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If atomic bombs are to be added as new weapons to the arsenals of a warring world, or to the arsenals of nations preparing for war,

then the time will come when mankind will curse the names of Los Alamos and Hiroshima, the peoples of this world must unite or they will perish.

This war that has ravaged so much of the earth has written these words. The atomic bomb has spelled them out for all men to understand.

Other men have spoken them in other times of other wars of other weapons. They have not prevailed.

There are some misled by a false sense of history who hold that they will not prevail today. It is not for us to believe that.

By our works, we are committed, committed to a world united before this common peril in law and in humanity.

That, Dominic, was J. Robert Oppenheimer talking in the wake of the dropping of the atom bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki as he was leaving Los Alamos,

the headquarters of the Manhattan Project, on the 16th of October 1945.

Well, you spoke about this biography that refers to him as Prometheus, but that is pretty much the tone of a Frankenstein, isn't it?

Someone who has created something that he kind of regrets, perhaps. I mean, there's definitely a tone of regret there.

Absolutely. Hello, everybody. Last time we were talking about the early life of J. Robert Oppenheimer, the godfather of the atomic bomb, as Tom called him, and then later a Cold War martyr.

He got up to the point where they did the Trinity test, so that's in July 1945.

And that quote you read out there, Tom, is, it's just a few months later, but the mood has very much changed.

And what has changed from Oppenheimer's mood of almost sort of ecstatic relief when the nuclear test worked to October when he finally leaves Los Alamos

is the fact that the bomb has been demonstrated twice in Japan and in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, as you say.

And so does he have a sense at this point that the bomb that he has worked so long and hard to bring into being might well lead to the destruction of life on Earth?

I think everybody who worked at Los Alamos from, let's say, 1943 to 1945, I think everybody who did that knew that there were ethical issues with the bomb,

that it would kill an enormous number of people. I think they are completely dedicated to the project as we talked about last time.

They always really thought of it as a weapon against Nazi Germany and many of them, because some of them have Jewish heritage,

because many of them are politically very idealistic and they're on the left, they have a passion.

They see this as an absolute crusade, but they also see it as Oppenheimer said after the test as a weapon that will save lives,

a weapon that will end wars, a super weapon that will render all other weapons obsolete.
But do you think that he is starting to think that that's naive when he gives that speech?
I think he's thinking conflicting, complicated thoughts even before Hiroshima, actually, Tom.
So there are reports, somebody says that a few days after the test, they see him and he's just
muttering to himself,
those poor little people, those poor little people, and he's talking about the people on whom the
bomb will be dropped.
Because, of course, by this point, the focus has moved to Japan.
So Japan is still in the war, but Germany isn't.
And I know last time you were keen to talk about the decision to drop the bomb, weren't you?
Because it is a massive historiographical issue and it's so complicated that we don't want to...
Well, we'll do an episode on the dropping of the bombs on Hiroshima, so we'll leave it for that.
But I think let's just focus on Oppenheimer himself and his relationship both to Truman,
so the civilian chain of command and to the military.
Does he have any input at all into whether it should be dropped or not?
No, that decision is made in Washington, two weeks after Truman became president.
So Truman became president on the 12th of April when FDR died.
So FDR died.
He's at his retreat in Warm Springs, Georgia.
He has a massive stroke.
He's been very ill for a long time.
Truman, who is a former haberdasher from Kansas City, Missouri, takes over a little man, very
undervalued.
Nobody really...
People are shocked that Truman is the president.
He's not a great figure to conjure with.
So when I went to the Capitol and was shown around it, wonderful tour,
and there was a splendid statue of Truman,
and the key thing on that statue was the fact he was wearing glasses, which you don't see very often
in statues.
He's a little man with glasses.
He looks...
I mean, this is very important to Truman.
He's not intellectual.
He does have a military record, but he's not a Titanic figure.
He's not a natural leader.
He, in his own mind, is the American everyman.
The soul of kind of Main Street, small town America.
A slightly Stanley Baldwin.
Tiny bids.
I mean...
Middle England, middle America.
It's a bit like...
I mean, obviously, the fact that he follows Roosevelt as Attlee does Churchill,

there's a sort of sense of perspective with little men replacing great colorful patricians.
Now, Truman is told about the bomb about two weeks after he becomes president by Henry Stimson.
His secretary of state, James Burns, is very keen for him to use it.
There are lots of people.
I mean, there are different reasons why you would use it.
So you would obviously use it because you want to avoid American casualties when they launched the attack on the Japanese home islands.
The Americans had incurred colossal casualties in Okinawa.
The Japanese had fought to the last man.
They're worried that a similar invasion will incur huge casualties.
They also...
There is a whole school of thought among some historians that they are very conscious of Stalin and of the Soviet Union, of the emerging Cold War.
So they want to basically demonstrate American power.
Yeah, they want to demonstrate American power.
They also want to shut down the war in the Pacific as quickly as possible because Stalin is poised to declare war on Japan himself.
So they want to shut it down on their terms and send Stalin a signal.
On the other side, there are historians who say, well, listen, I mean, there were people, by the way, within the administration having this argument.
So there were people who say Japan is about to surrender anyway.
I mean, Japan is on its last legs.
There are some hints from our sources in Japan that they are moving towards some kind of conditional surrender as long as they can keep the emperor, which of course they end up doing.
Because the war has not been developing necessarily to Japan's advantage.
Correct. And in fact, even there are a lot of quite hawkish people.
Actually, people working on the bombing of Tokyo and things who say later the bombing of Hiroshima was unnecessary.
Now, this is not an argument that we can settle in three minutes in this podcast.
So let's save that for a later episode on Hiroshima itself, but sticking to Oppenheimer.
Oppenheimer is not part of those conversations.
But in the wake of the bombs, does the discovery of what this means in practical terms, does this affect him?
Does it change his views on what he's done or what?
But in complicated ways and slightly surprising ways.
So the story goes on the 6th of August, 1945, they get the news that the Enola Gay has dropped the bomb on Hiroshima.
It has gone off. Everything has gone according to plan.
It's killed lots of people.
Exactly.
And that evening, a crowd gathers in the auditorium at Los Alamos.

