

Oppenheimer (2 of 2)
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The newly released film, Oppenheimer, will undoubtedly be seen by large audiences. I saw it the first week of release, the first in-house film I have seen since COVID. It was marvelous in many ways, and difficult in others.

For one thing, it was more than three hours long (without intermission), which is difficult for elderly audiences. It was also very accurate, but very complex, and I cannot imagine young people understanding the whole story. For this reason, I recommend the Netflix Documentary, which is only 1-1/2 hours long and has commentary, as well as the original players in this drama, including Oppenheimer himself. I would recommend seeing this before taking on this complicated and overly long movie.

However, the directing and acting in this film were splendid and well worth seeing. Christopher Nolan was the director, and Cillian Murphy (new to me) played the thin, blue-eyed, high cheek-boned J. Robert Oppenheimer. He appears in almost every scene. Robert Downey Jr plays the conflicted scientist, Lewis Strauss, who in later life is the enemy of Oppenheimer. Matt Damon plays Leslie Groves, the general who was in charge of the Manhattan Project, its building and staffing. He appointed J. Robert Oppenheimer to direct the scientists. (My only problem with this casting was that General Groves was 6 feet 8 inches tall, which Damon is not.)

The film shows that the team under Oppenheimer worked on this top-secret Manhattan Project for some years before finally testing the first bomb on July 16, 1945, in the New Mexico desert. It is clear that nobody knew for sure that this device would work, and if it did, would it ignite the earth's atmosphere? The odds were against this, but they were extremely nervous when the bomb went off, with its awesome mushroom cloud and deafening roar.

From the start of this development, the project weighed heavily on Oppenheimer. He had no problem with using it on the Nazis, who would have done the same to us if they finished developing it first. But he did have a bad conscience about using it on the two selected Japanese cities. He knew that the world had to see how terrible this bomb would be; had to see the deaths of many people (they didn't know how many), and that it would finally force the Japanese into unconditional surrender. There would be no armistice this time, as there had been in ending World War I.

General Groves protected Oppenheimer from the suspicious intelligence community throughout the Manhattan Project. The FBI noted that Oppenheimer's mistress, Jean Tatlock (Florence Pugh) was a card-carrying communist, as was Oppenheimer's wife Kitty (Emily Blunt), although Oppenheimer was just a sentimental leftist, not a communist himself.

The problem for the FBI, and Groves, was that there was no danger that the Oppenheimer team could harbor Nazi agents; they were almost all Jewish. But after the end of the war, the next enemy was the Soviet Union. The government became paranoid about this, and the nasty Un-American Activities committee in Congress and the Joseph McCarthy Senate Committee went after all the once-leftist intellectuals, both in government and the film industry, which became a horrific witch hunt, ruining many lives.

Oppenheimer went from national hero to possible traitor, losing his security clearances. The film chose to follow this, making the film one hour longer than it might have been. The one bright note was that eventually Oppenheimer regained his heroic reputation with a presidential award granted by President Kennedy.

This piece of history is extremely important for us all, as we now face another maniac, Vladimir Putin, who threatens to use nuclear weapons against Ukraine in his unwarranted war against this innocent neighbor. Oppenheimer had gotten his wish: that this weapon never be used in conflict until now. It came close several times, but we lucked out.

As for Putin's future, it appears in question now---due to his aging and his murder of every possible opponent who could replace him. His country is in increasing turmoil, and we will all watch with concern. Nuclear weapons are there and ready.

686 words

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