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[***The Art of Negotiations, lessons from the film* Bridge of Spies**](http://stansburyforum.com/the-art-of-negotiations-lessons-from-the-film-bridge-of-spies/)

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The Stansbury Forum.

*The Stansbury Forum is a website for discussion by writers, activists and scholars on the topics that Jeff focused his life on: labor, politics, immigration, the environment, and world affairs.*

**Introduction.**

While the power of a strike, boycott, or direct action campaign may get you to the negotiating table, it doesn’t close the deal. There, a new art and science is called upon: **negotiations**. It is individual people who are the negotiators, not anonymous organizations. While these individuals are the voices of organizations—whether governments or private entities—they also have egos, aspirations, preconceptions, strengths and weaknesses, and some autonomy regarding the deals they finally strike.

***“Bridge of Spies”*** is a first-rate, fact-based, Cold War thriller; it is also a lesson in the art and science of negotiations.

**The Story.**

The Stephen Spielberg-directed film’s plot is the complex negotiations that took place between the U.S., East Germany and the Soviet Union over the exchange of U-2 spy plane pilot Francis Gary Powers (who was captured by the Soviet Union), and American student Frederic Pryor (arrested and accused of spying by East Germany) for U.S.-imprisoned Soviet spy Colonel Rudolf Abel. The major U.S. negotiator, Attorney James B. Donovan, is played by Tom Hanks. Mark Rylance won an Academy Award for his role as Colonel Abel.

Donovan had earlier represented Abel as a court-appointed attorney in his spy case. Convicted, Abel was spared the death sentence in large part by Donovan’s effective representation.

About six weeks after a U.S. Supreme Court 5-4 vote upheld Abel’s conviction on the 28th March, 1960, an American pilot named Francis Gary Powers was flying a U-2 spy plane on a CIA mission over the Soviet Union. His plane was shot down, and he was captured—undermining all U.S. government claims that it was not using these high-altitude flights to spy on the Russians. The U.S. wanted him back, and asked Donovan to be the negotiator who got him.

**Identify Self-Interests—not yours, but those with whom you’re dealing.**

Donovan’s skill at homing in on specific self-interests makes the film a lesson in the art of negotiations. At Col. Abel’s earlier sentencing appearance, Donovan made this argument in the Federal District Court:

***“It is in the best interests of the US that Abel remain alive…It is possible that in the foreseeable future an American of equivalent rank will be captured by Soviet Russia or an ally; we might want to have someone to trade.”***

***“There’s also the humanitarian argument: he’s doing the job they sent him to do.”***

This makes Abel an honorable man, though an opponent. Here Donovan seeks to deal with the Cold War-immersed Federal District Court Judge’s predisposition to dehumanize Abel.

The narrow self-interest (the possibility of a future trade) is wrapped in a larger framework of values (Abel is an honorable human being). The Federal District Court Judge can tell others, and say to himself, that he was above self-interest in sentencing Abel to 30 years in prison rather than death. Similarly, the Supreme Court is asked to stand for the Constitution so that the U.S. doesn’t look weaker in its cause the does the USSR in its.

At the Supreme Court, where the case goes on appeal, Donovan makes an appeal aimed at convincing the Justices that we should be as committed to our Constitution as Abel is to his country: “Will we stand by our cause less resolutely than he stands by his”.

Shortly after Donovan made his case for Abel, Powers was captured by the Soviets when he parachuted from his plane rather than injecting himself with the poison he’d been told to take by the U.S. government if he was shot down and there was any possibility of capture. Thus the stage is set for an equal trade between the United States and the Soviet Union. But things get complicated when the East Germans take graduate student Frederic Pryor as a prisoner while he’s in East Berlin at the time the Berlin Wall is being completed and hostilities between the U.S. and the Soviet Union are at a high point.

The U.S. government’s principal interest was to negotiate Abel for Powers. In a face-to-face meeting, Allen Dulles tells Donovan that Pryor can be sacrificed. The CIA representative who is Donovan’s contact person acquiesces to Donovan’s interest in getting Pryor released as part of the deal to humor Donovan, but insists that the goal is to get Powers. When Donovan holds out for Pryor’s release when everything is set for an Abel-Powers exchange, his CIA liaison officer says, “You fucked it up.”

