

## Living in a nuclear world

By Martin J. Sherwin | Special to the Tribune December 9, 2007

Martin J. Sherwin, Pulitzer Prize winning author of 'American Prometheus: The Triumph and Tragedy of J. Robert Oppenheimer,' writes on why the first atomic explosion continues to rip a great fissure across human history.

Plays, books, novels, artistic representations and, finally, an opera. (What took John Adams and Peter Sellars so long?) Robert Oppenheimer's extraordinary life and complex personality have been a magnet for creative artists, not to mention historians and biographers. "The father of the atomic bomb" was at once brilliant and foolish, arrogant and vulnerable, charismatic and awkward, ambitious and conflicted, analytical and poetic, Jewish and secularly uncomfortable with the religion into which he was born.

During his 62 years (1904-1967) Oppenheimer engaged all the great transformative forces that roiled the 20th Century: quantum physics, with its new understanding of the universe; the communist movement, with its alternative vision of capital and labor; the Manhattan Project, with its terrifying creation -- that colossal Rosemary's Baby -- that immediately threatened the world's security, sanctity and sanity.

After the soul-wrenching experiences of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Oppenheimer sought to exorcise the demon he strived so mightily to conceive. In this final critical engagement -- the effort to prevent a nuclear arms race -- he failed completely. The existence today of weapons of mass destruction links his nuclear world to ours.

On July 16, 1945, just 51/2 years after the discovery of nuclear fission, Oppenheimer's new world debuted in the Alamogordo desert in New Mexico. At 5:30 a.m., science pre-empted nature with "a lighting effect ... equal to several suns in midday."

That first atomic explosion ripped a great fissure across human history. On the far side, were thousands of years of war and peace, degradation and progress -- in sum, the fantastic evolution of human existence. On the near side, there was a new, incredible fact. Human beings would soon be able to annihilate all life on Earth, to destroy everything, ourselves included. That explosion in the New Mexico desert seemed to shift an active volcano under humanity; Mt. Vesuvius and Pompeii became metaphors for the new world. "Suddenly the Day of Judgment was the next day and has been ever since," a Manhattan Project scientist observed.

A private purgatory

The atomic conflagrations that appeared to hasten the end of the war marked Oppenheimer's triumphant -- and transformative -- moment. He had devoted himself totally to achieving that success. He had been a magnificent and uniquely effective scientific director of the Los Alamos Nuclear Weapons Laboratory, and there is no doubt that it was Oppenheimer's charismatic leadership that made it possible to have two atomic weapons ready for delivery in August 1945.

In public he appeared pleased with his success, but privately he was suffering. "Robert was just definitely beside himself [after Hiroshima]," his wife told a friend. The enormity of what had happened in Hiroshima and Nagasaki had affected him profoundly. In too many instances for his humanistic soul -- the soul that his ethical culture education had done so much to form -- Oppenheimer had made the bombings possible. He had not just consented to them; he had encouraged them.

He had participated in the targeting of Hiroshima and Nagasaki -- the bull's-eye for each city being its civilian center, not a military facility. He had been a member of two committees in which the use of the bomb was discussed. He could have said, "Don't use it." But he had supported its use.

As the director of the Los Alamos, N.M., laboratory he had intervened to prevent a petition against the use of the bomb from being passed among the scientists. And he had stifled discussions, initiated by other scientists, about whether it was appropriate to continue to work on the bomb after the surrender of Germany on May 8, 1945.

He had, in other words, uncritically supported the scientists' two crusades: The first was the race against Germany for an atomic bomb. The second was the race to complete the bomb before the end of the war. The first crusade was unambiguously defensible. But, after the war, the second created a deep sense of moral uncertainty.

Was he misled?

Ambition, no doubt, had motivated him to work so feverishly to complete the bomb quickly. But it was ambition reinforced by the belief that the alternative to having atomic bombs available was a ghastly invasion. After the war he learned differently.

He learned that the invasion had not been imminent, but was months away, scheduled for Nov. 1, 1945. He learned that the Japanese -- and this included the Emperor himself -- had begun to seek surrender terms as early as June, the main obstacle being the call for unconditional surrender, a demand that appeared to put the Emperor's life in jeopardy.