So they have built facilities for the New Town.
There is a big auditorium where they can all gather and have meetings and things
or for entertainment or whatever they all gather.
Oppenheimer comes in and he is greeted with rapturous applause and cheers.
And the eyewitnesses say he's clasping his hands above his head,
like a kind of boxing champion.
Yes, we've done it. Congratulations.
Wonderful. Well done, everybody.
Hurrah, hurrah.
So there's that side to it.
And there's no doubt that that night, some people did hold parties,
Los Alamos scientists, to celebrate the dropping of the atom bomb.
On the other hand, there are stories that there are,
while some people are partying, there are other people who are being physically sick
because they feel so full of guilt and they're so conflicted about this.
And I think as time goes on, especially once Japan has surrendered,
more and more of them, Oppenheimer included, start to feel very, very guilty.
Oppenheimer always denied that he felt guilty.
He said, I feel just a crushing burden of responsibility,
which is not quite the same as guilt.
And one scientist's wife said, as time went on,
we felt an intensely personal experience of the reality of evil.
An extraordinary thing to say after they've been working so long on this project
that they were so devoted to.
The FBI files, because of course, as we said last time,
the FBI are surveilling Oppenheimer the whole time,
tapping his phones, you know, why tapping his office.
The FBI files say that he's a nervous wreck,
that he is morose and withdrawn and smoking even more heavily,
smoking a thousand cigarettes a minute or whatever.
Yeah, exactly.
Of course, the irony is that he is now a celebrity.
He's a hero to a lot of Americans.
He's put on magazine covers.
The man who won the war.
The man who won the war, right?
So we talked about the Prometheus thing,
because the book on him by Kai Bird and Martin J. Sherwin,
on which the Christopher Nolan film is based,
is called American Prometheus.
Scientific Monthly, a big American periodical,
a few weeks after this, run a big story,
and this is what they said.
Our modern Prometheans have raided Mount Olympus again,

and they have brought back for man the very thunderbolt of use.
But do you know, I mean, is anyone using the Frankenstein metaphor?
I don't think so, because of course, at this point,
they think a lot of people think this is ours.
This is America's bomb.
And this has made us untouchable, impregnable.
But the US must have a sense that the Soviets are going
to be getting this bomb as well at some point, right?
Yeah, absolutely.
And in fact, even at this stage, Tom,
there are some people who say, well, this is not enough.
There are some people who say, oh,
we're basically predicting the arms race.
So there's one of Oppenheimer's colleagues
that we mentioned last time very briefly,
a chap called Edward Teller, who's of Hungarian heritage.
Teller is a very controversial person in the scientific community,
because he and Oppenheimer will, in this episode,
have a very tangled relationship.
He's going to play a sort of almost Faustian kind of part
in Oppenheimer's story.
It's amazing how many of these kind of mythic archetypes
are readily invocable in this story.
And Teller, even at this point, is calling for a better weapon.
He calls it, to that point, the super.
People call it the super, but we would call it the H-bomb,
the hydrogen bomb.
So he's Dr. Strangelove.
People used to ask him in the 1990s,
because he lived to the age of about 137.
And people would say to him, you're Dr. Strangelove, aren't you?
And he would get very cross and terminate the interview then
and there.
But he absolutely is saying, we need this bomb that has a second
stage where we basically become a fusion bomb,
and it's infinitely bigger explosion than Hiroshima and Nagasaki.
And even at this point, Oppenheimer says, that's bad.
We don't need to go that far.
And Teller is very, very cross about this.
And even at this point, we're talking about the summer into the
autumn of 1945, Oppenheimer is already actually in some ways
beginning to just distance himself from his own fame
and his own project, because you began with that quote,
that speech, the 16th of October, when he left Los Alamos.

And very kind of, he's back into his kind of idealism, world government, internationalism stuff.

And so the UN is being, it's the founding of the UN is also part of the backdrop of this dream of a kind of universal global order.

Absolutely.

And those people who love the UN, I mean, it's like, even when I was a boy, I can remember, there'd be some people who would like bang on about the UN, very passionate, very idealistic about it, going to go to UN clubs and stuff. And they are the the heirs of those kind of radical people, idealistic people that Oppenheimer had been associating with Berkeley in the 1930s.

So nine days after that speech, when he left Los Alamos, he went to meet Harry Truman for the first time.

And he goes into the White House and he says to Truman, Mr. President, I feel I have blood on my hands.

And do you know what Truman said?

Son of a bitch.

Yeah.

Worse than a fact.

He's furious, isn't he?

He said to him, supposedly he said to him, never mind, it'll come out in the wash.

Well, he's a habit.

As soon as Oppenheimer leaves, Truman turned to his aides and he said, I don't want ever to see that son of a bitch in this office again.

