

## *The Trials of J. Robert Oppenheimer*

### *Program Transcript*

*The words spoken in the courtroom in this documentary are taken directly from the transcript of the hearing in the matter of J. Robert Oppenheimer.*

**Gordon Gray (Boyd Gaines):** The hearing will come to order... Dr. J.R. Oppenheimer, The Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton, N.J. There has developed considerable question whether your continued employment on Atomic Energy Commission work is consistent with the interests of the national security. In view of your access to highly sensitive classified information, and in view of allegations which, until disproved, raise questions as to your veracity, conduct, and even your loyalty, the Commission has no other recourse but to suspend your clearance until the matter has been resolved.

**Narrator:** The hearings were held in a makeshift courtroom in a shabby government office in Washington DC.

**Gordon Gray (Boyd Gaines):** It was reported that your wife Katherine Puening Oppenheimer was a member of the Communist party. It was reported that your brother Frank Friedman Oppenheimer was a member of the Community Party.

**Narrator:** J. Robert Oppenheimer, the most eminent atomic scientist in America, stood accused... a risk to national security. It was 1954. The cold war with Russia was fueling fears of Communist infiltration at the highest levels of government.

**Gordon Gray (Boyd Gaines):** It was reported that you stated that you were not a Communist, but had probably belonged to every Communist front organization on the west coast and had signed many petitions in which Communists were interested.

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**Narrator:** The news shocked Americans everywhere. If Robert Oppenheimer could not be trusted with the nation's secrets, who could be? Brilliant, proud, charismatic, a poet as well as a physicist, Oppenheimer had seemed to enjoy the full trust and confidence of his country's leaders. He was a national hero... The man who had led the scientific team which devised the atomic bomb... the ultimate weapon of mass destruction. Oppenheimer came to prominence through unspeakable violence, and suffered all the ambiguities and contradictions he had helped create.

**J. Robert Oppenheimer (archival):** We knew the world would not be the same. A few people laughed. A few people cried. Most people were silent. I remembered the line from the Hindu Scripture the Bhagavad-Gita. Vishnu is trying to persuade the prince that he should do his duty and to impress him takes on his multi-armed form and says, Now I am become death, the destroyer of worlds. I suppose we all thought that one way or another.

**Richard Rhodes, writer:** What he was trying to help the world understand is that these are not weapons. These are forces of destruction so great that we finally, as a species, are in a position where we can destroy the entire human world, without question.

**Narrator:** As the nation's top nuclear weapons advisor, Oppenheimer tried to warn his countrymen of their dangers, but powerful figures within the government feared he was a threat to America's security. They determined to destroy him.

**Marvin Goldberger, physicist:** The country asked him to do something and he did it brilliantly, and they repaid him for the tremendous job he did by breaking him.

**Roger Robb, courtroom prosecutor (Michael Cumpsty):** Doctor, do you think that social contacts between a person employed in secret war work and Communists or Communist adherents is dangerous?

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**J. Robert Oppenheimer (David Strathairn):** Are we talking about today?

**Roger Robb, courtroom prosecutor (Michael Cumpsty):** Yes.

**J. Robert Oppenheimer (David Strathairn):** Certainly not necessarily so. They could conceivably be.

**Roger Robb, courtroom prosecutor (Michael Cumpsty):** Was that your view in 1943 and during the war years?

**Narrator:** The hearings would go on for nearly a month, the story of Oppenheimer's life laid bare, his secrets exposed, his brilliance and arrogance, naïveté and insecurities debated, dissected, and judged. A special three-man board appointed by the Atomic Energy Commission would rule on the charges. To defend himself, the embattled scientist felt compelled to tell his own story in his own way.

**J. Robert Oppenheimer (David Strathairn):** The items of so-called derogatory information... cannot be fairly understood except in the context of my life and work. I was born in New York in 1904. My father came to this country at the age of 17 from Germany.

**Narrator:** Julius Oppenheimer was a penniless Jewish immigrant who arrived in America in 1888 unable to speak a word of English and went to work in his uncle's textile importing business. By the time he was 30, he was a partner in the company and a wealthy man. When he fell in love, it was with a sensitive, talented woman of exquisite taste and refinement.

**J. Robert Oppenheimer (David Strathairn):** My mother was born in Baltimore and before her marriage she was an artist and teacher of art.

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**Narrator:** Ella Oppenheimer was “very delicate,” a friend remembered, with an air of sadness about her. Robert was precociously brilliant, and both parents were protective of his uncommon gifts. Frail, frequently sick, he was attended to by servants, driven everywhere. He rarely played with other children.

**Priscilla McMillan, writer:** He wasn’t mischievous. He was too brilliant to be just one of the children. But his parents treasured him; treated him like a little jewel. And he just skipped being a boy.

**Narrator:** “My childhood did not prepare me for the fact that the world is full of cruel and bitter things,” Oppenheimer said. “It gave me no normal, healthy way to be a bastard.” Sometime around the age of five, Robert’s grandfather gave him a small collection of minerals. “From then on,” he said, “I became, in a completely childish way, an ardent mineral collector. But it began to be also a bit of a scientist’s interest, a fascination with crystals.”

**Martin Sherwin, historian:** He wrote to the New York Mineralogical Society on a typewriter. They were so impressed with what he had to say that, of course, thinking he was an adult, they invited him to give a lecture, and little Robert, at age 10 or 11, shows up at the New York Mineralogical Society, and has to stand on a box in order to see over the lectern to give this lecture. That is not a normal, average childhood.

**Narrator:** Eight years separated Robert from his brother Frank, too many for companionship. Robert was a loner. And at New York’s Ethical Culture school, he inhabited his own rarefied world, more comfortable with his teachers than with the other students, who nicknamed him “Booby” Oppenheimer. To protect himself, he relied on his preternatural brilliance and grew aloof and arrogant.

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**Priscilla McMillan, writer:** He didn't grow up. He studied a great deal, which shielded him from the world. And the emotional side of him didn't catch up until much later.

**Narrator:** Oppenheimer graduated high school valedictorian and then conquered Harvard. He studied chemistry, physics, calculus; English and French literature; Western, Chinese and Hindu philosophy; he even found time to write stories and poems.

**Richard Rhodes, writer:** He described it as being like the Huns invading Rome, by which he meant he was going to swallow up every bit of culture and art and science that he could possibly do.

**Martin Sherwin, historian:** Harvard's an environment in which the intellectual life is a rich feast, but the social life is a desert.

**Narrator:** In all his years at Harvard, he never had a date. He remained immature, uncertain, easily bewildered in social situations. One friend remembered "bouts of melancholy, and deep, deep depressions." In the days of my almost infinitely prolonged adolescence, he said later, "I hardly took an action, hardly did anything that did not arouse in me a very great sense of revulsion and of wrong. My feeling about myself was always one of extreme discontent." His doubts about himself came clear in his poems:

**J. Robert Oppenheimer (David Strathairn):**

The dawn invests our substance

With desire

And the slow light betrays us,

And our wistfulness...

We find ourselves again

Each in his separate prison

Ready, hopeless

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For negotiation

With other men.

**Narrator:** Oppenheimer graduated in just three years, and in 1925 headed for Cambridge, England and an advanced degree at the celebrated Cavendish laboratory. Academic success had always come easily. Ambitious, determined to succeed, in England he would learn what it was like to struggle, and fail.

**Richard Rhodes, writer:** Oppenheimer, like so many theoretical physicists, it turns out that if he walks through a lab the instruments all break. And he's trying to do a rather delicate physical experiment and he's not getting anywhere, and he's sinking deeper and deeper into that special despair that comes along when prodigies grow up and have-and realize they can't just do it by being a prodigy anymore.

**Martin Sherwin, historian:** His eyes and his hands and his mind are not coordinated, he can't do what all of the other young people are able to do. And he finds himself one day standing at a blackboard, staring into space, saying, "The point is. The point is. The point is. There is no point."

**Richard Rhodes, writer:** He fell into despair, he fell into depression. Here was a point where he was suddenly doubting his intellect, his ability to do science, so it's not surprising that at that point the whole thing would go collapsing down for him. At the same time, he had never really learned how to approach women, how to close the sale, if I may call it that, and he was dealing with that as well.

**Narrator:** Wrestling with inner demons that threatened to overwhelm him, he was, he later said, "at the point of bumping myself off." In 1926, Oppenheimer would save himself. He cut free from the English experimental laboratory and headed for Göttingen, Germany to study theoretical physics with some of the greatest scientific minds of the century. "I had very

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great misgivings about myself on all fronts," he said. "I hadn't been good, I hadn't done anybody any good, and here was something I felt just driven to try." In Gottingen, Oppenheimer would make his mark in a new science, which explored a world that ran counter to everyday experience - quantum physics.

**Herbert York, physicist:** Quantum physics is the basic physics behind electrons and atoms. It turns out that classical ideas about Newtonian mechanics and particle motion and so on, do not apply to things of-to things of atomic scale. You needed a new kind of physics.

**Richard Rhodes, writer:** So if you're going to change on a different scale the-the whole structure of the physics, everything has to be redone if you will, and that means there are enormous opportunities available for a young graduate student with talent to come in and make various aspects of this his own.

**Narrator:** Oppenheimer immersed himself in the mysteries of the subatomic universe, where nothing was certain, and probability the only rule. He found the work exhilarating. "There was terror," he wrote, "as well as exaltation."

