

ABOUT J. ROBERT OPPENHEIMER

THIS ARTICLE IS IN TWO PARTS

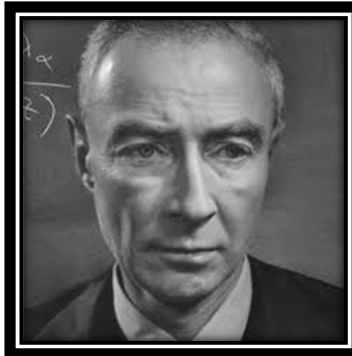
PART ONE

WHEN OPPENHEIMER “FATHER OF THE BOMB” WAS BLACKLISTED

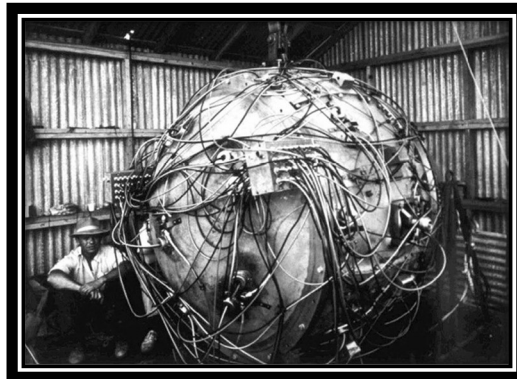
PART TWO

U.S. REVERSES REMOVAL OF J. ROBERT OPPENHEIMER'S SECURITY CLEARANCE

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After leading the development of the first atomic bomb, J. Robert Oppenheimer called for international control of nuclear weapons. **It cost him his job.**



Exposed wiring of “The Gadget,” the nuclear device that exploded as part of Trinity, the first test of an atomic bomb. **At the time of this photo, the device was being prepared for its detonation, which took place on July 16, 1945**



ORIGINAL: AUG 10, 2017

UPDATED: MAY 16, 2023

On July 16, 1945, a team of scientists and engineers watched the first successful atomic bomb explosion at the Trinity test site in Alamogordo, New Mexico. The team, dubbed **“The Manhattan Project.”** had been secretly developing the weapon at the Los Alamos Laboratory during World War II. By the time it was ready, the Allies had already declared victory in Europe but were still fighting in Japan.

Physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer, the director of the laboratory and so-called “father of the atomic bomb,” watched from afar that morning as the bomb released a mushroom cloud 40,000 feet high. His description of that moment has since become famous:

"I remembered the line from the Hindu scripture the Bhagavad-Gita," he said. "Now I have become Death, the destroyer of worlds." I suppose we all thought that, one way or another."



A fireball begins to rise, and the world's first atomic mushroom cloud begins to form, nine seconds after Trinity detonated on July 16, 1945.

On August 6, the U.S. dropped the bomb on Hiroshima, Japan, wiping out 90 percent of the city and killing 80,000 people. Three days later, the U.S. killed 40,000 people in Nagasaki with another bomb. Tens of thousands more would die from radiation exposure. Japan surrendered a few days after the second bombing, ending World War II.

As details of the horrific destruction reached the Manhattan Project scientists, many began to question what they had done. In late October, Oppenheimer visited President Harry S. Truman, who had okayed the use of bath bombs, to talk to him about placing international controls on nuclear weapons. Truman, worried about the prospect of Soviet nuclear development, dismissed him.

When Oppenheimer said he felt compelled to act because he had blood on his hands, Truman angrily told the scientist that "The blood is on my hands, let me worry about that." He then kicked him out of the Oval Office, writes author Paul Ham in

Ham isn't convinced that Oppenheimer felt remorse specifically for the bombing of Japan, which the scientist may have viewed as a necessary evil. Rather, he thinks that Oppenheimer was more concerned about the devastation that future nuclear war could bring.

After the war, Oppenheimer took steps to prevent such a future. He began working with the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission to control the use of nuclear weapons. In 1949, when Truman approached the commission about creating a hydrogen bomb, Oppenheimer opposed it.

Despite his opposition, the U.S. developed an H-bomb and tested it in 1952. But Oppenheimer's resistance ended up costing him his job. During the McCarthy era, the government stripped him of his job with the commission, citing his opposition to the hydrogen bomb as well as his purported Communist ties.

Oppenheimer's blacklisting had more to do with his stance on the H-bomb than his Communist friends. Still, it created a scandal that followed him until he died in 1967. For decades afterward, people continued to speculate about whether he was a Soviet spy.

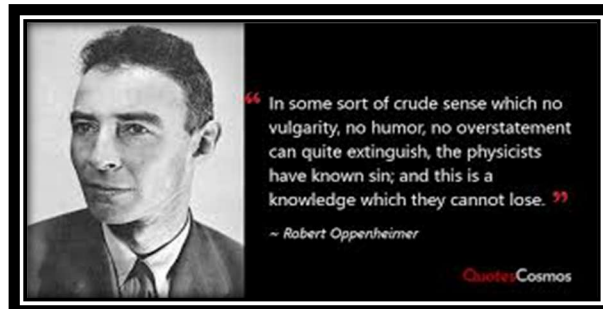
Today, Oppenheimer is mostly remembered as a scientist who was persecuted for trying to address the moral problems of his creation. Though there have been some close calls, no country has used nuclear bombs as weapons since Hiroshima and Nagasaki. This means that, so far, we've been able to avoid the nuclear future Oppenheimer feared he'd already set in motion.

