Oppenheimer: Was the Father of the A-Bomb a Patriot or a Traitor?

by Bruce Bawer

Although biopics about great scientists have been a Hollywood staple ever since the early days of the talkies, they pose distinct challenges to filmmakers. How, after all, to make the sight of somebody working out a mathematical problem in his head visually exciting? Still, from *The Story of Louis Pasteur* (1936) and *Madame Curie* (1943) to *The Theory of Everything* and *The Imitation Game* (both 2014), the genre has yielded some first-rate results. The latest such achievement is the epical *Oppenheimer*, written and directed by Christopher Nolan (*Memento, The Dark Knight, Inception, Interstellar, Dunkirk*).

It’s the story of J. Robert Oppenheimer (1904-67), “the father of the atom bomb” – not to be confused with Edward Teller, “the father of the hydrogen bomb.” Before seeing it, I read *American Prometheus*, the 2007 biography by Martin J. Sherwin and Kai Bird on which it’s based. The book is fascinating, but after finishing it I wondered how Nolan had managed to make it cinematic. Yes, in films like this, sooner or later you know you’re going to see the hero excitedly scribbling complex equations on a blackboard. But in *The Theory of Everything* we also experienced the human drama of Stephen Hawking becoming increasingly weakened by ALS; in *The Imitation Game*, Alan Turing’s autistic personality made for plenty of interpersonal conflict; and *A Beautiful Mind* actually put John Nash’s imaginary friends onscreen.

But what to do with Oppenheimer? The man was a puzzlement, complex and contradictory. Obsessed with the paradoxes of the cosmos, he nonetheless found time to become a multilingual polymath of surpassing erudition – an aficionado of Picasso, Stravinsky, and *The Waste Land* who taught himself Italian so he could read Dante and learned Sanskrit just for the hell of it. Different people described him in strikingly different ways: for one, he was “angelic, true and honest”; for another, he was a guy who “could cut you cold and humiliate you down to the ground.” In more than one way, his story is similar to Turing’s. Both were geniuses who played outsized roles in winning World War II but who, years later, were punished by their governments for matters unrelated to their work (in Turing’s case, his homosexuality; in Oppenheimer’s, his intimacy with Communists). While Turing’s wartime work gave birth to the computer age, Oppenheimer’s ushered in the atomic age. Both men’s discoveries had their positive and negative consequences; but while the downsides of computers took decades to come into focus, the downsides of nuclear energy were clear from the git-go.

In Oppenheimer’s youth, to be sure, physics seemed innocuous –

a matter of working out abstruse calculations about the behavior of atoms and the movements of galaxies that had no conceivable connection to everyday human life. Inclined, in any event, far more to theoretical than to applied science (in chem lab, he was a klutz), he took his undergraduate degree at Harvard, then – in order to immerse himself in quantum mechanics, which back then (it was the 1920s) had yet to gain a foothold in the U.S. – did advanced work at Cambridge, Göttingen, Leiden (where he picked up the nickname Opje, later anglicized to Oppie), and Zurich. Reading *American Prometheus*, I feared that any film about Oppenheimer would have to jettison these years in Europe, which, though colorful, might be dismissed by some screenwriters as tangential. But my concerns were unfounded: Nolan works just enough of this stuff in to get the gist of it all, and, bless him, puts in every last one of the details I was particularly fond of – such as the spectacle of Oppenheimer, newly arrived in Leiden, delivering a lecture in Dutch, which he's just taught himself for the occasion.

After completing his education in Europe, Oppenheimer returned to the U.S. – where, teaching at Berkeley and Cal Tech, he helped introduce the quantum revolution to America and predicted the existence of positrons and of black holes. He was right in both cases, but the experimental proof would be a long time coming. How do you cinematize such abstract-seeming feats? Nolan pulls it off, here as elsewhere in the film, by using remarkable visual and aural effects to suggest the cataclysmic nature of the things that Oppenheimer is imagining in his head and that are, in fact, really going on out there among the distant stars or right here on earth, in the very atoms that make up you and me.

