

Book Review

J. Robert Oppenheimer, Shatterer of Worlds. By Peter Goodchild. Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston (1981). 301 pp. \$15.00.

The matter of J. Robert Oppenheimer gnaws at the conscience of most of us, especially those who, even peripherally and at some distance, knew the father of the A-bomb. Was the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) justified in lifting his clearance in 1954 after a searing, quasi-judicial proceeding? Or was Robert Oppenheimer the victim of circumstances, of his own arrogance, of jealous intellectual enemies?

Much has been written about Oppenheimer, and I suppose much more will be written. But Peter Goodchild's *J. Robert Oppenheimer, Shatterer of Worlds* is by far the best account of this extraordinary, immensely complicated man. I had intended merely to browse through the volume, but I was transfixed by the book and could not lay it down. I found it a moving, emotional experience, which at times elicited some tears—when, for example, Goodchild describes the reconciliation between Edward Teller and Robert Oppenheimer that took place at the latter's Fermi Award ceremony. (As usual, Oppenheimer said just the right thing to President Johnson, who made the award: "I think it is just possible, Mr. President, that it has taken some charity and some courage for you to make this award today. That would seem to me a good augury for all our futures.")

The book is the basis for a seven-part BBC television series of which Goodchild is the producer. It covers Oppenheimer's entire life. Goodchild's account includes much material, and many stunning photographs, that have either been declassified recently or were made available to the author under the Freedom of Information Act. In addition, he interviewed nearly 50 of Oppenheimer's former colleagues, friends, and adversaries. The resulting biography gives an astonishingly vivid account of the man David Lilienthal described as "... worth living a lifetime just to know that mankind has been able to produce such a being. We may have to wait another hundred years for the second one to come off the line."

Goodchild concludes that the AEC did Oppenheimer a terrible injustice in lifting his clearance. From the perspective of 25 years, I certainly agree with this assessment—Oppenheimer's opposition to the H-bomb simply could not be

attributed to disloyalty—indeed, the hearing board concluded that Oppenheimer was loyal.

Then why was Oppenheimer disgraced? It seems to me that the proximate villain in the case was William Borden, who at the time was executive director of the Joint Congressional Committee on Atomic Energy. In an infamous memorandum sent to J. Edgar Hoover, Borden, after summarizing Oppenheimer's previous Communist affiliations (and, incidentally, entirely erroneously accusing Oppenheimer of being against the submarine program), concluded: "More probably than not, Dr. Oppenheimer is an espionage agent under Soviet direction." This irresponsibly mischievous and ill-conceived piece of paper found its way to President Eisenhower. Lewis Strauss, on the one occasion I discussed the Oppenheimer matter with him, some 25 years ago, insisted that Ike then *directed* him to put Oppenheimer through the security hearing (a point verified by Goodchild). Had there been no Borden memorandum, I doubt that there would have been a hearing, especially since Oppenheimer had already been cleared by the Manhattan District and by the AEC; and there was no new security-relevant information on which to base another investigation. But once the proceedings got under way, they acquired a powerful momentum of their own, propelled by the deep controversies over the H-bomb.

Though Goodchild vindicates Oppenheimer, he certainly does not make him a man without fault. Coruscatingly brilliant, incredibly, powerfully articulate, with a capacity to synthesize and to drive to the heart of things—but arrogant, capable of intellectual cruelty, and often a player of games. I recall my only brush with Oppenheimer in the early 1960s when I said, before a group of high energy physicists, that the primary justification for public support of science lay in the ultimate practical usefulness of science, not in its enlargement of man's horizon. Oppenheimer, who was in the audience, scribbled something on a matchbox and, without saying a word, shoved it at me after I finished. Inscribed were the words, "Jefferson would have considered you a monster!" The next morning Oppenheimer seemed to be apologizing to me—he actually had enjoyed my talk, and, as he said, he had just been deeply immersed in Jefferson's writings on science. Ten years later, a man who had known Oppenheimer very well gave this interpretation of the incident: that Oppenheimer first had to express his disdain for me and for what I had said; but

that by the next morning he had decided he had no need for another enemy. Childishly complicated? Of course; but as Oppenheimer himself said at his hearing when confronted with discrepancies over his contacts with his friend Chevalier, he could sometimes be an idiot.

In retrospect, the words of Professor Evans, the Northwestern University chemist who sat on the hearing board, ring so true: "... our failure to clear Dr. Oppenheimer will be a black mark on the escutcheon of our country." Yet I believe Goodchild is wrong when he implies that the AEC's security system, and particularly its misapplication in the matter of J. Robert Oppenheimer, was tantamount to tyranny prevailing in the United States. After all, Oppenheimer was not stripped of his freedom: He could have, had he chosen, simply given up his Q-clearance. And our system is resilient. To suggest that the Oppenheimer affair, and other, less prominent security episodes, that "are intended to protect the free world against Communism, but instead . . . can be seen as assisting in the rapid convergence of the two political systems" is unjustified

rhetoric. Despite this overdrawn conclusion, Goodchild has produced a gem that is must reading for anyone connected with atomic energy.

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About the Reviewer: Again we welcome Alvin Weinberg to this section with his remarks on a thoughtful biography. Through his tenure with the Metallurgical Laboratory, then as director of the Oak Ridge National Laboratory, and now director of the Institute for Energy Analysis, Dr. Weinberg is well known to all for his thought-provoking analyses and predictions.