

Webb Mealy's Remarks at the Gate about Robert Oppenheimer (slightly edited)

J. Robert Oppenheimer, known as the father of the atomic bomb, did work that's very similar to what's going on in here: intense research and development on the very first nuclear weapon. He and his crew were working at Los Alamos in 1942–1945, creating the first uranium fission bomb and the first plutonium fission bomb. In late 1944 US intelligence services learned that the German A-bomb project had failed. The whole reason how Robert Oppenheimer and others were recruited into this project was that they were told that Hitler was trying to develop the nuclear bomb, because Hitler's scientists knew the principles upon which it was made. And so they felt, because Hitler was threatening to take over the world, that it was essential that someone get the bomb before he did.

But in late 1944 US intelligence services understood very clearly that the German bomb project had failed. But contrary to this, the work at Los Alamos actually increased. There was an all-out push. People were working 16 hour days six days a week.

In the Spring of 1945 we had victory in Europe, and the Nazis had never come close to building a nuclear weapon.

Frank Oppenheimer, Robert's brother said this: "[It's] Amazing how the technology tools trap one. They're so powerful. I was impressed, because most of the fervor for developing the bomb came in a kind of anti-fascist fervor against Germany. But when VE day came, nobody slowed up one little bit. No one said, "Well...it doesn't matter now." We all kept working, and it wasn't because we understood the significance against Japan...it was because the machinery had caught us in its trap, and we were anxious to get this thing to go."

Robert and his brother Frank, and many others who worked on the bomb that was dropped on Hiroshima, reported that their first reaction, when they heard the announcement that it had detonated as designed, was one of excitement or pleasure that it had worked, it wasn't a dud. But before the first sentence of the announcement was finished, they realized that they had done something so horrible it was beyond imagination. Many people carried a sense of nausea and deep depression for weeks, and sometimes years thereafter.

Oppenheimer said in November of 1945: "[We physicists cannot] forget that these weapons as they were in fact used dramatized so mercilessly the inhumanity and evil of modern war. In some sort of crude sense which no vulgarity, no humor, no overstatement can quite extinguish, the physicists have known sin; and this is a knowledge which they cannot lose. The physicists have known sin, and this is a knowledge that they cannot lose."

In 1965 Oppenheimer gave an interview, after he had been completely stripped of all influence on the US government, because he was intensely lobbying for global arms control and eventual disarmament. The hawks, including the man [Edward Teller] who developed the H-bomb, the hydrogen bomb, had basically torpedoed him because they did not want his voice towards peace and sanity to prevail. But he asked Dr. Oppenheimer in 1965, "[C]an you tell us what your thoughts are about the proposal of Senator Robert Kennedy that President Johnson initiate talks with a view to halt the spread of nuclear weapons?" He said, "It's twenty years too late. It should have been done the day after Trinity."

Main Sources:

American Prometheus: The Triumph and Tragedy of J. Robert Oppenheimer, by Kai Bird and Martin J. Sherwin (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005).

The Day after Trinity: J. Robert Oppenheimer and the Atomic Bomb, a documentary film by Jon Else, 1980.

The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb, by Gar Alperovitz (New York: Vintage Books, 1996).