**Freeman Dyson, physicist:** Oppenheimer really flourished there. He annoyed everybody, of course, by talking too much and pretending he knew everything.

**Marvin Goldberger, physicist:** He always considered very carefully what he said as though he was speaking for the ages. And he expected everybody to be seduced by his Renaissance man knowledge of everything.

**Narrator:** In Göttingen, Oppenheimer came into his own as a theoretical physicist, publishing 16 papers in three years. By the time he was ready to return to America, he was focused and confident, an ambitious young man with an international reputation.

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**J. Robert Oppenheimer (David Strathairn):** In the spring of 1929, I returned to the United States. I was homesick for this country. I had learned in my student days a great deal about the new physics. I wanted to pursue this myself, to explain it, and to foster its cultivation.

**Narrator:** Oppenheimer was just 25, and already knew more about the quantum universe than nearly any other American. He settled in California and began teaching at Cal Tech in Pasadena and the University of California in Berkeley. But at first, his lectures were incomprehensible.

**Robert Christy, physicist:** It was customary until I got there for students to take his main course in theoretical physics twice in a row. They would take a second year to fully understand it. Other students were taking it in pairs. One would listen and the other would write notes and they'd work up the lecture afterward.

**Martin Sherwin, historian:** He spoke at a very fast clip, puffing on his cigarette, which he always had; he was writing with his chalk, and he was moving back and forth between his left hand and his right hand so quickly that people thought he was going to smoke the chalk, you know, and write with the cigarette, and they could not/couldn't follow him. But he was able to transform himself into an excellent lecturer, who was charismatic, and extremely effective.

**Narrator:** Oppenheimer became a magnetic, dazzling teacher. But his arrogance could make even his colleagues wince.

**Marvin Goldberger, physicist:** He was not likeable because he wouldn't let you look at him. He was always on stage. You never had a feeling that he was speaking from the heart somehow. He never came across as a real person. There was always a studied remark intended to convey some sort of I don't-, superiority or deeper knowledge than you pos-you slob could possibly understand. He could be devastating especially to young people. He

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became very impatient and was always all over them, and sometimes reduced them practically to tears.

**Richard Rhodes, writer:** His sharp remarks were not inadvertent. They had to do with a kind of arrogance and contempt. I take it to be a way that he disguised his anxieties, that he disguised his social insecurities, but it was immensely cruel.

**Narrator:** Oppenheimer called his behavior “beastliness.”

“It is not easy,” he wrote in a letter to his brother, “at least it is not easy for me, to be quite free of the desire to browbeat somebody.”

Ever since Oppenheimer had visited New Mexico as a teenager, he had been haunted by its wild beauty. In 1927 his father took a lease on a rustic cabin high in the mountains 45 miles northeast of Santa Fe and gave it to both his sons. The Oppenheimers called it Perro Caliente - Spanish for hot dog.

**Richard Rhodes, writer:** He found peace there. He found a different self there. One that he liked, a cowboy self. Friends who went to visit him later would talk about the fact that he would go out riding for three days at a time up the ridge of the Rocky Mountains with a bar of chocolate and a pint of whiskey in his hip pocket, and they would be starving and terrified riding through mountain storms and lightning, and he would just be having a wonderful time.

**Narrator:** “My two great loves,” he once told a friend, “are physics and desert country. It’s a pity they can’t be combined.”

In 1934, San Francisco longshoremen battled police, shutting down the waterfront just across the bay from Oppenheimer’s home in Berkley. America itself seemed on the verge of

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revolution - with violence in the streets, strikes, a failing economy, a third of the nation unemployed. But Oppenheimer remained aloof.

**J. Robert Oppenheimer (David Strathairn):** I had no radio, no telephone. I never read a newspaper or a current magazine; I learned of the stock market crash in the fall of 1929 only long after the event; I voted for the first time in a presidential election in 1936. I was deeply interested in my science; but I had no understanding of the relations of man to his society.

**Martin Sherwin, historian:** The Depression didn't affect him personally. He had an income from his father who was wealthy. And politics seemed gross to him.

**J. Robert Oppenheimer (David Strathairn):** Beginning late 1936, my interests began to change.... I saw what the Depression was doing to my students. Often they could get no jobs. But I had no framework of political conviction or experience to give me perspective in these matters. In the spring of 1936, I was introduced by friends to Jean Tatlock. In the autumn, I began to court her. We were at least twice close enough to marriage to think of ourselves as engaged.

**Narrator:** Jean Tatlock was Oppenheimer's first real love. She was 22, studying to be a doctor, and passionately involved with the contentious issues of her day: the civil war in Spain, organizing workers, racial discrimination. She was also a member of the Communist Party, and introduced Oppenheimer into her political circle.

**J. Robert Oppenheimer (David Strathairn):** I made leftwing friends, and felt sympathy for causes which hitherto would have seemed so remote from me, like the Loyalist cause in Spain and the organization of migratory workers. I liked the new sense of companionship and at the time felt that I was coming to be part of the life of my time and country. I did not then regard Communists as dangerous, and some of their declared objectives seemed to me desirable.

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**Richard Rhodes, writer:** In the 1930s, in the bottom of the Depression, there was a deep and fundamental concern about the future of this country, whether its economic and to some degree political system was adequate. We came later in America to demonize people who belonged to the Communist Party. But it was a very common business in the '30s.

**Narrator:** Workers, teachers, doctors, writers – Americans of every stripe and color were party members, but although he shared many of their political concerns, there is nothing to prove that Oppenheimer himself was a Communist.

**Richard Rhodes, writer:** Oppenheimer never joined the party. The FBI spent 30 years trying to prove that Oppenheimer had been a Communist and was never able to do so. That's probably good evidence that he never joined the party.

**Narrator:** Oppenheimer was deeply bound to Tatlock, but she was volatile, moody, sometimes distraught. After 3 years, she broke off their relationship.

**Priscilla McMillan, writer:** Their relationship appears to have been quite a stormy one, and Jean Tatlock, although for many years people who knew her didn't say this, was uncertain whether she wanted to be with men or women, whether she was lesbian or heterosexual and I believe that must have been at the bottom of her crises with Oppenheimer. And how that fed into his own sexual certainties and uncertainties, one can only imagine. He was troubled. That's why he was attracted to troubled women: he was troubled. He didn't know who he was.

**Narrator:** Oppenheimer would always feel a tender attachment to Jean, but they had gone their separate ways when Kitty Harrison set her cap for him. Kitty was 29, and also a former Communist party member. She was married to a doctor, but that didn't stop her from going after the well-known scientist.

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**Richard Rhodes, writer:** When she saw Oppenheimer, she grabbed him. They were together, of course, for the rest of their lives but it was, God knows, a tumultuous relationship with a lot of bickering and a lot of fighting and a lot of drinking. You know, Kitty and Jean were both dominant women. They were passionate women, and in some way he could comfort them. He could save them, or try to. Here were two women who both presented themselves as people who needed saving and Robert jumped in like the-like the white knight that he, I think, wanted to be.

**Narrator:** In 1940, Oppenheimer became Kitty's fourth husband. Less than 7 months later, their first child Peter was born. Although they continued to see some of their left-wing friends, the Oppenheimers were, by now, detaching themselves from Communist party politics.

**J. Robert Oppenheimer (David Strathairn):** My views were evolving. At that time I did not fully understand - as in time I came to understand - how completely the Communist Party in this country was under the control of Russia. Many of its declared objectives seemed desirable to me. But I never accepted Communist dogma or theory. In fact, it never made any sense to me.

**Narrator:** What did make sense was science. He would never let politics interfere with his teaching, or his physics.

**Roy Glauber, physicist:** Of course he paid attention to experiment, but he was a theorist. He probed very deeply. He was interested in the deepest ideas, and he did contribute to some of them.

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**Freeman Dyson, physicist:** In 1939, he published with his student Hartland Snyder, really a great piece of work explaining how stars collapse and how they can actually end up as black holes, which had never been understood before.

**Narrator:** That same year, a startling dispatch from the abstruse world of nuclear physics changed the course of history - and Oppenheimer's life. Two German chemists reported that the uranium nucleus could be split. The discovery soon had a name – nuclear fission. "The U-business is unbelievable," Oppenheimer wrote. "Many points are still unclear. I think it really not too improbable that a ten cm cube of uranium deuteride might very well blow itself to hell." The discovery of nuclear fission began a race that would end with the atomic bomb.

**Richard Rhodes, writer:** He saw already at the beginning, as I think any really good physicist did just by doing the numbers about the amount of energy released in this reaction, that this was going to change the world. With that discovery came a change in the relationship between science and the nation state. Every country in the world in 1939 and 1940 that had the capability of even beginning to work on a bomb, began that work, not only England and Germany and the United States, but also France, Japan, and the Soviet Union.

**Narrator:** But the only threat came from Germany.

**J. Robert Oppenheimer (David Strathairn):** We had information in those days of German activity in the field of nuclear fission. We were aware of what it might mean if they beat us to the draw in the development of atomic bombs. I had relatives there, and was later to help in extricating them and bringing them to this country.

**Narrator:** Nine months after the discovery of nuclear fission, Germany invaded Poland. World War II had begun. When the United States entered the war two years later, American scientists feared that Germany was already well ahead in the race to build an atomic bomb. If America was going to develop a bomb first, they would have to work fast. In October 1942,

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the 20th Century Limited was speeding toward New York City. Sharing a private Pullman car were Robert Oppenheimer and a 46-year-old career Army officer — General Leslie Groves. Groves had been placed in command of the Manhattan Project - the staggering enterprise to marshal the vast technical and industrial resources to develop an atomic bomb. Now, he was looking over the man he hoped might head-up the secret laboratory where the bomb would be designed and built.

