a mess he barely understands. The moment is shocking, and a touch incongruous, but welcome nonetheless. For relying on dialogue as much as it does, *Bridge of Spies* is still exciting. While it ruminates on the importance of the rule of law it also serves as a fascinating primer on negotiation tactics. Its only major misstep is the crash of the Powers U-2. According to the film, the pilot was harassed and/or tortured by the Soviets; actually he was treated well—the busted-up plane spoke for itself. Also, too much emphasis is placed on his struggle to maintain control of the airplane, while nothing is done with his fateful decision to forego suicide; it was that decision which makes the film's climax of a prisoner exchange possible. Such a moment could highlight the film's theme that individual lives are more important than the blind machinations of sullen, soulless nation-states. It is tempting to think that veteran director-extraordinaire Steven Spielberg simply couldn't pass up the chance for a big action sequence in the middle of a

talky film, so he emphasized what happened in the air, at the expense of what happened on the ground. Surely he has learned by now that, at least sometimes, less is more.