Dammit, he hasn't half as much blood on his hands as I have.

Then he goes around saying,

I've had a visit from this awful crybaby scientist.

So some people, I mean, Truman actually is a greatly underrated president, to my view.

But if you were Truman critic, you would say, this is somebody who basically doesn't know what he's talking about and it's totally out of his depth.

Overcompensating by trying to be, you know.

A tough guy.

A tough guy.

Play the tough guy.

Because on that, I mean, on that, there are reports, aren't there, when the first test happened, so back at Los Alamos, people report that Oppenheimer kind of struts around like he's a cowboy in high noon.

Yes.

Yeah.

That he feels kind of empowered by it, kind of raised up.
But now he's become this crybaby scientist.
I think it's a really difficult one, Tom,
because actually, even in the American Prometheus book,
which is very pro-Oppenheimer, they have a story.
I mean, to their credit, they've included a story from somebody who knew Oppenheimer
much later in life when he spent a lot of time in a Caribbean island,
the island of St. John's in the U.S. Virgin Islands.
And these people said that on the 6th of August every year,
Oppenheimer and his wife would do exactly that,
would kind of strut around very smugly.
This was their big anniversary.
This was their day, the bombing of Hiroshima.
You have that on the one hand, and then on the other hand,
you have Oppenheimer going around saying,
I have blood on my hands.
I feel so awful being kind of morose and withdrawn and melancholy.
And which of those are true?
Well, the truth.
Both could be both, I suppose.
Exactly.
Maybe both are true.
Maybe he's a complicated, nuanced man,
and he feels both enormous pride at his achievement that he thinks entered the war.
But also, he clearly does feel great guilt and a sense of, you know,
well, you'd be a monster, Tom, if you didn't feel a bit of guilt, wouldn't you?
I mean, there is a sense in which, for great powers even to this day,
the possession of nuclear weapons is a totem of their status,
while at the same time, obviously, possessing a nuclear weapon
means that you can kind of destroy the world.
Yeah.
Of course.
I mean, of course.
People have complicated views about them.
I think it's, in some ways, it doesn't...
You and I don't have to resolve that contradiction in Oppenheimer's personality.
It can just be there, and I think it was there.
Okay.
So, he leaves Los Alamos.
Yeah.
And what is he going off to do?
Well, he actually goes off effectively.
It's interesting.
His career, his career as a physicist is pretty much over.

So, he's out of ideas.

In some ways, he's been out of the lab for a long time.

He's been running the town.

Physics just doesn't seem relevant to him anymore.

And he, in the long run...

Partly because the pace of discovery has left him behind.

If he's spent five years kind of running Los Alamos,

he hasn't had time to keep abreast of what must be an incredibly turbulent period of discovery and innovation.

Exactly.

I mean, when we were talking the first episode about physics in the 1920s,

and we said that it was a young man's game,

and he's not a young man anymore.

What is he in his 40s?

He's been doing a lot of bureaucratic inviting.

I like to think of that as quite young.

You think of that as young.

Yes.

Well, I know exactly what you mean.

But if there's some brilliant 22-year-old physicist coming up with discoveries,

I mean, Oppenheimer is yesterday...

To them, Oppenheimer is yesterday's man.

He's an establishment man as well.

He's a symbol of corporate America and the military industrial country of America.

Yeah, absolutely.

But, I mean, the one thing that we can't underestimate, I think,

we said in the last episode that he'd been under surveillance by the FBI

and by the US Army intelligence people.

That never stops.

So just weeks after he's had that calamitous meeting with Harry Truman,

J. Edgar Hoover sends a summary of his FBI file to Truman,

and he says, we're pretty sure that he was a Communist member.

There's actually no evidence of that, but they say that.

And they say, we also think he still has contacts with the Communist Party.

And there's an amazing statistic that in the next eight years from 1945,

the FBI generated a thousand pages of wiretaps, transcripts, reports on Oppenheimer.

They can never prove that he was a Communist member.

They can never prove that he's still a Communist or anything like that,

but it never goes away.

Presumably, Dominic, this is expedited by the fact that the Soviet Union does get the atom bomb and gets it much sooner than American intelligence had anticipated that they would.

Yes. So they got it in August, 1949.

Their first test in Kazakhstan.

And so they suspect American Communists help in that?

Well, they're not wrong.

There are people. Klaus Fuchs is the most famous one. He was British.

He was part of the British scientists that were sent to help with the Manhattan Project, and he is sending secrets to the Soviet Union.

It had been from Britain even before he went to New Mexico.

So the mood of paranoia would explain that obsessive anxiety about Oppenheimer?

Oh, absolutely. Absolutely, Tom, because if you actually go through the chronology,

first of all, you've got all the stuff in Eastern Europe,

the toppling of non-communist regimes such as they were in Poland,

Czechoslovakia, Hungary and all these places,

the installation of Stalinist regimes,

and then of course the what happens in Berlin,

the creation of East Germany and so on and so forth.

You also have a series of incidents in the United States.

So we have the hearings into Communists in Hollywood,

which we talked about in the Reagan episodes.

The Alger Hiss case in 1948, when it turns out that a senior diplomat may well have been a communist spy.

There's what the Americans perceive as the loss of China to the victory of the communists in China in 1949.

And it's 1949 also that HUAC, the House Committee on Un-American Activities, set up by the House of Representatives in Congress,

that they start investigating the radiation laboratory in Berkeley.