He learned that Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson and several of the State Department's Japan specialists informed President Truman that clarifying the Emperor's postwar status in June might lead to Japan's surrender in July.

He learned, too, that the Soviets had made a commitment in February 1945, at the Yalta Conference, to declare war on Japan no later than Aug. 15, and had done so on Aug. 8. (Soviet entry into the war was likely to force surrender as Japan's military leaders were counting on a neutral Soviet Union to mediate better surrender terms.)

Oppenheimer also learned that the United States government was well informed about Japanese calculations. Japan's diplomatic code had been deciphered in 1939 and its diplomatic and political communications had been monitored throughout the war.

The result was a gnawing feeling that the atomic bombings may have been gratuitous. "Every American knows that if there is another major war atomic weapons will be used," he wrote despairingly in the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists in June 1946. "We know this because in the last war, the two nations which we like to think are the most enlightened and humane in the world -- Great Britain and the United States -- used atomic weapons against an enemy which was essentially defeated."

'I have blood on my hands'

The Bulletin article was not the only instance where Oppenheimer exposed his anguish. Earlier, in October 1945, meeting with President Truman in the Oval Office, he blurted out his confession, "Mr. President, I have blood on my hands."

Speaking in 1947 at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, he lamented that, "In some sort of crude sense which no vulgarity, no humor, no overstatement can quite extinguish, the physicists have known sin; and this is a knowledge which they cannot lose."

And, most directly in 1956, he told the graduating class of the George School -- attended by his son, Peter -- that the bombing of Hiroshima may have been "a tragic mistake." America's leaders, he said, had "lost a certain sense of restraint."

Oppenheimer left Los Alamos formulating plans to abolish nuclear weapons. But as the Cold War heated up, nuclear weapons came to be seen and valued as America's "great equalizer." Oppenheimer persisted although at times he appeared to surrender to "the inevitable." But in 1949, when, in response to the first Soviet nuclear test, Edward Teller proposed a crash program to build a hydrogen bomb, a weapon that could be made a thousand times more powerful than atomic bombs, Oppenheimer opposed it as provocative, unnecessary and genocidal.

This was the great turning point in his public career. The powerful men who had embraced nuclear weapons -- the Air Force and their supporters in Congress and elsewhere -- vowed to destroy him, and, in 1953, with President Eisenhower's inauguration, they were in a position to do it.

From hero to security risk

By the end of the year Oppenheimer was charged with being a security risk and, in the star chamber hearing that adjudicated his challenge, numerous illegal and underhanded tactics were used to assure that the carefully selected hearing board found him guilty. His lawyer's telephone was wiretapped and transcripts of lawyer-client conversations were delivered daily to the Atomic Energy Commission's prosecutor. Witness tampering, bribery, collusion between the prosecutor, the FBI and the chairman of the AEC were only a few of the numerous violations of due process that made, In the Matter of J. Robert Oppenheimer an eerie foreshadowing of current administration policies.

In truth, Oppenheimer was guilty of insufficient enthusiasm for nuclear weapons, which he viewed -- in President Ronald Reagan's words -- as "totally irrational, totally inhumane, good for

nothing but killing, possibly destructive of life on earth and civilization."

Recently a variant of this view has been promoted by a most surprising quartet. Former secretaries of state George Shultz and Henry Kissinger, former Secretary of Defense William Perry, and former Sen. Sam Nunn jointly wrote an op ed piece in the Wall Street Journal on Jan. 4, arguing for "A World Free of Nuclear Weapons":

"Nuclear weapons today present tremendous dangers, but also an historic opportunity," they wrote. "U.S. leadership will be required to take the world to the next stage -- to a solid consensus for reversing reliance on nuclear weapons globally as a vital contribution to preventing their proliferation into potentially dangerous hands, and ultimately ending them as a threat to the world."

Oppenheimer, who died of throat cancer in February 1967, would have been glad to sign that letter, for it says pretty much what he tried to tell President Truman, Congress and the military.

**Note:** Martin J. Sherwin will be part of a symposium Dec. 9 at 2 p.m. at the Art Institute of Chicago about "Doctor Atomic," the events and personalities that surround it. The event is sold out.