

Oppenheimer: Global Empire Trumps Good War

September 26, 2023



Oppenheimer (directed by Christopher Nolan, based on the book *American Prometheus: The Triumph and Tragedy of J. Robert Oppenheimer*, written by Kai Bird, of *The Nation*, and Martin J. Sherwin, a historian of foreign policy who died in 2021) is a morality play in which big personalities forcefully negotiate conflicting world views during and after the frantic drive to build the atomic bomb that would beat Hitler.

After the bait-and-switch bombing of Japan, the appalled leader of the Manhattan Project, J. Robert Oppenheimer, embarks on a public crusade for a future free of nuclear holocaust, thinking that great minds will save the people. Truman dismisses the nerdy do-gooder as a useful policy advisor, and the cold-warriors proceed with planning their ascent into the new American Century. By the 1950s they're thinking that having an articulate, technically astute, progressive critic inside the war machine was a bad idea and that potentially the guy was a damaging loose cannon in public discourse. Oppenheimer earlier had friends, including a girlfriend, in the Communist Party (CPUSA); he was a fellow-traveler on progressive issues. Did he share a Marxist perspective on social class or was he just a leftist diletante? We don't find out. The war planners could overlook this problem when they needed the bomb; now he had to be defrocked, eliminated. There were important issues and debates that accompanied these events and we need to understand the insights of leftists at that time, or the lack thereof. For that the film is not helpful. It's worthwhile to think about what the film could have been with different objectives, and what Oppenheimer might have done differently at some points.

The technical challenge of the Manhattan Project was producing a special form of uranium - U-235 - which is a very minor component of refined uranium ore, and then designing a device that can

suddenly smash U-235 material into a very compact sphere so fast that the resulting nuclear chain-reaction goes to completion and the murderous deed is done before it blows itself apart (which would interrupt the chain-reaction). At Los Alamos, they cheered when they got an 80% yield!! This all has to happen in hundredths of a second. The film doesn't quite explain this task. To make this bomb required significant innovation in conventional explosives design and high-speed electrical circuitry (hence the drama of special-effects explosions in the film).

One can assume that Oppenheimer discussed with some friends his pending decision on whether to take the job of leading the bomb project. It would have been credible if his CP girlfriend had said in passing "you know, this whole war didn't have to happen; it was predicted by high-level establishment strategists at the close of WW I because the terms of the settlement were so onerous, placing massive burdens on the German working class, while most of the ruling class got off almost scot-free." A German Trump was predictable. Fascism happened for material historical reasons.

One wonders if the CPUSA position on defending the Soviet Union at all costs from Nazi defeat played a role here. The CP endorsed the "no-strike pledge" in the unions of the corporate war-profiteers, and shut down their comprehensive network fighting Jim-Crow racism in the South to smooth the war effort. The film provides few hints of debate on these underlying strategic choices. Although the bomb team comprised a broad spectrum from progressives like future Nobel Prize winner Isidor Isaac Rabi to right-wing anti-communists like Reagan's future star-wars hero, Edward Teller, both of whom are in the film, it's not clear whether Oppenheimer had comrades there who were conversant in the class struggle, or that he even wanted that conversation. The bomb team was more focused on the drama of our future with the bomb.

When the full significance of the bomb attacks on Japan sunk in for the bomb builders, Oppenheimer and some colleagues sought to use their public importance and authority to guide a public conversation on the future of nuclear energy and weapons policies. Their naivete was rewarded with dismissal and charges of betrayal. Was this approach of hoping to use positions of influence to change policy an instance of the "burrowing from within" strategy of the CP, thinking that if we just get the right people in positions of power, we can fix things? All social movements burrow from within; it's called "politics." Not too long ago having a Catholic President (John F. Kennedy) was considered risky, not to mention having socialists in office and administrative positions today. It seems like Oppenheimer and his leftist friends had put aside a social-class conflict perspective denying ruling class power in their appeal to public judgement on an existential issue. For dissenting participants within societal civic institutions, this can be a slippery slope with no hand-holds.

The 1954 hearings where the cold-warriors went after Oppenheimer were classic Joe McCarthy anti-communism, very convincingly portrayed in the film, so much so that one forgets that the agenda is a bigger one than merely the career moves of the director of the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC), Lewis Staus. Were they afraid that he was a communist - corrupting their institutions - or that he wasn't a communist - a credible, honest liberal promoting dangerous public dissent? From the film, we don't know. Although Strauss was the bad guy, he actually opposed Truman's bombing of Japanese cities in favor of demonstrating the bomb's power by the annihilation of a large deserted island. The intent of the hearings was to deny Oppenheimer a security clearance, essential for any further work in weapons development and any related scientific research, and to eliminate his political persona. Dealing with star-chamber bullies was not generally well-strategized by the CP (with some notable exceptions where the victims turned the tables on the bullies and scored big in public; they usually pleaded the Fifth Amendment) and we don't know from the film what if any CP input there was. Clearly better advice was needed.

The question is: Why did Oppenheimer still want a security clearance? It's very unlikely he had wanted to help General Douglas MacArthur use the bomb on China in the Korean War, and he

opposed development of the H-bomb. Why didn't he denounce the new imperialism from post-war Greece and Korea to, in 1954, Iran, Guatemala, and Vietnam. In terms of terrible weapons, why didn't he point to the war-crimes in the horrendous fire-bombing of cities in Japan or Dresden in Germany. *Oppenheimer* visits an important period in our history, provides many lessons and poses challenges for progressive thought and action and for highly placed progressive intellectuals regarding their political options.