It's one of the places they start looking at.

And you know what, the story we always tell completely understandably is that this is hysteria, it is a witch hunt, all of this kind of stuff.

But, you know, Stalinism is a threat to the democratic world and, you know, the work of communist spies.

So Klaus Fuchs is the most famous one.

So of course there's a huge dose of hysteria and paranoia, but there's often a little kernel of truth.

Okay, and is there a kernel of truth with Oppenheimer?

I mean, to what extent are the suspicions that start to cloud around him justified?

That is a tough question to answer, Tom.

It's the key question of this episode.

He had, as we saw last time, associated with communists.

He had been a very, very keen fellow traveler.

I mean, he used that expression himself, of himself.

He would say, I was a fellow traveler.

He's still married to his Spitfire wife.

It's a kitty.

Yeah.

Emily Blunt.

Yeah.

She's not, I mean, she spends all her time lying in bed drinking.
That's what she's doing.
So she's a capitalist.
Yeah, smoking and drinking.
People would always say she fell asleep with a fag in her hand.
But Florence Pugh, is she back on the scene at this point?
No, Florence Pugh, unfortunately, is dead.
Oh, okay.
So that's Jean Tatlok.
She was a communist.
She was a communist, very keen communist.
She has taken her own life.
She was a very troubled person, and so she's out of the picture.
He is not hobnobbing with communist agents or anything like that.
In fact, what he did after leaving Los Alamos in the long run,
he becomes the director of the Institute of Advanced Study at Princeton,
which, as you will know, Tom, is an incredibly prestigious establishment Ivy League.
And it's for humanities as well as for the sciences, right?
So he's setting that up as well.
He's not setting it up.
It's already exists, but he becomes the director and he's a very active director.
He is employing, you know, people to come and talk about French poetry.
He employs T.S. Eliot, doesn't he?
Yes, T.S. Eliot, who turned out everyone said T.S. Eliot was a total disaster when he got there.
Was that T.S. Eliot?
Kind of mutters.
Yeah.
So he gets to the Institute of Advanced Study now.
There was a twist to this because the guy who basically recruits him,
who's one of the trustees of this institute in Princeton,
is a man called Lewis.
Well, it's spelled Lewis Strauss, but he always pronounces it Lewis Strauss.
I will explain why.
He's from West Virginia.
He is also of German Jewish stock.
Downplay his Jewishness in a world that is still quite anti-Semitic.
He pronounces it Strauss because he kind of thinks it'll sound more Southern and less Jewish.
Now, Strauss, as we have to call him, everybody thought this was ridiculous, by the way,
so people laughed at him about this, but we'll have to stick with it.
He is an extraordinary man.
He's a self-made millionaire.
He'd begun as a traveling shoe salesman.
Then at the age of about 21, he'd become an assistant to Herbert Hoover.
When Herbert Hoover was in charge of war relief for Belgians at the end of the First World War.

He just kind of went along and volunteered.

Oh, I see.

And his photos of him looking...

It wasn't kind of his expertise as a shoe salesman.

He'd attracted Hoover's attention.

No.

No.

So he was sort of swanning around in a bow tie looking very 1920s.

Then he came back with Hoover through Hoover's contacts.

He became a Wall Street investment banker, a millionaire, and a key establishment.

You know, an absolutely central kind of Washington establishment figure.

Country club.

Yeah, a bit well.

Although, of course, lost country clubs would, in those days, would not have been happy having Jewish members.

Yeah, but he's called Strauss.

So they all think he's a southern gentleman.

He is an abrasive man.

He is utterly ruthless.

He is very disputatious.

He is an implacable enemy.

And he gets Oppenheimer to Princeton, and then they fall out almost immediately.

And this feud, which served a lot, pitiful things, hiring poets who's going to book, you know, the booking of seminar rooms.

What kind of wine to have at high tables.

Right.

Ludicrous things.

But as we know, these kind of academic feuds can be unbelievably destructive.

Isn't Joe said that about?

Yes, because the stakes are so small that the rivalries are so venomous.

But the problem for Oppenheimer is that Strauss is a member of the Atomic Energy Commission.

And he is very close to the big power breakers in Washington.

In fact, he's one of them.

He is not a person you want to make as an enemy.

Has Oppenheimer, by this point, become a little bit more socially adept?

Or is he still the kind of guy who strangles people if they announce that he's getting married?

They're getting married.

No, he's the strangling is in the past.

I think it's fair to say.

He's stronger than that.

And the erotic poetry.

He's left all that behind.

He's left all that behind.

Exactly.

Because he's running this institute.
But he can hold a conversation now.
He can hold a conversation with T.S.
Eliot, in fact.
But there is a sense, even in the end of the very end of the 1940s, that there's a story about Henry James in which a guy, I can't remember what it's called.
He was obsessed with it.
It's called The Beast in the Jungle.
And it's this guy who goes through life and he has a sense of looming dread that follows him.
Oppenheimer was obsessed by this story.
No wonder.
Because he knows that there are things in his past, the Communist associations, if not membership, that perhaps will reemerge to devour him.
Okay.
And when he has the feud with straws, he has a sense of this hanging over him.
And there's a really good demonstration of this.
So it comes, we've got to about 1949.
So it's something that happens in June, 1949.
I said that the HUAC, the Un-American Activities Committee, were investigating the laboratory specifically.
One of the people they investigate is his brother, Frank, also a very talented physicist.
But who is a car carrying Communist?
Frank had joined the party.
And Frank, it's a day of hearings.
Frank goes along and he's decided with his wife, I'm not going to lie.
So they say to him, were you a member of the Communist party?
And he says, yes.
And they say to him, will you tell us the names of the other scientists who remember?
He says, nope, that's not what I'm about.
I'm not going to name names.
I'll admit myself.
He emerges from the hearing within an hour of the hearing ending.
He has been fired by the University of Minnesota.
And he couldn't get another job as a physicist, even though he was brilliant.
And he spent the next 10 years as a cattle rancher in Colorado.
So that is the threat.
That is, as it were, if it's not the most hideous cliché ever in the rest of history, the sword of Damocles, Tom.
Yeah.
I mean, I suppose the positive would be that at least they have all their practice on horse riding.
So he'd actually be quite good as a cattle rancher.
I mean, I know that...
If only they'd had you to console them, the Oppenheimer's.