**Richard Rhodes, writer:** Groves' way of operating was to be blunt and brutal. He knew, as they said during the First World War, how to get the Spam to the front lines. He knew how to get the job done.

**Narrator:** The two men talked for hours. When they were done, Groves had made up his mind. Oppenheimer, he believed, had the ambition, discipline, and brilliance to lead the most complex scientific effort America had ever undertaken. "He's a genius," Groves said later. "A real genius... He can talk to you about anything you bring up. Well, not exactly... He doesn't know anything about sports."

**Robert Christy, physicist:** Groves went a way out on a limb in choosing Oppenheimer. And no one would have- would have supposed that this esoteric person, with an interest in French poetry and Hindu Mysticism, would be a practical person to lead a laboratory.

**Marvin Goldberger, physicist:** He'd never directed anything really, to speak of. He hadn't even been a department chairman.

**Martin Sherwin, historian:** Most of his friends think that Oppenheimer could not run a hamburger stand.

**Narrator:** Groves wanted Oppenheimer anyway, but the United States Army refused to give the scientist a security clearance - the country was at war. Even though Russia was America's

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ally, anyone with Communist associations was considered a possible spy. It was the first time Oppenheimer's loyalty to America would be questioned.

**Martin Sherwin, historian:** The security people are appalled. Oppenheimer is the last person they would want as director, and he's the next to the last person they'd even want involved in the project at all as a- as a janitor. Groves is very conservative. He hates Communists. But Groves does not allow Oppenheimer's left-wing activities during the 1930s to trump his belief that Oppenheimer will be just the right person.

**J. Robert Oppenheimer (David Strathairn):** In early 1943, I received a letter appointing me director of the laboratory. Almost everyone knew this was a great undertaking. It might determine the outcome of the war. It was an unparalleled opportunity to bring to bear the knowledge and art of science for the benefit of the country. This job, if it were achieved, would be part of history.

**Narrator:** Oppenheimer had once fantasized combining his passion for physics with his love of the desert and mountains of New Mexico. Now, he suggested a remote wilderness near the Los Alamos canyon north east of Santa Fe as the site for the atomic bomb laboratory. General Groves quickly agreed. Oppenheimer's fantasy had come true. Before leaving for Los Alamos, Oppenheimer entertained an old friend for dinner, Haakon Chevalier, a French professor teaching at Berkeley – and a dedicated Communist.

**Richard Rhodes, writer:** Oppenheimer had known Chevalier for years. He-Chevalier was one of his closet friends. He knew Chevalier was a Communist. It didn't really worry him. He judged that Chevalier wouldn't do anything that would compromise Robert Oppenheimer.

**Narrator:** But Chevalier put Oppenheimer at risk. He told his friend that a British engineer named Eltenton wanted information about Oppenheimer's scientific work to pass on to a

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diplomat at the Soviet Embassy. Oppenheimer dismissed the idea. "That would be treason," he said.

**Richard Rhodes, writer:** Oppenheimer did not, at the time, take this approach as something serious. It was only later that it came to be a problem because it was useful to people who wanted to destroy him, to make it a problem.

**Roger Robb, courtroom prosecutor (Michael Cumpsty):** Doctor, do you think that social contacts between a person employed in secret war work and Communists or Communist adherents is dangerous?

**J. Robert Oppenheimer (David Strathairn):** Certainly not necessarily so. They could conceivably be. My awareness of the danger would be greater today.

**Roger Robb, courtroom prosecutor (Michael Cumpsty):** Doctor, in your opinion is association with the Communist movement compatible with a job on a secret war project?

**J. Robert Oppenheimer (David Strathairn):** I was associated with the Communist movement, and I did not regard it as inappropriate to take the job at Los Alamos.

**Roger Robb, courtroom prosecutor (Michael Cumpsty):** Doctor, let me ask you a blunt question. Don't you know and didn't you know certainly by 1943 that the Communist Party was an instrument or a vehicle of espionage in this country?

**J. Robert Oppenheimer (David Strathairn):** I was not clear about it.

**Roger Robb, courtroom prosecutor (Michael Cumpsty):** I am asking you now if fear of espionage wasn't one of the reasons that you felt that association with the Communist party was inconsistent with work on a secret war project?

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**J. Robert Oppenheimer (David Strathairn):** Yes.

**Roger Robb, courtroom prosecutor (Michael Cumpsty):** Your answer is that it was?

**J. Robert Oppenheimer (David Strathairn):** Yes.

**Roger Robb, courtroom prosecutor (Michael Cumpsty):** You would have felt then, I assume, that a rather continued or constant association between a person employed on the atomic bomb project and Communists or Communist adherents was dangerous?

**J. Robert Oppenheimer (David Strathairn):** Potentially dangerous; conceivably dangerous. Look: I have had a lot secrets in my head a long time. It does not matter who I associate with. I don't talk about those secrets.

**Narrator:** In times of spiritual trial, Oppenheimer would search the Bhagavad-Gita, a sacred Hindu text, for meaning and comfort. He often turned to the story of the warrior Prince Arjuna, who to fulfill his destiny must fight and kill.

**J. Robert Oppenheimer (David Strathairn):** In battle, in forest, at the precipice in the mountains,  
On a dark great sea, in the midst of javelins and arrows,  
In sleep, in confusion, in the depths of shame,  
The good deeds a man has done before defend him.

**Narrator:** In April 1943 Oppenheimer was 38 years old, about to take on a task for which few people thought him capable – harnessing the forces of the atom to build a bomb of awesome destructive power.

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**J. Robert Oppenheimer (David Strathairn):** There was little doubt that a potentially world-shattering undertaking lay ahead. We began to see the great explosion. We also began to see how rough, difficult, challenging, and unpredictable this job might turn out to be.

**Robert Christy, physicist:** A whole town was being constructed, and Oppenheimer's trying to organize the science. But in addition, they were constructing roads, laboratory buildings and homes.

**Roy Glauber, physicist:** We had no sidewalks anywhere, and in one season of the year walked around in mud up to our ankles.

**Richard Rhodes, writer:** They were trying to build a first-class physics laboratory out in the middle of a howling wilderness. It was a helluva place to try to move a linear accelerator up the narrow switchback mountain roads to install it at the top.

**Narrator:** The laboratory at Los Alamos was a closely guarded secret. From its beginnings, security had the highest priority. Army intelligence watched over everything and everybody – especially the laboratory director with the left-wing past. Oppenheimer's phones were tapped; his mail opened, his office, wired; his comings and goings, closely monitored. His driver and bodyguard was an undercover agent. Oppenheimer- who knew everything that was going on at Los Alamos – was still waiting for his security clearance.

**Martin Sherwin, historian:** Oppenheimer goes about doing the job as best he can do it, but the security people are like flies on a hot summer day. They're constantly buzzing around him. They're constantly annoying him. He does his best to shoo them, you know, away, but there's one instance where he makes a terrible, terrible mistake.

**J. Robert Oppenheimer (David Strathairn):** I had visited Jean Tatlock in the spring of 1943. I almost had to. She was not much of a Communist, but she was certainly a member of the

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Party. There was nothing dangerous about that. There was nothing potentially dangerous about that.

**Narrator:** The government knew all about Oppenheimer's visit. Agents from Army Intelligence waited outside Tatlock's apartment while Oppenheimer spent the night, and reported the details to the FBI.

**Roger Robb, courtroom prosecutor (Michael Cumpsty):** Why did you have to see her?

**J. Robert Oppenheimer (David Strathairn):** She had indicated a great desire to see me before we left for Los Alamos. At that time I couldn't go. For one thing, I wasn't supposed to say where we were going or anything. I felt that she had to see me. She was undergoing psychiatric treatment. She was extremely unhappy.

**Roger Robb, courtroom prosecutor (Michael Cumpsty):** Did you find out why she had to see you?

**J. Robert Oppenheimer (David Strathairn):** Because she was still in love with me....

**Roger Robb, courtroom prosecutor (Michael Cumpsty):** When did you see her after that?

**J. Robert Oppenheimer (David Strathairn):** She took me to the airport, and I never saw her again.

**Richard Rhodes, writer:** Jean Tatlock was a wounded, lonely woman, who was at wit's end, and she wanted this man whom she loved to come to her and he did. From the point of view of the gumshoes who sat outside Jean Tatlock's apartment all night in their car writing down who came and who went and at what hour, and when the lights were on and when the lights

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were off, there may have been a security problem. But for him, human need, human compassion, caring for someone you love, trumped the security system.

**Narrator:** The FBI feared that Tatlock might be passing atomic secrets to the Russians. They tapped her phone, but persistent eavesdropping revealed nothing. Six months after Oppenheimer's visit, Jean Tatlock killed herself. "I am disgusted with everything," she wrote in an unsigned note. "To those who loved me and helped me, all love and courage. I wanted to live and to give and I got paralyzed. I tried like hell to understand and couldn't. I think I would have been a liability all my life - at least I could take away the burden of a paralyzed soul from a fighting world."

