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J. Robert Oppenheimer

When J. Robert Oppenheimer's laboratory at Los Alamos engineered the first atomic bomb, it made warfare inescapably a civilian as well as a military affair. From that time on, the notion that civilians could leave the unpleasantness of war to the soldiers was obsolete. But the bomb made equally though less obviously obsolete the isolation of the world of science and the intellect from that of politics and practical affairs. It was the genius of Oppenheimer that he not only symbolized both these changes but had the moral courage to act accordingly.

No one could have predicted this from his early scholarly career, when he began to organize in America theoretical research in basic physics, applying and extending the lessons he had learned as a graduate student in Cambridge, Göttingen, Leyden, and Zurich. Then his interests outside mathematics and physics ran more to music and Sanskrit poetry than to public affairs. Only a little later he was called to administer at Los Alamos one of the greatest engineering enterprises in history. On the basis of that feat, and of his imaginative understanding of the effect of new weapons on the world power system, he became an adviser to high political authority on military strategy, international relations, and government organization. Later, in private life, he extended his interests in the social sciences and humanities, both in his work as director of the Institute for Advanced Study and as a board member of organizations like the Social Science Research Council and the Twentieth Century Fund.

The great tragedy of his life was the decision by the Atomic Energy Commission in 1954 that he was no longer to be trusted as an official adviser with secret information. To most of his associates in public life who had known the full record, the decision was a tragic error. On the record, it was clearly motivated less by the specific offenses which he had committed than by his failure to give enthusiastic support to a crash program for an H-bomb, a sin of omission in which he was joined by many of the leading scientists who had made a success of the Manhattan Project.

When he remarked after Hiroshima that scientists at last had known sin, he summed up the new moral and political dilemmas of the age. The new powers that science had conceived and engineering had delivered had destroyed the innocence and the sense of freedom of the scientist. Henceforth the scientist could never profess a lack of responsibility for the fate of society; yet, whenever he responded to the call to political action, he would have to deal with problems that far transcended his specialized scientific competence.

Such dilemmas exist, of course, for society as a whole, and not merely for scientists. Can the United States maintain the tolerance and rational political processes of an earlier and more peaceful age, when progress seemed to be guaranteed by the advancement of science? Under the threat of war abroad and civil strife at home, national unity will depend not on our technological competence but on the political faith that science can be united with moral responsibility only through free inquiry and rational discussion.

Robert Oppenheimer's life was a symbol of some of the tragic dilemmas of the age. But it became a triumph of sensitivity and courage, through the union of intellectual power and moral concern that must be the foundation of both free science and a just society.

—DON K. PRICE, *Harvard University*.