General Groves invented the Atomic Bomb, not Oppenheimer

By Peder Anker | Opinion | July 21, 2025

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Gen. Leslie Groves and J. Robert Oppenheimer at Los Alamos in 1942. (Credit: US Energy Department)

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Editor's note: This essay is paired with a second essay that offers a contrasting perspective about J. Robert Oppenheimer.

On August 6, 1945, the day the atomic bomb exploded above the city of Hiroshima, Gen. Leslie Groves could easily have promoted himself as the man behind the making of the bomb. After all, as the head of the Manhattan Project, he had a clear claim to being at the top of the pedestal. Instead, he singled out the obscure theoretical physicist J. Robert

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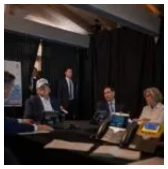
Oppenheimer—among the thousands of other scientists and technicians involved in the Manhattan Project—as the inventor of this gruesome new weapon. Why? The reason was simple: Oppenheimer was to be in the service of the state propaganda of sugarcoating the bomb in the months and years to come.

Oppenheimer as state propaganda. It is a truism that history is written by its winners, and the history of the making of atomic bombs is no exception. It was the War Secretary, Henry L. Stimson, who first issued a statement pointing out Oppenheimer as the inventor of the bomb. "The development of the bomb itself has been largely due to his genius and the inspiration and leadership he has given to his associates," he stated.[1]

Stimson and his close staff, which included Groves, were well prepared. They not only had constructed the most destructive bomb known to humankind, they also had a winning story to tell in which this terrifying weapon emerged as a force of good, one that saved rather than destroyed lives, one that could help them achieve peace rather than war, and ultimately lead to economic prosperity, even if through momentary destruction. They were ready for this moment. At the core of their narrative was a report entitled *Atomic Energy for Military Purposes* prepared by the Princeton physicist Henry DeWolf Smyth who had advised the military on how to develop the bomb.[2] Known today as the *Smyth Report*, its central message was clear: In the hands of the Americans, nuclear bombs and nuclear power were an unambiguous force of good, and its making was a true intellectual achievement of the nuclear science community.



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Oppenheimer was at the core of this positive narrative, but it was only for show.

Groves did not have much respect for Oppenheimer. He considered the scientists working in the Manhattan Project's Los Alamos Laboratory "the greatest bunch of prima donnas ever seen in one place!"[3] Yet Groves felt that Oppenheimer had something over others: an overweening ambition that could serve the nation well. Thus began the promotion of Oppenheimer as a key figure, with the physicist first becoming a poster child and later a scapegoat, depending on the government's priorities.[4] Despite engineers and chemists outnumbering physicists within the Manhattan Project, the physicists and Oppenheimer's work at Los Alamos on the assembly and testing of the first atomic bomb is still at the core of popular atomic lore.[5] The deflection of public attention has been remarkably successful, with the narrative of the Smyth Report still prevailing in today's scholarly as well as popular literature about the bomb. Oppenheimer has become a marker of scientific and cultural superiority, not so much as the "destroyer of worlds".[6]

The Smyth Report was at the core of Groves' propaganda campaign. When it was released on August 11, 1945, the report quickly became a phenomenal success, with it being on *The New York Times* bestseller list from October 1945 through January 1946, selling 127,000 copies in its first eight printings. It was the only account available, and it consequently served as a "censorship guideline and classification manual" for other possible interpretations.[7] Groves controlled the victorious narrative with an iron fist. He embedded *The New York Times* journalist William L. Laurence in the Manhattan Project, who would answer directly to him as

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the only person authorized to write about the weapon and its creation. Laurence would never raise critical questions. Instead, he followed Groves' account at every turn, making *The New York Times* effectively a vehicle of state propaganda that informs the public what it needed to know—nothing more and nothing else—until well into the 1950s. The rest of the journalists, short of firsthand accounts, would largely follow suit.