**Roger Robb, courtroom prosecutor (Michael Cumpsty):** You have said that you knew she had been a Communist?

**J. Robert Oppenheimer (David Strathairn):** Yes. I knew that in the fall of 1937.

**Roger Robb (Michael Cumpsty):** Was there any reason for you to believe that she wasn't still a Communist in 1943?

**J. Robert Oppenheimer (David Strathairn):** No.

**Roger Robb (Michael Cumpsty):** Pardon?

**J. Robert Oppenheimer (David Strathairn):** There wasn't. I do not know what she was doing in 1943.

**Roger Robb (Michael Cumpsty):** You have no reason to believe she wasn't a Communist, do you?

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J. Robert Oppenheimer (David Strathairn): No.

Roger Robb (Michael Cumpsty): You spent the night with her, didn't you?

J. Robert Oppenheimer (David Strathairn): Yes.

Roger Robb (Michael Cumpsty): That is when you were working on a secret war project?

J. Robert Oppenheimer (David Strathairn): Yes.

Roger Robb (Michael Cumpsty): You have told us this morning that you thought that at times social contacts with Communists on the part of one working on a secret war project was dangerous.

J. Robert Oppenheimer (David Strathairn): Could conceivably be.

Roger Robb (Michael Cumpsty): You didn't think spending a night with a dedicated Communist -

J. Robert Oppenheimer (David Strathairn): I don't believe she was a dedicated Communist.

Roger Robb (Michael Cumpsty): You don't?

J. Robert Oppenheimer (David Strathairn): No.

**Narrator:** Five weeks after Oppenheimer's visit to Tatlock, General Groves rammed through his security clearance. But Oppenheimer continued to operate under a shadow of suspicion and by the summer of 1943, the pressure began to tell. That August, Oppenheimer volunteered to talk with Colonel Boris Pash, Chief of Army Counter Intelligence for the West

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Coast. He had begun to worry about his conversation with his friend Haakon Chevalier. He realized that he should have reported it at once, but he still didn't want to get his old friend in trouble.

**Boris Pash (Danny Gerroll):** General Groves has, more or less, I feel, placed a certain responsibility in me. I don't mean to take much of your time.

**J. Robert Oppenheimer (David Strathairn):** That's perfectly all right. Whatever time you choose. I have no first hand knowledge, but a man attached to the Soviet Consul has indicated indirectly through an intermediary that he was in a position to transmit information. I think it might not hurt to be on the lookout for it. If you wanted to watch him I think it would be the appropriate thing to do. His name is Eltenton.

**Narrator:** Oppenheimer had simply wanted to alert army intelligence that Eltenton might be a threat. But Pash did not trust Oppenheimer and his left-wing past. He hid a microphone in the telephone receiver, and recorded their entire conversation. Oppenheimer had no idea that everything he said was set down, transcribed, and added to his security file, where it would be unearthed years later with disastrous consequences.

**J. Robert Oppenheimer (David Strathairn):** There were approaches to other people who were troubled by them and sometimes they came and discussed them with me. That's as far as I can go on that.

**Boris Pash (Danny Gerroll):** These people... Were they contacted directly by Eltenton?

**J. Robert Oppenheimer (David Strathairn):** No.

**Boris Pash (Danny Gerroll):** Through another party?

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**J. Robert Oppenheimer (David Strathairn):** Yes.

**Boris Pash (Danny Gerroll):** Well, now, could we know through whom that contact was made?

**J. Robert Oppenheimer (David Strathairn):** I think it would be a mistake.

**Martin Sherwin, historian:** Oppenheimer makes up this complicated story so that the security people are looking all over the place, and they won't finger Robert and they won't finger Chevalier.

**Richard Rhodes, writer:** He evidently hadn't learned to think the way security people think. Every time he said something else, he just made it worse. Pash ended up, of course, believing Oppenheimer was a Communist spy.

**J. Robert Oppenheimer (David Strathairn):** I think in mentioning Eltenton's name I essentially said that he may be acting in a way which is dangerous to the country, and which should be watched. I'm not going to mention anyone else's name in the same breath. I just can't do that.

**Narrator:** Oppenheimer quickly put the whole incident behind him. There was too much work to do. Los Alamos was growing into a bustling town with thousands of people. He had wildly underestimated the magnitude of the job. But he was thriving. In spite of the initial doubts of his scientific colleagues, he was proving that he was more than up to the enormous task.

**Marvin Goldberger, physicist:** He showed an ability to motivate and inspire that I think surprised everyone.

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**Roy Glauber, physicist:** Everyone loved him because he was everywhere. He understood all of these absurdly difficult and intractable problems, and he often had witty things to say about them.

**Harold Agnew, physicist:** He had a certain charisma, a certain charm, a certain flare. He had a robin's egg blue convertible Cadillac, you know. And if you're a young kid, and here's the boss, and he's driving around with his porkpie hat, and his tweed jacket and cigarette always, you know, like in the movies. You know, you're impressed.

**Roy Glauber, physicist:** Oppenheimer inspired everyone. He expressed the intellectual essence of what we were doing, the deepest sense of what it was.

**Marvin Goldberger, physicist:** I don't know, in retrospect, who could have done it better, who could have pulled that gang - 80 percent of which were prima donnas of their own — could have pulled that gang together and-and made them work as a unit.

**Richard Rhodes, writer:** In being the director of this historic laboratory, Oppenheimer found his greatest and most natural role. He was cruel to people before the war, he was cruel to people after the war, but he wasn't cruel to people during the war.

**Priscilla McMillan, writer:** The period at Los Alamos was the only time in his life when he wasn't plagued by existential doubt, when all the parts came together and worked together. It was the first chance he'd ever had to serve the country and forget himself.

**Narrator:** Oppenheimer shaped an array of brilliant, eccentric scientists into a team. The Hungarian refugee Edward Teller was his biggest problem.

**Roy Glauber, physicist:** Teller was always an ebullient scientist. Very bright quite impatient. When I showed up at Los Alamos I saw this name chalked next to the door: E Teller, but there

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was no one in the office. I learned that he was rather unhappy that he had not been chosen as leader of the theory division and had gone off in a huff. His passion from the very first was to create what he called the “The Zupa” - the super bomb.

**Narrator:** The “super” was a hydrogen bomb, a weapon with nearly unlimited destructive power. But since a hydrogen bomb would need an atomic bomb to set it off, Oppenheimer gave Teller’s super a low priority.

**Herbert York, physicist:** Oppenheimer, said, “No, no, we got enough on our hands. We’re not gonna-we’re not gonna — we gotta make the- we gotta make the atomic bomb. That’s what we’re gonna do. That’s our job and that’s what we’re gonna focus on.”

**Narrator:** Teller threatened to quit, until Oppenheimer relented and let him work independently to try and design his “super” bomb. But there would always be bad blood between them.

**Marvin Goldberger, physicist:** Teller was obsessive. He would not accept Oppenheimer’s judgment about the feasibility of this project. He was not a crackpot or anything like that. He was an excellent physicist, but he got off on something that was simply wrong, and he couldn’t let it go. Teller never forgave Oppenheimer, and paid him back, unfortunately.

**Narrator:** By summer 1944, the enormous burden of responsibility had begun to take its toll. Losing weight, afflicted with a rasping cough, Oppenheimer chain-smoked his way through increasingly demanding months. Kitty was an additional burden. She refused to take on the role of the director’s wife and found herself at loose ends. After their second child was born in the Los Alamos Hospital - a girl they named Toni - she became even more distracted. She was drinking hard, on the verge of emotional collapse while Oppenheimer was preoccupied, desperately pushing the project forward.

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**J. Robert Oppenheimer (David Strathairn):** For me it was a time so filled with work, with the need for decision and action and consultation, there was room for little else.

**Richard Rhodes, writer:** They had to invent all these new technologies in these very short months from the summer of '44 to the summer of '45. Oppenheimer nearly broke down. He was really depressed. He thought he'd blown it. He thought they had found themselves at a dead end.

**Roy Glauber, physicist:** It was devilishly difficult grappling with problems which were on the edge of absurdity. Just imagine trying to find out what's going on within an explosion. All of which is over in less than a thousandth of a second.

**Richard Rhodes, writer:** He seriously considered leaving the project, and one of his friends finally took him aside and said, "Robert, you can't leave. You're the only person who can make this happen. You have to stay. I don't care what you think." And he did stay.

**J. Robert Oppenheimer (David Strathairn):** The consensus of all our opinions and every directive I had stressed the extreme urgency of the work. Time and time again we had in the technical work almost paralyzing crises. Time and again the laboratory drew itself together and we faced the new problems and got on with the work. We worked by night and by day.

**Narrator:** While Oppenheimer and his team raced on, the war against Japan and Germany was reaching a bloody climax. On May 7, 1945, the Nazis surrendered. The race with Germany to build the bomb was over.

**Roy Glauber, physicist:** We had joined this project fearing that the Germans were working on trying to produce a bomb. If they succeeded in reaching it before we did, they wouldn't be very sentimental about using it.

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**Martin Sherwin, historian:** When Germany surrenders, the bomb is several months away from being built, and the question is, should we continue? Is it the right thing to do? Is it ethical?

**Roy Glauber, physicist:** We never heard any suggestion from Oppenheimer that there was any course other than continuing. There was a kind of momentum involved in our efforts in this direction. It was an enormous project, we were all deeply involved in finding out whether the darn thing would work.

**J. Robert Oppenheimer (David Strathairn):** When you see something that is technically sweet, you go ahead and do it and you argue about what to do about it only after you have had your technical success.

