

Nicholas Latimer
Vice President, Director of Publicity
(212) 572-2106

For author interviews, contact:
Michelle Somers, (212) 572-2082
msomers@randomhouse.com

News
from
Alfred A.
Knopf
Publisher

1745 Broadway
New York City 10019
phone: (212) 572-2104
fax: (212) 940-7307
knopfpublicity@randomhouse.com

www.aaknopf.com

PUBLISHED BY KNOPF APRIL 10, 2005:

The first full-scale biography of the brilliant and charismatic physicist
who ushered America into the atomic age and then
warned of the devastating consequences...

AMERICAN PROMETHEUS

The Triumph and Tragedy of
J. ROBERT OPPENHEIMER

by Kai Bird and Martin J. Sherwin

J. ROBERT OPPENHEIMER was the most famous scientist of his generation and one of the iconic figures of the twentieth century. Generally acknowledged as “the father of the atomic bomb,” he led the effort to capture for his country the fire of the sun in a time of war, and in doing so, became the very embodiment of modern man confronting the consequences of scientific progress.

In stark contrast to his work that put America in the forefront of the nuclear arms race, Oppenheimer fought to have international controls placed on all atomic materials. He opposed the development of the hydrogen bomb, and he criticized the Air Force’s plans to fight an infinitely dangerous nuclear war. In the now almost-forgotten hysteria of the early 1950s, his ideas were anathema to powerful advocates of a massive nuclear buildup, and, in response, Atomic Energy Commission chairman Lewis Strauss, Superbomb advocate Edward Teller, and FBI director J. Edgar Hoover worked behind the scenes to have a hearing board find that Oppenheimer could not be trusted with America’s nuclear secrets.

In *American Prometheus*, Kai Bird and Martin J. Sherwin present Oppenheimer’s life and times in revealing and unprecedented detail. A quarter century in the making, the book is based on thousands of records and letters gathered from archives in America and abroad, on massive FBI files, and on close to a hundred interviews with Oppenheimer’s friends, relatives, and colleagues. Exhaustively researched and masterfully written, it is at once history and biography, a galvanizing portrait and a cautionary tale.

ADVANCE PRAISE FOR AMERICAN PROMETHEUS:

**“No one interested in 20th-century
America can afford to ignore this book.”**

—ROBERT DALLEK, author of *An Unfinished Life: John F. Kennedy*

**“Bird and Sherwin have triumphed...
This fascinating and thoughtful book brilliantly captures
the political and scientific struggles of the early atomic age.”**

—WALTER ISAACSON, author of *Benjamin Franklin*

Continued...

“One of the best scientific biographies to appear in recent years...full of morality tales and juicy gossip.”

—Kirkus, a starred review

“Definitive.

Funneling more than 25 years of research into a captivating narrative, Bird and Sherwin bring needed perspective to Oppenheimer’s radical activities in the 1930s ...They are without peer in capturing the humanity of the man behind the porkpie hat, both at Los Alamos and in the tragic aftermath, when Oppenheimer’s tireless efforts to promote arms control made him the target of politicians and bureaucrats, leading to the revoking of his security clearance by the Atomic Energy Commission in 1954, during a hearing that the authors portray convincingly as a kangaroo court. That Oppenheimer both helped father the bomb and was crucified for lobbying against the arms race remains the fundamental irony in a supremely ironic story. That irony as well as the ambiguity and tortured emotions behind it are captured in all their intensity in this compelling life story.”

—BILL OTT in a starred review for *Booklist*

“Simply stunning.

A riveting scholarly history, a psychological spy thriller, and a dark comedy all woven into one grand and astonishing book.”

—JON ELSE, award-winning filmmaker,

The Day After Trinity: J. Robert Oppenheimer and the Atomic Bomb

“A triumph and a cautionary tale beautifully told.

Rarely has a work of biography had such narrative power—or urgent present relevance.”

—JAMES CARROLL, author of *Constantine’s Sword*

“A riveting account.

Indispensable for any real understanding of our present nuclear weapons dilemmas.”

—ROBERT J. LIFTON, author of *Superpower Syndrome*

“Engrossing, important and compellingly readable.”

—RONALD STEEL, author of *Walter Lippmann and the American Century*

“A tour de force.