But there is a sense in which that is, to me, the most surprising aspect of Oppenheimer's character is that he was effectively a cowboy.

Well, I mean, a temporary cowboy.

He's very good at horse riding and all that.

A summer holiday cowboy.

Anyway, that's by the bite.

So the risk is that he might be chunked out of Princeton.

Would that happen?

No.

Well, unlikely.

I mean, that's possible.

More likely is that he will basically be declared persona non grata by the government.

And that is the real threat.

And now that he has made this enemy in Lewis straws, who is the guy on the Atomic Energy

Commission that is an escalating threat,

who is also his basically his boss at Princeton.

Yeah.

And who hates him.

Absolutely.

And crucially, straws is a big, big fan of the H bomb.

So he wants bigger bombs.

He also wants total secrecy.

He despises all this stuff of sharing and kindness and, you know, hands over killing millions of people.

Right.

Yeah.

He has no time for any of this.

That's a commie rot.

Well, he genuinely straws comes to believe without any shadow of doubt,

he genuinely thinks this that Oppenheimer is a communist agent.

And this, of course, is what's going to bring Oppenheimer down.

Let's take a break and find out what happens when straws is determination to bring Oppenheimer down,

starts to work itself out.

See you back in a few minutes.

Hello.

Welcome back to the rest of history.

So Dominic, we are talking the career of Oppenheimer.

The Atom bombs have gone off.

He has left Los Alamos.

He is at Princeton with Lewis straws and they're not getting on.

And this is bad for Oppenheimer because straws suspect Oppenheimer of being a commie.

Right.

Exactly.

And Straws is not alone.

So about 1952, you know, Oppenheimer is doing his thing kind of, you know, arranging people to come and give talks at Princeton, but he is still a consultant to the Atomic Energy Commission.

So he's still an important, you know, he's a celebrity.

He is an important public figure who delivers speeches about atomic diplomacy, about the future of the nuclear age, all of this stuff.

But Straws is not the only person who thinks he's a security risk.

There was a young lawyer who works for a congressional committee who is a Democrat called William L.

Borden.

So this is not all directed by the way, by the hard right.

And Borden, he too is a fervent advocate of the hydrogen bomb and says we need bigger, better bombs to win the Cold War.

But he is also, he knows that Oppenheimer has gone around Washington saying hydrogen bombs are a bad idea.

And Borden starts writing to people across Washington and saying, I think Oppenheimer is saying this because he's a communist.

I genuinely think he is a Soviet agent and Stalin is directing him to oppose the atom bomb because he's so influential.

This is a serious issue.

And then the third part of this sort of triumvirate, I mean, you've got J. Edgar Hoover as well at the FBI who basically thinks everybody's a communist.

And is this guy Edward Teller?

Oh yes, Dr. Strangelove, Oppenheimer's former colleague who is passionate about the age bomb.

It's his own personal project.

So this is his own, his baby, ticket to celebrity.

And he is horrified that the super, as they call it, is being blocked by Oppenheimer.

And he explicitly tells the FBI in 1951, he says, I will do anything possible to see Oppenheimer's relationship with the government terminated.

In other words, no, it loses security clearance.

All of it thrown off all the atomic boards, all that kind of thing.

That's exactly it.

So the big provocation comes on the 17th of February, 1953.

Oppenheimer gives a lecture to the Council on Foreign Relations.

So some of our listeners will know this is a real gathering place of the great and the good of the American establishment.

Lewis Straws, by the way, is in the audience for this.

And Oppenheimer gives this lecture and he says, the age of secrecy about atomic weapons must come to an end.

Stop covering up what we have and what we know about their repercussions.

We must be honest for the first time with the American people and tell them that we cannot fight and win a nuclear war, that the repercussions would be far too grave.