**Narrator:** Caught up in the momentum of the project, driven by the desire to finish the job he had begun, Oppenheimer was determined to see it through. "This might help to convince everybody," he argued, "that the next war would be fatal. For this purpose actual combat use might even be the best thing." He rejected the idea of demonstrating the bomb first.

**Herbert York, physicist:** If you have a demonstration, what it is is a fantastic firework with nobody getting hurt. What's important about nuclear weapons is not that fantastic firework, what's important about nuclear weapons is the fact they kill people.

**Narrator:** On May 31, 1945, Oppenheimer joined a meeting of high-ranking government officials, scientists, and military men. It was agreed that "the most desirable target was a vital war plant employing a large number of workers and closely surrounded by workers' houses." Oppenheimer made no objection. What worried him was whether the bomb would work. The answer would come in New Mexico's Alamogordo desert. The place the Spanish had called the Jornada del Muerto, the Journey of Death. On July 15, Oppenheimer climbed a 110 foot tower for one last look at the bomb. It would be tested the next day. He was down to 115 pounds, tense, on edge.

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**Roy Glauber, physicist:** There was great tension about the test, great uncertainty whether it would work or produce a pathetic fizz.

**Robert Christy, physicist:** This had never been done before and, no one had a clear picture at all of what to expect.

**Narrator:** The evening before the test, someone recalled “the frogs had gathered in a little pond by the camp and copulated and squawked all night long.” Oppenheimer chain smoked nervously and sat quietly reading the French poet Baudelaire:

**J. Robert Oppenheimer (David Strathairn):**

Seductive twilight, the criminal's friend  
Silent like a wolf  
The sky is closing down  
A dark cloth drawn across an alcove  
Where the impatient man changes into a beast of prey

**Narrator:** At 5:10, the countdown began at zero minus twenty minutes. As loudspeakers ticked off the time at five minute intervals, Oppenheimer wandered in and out of the control bunker, glancing up at the sky. At the two minute mark, he was heard to say to himself, “Lord, these affairs are hard on the heart.” Minus one minute... Minus fifty-five seconds...

**Robert Christy, physicist:** We were given a piece of welder's glass to hold in front of our eyes, so that we could look at it without being blinded. It was pitch dark outside, just before dawn... there was a lot of tension.

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**Narrator:** Oppenheimer lay on his stomach, his face dreamy, withdrawn. “He grew tenser as the last seconds ticked off,” an Army general remembered. “He scarcely breathed... For the last few seconds he stared directly ahead.”

**Robert Christy, physicist:** There was a brilliant flash like daylight outside. Suddenly from pitch dark to daylight over a huge area. There was this rapidly expanding glowing sphere with swirling dark clouds in it and finally as it dimmed, you could see on the outside, a faint blue glow. It was simply fantastic.

**Narrator:** “It worked,” was all that Oppenheimer said. “It worked.”

**Roy Glauber, physicist:** We were just awestruck. There it was! It had happened. The test was evidently a success. But we had no idea when the next thing would happen. Nobody had said to us that a bomb had already been shipped out. There was total silence. Fear and tension. Now we’re into something. Now who knows what’s going to ensue. We heard not a single word until the 6th of August.

**Narrator:** On August 6, 1945, the United States exploded an atomic bomb over Hiroshima, a city with a population of 350,000. Even before the blast, Oppenheimer had been darkly mourning: “Those poor little people,” he said. “Those poor little people.” Yet he had given the military precise instructions to ensure that the weapon would be delivered on target. “No radar bombing,” he wrote. “It must be dropped visually. Don’t let them detonate it too high or the target won’t get as much damage.” Oppenheimer was of two minds. His success had been exhilarating. But he was in anguish over the human costs.

**Richard Rhodes, writer:** There’s no doubt that there was ambivalence about it. I think Oppenheimer saw the question in all its complexity. It wasn’t so simple as, was he guilty about building such a weapon? He understood that the bomb was going to change history. He might have hoped that there was some other way to demonstrate its effectiveness. They

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knew what they were making. They knew it was going to kill a lot of people. They didn't like that aspect of it, but there you were.

**Narrator:** The second atomic bomb, exploded over Nagasaki on August 9, left him morose, consumed by doubts, fast sinking into depression. "This undertaking," he wrote a friend, "has not been without its misgivings. They are heavy on us today, when the future, which has so many elements of high promise is yet only a stone's throw from despair."

"Some of you will have seen photographs of the Nagasaki strike," he told the American Philosophical Society 3 months after the blast, "seen the great steel girders of factories twisted and wrecked."

"Atomic weapons are weapons of aggression, of surprise, and of terror. If they are ever used again, it may well be by the thousands, or perhaps by the tens of thousands."

**Martin Sherwin, historian:** He was a great supporter of using the bomb. But he understood all along that he was on the cusp of a new terror - even at the moment when the scientists believe that there was no other choice. They knew that most of the people killed were civilians. They knew that the targets for these bombs were the centers of cities. It's a very heavy burden that he carries into the post-war period, after Hiroshima and Nagasaki are destroyed.

**J. Robert Oppenheimer (David Strathairn):** "I have been asked whether in the years to come, it will be possible to kill 40 million American people in the 20 largest American towns by the use of atomic bombs in a single night. I am afraid that the answer to that question is yes."

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**Narrator:** In 1945, America was the only country in the world with the atomic bomb. President Harry Truman believed that national security depended on keeping nuclear technology secret. Oppenheimer, along with nearly every other nuclear scientist, disagreed.

**J. Robert Oppenheimer (David Strathairn):** I have been asked whether there is hope for the nation's security in keeping secret some of the knowledge which has gone into the making of the bombs. I am afraid there is no such hope.

**Richard Rhodes, writer:** President Truman really did seem to feel that if you just kept the lid on enough we'd always have the secret and no one else would ever get it. There wasn't any secret. The secret was it worked.

**Narrator:** On October 25, 1945, Oppenheimer met with President Truman to share his concerns. When the President assured his visitor that the Soviets would "never" get the bomb, Oppenheimer became frustrated.

**Narrator:** "Mr. President," he said, "I feel I have blood on my hands."

"Blood on his hands," Truman complained later. "Damn it, he hasn't half as much blood on his hands as I have. You just don't go around bellyaching about it."

**Richard Rhodes, writer:** It's not surprising Truman just about threw him out of his office. It was the president's decision. It wasn't Oppenheimer's decision.

**Narrator:** Later, Truman told his Secretary of State, "I don't want to see that son-of-a-bitch in this office again." In the years after the war, Robert Oppenheimer's fame grew. His name became a household word. He was "the father of the A-bomb," the government's top advisor on atomic weapons, privy to all the nation's atomic secrets.

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**Herbert York, physicist:** He was instantly famous. Nuclear weapons, nuclear energy, was such a big and new thing, and such a surprise to nearly everyone, that it was very widespread to ask your local physicists, "What does this all mean and what should we do?" You know the Rotary clubs did it, the Kiwanis did it, the PTA's, I mean everybody – and not only that, whenever there was a pa-anything in the papers about it, it was always a brilliant nuclear physicist. There was no other kind. Now Oppenheimer was right at the top of it, so it was the president or the Congress or the senators or the U.N. who asked him and to whom he gave his advice.

**Priscilla McMillan, writer:** He was interested in power, he was drawn to it. He wanted to have a say in what became of those weapons. He wasn't going to go back down on the farm after he'd seen Paris.

**Richard Rhodes, writer:** He realized that he might turn this fame and power into statesmanship; that he might become the sort of philosopher scientist, philosopher statesman, who could bring the rest of the message to government about how you'd go about eliminating nuclear weapons in the world. Oppenheimer was naïve in that. He really thought that if he got inside, he could change things.

**J. Robert Oppenheimer (David Strathairn):** Immediately after the war, I was deeply involved in the effort to devise effective means for the international control of atomic weapons.

**Narrator:** In 1946 Oppenheimer hammered out the details of a visionary proposal with some of America's most distinguished statesmen. The plan was designed to put atomic energy into the hands of an international agency, controlling uranium mines, atomic power plants, and atomic laboratories.

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**Herbert York, physicist:** It involved giving up nuclear weapons and internationalizing the entire nuclear enterprise. And Oppenheimer writes: "We know that people will say, 'This is impossible. You can't do this.' Our answer is we must."

**Narrator:** But Oppenheimer's hope for an international accord that would lead to the elimination of nuclear weapons was facing fierce resistance, foundering on the deepening antagonisms between two former allies, the Soviet Union and the United States.

**Martin Sherwin, historian:** Oppenheimer believed that if we could figure out how to create a post-war period in which the foundation of international affairs was US-Soviet cooperation, the world would be a very different place.

**Narrator:** But the Soviet army already occupied much of Eastern Europe. Americans feared that Western Europe might be overrun. Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin had fears of his own.

**Richard Rhodes, writer:** The Soviet Union was not about to let the United States have a monopoly on these weapons. They didn't trust us, with reason. We had, after all, built a weapon in secret, telling our allies, Great Britain, but not telling our allies, the Soviet Union, and actually used the thing on a-on an enemy population. Stalin had every reason to believe that we would use it on him.

**Narrator:** In the face of opposition from both the Soviets and the Americans, Oppenheimer's plan to internationalize nuclear energy went nowhere.

