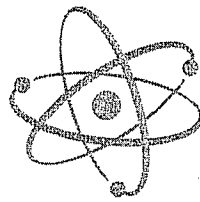


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AMERICAN PROMETHEUS

The Triumph and Tragedy of

J. ROBERT OPPENHEIMER



KAI BIRD *and*

MARTIN J. SHERWIN

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Modern Prometheans have raided Mount Olympus again and have brought back for man the very thunderbolts of Zeus.

—*Scientific Monthly*,
September 1945

Prometheus stole fire and gave it to men. But when Zeus learned of it, he ordered Hephaestus to nail his body to Mount Caucasus. On it Prometheus was nailed and kept bound for many years. Every day an eagle swooped on him and devoured the lobes of his liver, which grew by night.

—Apollodorus, *The Library*, book 1:7,
second century B.C.

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ROBERT OPPENHEIMER'S life—his career, his reputation, even his sense of self-worth—suddenly spun out of control four days before Christmas in 1953. "I can't believe what is happening to me," he exclaimed, staring through the window of the car speeding him to his lawyer's Georgetown home in Washington, D.C. There, within a few hours, he had to confront a fateful decision. Should he resign from his government advisory positions? Or should he fight the charges contained in the letter that Lewis Strauss, chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC), had handed to him out of the blue earlier that afternoon? The letter informed him that a new review of his background and policy recommendations had resulted in his being declared a security risk, and went on to delineate thirty-four charges ranging from the ridiculous—"it was reported that in 1940 you were listed as a sponsor of the Friends of the Chinese People"—to the political—"in the autumn of 1949, and subsequently, you strongly opposed the development of the hydrogen bomb."

Curiously, ever since the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Oppenheimer had been harboring a vague premonition that something dark and ominous lay in wait for him. A few years earlier, in the late 1940s, at a time when he had achieved a veritably iconic status in American society as the most respected and admired scientist and public policy adviser of his generation—even being featured on the covers of *Time* and *Life* magazines—he had read Henry James' short story "The Beast in the Jungle." Oppenheimer was utterly transfixed by this tale of obsession and tormented egotism in which the protagonist is haunted by a premonition that he was "being kept for something rare and strange, possibly prodigious and terrible, that was sooner or later to happen." Whatever it was, he knew that it would "overwhelm" him.

As the tide of anticommunism rose in postwar America, Oppenheimer became increasingly aware that "a beast in the jungle" was stalking him. His appearances before Red-hunting congressional investigative committees, the FBI taps on his home and office phones, the scurrilous stories about his political past and policy recommendations planted in the press made him feel like a hunted man. His left-wing activities during the 1930s

in Berkeley, combined with his postwar resistance to the Air Force's plans for massive strategic bombing with nuclear weapons—plans he called genocidal—had angered many powerful Washington insiders, including FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover and Lewis Strauss.

That evening, at the Georgetown home of Herbert and Anne Marks, he contemplated his options. Herbert was not only his lawyer but one of his closest friends. And Herbert's wife, Anne Wilson Marks, had once been his secretary at Los Alamos. That night Anne observed that he seemed to be in an "almost despairing state of mind." Yet, after much discussion, Oppenheimer concluded, perhaps as much in resignation as conviction, that no matter how stacked the deck, he could not let the charges go unchallenged. So, with Herb's guidance, he drafted a letter addressed to "Dear Lewis." In it Oppenheimer noted that Strauss had encouraged him to resign. "You put to me as a possibly desirable alternative that I request termination of my contract as a consultant to the [Atomic Energy] Commission, and thereby avoid an explicit consideration of the charges. . . ." Oppenheimer said he had earnestly considered this option. But "[u]nder the circumstances," he continued, "this course of action would mean that I accept and concur in the view that I am not fit to serve this government, that I have now served for some twelve years. This I cannot do. If I were thus unworthy I could hardly have served our country as I have tried, or been the Director of our Institute [for Advanced Study] in Princeton, or have spoken, as on more than one occasion I have found myself speaking, in the name of our science and our country."

By the end of the evening, Robert was exhausted and despondent. After several drinks, he retired upstairs to the guest bedroom. A few minutes later, Anne, Herbert and Robert's wife, Kitty, who had accompanied him to Washington, heard a "terrible crash." Racing upstairs, they found the bedroom empty and the bathroom door closed. "I couldn't get it open," Anne said, "and I couldn't get a response from Robert."

He had collapsed on the bathroom floor, and his unconscious body was blocking the door. They gradually forced it open, pushing Robert's limp form to one side. When he revived, "he sure was mumbly," Anne recalled. He said he had taken one of Kitty's prescription sleeping pills. "Don't let him go to sleep," a doctor warned over the phone. So for almost an hour, until the doctor arrived, they walked Robert back and forth, coaxing him to swallow sips of coffee.

Robert's "beast" had pounced; the ordeal that would end his career of public service, and, ironically, both enhance his reputation and secure his legacy, had begun.