It has this image, he says, we in the Soviet Union are like two scorpions in a bottle. Each is capable of killing the other, but only at the cost of his own life. Now, lots of people in his audience think this is actually very sensible stuff. You know, this is completely reasonable. So the thing is, there's a new administration in town, the Eisenhower administration. So the Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, he is committed to a doctrine called massive retaliation. And that basically is, if the Soviet Union overstepped the mark, we will bombard them with nuclear weapons and absolutely destroy them. On the back of the Stone Age. It's a very, very hawkish position. But slightly counterintuitively, the former general and now President Dwight D. Eisenhower is a bit ambivalent about this. So Eisenhower actually had doubts about whether bombing Hiroshima and Nagasaki was the right thing to do. Well, I suppose military men know what war means. Exactly. I think that's right. Military men are often more sensible than gung-ho civilians. And Lewis Strauss is terrified that Eisenhower will agree with Oppenheimer, that Eisenhower, he thinks, you know, Eisenhower will listen to this and be seduced by it. So Strauss contacts the FBI and he contacts the White House and he says, Oppenheimer, my colleague at Princeton, is a Communist. He's a Soviet agent. The administration should distance themselves from him. And all that he is saying is inspired by Moscow. And then Oppenheimer makes another of these catastrophic mistakes that he keeps on making. Later that year, Tom, he goes to Europe because he's been invited to give the Reef Lectures. Oh, the BBC. Our British listeners will know these are these very prestigious lectures that the BBC organise every year. They will choose a kind of Nobel Prize winner or an absolute... Well, Oppenheimer never gets the Nobel Prize, does he? No, he doesn't. He doesn't. He could well have done if he hadn't got involved with them. You know, if his career hadn't taken that extraordinary twist. Oppenheimer has come to give the Reef Lectures, his very prestigious lectures. And while he's in Europe, he goes to Paris and he has dinner with Hawkin Chevalier, the professor of medieval French poetry. Right. Who had been the communist kind of intermediary. Now, on one level, you could say what an admirable act of friendship. On the other hand, what a disaster because Strauss has had the US Embassy tail Oppenheimer

through Paris and log all his phone calls.

So they know that he's doing this.

And actually, the story is always told by the way, Oppenheimer the martyr, Strauss an absolute monster and a madman.

But if you were to take Strauss aside just for a moment, Oppenheimer is giving them a lot of ammo.

He did flirt with communism.

He was a fellow traveler.

Now he's going and having dinner with one of his old communist buddies.

So what is the status of the French professor?

He's just a professor of French.

So he hasn't been sacked or anything?

No, he's still...

He hasn't been fingered as a communist.

Who has he?

I think he has.

I think he's openly a communist, but I don't think there have been great repercussions for him.

So that point that the FBI say to Eisenhower, listen, you must absolutely cut off all your contacts with this guy.

And by the end of the year, senior Eisenhower administration people are meeting Strauss and they're saying, okay, fine, we need to act against Oppenheimer and make an example of him.

It's the making an example, the public nature of it that I think makes this case resonate because they decide that the way to do this is to hold this review of his security clearance. His security clearance will be suspended, but he can appeal.

And in a way, I think Strauss kind of wants him to appeal because if he appeals, then they'll hold hearings, which will be publicly reported and the hearings will effectively be a trial.

So Oppenheimer will go on trial.

So slight shade here of our previous episodes on Oscar Wilde, a figure whose trial has vast kind of cultural resonances.

It's not just Oppenheimer, it's a whole cast of thought that is being put on trial.

That is quite right, Tom.

It is a whole cast of thought that is put on trial because by this point, McCarthyism is kind of at its height.

So Joe McCarthy, Senator from Wisconsin, had given a speech in February 1950 in Wheeling, West Virginia to a group of Republican women where he had said, I have in my hand a list of 205 communists working in the State Department.

This was complete balderdash, by the way, and from that point onwards, there had been this climate of hysterical paranoia about communists and about fellow travelers.

And basically, if you'd been in a room near a book that mentioned Karl Marx, you were fair game.

And particularly in universities, it's used as an excuse to kind of purge people for particularly

the kind of the old guard who had been flirting with ideas to the left of the New Deal in the 1930s.

The Republicans use it as a way of attacking the Democrats and the Democratic establishment who had run United States politics from 1933 all the way through to the beginning of the 1950s.

So there's all kinds of different things going on.

And in the middle of all this, Oppenheimer, who, you know, he's a physicist, not normally celebrities, but he's the father of the bomb.

He's the face of the atom bomb.

For him to be caught up in this makes it this incredibly kind of totemic showdown.

So he says he's going to appeal it.

Of course, everybody knew that he would.

And we were in Washington a couple of weeks ago, Tom, we were by the Washington Monument.

There's a building not far from the Washington Monument, one of many buildings that we put up in a rush during World War II because, you know, Washington bureaucracy was expanding because the burdens of first the New Deal and then the war.

So on the 12th of April, the hearings opened in this building.

So there's a review board that basically three judges, straws has picked them himself.

He's handpicked them to conservative Democrats and one conservative Republican.

And for a month, the trial lasts for a month.

I say trial.

It's a hearing.

And it's all public.

Well, it's it's reported in the newspaper.

So it's a front page story in the New York Times.

I mean, I don't think it's this kind of thing where you've got crowds of people, you know, queuing for seats or anything like that.

It's not televised.

No, it's not televised or anything like that.

And there's no doubt that Oppenheimer is on trial.

He's accused of being a member of communist front organizations.

He's accused of associating with communist agents.

And he's accused of employing communists at Los Alamos.

And actually, to some extent, I mean, the funny thing about this is all those things are true.

He did.

He was a fellow traveler.

He did talk about with communists and some of the people at Los Alamos did have very radical sympathies.

But surely the ultimate question is, is he a traitor?

And he's not.

I mean, isn't that the question?

Yeah.

Well, of course, you're absolutely right.

Basically, I mean, if you're a communist or a communist or whatever, but you're not a traitor, then it doesn't really matter.

Well, this is what his supporters say.

So General Groves, he's now, he was a colonel now, he's general.

The guy who had hired him, Los Alamos, this, who is, by the way, a very conservative man.

He goes to the hearings and he says, I didn't care that Oppenheimer was a fellow traveler.