**Richard Rhodes, writer:** So it was a brilliant, and radical, and evidently premature idea.

**Herbert York, physicist:** Because national sovereignty trumped everything.

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**Narrator:** On July 1, 1946, the United States tested a 21,000 ton atomic bomb, exploding it in Bikini atoll in the Pacific Ocean. Two months before, Oppenheimer had written President Truman a letter opposing the tests. Truman paid no attention, calling Oppenheimer that “cry-baby scientist.” By now, Oppenheimer was disillusioned with America’s efforts to eliminate the threat of nuclear weapons, but he was even more disillusioned with the Russians.

**Priscilla McMillan, writer:** He saw how intransigent the Russians were going be. And he went into another mode in his thinking about what should be done about the bomb.

**Herbert York, physicist:** He felt that what you had to do instead of you had to accomplish the impossible, what you had to do was accomplish another impossibility, and that is live successfully and peacefully with nuclear weapons.

**Narrator:** That fall, Oppenheimer was made a key advisor to the newly created Atomic Energy Commission. As chairman of its General Advisory Committee, he reached what he described as a “melancholy” conclusion.

**J. Robert Oppenheimer (David Strathairn):** As the prospects of success receded, and as the evidence of Soviet hostility and growing military power accumulated, we were more and more to devote ourselves to finding ways of adapting our atomic potential to offset the Soviet threat. We concluded that the principal job of the Commission was to provide atomic weapons and good atomic weapons and many atomic weapons

**Narrator:** Oppenheimer was now a scientific statesman. He had little time to be a scientist. After the war, he had given up teaching to become the director of the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton - a center for theoretical research, renowned as the home of the most famous scientist in the world, Albert Einstein. But Oppenheimer rarely did any research himself anymore. He published only a few scientific papers and after 1950, never published one again.

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**Freeman Dyson, physicist:** And that was a great grief to him, he had had dreams of getting back into science and doing something great while he was here. His wife Kitty begged me if I couldn't actually work with Robert and actually do some science with him, and I never could. Some – you know, it was – he never got down to the nitty-gritty

**Priscilla McMillan, writer:** He was older. What, he was forty? He was past the age when people do their best scientific work.

**Narrator:** The popular press continued to depict him as a scientist on the cutting edge and a model American - a happily married man with two small children, and a German shepherd called Buddy. No one knew that he was under close surveillance by the FBI because of his past ties to the Communist party.

**Herbert Hoover (archival):** Communists have been, still are, and always will always be a menace to freedom, democratic ideals, to the worship of God and to America's way of life.

**Narrator:** With America's relationship with Russia deteriorating, the fear of Communism seemed to be spreading everywhere, and FBI Director J Edgar Hoover continued to find Oppenheimer suspicious – in spite of Oppenheimer's leadership at Los Alamos and his immense reputation.

**Martin Sherwin, historian:** There were periods in which there was a letup, but the FBI started to follow and surveil Oppenheimer in about 1940-1941, and never stopped. Never stopped.

**Narrator:** As the Soviets tightened their grip on Eastern Europe, the hunt for Communists spies was becoming a national obsession.

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**Priscilla McMillan, writer:** Looked at from outside, the United States was the most powerful country in the world. But in the U.S. there was this awareness that the Russians had walked all over Eastern Europe, and that Communism was being foisted on the peoples of those countries, and that was terrifying to the American public. And it wasn't long before there were politicians who learned to exploit that fear.

**Narrator:** The House Un-American Activities Committee had begun investigating what they called the Communist threat to the American way of life. In June 1949, it subpoenaed Oppenheimer. The famous scientist tried to charm the Congressmen. When they asked, he confirmed the names of Communist Party members. Some had been his students. Later, he said that "his nerve just gave way."

**Freeman Dyson, physicist:** It looked as though he was just trying to save his own skin by incriminating the students. To me, it was horrible.

**Priscilla McMillan, writer:** He must have sensed that the flames could get to him sometime. And it wasn't clear to him what he should do.

**Narrator:** That same June, Oppenheimer appeared before Congress again but this time, made a formidable enemy. Lewis Strauss was the president of the Institute for Advanced Study, he had hired Oppenheimer as its director. Strauss was also a member of the Atomic Energy Commission. A self-made millionaire, ambitious, proud, fiercely anti-Communist, he did not like to be crossed. "If you disagree with Lewis about anything," a fellow atomic energy commissioner said, "he assumes you're just a fool at first. But if you go on disagreeing with him, he concludes you must be a traitor." Oppenheimer and Strauss clashed over a minor issue at a Congressional hearing — and Strauss never forgave him.

**J. Robert Oppenheimer (archival):** "My opinion is that if the determination were made that isotopes should not be shipped abroad, the congress will be making a profound mistake...."

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**Narrator:** Oppenheimer was testifying in support of exporting radioisotopes to Europe – while Strauss looked on, seething. Strauss violently disagreed, fearing that the isotopes might fall into the hands of Russia. In a reckless display of arrogance, Oppenheimer aimed a jibe directly at Strauss, telling the Congressmen that radioisotopes were no more dangerous than a shovel, or a bottle of beer.

**Martin Sherwin, historian:** And everybody laughed and a journalist, said he looked over at Lewis Strauss who had turned beet red. He had never seen so much hate and anger on anyone's face as he saw on Strauss' face at that moment.

**Priscilla McMillan, writer:** Strauss was very sensitive to criticism. If he didn't like people, he dealt with them. And he had a long memory. He could deal with them a long time afterward, if he wanted to.

**Narrator:** On August 29, 1949, the Soviet Union tested its first atomic bomb. America was still the most powerful nation on earth, but the confidence of many of its citizens was shattered.

**Richard Rhodes, writer:** There was near hysteria in Washington. People were running around screaming, "The sky is falling." Now why would they do that? If you've got all of your eggs in the basket that it's a secret and then the secret is lost, then of course you think you've lost everything.

**Narrator:** The day the test made headlines, Oppenheimer received a call from an agitated Edward Teller. What should I do now, Teller wanted to know. "Keep your shirt on," Oppenheimer told him.

**Richard Rhodes, writer:** From Teller's point of view, there was a balance of forces between us and the Soviet Union in Europe. They had four million men on the ground in Eastern Europe

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and we had the bomb. Now suddenly they had four million men on the ground in Europe, we had the bomb, and they had the bomb, so the balance of forces was upset.

**Marvin Goldberger, physicist:** He hated the Soviet Union. He grew up in Hungary and Communism was a four letter word so he thought the only way you could deal with the Soviet Union was to have more bombs than they did, that they would be influenced by force and by nothing else.

**Narrator:** Teller believed he had the answer to the Soviet threat: the super - the hydrogen bomb, which had remained his pet project ever since Los Alamos. It was up to Oppenheimer and his General Advisory Committee to recommend to the Atomic Energy Commission whether or not to try and create the most awesome weapon of mass destruction ever devised.

**J. Robert Oppenheimer (David Strathairn):** A good many people came to see me or called me or wrote me letters about the super program. It was not clear to me what the right thing to do was. Was it crash development, the most rapid possible development and construction of a “super”?

**Narrator:** The debate over the H-bomb sparked a controversy fraught with danger for the unsuspecting scientist. Ever since the war had ended, Teller had been trying to convince any high official who would listen that the super would keep Americans safe.

**Marvin Goldberger, physicist:** He thought that if we didn't develop it, the Russians surely would and we would be at their mercy.

**Priscilla McMillan, writer:** He thought that it would be crazy not to develop it and that those who opposed it might possibly be unpatriotic.

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**Narrator:** But Oppenheimer and the General Advisory Committee worried more about the destructive power of the H-bomb than they did about the Russians. They voted eight to zero against it.

**J. Robert Oppenheimer (David Strathairn):** There was a surprising unanimity to me very surprising - that the United States ought not to take the initiative in an all out program for the development of thermonuclear weapons.

**Martin Sherwin, historian:** The committee concluded that it shouldn't be built because this was a weapon of genocide that had absolutely no military necessity, and that our stockpile of atomic bombs was a sufficient deterrent.

**Narrator:** The debate seemed to be over. Oppenheimer along with some of the country's most experienced nuclear scientists had rendered their opinion. But President Truman, fearing the Russians would develop an H-bomb first, dismissed it. On Nov. 1, 1952, the world's first hydrogen bomb, vaporized the tiny island of Elugelab in the Pacific.

**Harold Agnew, physicist:** It became a great big lagoon, it just went away. And the whole water around it was milky white. It was scary. The heat from this thing was really very frightening. It started getting hotter and hotter and hotter and hotter! This is almost 30 miles away.

**Richard Rhodes, writer:** These were no longer weapons that were military devices. They were simply weapons of mass destruction on the most terrible scale. Well let's take New York. The blast would destroy the entire greater New York area. The fallout would take out the rest of the East Coast. One bomb.

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**Priscilla McMillan, writer:** It meant that a new era of warfare was upon us. We now had in our possession a weapon of genocide, not just warfare. The modern arms race started with the invention of the hydrogen bomb, and after which it was escalation all the way.

**J. Robert Oppenheimer (David Strathairn):** If the development by the enemy as well as by us of thermonuclear weapons could have been averted, I think we would be in a somewhat safer world today than we are. God knows, not entirely safe because atomic bombs are not jolly either.

**Narrator:** Once the decision was made, Oppenheimer did nothing to oppose it. Frustrated, he considered leaving the government altogether, but instead played the loyal soldier. Later, Oppenheimer's lack of enthusiasm would be interpreted as outright opposition.