J. Robert Oppenheimer died on February 18, 1967, at the age of 62. The cause of death, contrary to the cataclysmic power of the atomic bomb he helped create, was the outcome of a prolonged battle with throat cancer. He had been a heavy chain smoker since his youth.

Oppenheimer underwent surgery, radiation treatment, and chemotherapy, but unfortunately, these were all unsuccessful, and he fell into a coma before passing away in 1967, his death marking the loss of one of the most consequential figures in modern science.

If you would like to read his rather long obituary, copy and paste the below link into your browser.

<http://www.plosin.com/beatbegins/archive/OppenheimerObituary.htm>

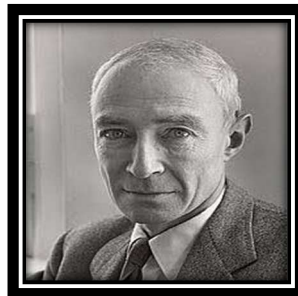


PART TWO

U.S. REVERSES REMOVAL OF J. ROBERT OPPENHEIMER'S SECURITY

CLEARANCE

THE "FATHER OF THE BOMB" WAS ACCUSED OF BEING A COMMUNIST ALONG WITH OTHER ACCUSATIONS



THEY TOOK HIS SECURITY CLEARANCE AWAY IN 1954. HE DIED IN 1967. THEY DIDN'T REINSTATE IT UNTIL 2022. HE LIVED IN DISGRACE FOR 13 YEARS AND IT TOOK 68 YEARS TO HAVE IT REINSTATED



DEC 20, 2022

During the peak of the Cold War—when American fears of the Soviet Union were at a high—Senator Joseph McCarthy helped stoke a mass paranoia that communists were infiltrating life in the United States. The ensuing hysteria led the loyalties of hundreds to be scrutinized during the so-called Red Scare. **One such person to come under fire was the famed physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer, the "father of the atomic bomb."**

Oppenheimer fell from grace after the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) alleged he had ties to communism and revoked his security clearance in 1954. Now, almost 70 years later, the United States Department of Energy has reversed the decision, stating the trial was a "flawed process that violated the Commission's regulations."

"As time has passed, more evidence has come to light of the bias and unfairness of the process that Dr. Oppenheimer was subjected to, while the evidence of his loyalty and love of country have only been further affirmed," Secretary of Energy Jennifer Granholm says in the statement.

What's more, a review of the historical evidence shows the 1954 decision was less born out of genuine national security concerns than it was a product of the AEC's disagreement with Oppenheimer on nuclear weapons policy, Granholm writes in the order. After World War II, Oppenheimer opposed nuclear proliferation and argued against developing the hydrogen bomb, writes Dan Whitcomb for Reuters.

Before the decision to revoke his clearance, Oppenheimer was widely regarded as a brilliant scientist. He graduated from Harvard in three years, researched at the University of Cambridge in England, earned a Ph.D. at the University of Göttingen in Germany, and became a professor at the University of California, Berkeley.

One of his first contributions to the field of physics was his work laying the “foundations of modern theory for the quantum behavior of molecules,” per his 1967 *New York Times* obituary.

A few years later, he discovered the Oppenheimer-Phillips process, which “involves the break-up of deuterons [the nuclei of a hydrogen isotope called deuterium] in collisions that had been thought far too weak for such an effect,” per the *Times*.

But he's most well-known for his role in the Manhattan Project, a mission to develop the atomic bomb during World War II. Oppenheimer was then the director of the Los Alamos Laboratory. Described in his obituary as having a “special genius for administration,” he built a team of top-notch scientists and completed the mission in two years. The weaponry was then used to kill an estimated 200,000 people in the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, though the exact death toll is unknown.

By the 1950s, suspicions of Oppenheimer were growing. The physicist had past associations with communists, including his brother, Frank, who briefly joined the party from 1937 to 1941.

Oppenheimer was also outspoken against the development of the more powerful hydrogen bomb.

In 1954, after a trial that lasted 19 days, the AEC declared Oppenheimer a risk to the United States, saying he had “‘fundamental defects’ in his character,” per the *Associated Press*. With his security clearance revoked, Oppenheimer was cut off from the restricted information he needed to continue his work, and his career essentially came to an abrupt halt.

Historians have long advocated for a reversal of the AEC's decision, writes the *New York Times*'s William J. Broad. In 2014, the Obama administration released declassified pages from the trial, and experts say they show no evidence of disloyalty or wrongdoing.

“I'm overwhelmed with emotion,” Kai Bird, co-author of *American Prometheus*, a Pulitzer Prize-winning biography of Oppenheimer, tells the *Times*. “History matters, and what was done to Oppenheimer in 1954 was a travesty, a black mark on the honor of the nation.”

Senator Patrick Leahy praised the reversal in a statement: “This decision reaffirms that government scientists, whether renowned like Oppenheimer or a technician doing his or her daily job—including those willing to raise safety concerns or to express unpopular opinions on matters of national security—can do so freely and that their cases will be fairly reviewed based on facts, not personal animus or politics.”

Editor's note, January 18, 2023: *This story has been updated to more accurately describe Oppenheimer's role in the Manhattan Project and the consequences of the removal of his security clearance. The headline has also been changed to better reflect the actual action taken by the AEC.*