Among the delights of *American Prometheus* are the episodes in which Oppenheimer interacted with some of the immortal physicists of his day. Surely, I fretted, Nolan wouldn't be able to squeeze very many of these colorful personages into a

single film. But he does, giving us a superb gallery of terrific performances, including Edward Safdie as Teller, whose enthusiasm for the H-Bomb Oppenheimer failed to share; Josh Hartnett as Ernest Lawrence, the Nobel Prize-winner at Berkeley whose emphasis on applied science clashed with Oppenheimer's theoretical bent; Tom Conti as Albert Einstein, who gave Oppenheimer sage, fatherly philosophical counsel; David Krumholtz as Isidore Rabi, who became a fast and loyal friend; Kenneth Branagh as Niels Bohr, the Danish Nobelist who, having escaped Hitler's reich, shared Oppenheimer's deep concern about the postwar uses of atomic energy; and Christopher Denham as Klaus Fuchs, who fled from Germany to Britain and then, while at Los Alamos, shared atom secrets with the Soviets. I could easily imagine all five nominations for this year's Best Supporting Actor Oscar going, unprecedentedly, to Oppenheimer.

Needless to say, Los Alamos is at the heart of Oppenheimer's story. He loved the New Mexico desert and knew it intimately, and it was he who chose the site for the secret lab. It was the most dramatic of life changes; he'd spent years being immersed in seemingly harmless theory, only to be put in charge of turning his equations into instruments of death. Invited by General Leslie Groves (Matt Damon), director of the Manhattan Project, to run the secret atom-bomb lab, Oppenheimer threw himself eagerly into the task. The film beautifully limns the richly nuanced relationship between the slim, pensive, soft-spoken Oppenheimer (played excellently by the Irish actor Cillian Murphy, of Peaky Blinders fame, who's so gaunt here that you can't help being reminded of Holocaust survivors) and the gruff, beefy, no-nonsense Groves, who, despite his concerns about Oppenheimer's leftist past and effete affect, ended up being his strong supporter and admirer.

The big bomb test in the New Mexico desert is the most obviously cinematic material in the whole movie, and Nolan

handles this sequence masterfully, ramping up the suspense and then providing a spectacular payoff. He spares us Hiroshima and Nagasaki; but after those two bombs end the war, we see Oppenheimer's exultation turn into doubt, guilt, horror. (Murphy looks and moves very much like the real Oppenheimer, skillfully embodies his ambiguities, and, when the camera closes in on his hollow eyes, perfectly captures his tragic depths.) Admittedly, even while the A-Bomb project was underway, there was intense ethical debate among the Los Alamos scientists. For some, the whole point had been to beat Hitler to the bomb, and after the fall of Germany they considered it unfair to drop it on Japan ("those poor little people," said Oppenheimer, in a line omitted from the movie); after V-J Day, these doubters were increasingly inclined to step back from their work and take some time for moral reflection. Others, however, were eager to move on to a bigger bomb and a new enemy, the USSR. In this debate Oppenheimer was something of a fence-straddler, although his anguished expression of guilt feelings at a brief Oval Office meeting was enough to lead a disgusted President Truman (Gary Oldman) to call him a "cry-baby."

Which brings us to Oppenheimer's politics. On the one hand, during his years in Europe, many of his fellow students were struck by his deep patriotism. On the other hand, he spent much of the 1930s engaged in left-wing activism, supporting the Republican cause in Spain and trying to unionize professors at Berkeley. He was, as the film acknowledges, very close to a great many Communists or ex-Communists — including his bibulous wife, Kitty (Emily Blunt); his neurotic mistress, Jean Tatlock (Florence Pugh); and his beloved brother, Frank (Dylan Arnold), a fellow physicist. In the early 1930s, according to *American Prometheus*, Oppenheimer identified the USSR with "freedom," although he supposedly cooled on Communism after Stalin's arrest of Soviet physicists, and following the fall of Paris he allegedly said: "we can have no truck with Communists."

During the war, when his friend Haakon Chevalier (Jefferson Hall), a professor of French literature at Berkeley, asked if he wished to share research secrets with the Soviets, Oppenheimer purportedly closed him down instantly, saying: “That would be treason!” But was Oppenheimer ever a card-carrying Communist? Some members of his 1930s circle said yes; others, no. He always denied it, and he certainly doesn’t come off as the kind of person to submit entirely to anyone’s ideology.

Nonetheless, having been elevated in 1945 to the level of war hero nonpareil, he was, nine years later, in the midst of the Red Scare, put through a humiliating secret Atomic Energy Commission hearing that resulted in the revocation of his security clearance. It was far from a Stalinist show trial (for example, he kept his job at Princeton), although Nolan labors to make it feel eerie, chilling, Kafkaesque.

In any case, vindication eventually arrived, when AEC chair Lewis Strauss (Robert Downey Jr.), who’d played the Javert to his Jean Valjean, was brought down in his own hearing — a 1958 Senate confirmation hearing for Secretary of Commerce — largely because of the way he’d treated Oppenheimer. More than a few movies — *The Social Network* comes to mind — are told in the form of flashbacks from some kind of hearing or trial or inquiry; but I don’t remember ever seeing a film that shuttles back and forth between two hearings, spaced four years apart, with the earlier narrative elements presented in flashbacks that are not in chronological order.