Deeply researched, wonderfully well written, and very thoughtful...

Clearly the most important and probing Oppenheimer biography.”

—BARTON J. BERNSTEIN, Professor of History, Stanford University

“A fascinating portrait of a brilliant and tragic life.

Oppenheimer has finally received the in-depth, insightful, and judicious biography he deserves.”

—ERIC FONER, author of *The Story of American Freedom*

“Stirs memory deeply enough to bring this student of a generation past and his once teacher to sharp recollection.”

—PHILIP MORRISON, Emeritus Professor of Physics, MIT and Los Alamos physicist, 1943-45

“A magisterial page-turner.

It forces us to think about the growing dangers in the 21st century of nuclear weaponry and political suppression.”

—WALTER LAFEBER, author of *America, Russia, and the Cold War*

Continued...

In the post-9/11 era, it is worth recalling that at the dawn of the nuclear age, the father of the atomic bomb warned us that it was a weapon of indiscriminate terror that instantly had made America more vulnerable to wanton attack.

THE ROAD J. ROBERT OPPENHEIMER TRAVELED from New York City to Los Alamos, New Mexico—from obscurity to prominence—led him to participation in the great struggles and triumphs, in science, social justice, war, and Cold War, of the twentieth century. His journey was guided by his extraordinary intelligence, his parents, his teachers at the Ethical Culture School, and his youthful experiences. Professionally, his development began in the 1920s in Germany where he learned quantum physics, a new science that he loved and proselytized. In the 1930s, at the University of California, Berkeley, while building the most prominent center for its study in the United States, he was moved by the consequences of the Great Depression at home and the rise of fascism abroad to work actively with friends—many of them fellow travelers and communists—in the struggle to achieve economic and racial justice. Those years were some of the finest of his life. That they were so easily used to silence his voice a decade later is a reminder of how delicately balanced are the democratic principles we profess, and how carefully they must be guarded.

The agony and humiliation that Oppenheimer endured in 1954 were not unique during the McCarthy era. But as a defendant, he was incomparable. He was America's Prometheus, "the father of the atomic bomb," who had led the effort to wrest from nature the awesome fire of the sun for his country in time of war. Afterwards, he had spoken wisely about its dangers and hopefully about its potential benefits and then, near despair, critically about the proposals for nuclear warfare being adopted by the military and promoted by academic strategists: "What are we to make of a civilization which has always regarded ethics as an essential part of human life [but] which has not been able to talk about the prospect of killing almost everybody except in prudential and game-theoretical terms?"

In the post-9/11 era, it is worth recalling that at the dawn of the nuclear age, the father of the atomic bomb warned us that it was a weapon of indiscriminate terror that instantly had made America more vulnerable to wanton attack. When he was asked in a closed Senate hearing in 1946 "whether three or four men couldn't smuggle units of an [atomic] bomb into New York and blow up the whole city," he responded pointedly, "Of course it could be done." To the follow-up question of a startled senator, "What instrument would you use to detect an atomic bomb hidden somewhere in a city?" Oppenheimer quipped, "A screwdriver [to open each and every crate or suitcase]." The only defense against nuclear terrorism was the elimination of nuclear weapons.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS:

Kai Bird is the author of *The Chairman: John J. McCloy, The Making of the American Establishment* and *The Color of Truth: McGeorge Bundy and William Bundy, Brothers in Arms*. He coedited with Lawrence Lifschultz *Hiroshima's Shadow: Writings on the Denial of History and the Smithsonian Controversy*. A contributing editor of *The Nation*, he lives in Washington, D.C.

Martin J. Sherwin is the Walter S. Dickson Professor of English and American History at Tufts University and author of *A World Destroyed: Hiroshima and Its Legacies*, which won the Stuart L. Bernath Prize, as well as the American History Book Prize. He lives in Boston and Washington, D.C.

AMERICAN PROMETHEUS

The Triumph and Tragedy of J. Robert Oppenheimer

by Kai Bird and Martin J. Sherwin

WITH 32 PAGES OF PHOTOGRAPHS • 719 PAGES • \$35

Author tour: Boston, New Mexico, New York, Portland, San Francisco, Washington, D.C.

ISBN 0-375-41202-6