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THE ROAD ROBERT TRAVELED from New York City to Los Alamos, New Mexico—from obscurity to prominence—led him to participation in the great struggles and triumphs, in science, social justice, war, and Cold War, of the twentieth century. His journey was guided by his extraordinary intelligence, his parents, his teachers at the Ethical Culture School, and his youthful experiences. Professionally, his development began in the 1920s in Germany where he learned quantum physics, a new science that he loved and proselytized. In the 1930s, at the University of California, Berkeley, while building the most prominent center for its study in the United States, he was moved by the consequences of the Great Depression at home and the rise of fascism abroad to work actively with friends—many of them fellow travelers and communists—in the struggle to achieve economic and racial justice. Those years were some of the finest of his life. That they were so easily used to silence his voice a decade later is a reminder of how delicately balanced are the democratic principles we profess, and how carefully they must be guarded.

The agony and humiliation that Oppenheimer endured in 1954 were not unique during the McCarthy era. But as a defendant, he was incomparable. He was America's Prometheus, "the father of the atomic bomb," who had led the effort to wrest from nature the awesome fire of the sun for his country in time of war. Afterwards, he had spoken wisely about its dangers and hopefully about its potential benefits and then, near despair, critically about the proposals for nuclear warfare being adopted by the military and promoted by academic strategists: "What are we to make of a civilization which has always regarded ethics as an essential part of human life [but] which has not been able to talk about the prospect of killing almost everybody except in prudential and game-theoretical terms?"

In the late 1940s, as U.S.-Soviet relations deteriorated, Oppenheimer's persistent desire to raise such tough questions about nuclear weapons greatly troubled Washington's national security establishment. The return of the Republicans to the White House in 1953 elevated advocates of massive nuclear retaliation, such as Lewis Strauss, to positions of power in Washington. Strauss and his allies were determined to silence the one man who they feared could credibly challenge their policies.

In assaulting his politics and his professional judgments—his life and his values really—Oppenheimer's critics in 1954 exposed many aspects of his character: his ambitions and insecurities, his brilliance and naïveté, his determination and fearfulness, his stoicism and his bewilderment. Much was revealed in the more than one thousand densely printed pages of the

transcript of the AEC's Personnel Security Hearing Board, *In the Matter of J. Robert Oppenheimer*; and yet the hearing transcript reveals how little his antagonists had been able to pierce through the emotional armor this complex man had constructed around himself since his early years. *American Prometheus* explores the enigmatic personality behind that armor as it follows Robert from his childhood on New York's Upper West Side at the turn of the twentieth century to his death in 1967. It is a deeply personal biography researched and written in the belief that a person's public behavior and his policy decisions (and in Oppenheimer's case perhaps even his science) are guided by the private experiences of a lifetime.

A QUARTER CENTURY in the making, *American Prometheus* is based on many thousands of records gathered from archives and personal collections in this country and abroad. It draws on Oppenheimer's own massive collection of papers in the Library of Congress, and on thousands of pages of FBI records accumulated over more than a quarter century of surveillance. Few men in public life have been subjected to such scrutiny. Readers will "hear" his words, captured by FBI recording devices and transcribed. And yet, because even the written record tells only part of the truth of a man's life, we have also interviewed nearly a hundred of Oppenheimer's closest friends, relatives and colleagues. Many of the individuals interviewed in the 1970s and 1980s are no longer alive. But the stories they told leave behind a nuanced portrait of a remarkable man who led us into the nuclear age and struggled, unsuccessfully—as we have continued to struggle—to find a way to eliminate the danger of nuclear war.

Oppenheimer's story also reminds us that our identity as a people remains intimately connected with the culture of things nuclear. "We have had the bomb on our minds since 1945," E. L. Doctorow has observed. "It was first our weaponry and then our diplomacy, and now it's our economy. How can we suppose that something so monstrously powerful would not, after forty years, compose our identity? The great golem we have made against our enemies is our culture, our bomb culture—its logic, its faith, its vision." Oppenheimer tried valiantly to divert us from that bomb culture by containing the nuclear threat he had helped to set loose. His most impressive effort was a plan for the international control of atomic energy, which became known as the Acheson-Lilienthal Report (but was in fact conceived and largely written by Oppenheimer). It remains a singular model for rationality in the nuclear age.

Cold War politics at home and abroad, however, doomed the plan, and America, along with a growing list of other nations, embraced the bomb for

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the next half century. With the end of the Cold War, the danger of nuclear annihilation seemed to pass, but in another ironic twist, the threat of nuclear war and nuclear terrorism is probably more imminent in the twenty-first century than ever before.

In the post-9/11 era, it is worth recalling that at the dawn of the nuclear age, the father of the atomic bomb warned us that it was a weapon of indiscriminate terror that instantly had made America more vulnerable to wanton attack. When he was asked in a closed Senate hearing in 1946 “whether three or four men couldn’t smuggle units of an [atomic] bomb into New York and blow up the whole city,” he responded pointedly, “Of course it could be done, and people could destroy New York.” To the follow-up question of a startled senator, “What instrument would you use to detect an atomic bomb hidden somewhere in a city?” Oppenheimer quipped, “A screwdriver [to open each and every crate or suitcase].” The only defense against nuclear terrorism was the elimination of nuclear weapons.

Oppenheimer’s warnings were ignored—and ultimately, he was silenced. Like that rebellious Greek god Prometheus—who stole fire from Zeus and bestowed it upon humankind, Oppenheimer gave us atomic fire. But then, when he tried to control it, when he sought to make us aware of its terrible dangers, the powers-that-be, like Zeus, rose up in anger to punish him. As Ward Evans, the dissenting member of the Atomic Energy Commission’s hearing board, wrote, denying Oppenheimer his security clearance was “a black mark on the escutcheon of our country.”