It sounds impossibly complicated, and this sort of thing rarely if ever works, but in this case it works like a charm; indeed, if we all aren’t wiped out in the interim by nuclear war, film instructors of the future could do worse than to engage in a close study of the way in which Nolan and his editor, Jennifer Lame, have taken all their strips of celluloid, which could have been cut together in any one of thousands of ways, and have presented them in a sequence that,

one feels as this movie unfolds, could not have been improved upon in the slightest. Indeed, a film class might well profit from viewing *Oppenheimer*, which clocks in at three hours but feels shorter, in conjunction with the recent *Everything Everywhere All at Once*, which runs 139 minutes but feels longer: the first is a brilliantly formed jewel, the other a ridiculous mishmash; both make unusual use of sudden, extreme visual and aural effects, but while in *Everything* it all comes off as a whole lot of sound and fury signifying nothing, in *Oppenheimer* it succeeds in keeping us on edge and at suggesting the cosmic – and subatomic – momentousness of the lab work underway at Oppenheimer's quiet desert hideaway.

But back to politics. Throughout the film, Nolan allows us to speculate as to whether Oppenheimer was ever really a Party member. But we're also expected to believe that, whatever his political loyalties were in the 1930s, he absolutely never passed anything to the Soviets in the 1940s. That he was innocent of any such crimes has certainly been Democratic Party orthodoxy since President Kennedy rehabilitated him by inviting him to a 1962 White House dinner and, the next year, selecting him for an award (which, as seen in the film, LBJ presented to him shortly after JFK's assassination). Last year, Biden's Secretary of Energy, Jennifer Granholm, reaffirmed Oppenheimer's rehabilitation by posthumously restoring his security clearance.

In doing so, she ignored an abundance of evidence of his involvement in actions that never came to the attention of his 1954 prosecutors. For one thing, there's the testimony of a Soviet spy chief, General Pavel Sudoplatov, who in his 1994 memoirs stated that Oppenheimer, while at Los Alamos, had passed nuclear secrets to the Soviets without which they'd never have been able to build their own A-Bomb so quickly.

Also ignored by Granholm was a 1944 letter from a Soviet security official, Boris Merkulov, to Lavrenty Beria, Stalin's notorious chief of secret police, in which he stated that

Oppenheimer had reported to the Soviets on his work at Los Alamos via CPUSA president Earl Browder. Moreover, in the famous Venona Project documents – which are decryptions of messages transmitted over several decades by Soviet intelligence agencies – Oppenheimer is identified by a code name, which was standard Kremlin practice when referring to Soviet assets.

Now, it may well be that Oppenheimer did shake off Communism by 1940, and that he passed secrets to the Soviets only because he sincerely (if naively) believed that doing so was the best way to secure world peace. Whatever the case, none of the evidence of his perfidy finds its way into *American Prometheus*, or into *Oppenheimer*, or into any of the numerous legacy-media reviews of the movie that I've perused. This isn't terribly surprising.

The biographers were both close to the far-left weekly *The Nation*, which has a long history of trying to whitewash Stalinists. (Sherwin, who died in 2021, was a *Nation* board member and regular contributor; Bird has been a *Nation* editor and columnist.) In their acknowledgments, they credit as "a friend and mentor to us both" Victor Navasky, the longtime *Nation* editor who died in January and who was famous for having spent decades fiercely insisting on the innocence of Alger Hiss, who was ultimately proven to be a Soviet spy.

Nolan, for his part, by ignoring the proof of Oppenheimer's guilt, is following in a long Hollywood tradition of depicting Stalinists as heroes (see, for instance, the nauseating 2015 movie *Trumbo*, in which Bryan Cranston played Dalton Trumbo, who was at once both a Communist Party hardliner and the highest paid screenwriter in Hollywood); various TV productions about Oppenheimer over the years have similarly omitted any mention of his Soviet collaboration.

And naturally you can't expect the legacy media to call foul on this whitewash. Bottom line: viewed in light of what the

Soviet sources tell us about Oppenheimer, the AEC's treatment of him in 1954 looks absurdly gentle. Not a whit of this, to be sure, takes away in the slightest from the extraordinary aesthetic merits of Oppenheimer, which deserves to win the Oscar for Best Picture. But to the extent that the information about Oppenheimer's espionage activities belies Nolan's depiction of the man as a noble and conscientious patriot, it puts a big dent in the film's value as the serious moral work that Nolan plainly intends it to be.

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