For Donovan, getting both released becomes a personal mission. He deals with an East German lawyer who claims to represent Abel’s wife, and Ivan Schischkin, second in command in the East Berlin Soviet Embassy.

At one point things look shaky in the negotiation with Schischkin. Donovan is talking with Schischkin’s aide: “If we have to tell Abel that he’s not going home, then his behavior might change. And who will be held responsible for that—your boss?”

**The Person on the Other Side of the Table**

Donovan wants to establish a personal relationship with Schischkin, at least as personal as can be expected in the circumstances. Having said, and found agreement from his Russian counterpart, that the world is in a very dangerous place, he says: “We need to have the conversation our governments can’t.”

Donovan is complimentary of Abel, telling Schischkin that Abel is still “your man.” He behaved “with honor” refusing to give information to his U.S. interrogators. He says to his Soviet counterpart, “This is not part of our business. I like your guy.”

Donovan also asks Schischkin what his standing will be with his superiors if this deal doesn’t go through. This happens in the context of Schischkin saying that he can’t speak for the East Germans—who are the ones holding Pryor.

**Bluffing**

At the table, you don’t want to reveal your hand—which means you don’t want your adversary to know what’s very important to you, and what’s of little value. Both Donovan and Schischkin, play the game:

***Schischkin: “We think Abel might have given up information; that’s why you’re ready to trade him.” And, “We have to determine whether he is still our guy.” All this to say Abel isn’t really all that important to the Russians. Schischkin tells Donovan there are parties in his government who would be just as happy if the trade wasn’t made. Is this a bluff?***

***Donovan calls the bluff: “The next operative caught by the United States might think twice about whether he gives up information.”***

If Abel, who didn’t give up information, is left to rot in a U.S. prison, a subsequent spy might decide to give the U.S. information so he can avoid that fate.

**Divide and Conquer**

Schischkin tells Donovan, “we don’t have Pryor, the East Germans do”. When it suits his purpose Donovan treats the East German government as a puppet of the Soviets, essentially freezing Schischkin as his target and making him responsible to deliver Pryor.

Donovan to Schischkin: “I’m confident you can make arrangements for Pryor.”

But when dealing with the East Germans, he acknowledges and uses their desire to be recognized by the U.S. (our government refused to give formal recognition to the German Democratic Republic) as part of his negotiating tactics to make Pryor part of the deal.

**God (or the Devil) Is In The Details**

The Abel-Powers trade takes place at the Glienicke Bridge between East and West Berlin. But the Pryor trade precedes it at “Checkpoint Charlie” so that the East Germans can make clear their separateness from the Soviets.

The timing must be perfect: the two sides stand facing each other at the bridge, waiting for the call from Checkpoint Charlie telling them Pryor is in U.S. hands. Only then the two parties, with spotlights and guns pointed from each end of the bridge, walk toward each other. The two men being exchanged continue walking. Those accompanying them turn back to their respective sides of Berlin. The deal is done.

**There’s More**

The subtleties are many: You have to leave room for your negotiating partner to save face. You have to establish the trustworthiness of your word. There is a continuous process of testing going on. Make them live by their rulebook. There’s more.  
It takes quickness of mind and facility of tongue to do the job. The movie is fun if you watch it as a lesson in negotiations.

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The author recently made a presentation of his co-edited book, People Power: The Community Organizing Tradition of Saul Alinsky. If you’d like to see a video of that event, or get is presentation notes, write him at [mikeotcmiller@gmail.com](mailto:mikeotcmiller@gmail.com). For more on him and his work, visit [www.organizetrainingcenter.org](http://www.organizetrainingcenter.org/)

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Mike Miller’s organizing background includes the early student movement at UC Berkeley, field secretary for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (1962-end of 1966), directorship of a Saul Alinsky community organizing project (1967-68), and a number of subsequent organizing projects. His articles on organizing have appeared in *Social Policy, CounterPunch, Dissent, Socialist Review, International Journal of Urban Planning and Reseearch, Organizing*, and *The Organizer*. He is author of *Community Organizing: A Brief Introduction, A Community Organizer’s Tale: People and Power in San Francisco*, co-author of *The People Fight Back*, and co-editor of the recently published *People Power: The Organizing Tradition of Saul Alinsky*. He directs ORGANIZE Training Center, www.organizetrainingcenter.org