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The Smyth Report was also a crafty account of the events meant to guide the public away from critical questioning. Just as the skin and hair were falling off the Japanese victims due to the exposure to radioactive fallout from the bombings, US journalists following the official narrative were writing enthusiastically about the glittering scientific achievements of atomic physicists. At the core of their journalism was the nation's scientific superiority and the idea that the bomb had the ability "to end all wars," as Smyth put it.[8] In looking back on his decision to annihilate Hiroshima, President Harry Truman would pick up this sentiment and argue that "dropping the bombs ended the war, saved lives, and gave the free nations a chance to face the facts."[9]

Why do so many narrators continue to tell the Oppenheimer story when scholars have determined it to be not only inadequate but in many respects simply false?[10] So much hung on the success of the narrative of the Smyth Report: The United States' moral and technical superiority,

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justification for the secrecy that enveloped a multi-billion project that was kept away from Congressional oversight, the payoff of research and development of science and technology, the flush funding of research universities and laboratories during an era of extreme deprivations, the segregation of black labor in production factories, the pillaging and exploitation of planetary resources and much more. It was to be a simple story of good versus evil with the United States, its president, cabinet, and military, squarely on one side—the good one. It was to be a solid foundation that characterized the "American" values of the 1950s and beyond. It all came together in the narration of the tortured genius of Robert J. Oppenheimer.

What the Oppenheimer story hides. The chief purpose of placing Oppenheimer at the core of state propaganda was to disguise everything of importance. By focusing on the petit-bourgeois neuroses of Oppenheimer and the adventures he led at the Los Alamos Laboratory, the Smyth Report avoided talking about the design secrets of the atomic bomb and the consequences of using it.

The latest recapitulation of the Smyth Report has been Christopher Nolan's film *Oppenheimer* (2023), which won the 2024 Academy Award for "Best Picture." The film is a familiar depiction of military, scientific, and technological superiority, spiced up with beautiful women, along with some political and moral hand-wringing, with first-class acting portraying brilliant and tormented physicists punching equations in their pursuit of the ultimate weapon. Tellingly, the radioactive hell at the Japanese ground zero is only fuzzily portrayed and mixed with a Hollywood-style scene of scientists cheering their technological achievement and sentiment of

mission accomplished. The *Oppenheimer* film is consistent with how the US popular media have portrayed the bomb in the past, including the use of anatomic women to sex up the bomb. But this should come as no surprise when considering what information Nolan used to base the script of the film on.

This essay has been adapted from Anker's new book, *For The Love of Bombs*.

The narrative of the film has been fed by an army of historians writing book after book devoted to factualizing Smyth's report about all those dazzling physicists.[11] These stories are of the tormented souls of elitist physicists who made a Faustian bargain with the military in pursuit of nuclear knowledge, while they tend to ignore the suffering and violence of the bomb to laypeople in general, and marginalized groups in particular. It is telling that the Library of Congress Catalog currently lists 503 entries with "Robert Oppenheimer" as a keyword, and 149 as included in the title. Readers of these Oppenheimer stories are typically spared from learning about the indigenous people who got cancers from uranium mining, for example. Not to mention the communities of "downwinders" who suffered from cancers due to being exposed to the radioactive fallout from decades of nuclear bomb testing, or also all those ordinary soldiers, blue-collar workers, and people of color who also got cancer.[12] The official history of

the atomic bomb in its different incarnations teaches us to forget and not to remember.

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So, who invented the bomb? If it was not Oppenheimer who invented the bomb, who could it be? If the salary is an indicator of status among bomb makers, the supposed "father of the bomb" was low on the totem pole, earning a lot less than some of the other scientists Groves oversaw. Oppenheimer earned $10,000 a year while, in comparison, Roger Williams, the chemist and overall supervisor for DuPont, earned $26.400.[13] This is evidence of Williams playing a more important role in the Manhattan Project, with him overseeing the Kellex Company that enriched uranium at the K-25 factory in the town of Wheat (later renamed Oak Ridge). If a scientist is to be given credit for making the bomb, then Williams could perhaps be a better candidate than Oppenheimer. If a laboratory should be pointed out, Kellex or DuPont could be better candidates than the one at Los Alamos. If a scientific field should be placed on the pedestal of the bomb creation, radiochemistry should probably be on the top of the pillar rather than nuclear physics.

