



The Trial of a Security System

AFTER weeks of arduous work, a special personnel security board of the Atomic Energy Commission has concluded that Dr. J. Robert Oppenheimer is of unquestioned loyalty to the United States but that his clearance should not be reinstated. Reactions to these decisions have been prompt and vigorous. Among them, Mr. Walter Lippman echoed an attitude he had expressed at the time the case first became public information: "The one intolerable result is the result we have got, a divided, confused, contradictory verdict that raises enormous issues and settles none of them."

Enormous issues are raised. The review board has asked itself questions of the utmost importance concerning relations between the nation's security system and the rights of individual men. The report is a provocative document which merits careful study in its entirety. Yet it comes to conclusions that to many—including one of the three members of the review board itself—appear contradictory. Clearly the case cannot be allowed to rest here. Whatever in the way of additional process precedes the final decision, the contradiction and inconclusiveness of the review board's recommendations, and of some of the bases upon which they were made, must be removed. Until this is done, the case will continue to be unfinished business.

The verdict of "loyal but a security risk" is logically defensible and has in fact been reached in other cases. A person may have not the slightest taint of disloyalty and yet be a security risk. If he is incautious in speech; if alcohol makes him overly loquacious; if immoral habits or the presence of near relatives in lands occupied by an unfriendly nation render him particularly susceptible to pressure, then it may be dangerous to entrust vital information to him. He is a security risk, even though his loyalty is unchallenged.

It is not therefore in the bare decision itself that the difficulty is to be found. Dr. Oppenheimer's loyalty was unquestioned. His discretion in handling classified information was commended. Why then was he not reinstated? The majority members of the board, Gordon Gray and Thomas A. Morgan, found the following four points to be controlling in leading to their decision:

1) We find that Dr. Oppenheimer's continuing conduct and associations have reflected a serious disregard for the requirements of the security system.

2) We have found a susceptibility to influence which could have serious implications for the security interests of the country.

3) We find his conduct in the hydrogen bomb program sufficiently disturbing as to raise a doubt as to whether his future participation, if characterized by the same attitudes in a Government program relating to the national defense, would be clearly consistent with the best interests of security.

4) We have regretfully concluded that Dr. Oppenheimer has been less than candid in several instances in his testimony before this board.

The first, second, and fourth of these points are debatable. They were controlling in the minds of two board members but not in the mind of the third. Debate on these points will unquestionably continue.

The third controlling factor—Dr. Oppenheimer's conduct in the hydrogen bomb program—is the most serious of the four, for it raises a basis for denying clearance that seems both foreign to democratic concepts and stultifying to the progress of military research and development. It had been charged that Dr. Oppenheimer opposed the development of the hydrogen bomb and that even after the decision to go forward with its development had been reached he had continued to oppose it, had declined to cooperate fully in the project, and had attempted to persuade other scientists not to work on the project. With regard to his initial opposition, there appeared to be no uncertainty: he had opposed it. Once the decision to go forward was made, however, the board found that Dr. Oppenheimer had not opposed it, did not decline to cooperate in the effort, and had not attempted to persuade others not to work on the project. However, the majority report goes on to point out that Dr. Oppenheimer's views had been widely known "and since he did not make it known that he had abandoned these views, his attitude undoubtedly had an adverse effect on recruitment of scientists and the progress of the scientific effort in this field."

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A. S. Kennard pointed out (10, p. 149) that "From the differences between the cut portion of the bone and the natural surface, he considered it possible that the bone was not in a fresh state when cut."

I think it highly probable that when this alleged "bone implement" is carefully studied it will be found that the terminal facets were produced by a sharp

metal blade probably of the Sheffield steel variety; in short, that this "bone implement" is quite as much a fake as the mandible.

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Received April 19, 1954.

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Then came the expression that seems so frankly astonishing as a criterion of security—the degree of enthusiasm:

The board finds that if Dr. Oppenheimer had enthusiastically supported the thermonuclear program either before or after the determination of national policy, the H-bomb project would have been pursued with considerably more vigor, thus increasing the possibility of earlier success in this field.

The criterion of enthusiasm should be examined both by itself and in connection with the question of whether a standard that is appropriate for a lesser man should be applied to one of Dr. Oppenheimer's great talents and contributions. The board argued that except in time of critical national need the same standard must apply to all. But if identity of standard is to apply to the denial of clearance, it would seem logical to apply a similar doctrine to the granting of clearance. It is doubtful whether that was done. It was apparently not alone Dr. Oppenheimer's lack of enthusiasm for the thermonuclear program, or his opposition to that program at one stage of its discussion: it was his prominence, the fact that his opposition was widely known, his failure to publicize the fact that he was supporting a decision which had gone counter to his recommendation; it was these things that the majority members of the board concluded had delayed progress on the H-bomb. Would an unknown and unimportant technician have been judged by the same standard? The wording of the report suggests not.

It is well that the criterion of enthusiasm was so clearly put. Its implications are too grave and frightening to have the basic issue clouded. It has been pointed out by a variety of writers that adherence to such a doctrine will dampen free discussion—not only in public but in secret councils. Who wants to risk such drastic punishment, years after a decision was made, for having honestly opposed the decision before

it was made? Does the same fate now face the other members of the AEC advisory committee who agreed with Dr. Oppenheimer? In perhaps the most trenchant "editorial" on this point, Herbert Block, the brilliant cartoonist of the *Washington Post and Times-Herald* pictured an office labeled "U.S. Govt. Atomic Science." On the wall hung an admonitory plaque reading, ENTHUSE. In the wastebasket rested its discarded predecessor, THINK.

In two quite distinct senses the outcome of the review board's work has been contradictory and confusing. Dr. Oppenheimer has been found to be loyal and discreet, but two of the three board members voted against restoring his clearance. But Dr. Oppenheimer was not alone on trial. The case also constituted a trial of the security system itself. Like Dr. Oppenheimer, in one sense it too came out with unblemished reputation. A thoughtful board devoted weeks to the case; many witnesses came to the defense of a man whose character had been questioned; Dr. Oppenheimer was permitted to cross-examine adverse witnesses; a valuable analysis of some of the underlying and terribly perplexing problems of the relations between national security and individual freedom of action has become available; nor is that all, for there will be further review before a final decision is reached. In this democratic, judicial, fair procedure, the country can take great pride.

But the process does not go on in a vacuum. The process brings out some of the difficulties of the security regulations, some of the troublesome aspects of the attempt to judge who is a security risk, some of the tremendous cost to the nation that must lose the services of a uniquely qualified advisor in order to comply with regulations of unknown validity and perhaps temporary applicability. The majority report leaves the status of Dr. Oppenheimer in doubt. It also leaves doubts about the security regulations under which he was judged.

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June 5, 1954.