**Roger Robb (Michael Cumpsty):** Did you subsequent to the President's decision in January 1950 ever express any opposition to the production of the hydrogen bomb on moral grounds?

**J. Robert Oppenheimer (David Strathairn):** I would think I could very well have said this is a dreadful weapon, or something like that.

**Roger Robb (Michael Cumpsty):** Why do you think you could very well have said that?

**J. Robert Oppenheimer (David Strathairn):** Because I have always thought it was a dreadful weapon. Even if from a technical point of view it was a sweet and lovely and beautiful job, I have still thought it was a dreadful weapon.

**Roger Robb (Michael Cumpsty):** And have said so?

**J. Robert Oppenheimer (David Strathairn):** I would assume I have said so, yes.

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**Roger Robb (Michael Cumpsty):** You mean you had a moral revulsion against the production of such a dreadful weapon?

**J. Robert Oppenheimer (David Strathairn):** This is too strong.

**Roger Robb (Michael Cumpsty):** Beg your pardon?

**J. Robert Oppenheimer (David Strathairn):** That is too strong.

**Roger Robb (Michael Cumpsty):** Which is too strong, the weapon or my expression?

**J. Robert Oppenheimer (David Strathairn):** Your expression. I had grave concern and anxiety.

**Roger Robb (Michael Cumpsty):** You had moral qualms about it, is that accurate?

**J. Robert Oppenheimer (David Strathairn):** Let us leave the word “moral” out of it.

**Roger Robb (Michael Cumpsty):** You had qualms about it.

**J. Robert Oppenheimer (David Strathairn):** How could one not have qualms about it? I know no one who doesn’t have qualms about it.

**Richard Rhodes, writer:** Oppenheimer wasn’t opposed to building nuclear weapons, he was just opposed to building huge nuclear weapons that wouldn’t—that were bigger than the targets.

**Narrator:** In 1950, the United States went to war in Korea. Soon Americans were fighting both Korean and Chinese communists while the Russians seemed to be growing increasingly

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belligerent. Oppenheimer knew that America's military planned a devastating response to any Soviet attack: in 1951, he was shown the air force's top-secret strategic war plan.

**Richard Rhodes, writer:** The plan was that we would bomb our way across Eastern Europe with nuclear weapons, we would then destroy the Soviet Union, and then as a kind of an extra we'd go on and destroy China because after all it was a Communist country.

**Martin Sherwin, historian:** The American government was planning, in its nuclear weapons response to any Soviet attack, to kill 200 and something million people within a week or two. I mean, Oppenheimer just felt that this was madness, sheer madness.

**Narrator:** Oppenheimer spoke out for moderation. He took a stand against building nuclear powered aircraft and submarines, and advocated open discussion of the growing arms race.

**J. Robert Oppenheimer (archival):** "It is a grave danger for us that these decisions are taken on the basis of facts held secret. If we are guided by fear alone, we'll fail in this time of crisis."

**Narrator:** But powerful Washington insiders believed he was standing in the way of America's ability to defend itself. They were led by Lewis Strauss. With the election of Dwight Eisenhower to the Presidency, Strauss became the Chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission. He now had the power to build a case to rid the government of the influential scientist.

**Richard Rhodes, writer:** Strauss would deliberately destroy the name and reputation and government position of Robert Oppenheimer and when he destroyed something, he destroyed it thoroughly.

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**Narrator:** Strauss began by orchestrating a campaign in America's most popular news magazines, alleging that Oppenheimer was undermining the nation's atomic weapons program. The stories depicted Edward Teller as a scientific patriot. Teller readily joined the crusade against his old boss. He had long wanted to remove Oppenheimer from public life. In 1951, he told the FBI that "a lot of people believe Oppenheimer opposed the development of the hydrogen bomb," on "direct orders from Moscow."

**Marvin Goldberger, physicist:** Teller sincerely believed that we were in a dangerous arms race with the Russians, and that Oppenheimer was standing in the way of protecting the country against this dreaded foe. I think he may well have sincerely believed that.

**Richard Rhodes, writer:** And I'm sure for Teller it was also a very personal jealousy. Oppenheimer likes his bomb but he doesn't like my bomb. I know that sounds absurd and yet I have no doubt that it was part of the equation, So get rid of him and then Teller, like cream would rise to the top of the bottle. They needed to get Oppenheimer out of the way. So that Strauss and Teller they could realign the physics community around the dream of building new and better bombs.

**Narrator:** Late in August 1953, the Russians exploded what the press called a hydrogen bomb. The news seemed to confirm what Americans feared – their nuclear secrets were being stolen. Two years before, reports that Soviet agents had penetrated Los Alamos and passed atomic secrets to the Russians under Oppenheimer's watch had stunned them. Convinced that America was vulnerable, many began searching for someone to blame.

**Joseph McCarthy (archival):** "One communist on the faculty of one university is one communist too many."

**Narrator:** The reputations and careers of loyal citizens in universities, businesses, and government were already being ruined.

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**Joseph McCarthy (archival):** “Are you a member of the Communist conspiracy as of this moment?”

**Richard Rhodes, writer:** People were really convinced that tomorrow Soviets were going to take over America, and they were convinced that it would be because of internal subversion, not because of external activity, but because we had spies and they were destroying the American way.

**Narrator:** The former executive director of the congressional Joint Committee on Atomic Energy was convinced that Oppenheimer was one of them. William Borden had harbored doubts about Oppenheimer for years, and shared his suspicions with Strauss.

**Martin Sherwin, historian:** Borden is a natural ally of Lewis Strauss. And Strauss allows Borden to take Oppenheimer’s security file home, and Borden studies it for months and writes this letter to J. Edgar Hoover.

**Narrator:** Borden outlined a series of charges against Oppenheimer. He concluded with an accusation that went off like a bombshell: “More probably than not,” Borden wrote, “J. Robert Oppenheimer is an agent of the Soviet Union.” Hoover forwarded the letter to the White House. The President called in Lewis Strauss to help him decide what to do.

**Martin Sherwin, historian:** Strauss convinces Eisenhower that if this letter was being sat on by the administration, it will cost Eisenhower politically, and Eisenhower declares that a wall should be put between Oppenheimer and secrecy.

**Narrator:** On December 21, 1953, Strauss told Oppenheimer that his security clearance had been suspended. The country’s most famous authority on atomic weapons, “the father of the A-bomb,” was stunned. He fell into in a “despairing state of mind,” a friend remembered.

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The following evening, after meeting with his lawyers, and more than one drink, he fainted on the bathroom floor.

**Martin Sherwin, historian:** When he began to think about the consequences of what he was facing, I think he realized that he was in deep, deep trouble for the first time in his life.

**Priscilla McMillan, writer:** Oppenheimer realized that he was gonna pay. I think he had the tragic sense. He understood the drama that he had to play out, even though he later called it a farce.

**Narrator:** The hearings were enveloped in an atmosphere of fierce anti-communism.

**Gordon Gray (Boyd Gaines):** It was reported that in 1940 you were listed as a sponsor of the Friends of the Chinese People, an organization characterized by the House Committee on Un-American Activities as a Communist-front organization.

**Narrator:** At stake was a man's dignity, and the role that nuclear weapons would play in America's military strategy.

**Gordon Gray (Boyd Gaines):** "It was reported that you strongly opposed the hydrogen bomb on moral grounds and by claiming that it was not feasible and not politically desirable. And even after it was determined to proceed, you continued to oppose the project."

**Narrator:** Confronted with charges that could ruin his reputation, Oppenheimer himself insisted on the hearings despite the warnings of some of his friends.

**Richard Rhodes, writer:** Oppenheimer couldn't see tucking tail and walking away. What would that say about the charges against him? On the other hand, it's too bad he didn't understand what sort of forces he was up against.

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**Narrator:** With no credible evidence to prove that Oppenheimer had put America's security at risk, Prosecutor Roger Robb would have to wear the scientist down, force him into contradictions, confuse and embarrass him.

**Roger Robb (Michael Cumpsty):** Your brother Frank told you in 1936, or probably 1937, that he and his wife Jackie had joined the Communist Party. Did he ask your advice about it?

**J. Robert Oppenheimer (David Strathairn):** Oh, lord, no. He had taken the step. I had confidence in his decency and straightforwardness and in his loyalty to me.

**Roger Robb (Michael Cumpsty):** Tell us the test that you applied to acquire the confidence that you have spoken of.

**J. Robert Oppenheimer (David Strathairn):** In the case of a brother one doesn't make tests, at least I didn't.

**Roger Robb (Michael Cumpsty):** Well....

**J. Robert Oppenheimer (David Strathairn):** I knew my brother.

**Roger Robb (Michael Cumpsty):** When did you decide that your brother was no longer a member of the party and no longer dangerous?

**J. Robert Oppenheimer (David Strathairn):** I never regarded my brother as dangerous.

**Narrator:** Robb was an experienced trial lawyer, but Lewis Strauss wasn't taking any chances. The hearing turned into a trial in which Strauss made the rules. Strauss selected the judges,

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kept the defense from seeing all the relevant documents and from knowing in advance which witnesses would be called.

**Martin Sherwin, historian:** They are in a war against communism and therefore the normal rules of justice, have to be set aside in order to protect the body politic.

**Narrator:** Strauss even broke the law to get his man. The FBI bugged Oppenheimer's lawyer's offices, his home, nearly everywhere he went, then passed the information along to the prosecutor. The defense strategy was known to the prosecution in advance.