Yet giving the honor—a very questionable one—to a scientist, a scientific community, or a scientific field would play into the very narrative of American superiority of the Smyth Report. Even more problematic, it would lead (as it has surely done for nuclear physicists) to fruitless debates about

the moral responsibility of scientists, when questions about the morality of bombs should be addressed to military and political authorities seeking to use them. For the love of bombs, let us say farewell to Oppenheimer as the father of the atomic bomb. Instead of him, we should give the credit for inventing the bomb to the man in charge of the Manhattan Project in the first place, Brig. Gen. Leslie Groves.

Notes

[1] Henry L. Stimson, "Statement of the Secretary of War," Aug. 6. 1945. Archive of the *Atomic Heritage Foundation*. https://ahf.nuclearmuseum.org/ahf/key-documents/stimson-press-release/

[2] Henry DeWolf Smyth under the auspices of the United States Government, *Atomic Energy for Military Purposes*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1945). https://nuclearprinceton.princeton.edu/atomic-energy-military-purposes-smyth-report

[3] Quoted in Stephane Groueff, *Manhattan Project the Untold Story of the Making of the Atomic Bomb*, (Boston: Little, Brown, 1967), 204. https://bookshop.org/p/books/a/11711606

[4] Albert Berger, *Life and Times of the Bomb*, (New York: Routledge, 2016), 46-49. https://www.routledge.com/p/book/9780765619860

[5] Alex Wellerstein, *Restricted Data: The History of Nuclear Secrecy in the United States*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021), 101. https://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/R/bo15220099.html

[6] https://www.atomicarchive.com/media/videos/oppenheimer.html

[7] Rebecca Press Schwartz, *The Making of the History of the Atomic Bomb: Henry DeWolf Smyth and the Historiography of the Manhattan Project*, Ph.D. thesis, (Princeton: Department of History, Princeton University, 2008), 107. https://www.proquest.com/openview/39a277ba68ce652b193b7a0c83feb790/1.pdf

[8] Smyth, 247.

[9] Harry Truman in a letter to James L. Cate, Jan. 12, 1953, *Atomic Archive*. https://www.atomicarchive.com/resources/documents/hiroshima-nagasaki/truman.html

[10] For examples, Jimena Canales, "The Secret PR Push That Shaped the Atomic Bomb's Origin Story", *The Atlantic,* April 18, 2017. https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2017/04/atom-bomb-pr/523413/; Beverly Deepe Keever, *News Zero: The New York Times and the Bomb*, (Monroe: Common Courage Press, 2004). https://books.google.es/books/about/?id=sZjuAAAAMAAJ

[11] For example, Kai Bird and Martin J. Sherwin, *American Prometheus*: *The Triumph and Tragedy of J. Robert Oppenheimer*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005). https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/13787/

[12] Sarah Alisabeth Fox, *Downwind: A People's History of the Nuclear West*, (Lincoln, NE: Bison Books, 2018). https://www.nebraskapress.unl.edu/bison-books/9781496207661/; Trisha T. Pritikin, *The Hanford Plaintiffs: Voices from the Fight for Atomic Justice*,

(Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2020).
https://kansaspress.ku.edu/9780700629046/

[13] Schwartz, 40.

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Groves was undoubtedly the most important personage in the Manhattan Project. But he did not invent anything. Rather, he was the producer of the bomb. The most important innovation of the Manhattan Project was the spherical implosion technique essential to avoid the premature detonation of plutonium. In the years preceding the Manhattan Project, Oppenheimer and Serber at Berkeley worked out all the physics criteria for a nuclear explosion, and that work led to the 1943 Los Alamos Primer, which even today is

regarded as the seminal document of nuclear explosives. But the necessity of the spherical implosion technique was not recognized until the Project… Read more »

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I don't care what his academic creds are; this essay is nothing but an attempt to create controversy out of nothing – semantics over the word "invented". Laughable.

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