



January 12, 2018 5:50 AM Age: 2 yrs

## First Amendment Goose Bumps

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Source: Larry Checco, featured commentator

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When **Katherine Graham** gave **Ben Bradley** the go-ahead to publish the **Pentagon Papers**, I got **goose bumps**.

If you don't know what I'm talking about, go see **Steven Spielberg's** new movie, ***The Post***.

My goose bumps weren't the result of actors **Meryl Streep's** and **Tom Hanks'** fine acting ability, although both turned in **Oscar-quality** performances.

No, those goose bumps rose because -- in what now seems like a long time ago in a **galaxy far, far** away -- there existed people like **Publisher Katherine Graham**, **Editor Ben Bradley**, **Daniel Ellsberg** and others, including executives of ***The New York Times***, who made extremely difficult, potentially life-altering



decisions, not for personal or political gain, but because they knew the decisions they were making were *ethically and morally correct*.

Although threatened and excoriated by a government swathed in secrecy and paranoia?namely, the **Nixon Administration** ? these people deeply believed that the citizens of the **United States of America** had a right to know that **their government**, over the course of 30 years and five presidents, had been lying to them.

The cost of those lies translated into the deaths of **two million Vietnamese**, many of whom were innocent women and children, nearly **60,000 American GIs**, and about **\$1 trillion** U.S. taxpayer dollars when adjusted for inflation.

#### *Why the lies that prolonged the war?*

No administration?from **Harry Truman?s to Richard Nixon?s**?wanted to go down in history as having ?lost? Vietnam to communism. It was more about losing political face than winning a war.

According to the **Pentagon Papers**, 10 percent of the war was fought to help the people of Vietnam, 20% to contain Communist China, and a full 70% to save face.

However, the principal characters in this courageous escapade to uphold the **First Amendment** of the **U.S. Constitution** and to publish had more to lose than face.

Ellsberg, who photocopied-- by hand -- **7,000 pages** of the **Rand Report** that became known as the Pentagon Papers, faced life imprisonment for treason. The leaders of *The Washington Post* -- Graham and Bradley -- also risked jail time, their reputations, and in the case of Graham, *The Washington Post*, itself. The movie does a great job dramatizing all of this.



Fact is the **First Amendment of our Constitution** states: *Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.*

That's a lot of serious ground covered in a mere 45 words.

But if you are a strict constructionist of the constitution, which many in this current administration are, the code is clear, *?'Congress shall make no law?'abridging the freedom?'of the press.'?*

What the U.S. **Constitution** does not address, however, is how *far* our political leaders and others can go in trashing or discrediting that free press, or what we now call 'the media'.

**Who you trust is paramount to what you believe.**

With the advent of fake news?'promoted from the highest levels of our government, no less?'we've entered into a very squirrely state in our **democracy**.

Consider: If, in **1971**, we believed that the publication of the Pentagon Papers was nothing more than the mainstream media perpetrating a conspiracy against the **U.S. government'**as many have been led to believe the media is doing today?'the **Vietnam War** may have gone on for several more years. As it is, the war didn't end until April 1975.

We have faced many crises since the inception of our democracy, but few as serious as the assault our free press is experiencing today. If all we have is a government dictating to us what its truth is, history has proven



we're in deep do-do.

Kudos to today's Grahams, Bradleys and Ellsbergs who are still out there, acting as checks on our government, trying to keep it honest. **If that check goes, so does our democracy.**

**Go see the movie *The Post*.** You'll better understand what I mean. You may even get goose bumps.

Larry Checco

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