I had no doubts about his patriotism.

I had no doubts about his service to the nation.

I didn't think he was the security risk.

And this is what a lot of people say.

Sure, Oppenheimer associated with communists in the 1930s, but lots of people did.

There's never been any doubt about his fidelity to his country.

There's never been any sense in which he was untrustworthy.

And I think that that's true too.

It's understandable why people thought he was a risk.

But then when you look into it, there's no suspicion whatsoever that he was anything other than utterly faithful to the United States.

But this is a terrible humiliation for Oppenheimer.

He's forced to admit about the fellow traveling.

He's forced to admit about that conversation that he had with that guy, Chevalier, that he didn't initially report and then he reported it in a sort of, in this ham-fisted, slightly made up, exaggerated way.

He's told by basically the guy who's affected with the prosecutor that he's a fabricator.

He weaves tissues of lives.

And Oppenheimer doesn't disagree.

He says, you know, yeah, I suppose I did make up stuff about that conversation.

And very humiliatingly, he's forced to admit that he was still seeing Jean Tatlok from his putum throughout the early 1940s, even though he was married, even though he knew she was a communist, you know, that's all pretty damaging for him.

And then in some ways, the great, the famous moment comes on the 28th of April.

That's more than two weeks after the hearings have been going, when Edward Teller, his former Los Alamos colleague, the guy who's been advocating for the hydrogen bomb, he takes the stand and he says, he throws Oppenheimer under the bus.

He says, when he was director at Los Alamos, he often acted in a way which was exceedingly hard to understand and gave reasons that seemed to me confused and complicated.

And then he's asked, do you think his security clearance should be withdrawn?

And Teller says, I think US interests should be in much more trustworthy hands and it would be wise not to grant him clearance.

And there's a great kind of, you know, the atmosphere is electric to this guy in court.

It's not kind of uproar.

I think it's like a intake of breath.

Yeah.

It's a silence that is fraught with tension.

And on his way out, Teller, I mean, strange detail.

As Teller passes Oppenheimer the way out, he says to him in this sort of guttural, Hungarian accented English, I'm sorry.

And they shake hands.

And then off he goes.

And the verdict comes down on the 23rd of May.

It's actually, Strauss is livid because it was only two to one against Oppenheimer.

Would you believe it, Tom?

The Republican guy backed him.

Wow.

So Strauss is gerrymandering.

I mean, it works, but not as unanimously as you've been hoping.

The Republican guy actually issued a blistering dissent and he said this, you know, I've read all the stuff.

I've heard all the stuff.

There is actually nothing new here that the FBI didn't know in 1941 or 1942.

He said Oppenheimer surely had foolish associations, but people do, you know, there's no evidence of any treachery.

And he ends by saying, this is a black mark on the escutcheon of our country.

That's a great phrase, which is a very good phrase.

Now, not all Republicans felt like that.

When the verdict was announced in the House of Representatives, some Republican congressmen stood up and applauded, such as the mood of sort of McCarthyite fervor in the 1950s.

And the funny thing is that that's a moment that simultaneously destroys and makes Oppenheimer because on the one hand, when he loses that security clearance, he's out.

He's out of the establishment.

He keeps his job at Princeton, by the way.

He doesn't lose that, but he doesn't get invited to all these meetings.

This is not a name to conjure with in the halls of power in the Eisenhower administration.

He is tainted.

That's the end of him.

And he's been humiliated publicly.

And yet on the other hand, it creates a new Oppenheimer, which is the martyr.

So people pour out all these kind of Jacques style essays, teller becomes a pariah among lots of scientists kind of will cross the road to avoid him, not shake his hand and stuff, won't appear on panels with him.

Lewis straws, who has won this great victory over his great foe.

He becomes a hate figure to liberals.

And actually Eisenhower, when he nominated him as his secretary of commerce at the end of the 1950s, he was blocked by the Senate because of his treatment of Oppenheimer.

So a Pyrrhic victory.

It was a Pyrrhic victory, Tom.

I mean, but here's the weird thing.

He never stopped being obsessed with Oppenheimer and he was still kind of ordering FBI wiretaps on Oppenheimer years afterwards.

Wow.

But for Oppenheimer himself, I mean, it's interesting when you read this enormous sort of titanic biography by Kai Bird and Martin Sherman, which I've quoted from extensively in these podcasts.

After this point, the story just ends very quickly because they basically say that from this moment, Oppenheimer was spirit, they say spiritually dead.

So he's been humiliated publicly.

He spends a lot of time in the US Virgin Islands, an island called St. John basically drinking and smoking and just hanging around and being sad.

Is he writing poetry?

I think the writing poetry is over, actually.

That's a shame because he could write some very sad poems.

And this is sort of irony that the father of the nuclear age has become this very famous victim, I suppose, Marta.

And in fact, he starts to say, instead of exalting about his role at Los Alamos and all that stuff and being proud of it, when he talks, when it comes up, he's now, I don't know whether how much this is him being performative.

In other words, playing the part that has been prepared for him by his liberal admirers.

But he always talks about his guilt.

And he's invited to his son's school when his son graduates from school.

And he talks about Hiroshima and says it was a tragic mistake.

You know, these kinds of things.

So his reputation as a martyr, it starts to allied with a sense that he is someone who regrets what he's done to a degree.

Yes.

And so he comes to seem a kind of the archetypal figure who sums up the paradoxes and the tensions and the complexities of responses to this great scientific program that's created the bomb, but also that the horror that that is unleashed.