**Richard Rhodes, writer:** It was the worst kind of kangaroo court. They had them ten ways to Sunday.

**J. Robert Oppenheimer (David Strathairn):** There were approaches to other people who were troubled by them and sometimes came and discussed them with me. That's as far as I can go on that.

**Narrator:** Unknown to Oppenheimer or his lawyer, Robb had discovered the secret recording of Oppenheimer's conversation with army intelligence officer Colonel Pash. He carefully studied the transcript, and prepared a trap to catch Oppenheimer in a lie.

**Roger Robb (Michael Cumpsty):** Did Chevalier tell you or indicate to you in any way that he had talked to anyone but you about this matter?

**J. Robert Oppenheimer (David Strathairn):** No.

**Roger Robb (Michael Cumpsty):** You are sure about that?

**J. Robert Oppenheimer (David Strathairn):** Yes.

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**Roger Robb (Michael Cumpsty):** Did you learn from anybody else or hear that Chevalier had approached anyone but you about this matter?

**J. Robert Oppenheimer (David Strathairn):** No.

**Roger Robb (Michael Cumpsty):** You are sure about that?

**J. Robert Oppenheimer (David Strathairn):** That is right.

**Roger Robb (Michael Cumpsty):** Doctor, I would like to read from the transcripts of your interview with Colonel Pash. "There were approaches to other people who were troubled by them and sometimes came and discussed them with me. That's as far as I can go on that." Do you recall saying something like that?

**J. Robert Oppenheimer (David Strathairn):** I don't recall that conversation very well. I can only rely on the transcript.

**Roger Robb (Michael Cumpsty):** Doctor, for your information, I might say we have a record of your voice.

**J. Robert Oppenheimer (David Strathairn):** Sure.

**Roger Robb (Michael Cumpsty):** Do you have any doubt that you said that?

**J. Robert Oppenheimer (David Strathairn):** No.

**Roger Robb (Michael Cumpsty):** So, as to be clear, did you discuss with or disclose to Pash the identity of Chevalier?

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J. Robert Oppenheimer (David Strathairn): No.

Roger Robb (Michael Cumpsty): Let us refer then, for the time being, as X.

J. Robert Oppenheimer (David Strathairn): All right.

Roger Robb (Michael Cumpsty): Didn't you say that X had approached three people?

J. Robert Oppenheimer (David Strathairn): Probably.

Roger Robb (Michael Cumpsty): Why did you do that, doctor?

J. Robert Oppenheimer (David Strathairn): Because I was an idiot.

Roger Robb (Michael Cumpsty): Is that your only explanation, Doctor?

J. Robert Oppenheimer (David Strathairn): I was reluctant to mention Chevalier.

Roger Robb (Michael Cumpsty): Yes.

J. Robert Oppenheimer (David Strathairn): No doubt somewhat reluctant to mention myself.

Roger Robb (Michael Cumpsty): So you told Pash that there were several people that were contacted.

J. Robert Oppenheimer (David Strathairn): Right.

Roger Robb (Michael Cumpsty): And your testimony now is that was a lie?

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J. Robert Oppenheimer (David Strathairn): Right.

Roger Robb (Michael Cumpsty): That wasn't true?

J. Robert Oppenheimer (David Strathairn): That is right.

Roger Robb (Michael Cumpsty): You did, you are sure, tell Colonel Pash there was more than one person involved?

J. Robert Oppenheimer (David Strathairn): This whole thing is a pure fabrication except for the one name Eltenton.

Roger Robb (Michael Cumpsty): Why did you go into such great circumstantial detail about this thing if you knew it was a cock-and-bull story?

J. Robert Oppenheimer (David Strathairn): I fear this whole thing is a piece of idiocy.

Richard Rhodes, writer: Oppenheimer was up against a kind of psychological torture. He was broken down by a very, very skillful prosecutor. Made to look stupid, made to look like a fool.

Priscilla McMillan, writer: The purpose in proving him a liar was to impress the hearing board that he couldn't be trusted and that they should declare him a security risk. It had to be totally humiliating and destroy his confidence in himself. He's being told that he's a liar, untrustworthy, unworthy, and he folded.

J. Robert Oppenheimer (David Strathairn): The story I told Pash is not a true story. There were not three or more people involved. I believe I can do no more than say that the story I told is a false story. It is not easy to say that. Now, when you ask as to why I did this other

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than that I was an idiot, I am going to have more trouble being understandable. I found myself, I believe, trying to give a tip to the intelligence people without realizing that when you give a tip you must tell the whole story. But I am in any case solemnly testifying that there was no conspiracy in what I knew, and what I know of this matter. I wish I could explain to you better why I falsified and fabricated.

**Priscilla McMillan, writer:** The trial proved to him his worst fears. Oppenheimer had been troubled all his life about who he was. He later said that he was repulsive to himself. The trial said that he had defects of character, that he was not a good human being. And unfortunately he agreed.

**Narrator:** Oppenheimer testified for 27 hours. A parade of witnesses was called on both sides. He looked wan, demoralized by the time Edward Teller took the stand. Teller drove the final nail into Oppenheimer's coffin.

**Edward Teller (Michael Stuhlbarg):** I thoroughly disagreed with Dr. Oppenheimer in numerous issues and his actions frankly appeared to me confused and complicated. I feel that I would like to see the vital interests of this country in hands which I understand better, and therefore trust more. I would feel personally more secure if public matters would rest in other hands.

I'm sorry.

**J. Robert Oppenheimer (David Strathairn):** After what you've just said, I don't know what you mean.

**Narrator:** The hearings lasted nearly four weeks. In his closing remarks, Oppenheimer's lawyer warned, "America must not devour her own children."

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**Gordon Gray (Boyd Gaines):** We find that Dr. Oppenheimer's continuing conduct and associations have reflected a serious disregard for the requirements of the security system. We have found a susceptibility to influence which could have serious implications for the security interests of the country. We find his conduct in the hydrogen bomb program sufficiently disturbing. We have regretfully concluded that Dr. Oppenheimer has been less than candid in several instances in his testimony.

**Narrator:** By a vote of two to one, the board concluded that, although Oppenheimer was a "loyal citizen," his security clearance should be revoked. Numb and bewildered, Oppenheimer told a friend, "I have so little sense of self remaining." In a futile gesture, he appealed to the Atomic Energy Commission, chaired by Lewis Strauss. The Commission upheld the verdict, four to one.

**Jeremy Bernstein, writer:** I took a train ride with him to New York, and for some reason he started talking about "my" case, my case, and he said to me that at the time he thought it was happening to somebody else.

**Priscilla McMillan, writer:** He wasn't accused in the course of the hearing of having ever betrayed a secret. It was about getting Oppenheimer out of the security counsels of the US Government.

**Narrator:** America's most influential voice for nuclear moderation had been stilled.

**Martin Sherwin, historian:** The Oppenheimer hearing was a political battle between the Strauss view, "We need more and more and more nuclear weapons" and the Oppenheimer view that nuclear weapons are a part of our defense, but we have to, you know, use them sensibly and we can't rely on them totally. That hearing had a profound effect on the nuclear arms race. It essentially opened the floodgates. It removed the legitimacy of criticism against more and more nuclear weapons.

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**Narrator:** In 1954, the year of the Oppenheimer hearings, America had some 300 nuclear weapons. By the end of the 20th century, the United States would have at the ready more than 70,000.

**Richard Rhodes, writer:** We built so many more than we ever needed and the Soviets followed suit.

**Narrator:** In 1954, Robert Oppenheimer turned 50. His security clearance had been revoked. His connection to the government had been severed. He would live for 13 more years. But he was never the same man.

**Robert Christy, physicist:** He had been a strong forceful leader before that, and he was a beaten man afterward.

**Richard Rhodes, writer:** He gave lectures on science and its interaction with humanity, he continued to direct the Institute for Advanced Study, he became what Yeats calls a smiling public man.

**Marvin Goldberger, physicist:** I saw a lot of him at that time, and I saw the impact that this tragedy had on him. I can't recall ever seeing him happy, you know? Just relaxed and having fun. I don't have the feeling that he ever felt good about himself, if he was ever in any sense at peace with himself.

**Narrator:** In 1963, Oppenheimer received what many saw as an official apology: President Lyndon Johnson presented him with one of the nation's highest scientific honors - the Fermi Award from the Atomic Energy Commission.

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**J. Robert Oppenheimer (archival):** With countless other men and women, we are engaged in this great enterprise of our time testing whether men can live without war as the great arbiter of history. I think it's just possible Mr. President that it has taken some character and some courage for you to make this award today.

**Narrator:** Edward Teller was there that day, come to offer his congratulations. When he extended his hand, once again, Oppenheimer shook it. After the ceremony, Lewis Strauss wrote an angry letter to Life Magazine, complaining that honoring Oppenheimer "dealt a severe blow to the security system which protects our country." Robert Oppenheimer died four years later. He was 62. In those twilight years, he seldom returned to the New Mexico where he had come to feel at peace. When he was 24, he had written a poem inspired by the wilderness he loved so well, and the allure of death.

**J. Robert Oppenheimer (David Strathairn):**

It was evening when we came to the river with a low moon over the desert that we had lost in the mountains, forgotten,  
What with the cold and the sweating and the ranges barring the sky.  
We waited a long time in silence.  
Then we heard the oars creaking  
And afterwards, I remember,  
The boatman called to us.  
We did not look back at the mountains.

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