

**GOOD NIGHT AND GOOD LUCK**  
A Review

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“We’re gonna run with the story because the terror is in this room...”

So says Ed Murrow in an early scene of “Good Night and Good Luck”. Nervous television journalists search their consciences for family associations or anything in their past that might allow the infamous Senator McCarthy to smear them and further emasculate freedom of speech in an age of fear.

This film is of course set during the 1950s, that inglorious and ironic period in US history during which the fear of communism reached such hysterical proportions that McCarthy and others were able to abuse the Senate Committee structure (a key component in the US democratic system) to conduct rather un-American public witch hunts. In these show trials, public figures and private individuals alike were smeared and on occasion ruined through accusation, hearsay and lies.

Just as Arthur Miller illuminated this tragic period in “the Crucible” using the earlier Salem witch hunts as metaphor, George Clooney (as co-writer and director of this film) is plainly speaking to us about our own moment, the new illiberal era which they call “the War on Terror” and which historians may one day condemn with as much rigour as that of McCarthyism itself.

Edward R. Murrow was a heavyweight television journalist working for the CBS network in the United States- a Jon Snow or Jeremy Paxman of his day. Some of the most tense and powerful scenes in the film deal with his complex, delicate and vital relationship with the head of the corporation and its various commercial sponsors. However this is not a completely one-sided portrait of the morality of reporting during illiberal times. There are genuine and difficult dilemmas posed about the line between news and polemic and the difficulty of achieving balance when reporting on profound injustice.

The real story however, is about courage and reason under fire in defence of fundamental rights and freedoms. In that sense Hollywood may have provided both Liberty and the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) with the most inspirational of recruitment ads. All who love this film are natural members.

Early on, Murrow and his team plan to report on the case of a member of the armed forces. He has been convicted of being a “danger to national security” on the basis of sealed evidence which he has had no opportunity to challenge. Fred Friendly (Murrow’s producer played by Clooney) is visited by two senior military personnel in an attempt to intimidate the programme makers away from the story. In a moment that I found particularly chilling, one of the senior officers berates the journalist with the assertion that those who have seen the uncontested secret intelligence are the best judge of “who is a danger to this country”. This is an assertion which I have heard from many a proponent of detention and then punishment without trial here in the United Kingdom in recent years.

Some have said that this film is of greatest interest to those already familiar with McCarthyism. That may be the case, but this is no dry political essay. The strain on individual human beings, the effect on personal and professional relationships and the claustrophobia of fear are ever-present. The beautiful black and white portrait of this episode in American history is punctuated by Dianne Reeves’ haunting ballads and more tumblers of whisky and cigarettes than you ever see today.

In a particularly poignant counterpoint to the main plot, Robert Downey Jr. (at his career best) and Patricia Clarkson play Joe and Shirley Wershbo, close colleagues forced to disguise their marriage because of the CBS personnel policy forbidding such liaisons between fellow employees. Their clandestine encounters at work and home make their rather touchingly wholesome relationship seem almost adulterous. This great irony of fear and illiberalism is beautifully brought out in the film.

At the height of McCarthyism so-called patriots undermined freedom at home whilst claiming to defend and promote it abroad. Suspicion hung like a low cloud and good people lived in fear, even of each other. The ultimate message of this wonderful film is provided by Murrow’s own words taken from his original broadcasts:

“We must not confuse dissent with disloyalty. We must remember always that accusation is not proof and that conviction depends upon evidence and due process of law. We will not walk in fear, one of another. We will not be driven by fear into an age of unreason if we dig deep in our history and our doctrine and remember that we are not descended from fearful men- not from men who feared to write, to associate, to speak and to defend the causes that were for the moment unpopular. Good night and good luck.”

These words are as true today as they were half a century ago.

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