Yeah, I think I think certainly for his supporters, that the man they like to celebrate is a man haunted by his own responsibility.

Yeah.

I mean, as we said before, he doesn't like to use the word guilt, but he does use the word responsibility.

And so that's that that's why that that phrase from from the Bhagavad Gita becomes so associated with him, even if he didn't actually say it at the time.

Yeah, because he says he said it.

And that's the important thing, isn't it, that he feels it now.

Yeah.

Now I am become death, the destroyer of worlds.

And I guess that actually, even before the Oppenheimer hearings and the anti communism stuff, there were people even in 1945, even at the very moment, who were horrified by the use of the atom bomb.

Well, you said people being sick.

Yeah.

When the news comes in, I mean, physicists, I mean, there are people who write in their diaries in England and America and so on, some who are delighted by the super weapon, but some who think, gosh, we've killed what? 100,000 people, 120,000 people and dread of where it might lead.

Yeah.

And the dread of, well, not just the dread though, but also a sense that, you know, how many tens of thousands of Japanese women and children were destroyed by that bomb.

And it's impossible to look on that and to result, I would say, even if you think it was the right thing to do.

Well, although some do.

Well, when they had a, there was a massive few already.

The very first time I went to America, Tom in the 1990s, a huge row, I went to Washington and a huge row was underway in Washington because the Smithsonian had put on an exhibition about the Enola Gay.

And lots of people thought it was insufficiently patriotic and too hand-wringing that it was, dare I say, woke Tosh.

So it's Truman against Oppenheimer.

Well, that Truman, Oppenheimer divide.

I mean, I think, I think there's something wrong with you if you, if you can't see that this is a very complicated issue.

Yeah, of course.

Of course.

And this is why Oppenheimer's biography is so interesting.

Yeah, exactly.

Exactly.

That he's a very complicated man.

By the way, he was rehabilitated a bit in the final years.

Kennedy invited him to the White House for dinner.

And then LBJ gave him a medal in the prize at the end of 1963.

Is the security clearance restored or not?

Never.

There was talk of doing it, but people in the Kennedy administration said it's too controversial.

We should steer clear.

We'll just have him for dinner and give him some prizes.

Give him a medal.

Yeah.

And actually, Edward Teller, the man who had basically stabbed him in the back, he was there when he got his prize and they shook hands again.

Very strange.

Well, or reflects very well on Oppenheimer, who up till now we've chiefly been casting as a bit of a weirdo.

Yeah, I think that reflects well on him.

Well, I think the funny thing about Oppenheimer is that to me, he's not a very likeable man.

I imagine he would be a terrible person to have as a colleague.

And I can't imagine being his friend, but he's an extraordinary figure.

I mean, incredibly clever.

And beyond that, there are many scientists who propel themselves so completely into the world of public affairs and into the kind of headlines.

Maybe Einstein, but Oppenheimer is remarkable.

You know, not just in a sort of Richard Dawkins way about being involved with intellectual debates that become public debates.

But a man who changes history, who affects the lives of millions.

And again, I mean, he sounds so unsuited to that task for everything that you said in the first part of our first episode, that he could have been at the head of this remarkable feat of planning.

That's the paradox, isn't it?

That he's a man so unsuited and that's what makes it so appealing.

So that's Oppenheimer.

He died in 1967 from cancer.

He'd smoked and drank all his life.

It's the smoking, I think they got him.

He was 62 years old and had had this life packed with drama.

But Teller is very faux.

He lived to about 100 and he was knocking around at the end of the 20th century.

So Oppenheimer could have been as well.

And who knows, you know, where his career would have taken him.

Anyway, are you a Christopher Nolan film fan, Tom?

I don't see you as a, are you?

No, I do like Christopher Nolan.

I watched Inception on a plane and anyone who's watched Inception will know that it's a, you don't want to be watching it on a plane.

Kind of slightly groggy.

I was, you know, I slept and woke up and I had no idea what was going on.

But that's very much the feeling in a Christopher Nolan film is.

But it's so, it's such a haunting film.

And all his work is kind of makes play with time and space.

And it does.

So you can absolutely see the appeal to him, I guess.

I haven't seen the film, so I don't know.

Have you seen Memento?

That's my favorite.

That's a brilliant film.

That really is a good film.

If you've, if you've taken nothing else from this podcast, you know, I did like Dunkirk.

A lot of people, some people don't like it because they don't like the messing around with time.

I loved all that.

I love a bit of messing around with time.

But a film that ends with a soldier reading Church Harry Styles, Harry Styles, a man and a bit of Elgar.

I think you can't beat it.

Something for everybody.

So looking forward to, to Oppenheimer.

Right.

That's enough of Oppenheimer and Tom, we will be back with the tremendous excitement of the Ark of the Covenant and the Holy Grail.

So the Ark of the Covenant, another weapon of mass destruction.

Yeah.

And the Holy Grail.

And if you can sense in those two titles, the shadow of a man and a fedora hat with a bullwhip being played by Tom Holland, then you are absolutely right.

Well, I hope you've enjoyed this two-part survey of Oppenheimer's life.

And that's not a subject I really knew very much about, Dominic.

I'm not going to call it a tour de force because you'll just laugh at me.

But it was very good.

Very good.

Thank you, Tom.

And has nicely set up going to see the film.

Excellent.

The physics test will follow.

Goodbye.

Bye-bye.

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