

## Nuclear Secrecy, Security, and the Tragedy of Oppenheimer

### Nuclear Politics/Politics

- Talking about not partisan or ideological politics
- Referring power changes or power relationships (micro versus macropolitics)
- Power issues can be very subtle or very overt

### Does the bomb produce its own politics?

- **Existential politics:** state charged with keeping security, and the security needs are total, does the state need to become total?
- **Power and Responsibility:** if the fate of millions is tied up in the minds of individuals, how should those individuals be vetted, trusted, treated?
- **Technological politics:** Do technology produce its own political structures?

### Secrecy Regimes

- Secrecy is the desire to control information
- Ideas, information and knowledge are hard to control -- slippery
- Physical manifestations of ideas are part of secrecy regimes
- We have the espionage act -- what happens when you give a secret away in the USA

### Oppenheimer: an unlikely WMD creator

- J Robert Oppenheimer
- He has big hair
- Grew up on the Upper West Side of NYC
- Goes to grad school in Europe
- Never wins a Nobel Prize; works with students and did a lot of early work on neutron stars and black holes
- Terrible teacher and chain smoked during lecture while teaching
- Gravitating towards communist party members. Did not notice Great Depression because he hella rich
- WWII Oppenheimer: assigned to the Manhattan project. He is a cool dude and smokes a lot of cigarettes. He chose the Los Alamos location. Must prove that he is a great American
- Groves knows that Oppenheimer has a lot of left wing connections. He is credited with a lot of the Manhattan Project work
- Wartime security issues: Frank Oppenheimer is a communist party. Frank is his brother.
- Jean Tatlock kills herself during the war. Not crazy to believe that she was killed. Oppenheimer's girlfriend.
- **Chevalier Incident (1943):** Oppenheimer tells Manhattan Project security agents that Haakon Chevalier approached him and asked him about passing on information to USSR
- Oppenheimer does not see this as a big issue and he keeps changing the story.
- The lack of consistency raised concern. They thought he could be covering up a potential spy.
- Oppenheimer ascendant: Hugely important. Seen as a cool guy to a very responsible government expert. If he was a pokemon, he evolved
- Postwar: plays a big role in pushing for international control; create postwar declassification system; plays a big role in project VISTA recommending development of tactical nuclear weapons for use in Europe; chairman of the GAC of the AEC.

- Oppenheimer becomes Airforce's enemy

### **Red Fears**

- **Postwar anti communism in the USA:** Truman loyalty-security program of 1947: government can fire employees if believed that they might be disloyal
- Communist party is considered disloyal
- House committee on Un-american activities investigates film industry, scientists, others starting in 1947
- Senate Permanent subcommittee on investigations - senator Joseph McCarthy's bully pulpit

### **Venona**

- US army signal intelligence agency starts new program, code-named VENONA in Feb 1943
- Goal was to decrypt Soviet diplomatic communications between US embassies and Moscow
- US had already intercepted thousands of messages
- Some weaknesses in Soviet encryption identified as early as 1943-44 but messages were double encrypted, very difficult to break
- Full messages by 47 about Manhattan project
- None of this is in realtime and messages are a few years old
- Fuchs: VENONA identifies Klaus Fuchs
- FBI is allowed to know about VENONA, but AEC is not. SO FBI has to make a clean case of Fuchs information before telling AEC.

### **The Rosenberg Trial**

- Julius and Ethel Rosenberg arrested, charged with conspiracy to espionage
- It is not clear if his wife was involved. She did not have a code name. She may have known what was going on.
- Rosenberg says that they are innocent and the FBI push for the electric chair
- Rosenberg during peacetime are the only people to be executed for espionage
- They are not major figures in this ring, they just won't play ball
- Evidence against rosenbergs primarily given by greenglass and gold - no VENONA information used in court case
- Hugely controversial then and now
- They are both Jewish
- VENONA releases prove without doubt that Julius was a spy and questions still linger about Ethel

### **Oppenheimer's associates**

- Bernard Peters: student, "quite a Red", he got blacklisted
- Frank Oppenheimer - blacklisted
- David Bohm - blacklisted
- Rossi Lomanitz - drafted in army in hopes he would get shot and was blacklisted
- Robert Serber - harassed by FBI, wiretapped

### **Frank Oppenheimer**

- Robert Oppenheimer asked about Frank's communist in June 1949 begs to not have to answer

- Frank called before HUAC not long after and testifies that he was a member of the communist party
- Loses job at U. Minnesota blacklisted from all teaching jobs
- Sells a VanGogh and becomes a cattle rancher in New Mexico

### **Oppenheimer's Enemies**

- Edward Teller: clashes over who directs theoretical division
  - Clashes over priority of super bomb, international control, secrecy of bomb project
  - Ends up desiring a second laboratory to compete with los-alamos (free market ethos)
  - Personality clashes
- Lewis Strauss: grew up in Virginia < jewish, self-taught, becomes secretary of Herbert Hoover; added as the Republican representation on the AEC - conservative on secrecy and defense

### **Fallout from the H-bomb debate**

- Strauss and Teller lobby heavy for H-bomb
- Strauss animosity towards Oppenheimer grows. Strauss version of h-bomb debate put forward in heavily inaccurate articles and eventually a book
- Implies oppenheimer delayed h-bomb development, probably did this on purpose
- Strauss leaves AEC and eisenhower appoints him to be AEC chairman in 1953
- Los Alamos builds h-bomb in 1952
- Winners think h-bomb was delayed

### **Investigating Oppenheimer**

- Dec 53: Strauss tells Eisenhower that there are serious charges against Oppenheimer
- Eisenhower orders a blank wall put between Oppenheimer and classified information pending formal investigation
- Strauss tells Oppenheimer he can avoid hearing and walk away clean
- Oppenheimer on the Chevalier Incident: Lol
- Oppenheimer retreats from public life and government service
- His clearance was set to expire in a matter of weeks anyway
- When democrats take white house they give Oppenheimer AEC's fermi prize
- Strauss continues as AEC chairman. Rejected for secretary of commerce

▪ How would we think of Oppenheimer today if his security clearance had not been stripped?

▪ The transcript shows a theoretical physicist who:

▪ eagerly built the atomic bomb and recommended it for use on civilians and expressed no serious regrets about that

▪ argued against the H-bomb when nobody knew how to make it, but switched positions after the Teller-Ulam design invented

▪ wasn't a nuclear abolitionist – supported tactical nuclear weapons

▪ sold out his friends in an effort to appear loyal to the government at all times

- Got himself in trouble because he lied to security officers and had a communist mistress while he ran Los Alamos
- Frank Oppenheimer: became a high school physics teacher