



Thinking About Oppenheimer

The arrival of *Oppenheimer* in theaters increased interest in both J. Robert Oppenheimer and work on the atomic bomb. For Sandians, the movie provides an origin story – how the work of the current Nuclear Security Enterprise began. It offers insight into early thinking about nuclear weapons and the role they played in the politics of the postwar decade.

Based on Kai Bird and Martin Sherwin's *American Prometheus*, the movie emphasizes the metaphor – Prometheus bringing fire to humans against the will of the gods and being forever punished for it. It moves through Oppenheimer's life – as an academic theoretical physicist who established quantum physics at UC Berkeley, as a left-wing sympathizer to some communist causes, and as leader of Los Alamos, working with General Leslie Groves (head of the Manhattan Engineer District) and managing the headstrong, wildly brilliant scientists who gathered to beat the Germans to the bomb.

Oppenheimer went on to chair the Atomic Energy Commission's (AEC) General Advisory Committee, where he argued against development of the hydrogen bomb, making the case that it would ignite an arms race. He lost that argument, with the U.S. actively pursuing development of the thermonuclear weapon beginning in 1950. Caught up in the McCarthy Era of the early 1950s, he was accused of being a Soviet spy and the AEC canceled his clearance. The March-April 1954 hearing that followed resulted in revocation of his clearance. In the broader scientific community, many then saw Oppenheimer as a persecuted hero.

Much of the film deals with consequences – of believing that personal decisions are no one else's business, of a theoretical physicist stepping into the realm of politics and war, and of believing that mastery in science will equate to influence in politics. In addition to the story of how the U.S. nuclear arsenal began, the movie may also inform our understanding of our mission – help us think about how current work grew out of the original technical decisions and the arms race; help us think about the relationship between science and politics; help us think about why we are here.



Some Context

The National Security Research Center at Los Alamos National Laboratory is producing a documentary on Oppenheimer. The trailer for "Oppenheimer: Science, Mission, Legacy" is available at <https://about.lanl.gov/oppenheimer/>.

Sandia historian Rebecca Ullrich gave a talk on Oppenheimer and his connections to Sandia prior to the *Oppenheimer* movie opening.

<https://digitalmedia.sandia.gov/Mediasite/Play/04227c9b1ba24dcdaadde16b984d840f1d>

Further Reading

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