J Robert Oppenheimer, Father of the Atomic Bomb

Robert Oppenheimer (April 22, 1904 - February 18, 1967) was the father of the atomic bomb. He was an enormously complex man. After making important contributions to the science of Quantum Physics, he was chosen by General Leslie Groves to head up the Manhattan Project in 1942. He performed this monumental task with great administrative genius. But the world’s first atomic detonation, at Trinity, New Mexico, on 16 July 1945 awakened in Oppenheimer deep misgivings about his achievement, and about the marriage of physics and government. Because he was not fully supportive of the development of the hydrogen bomb, because he was convinced that its only purpose was genocidal, and because of some questionable pre-war contacts with American members of the communist party, Oppenheimer was destroyed by the Cold Warriors in 1954. His security clearance was revoked. He was accused wrongly of being a traitor. He was vindicated in 1963.

When the world’s first atomic device exploded over the desert of New Mexico on a stormy dawn in July of 1945, two great men reacted to one of the pivotal moments in human history. Enrico Fermi had torn up a piece of paper into small shreds and released them into the air at the moment of detonation. By measuring their displacement, he was able to calculate the equivalent numbers of tons of TNT the blast represented. This was pure science in the field.

Robert Oppenheimer also witnessed the event. He too was a scientist. He, of course, was delighted that the gadget worked because as few as twelve hours before the test he had been assured by members of his team that it would not explode. But he brought the great tradition of the humanities to the moment. His reaction was deeper, more interesting and it was morally informed. From deep in his literary training lines from the Hindu sacred text the Bhaghavad Gita burst into his consciousness at the moment of detonation. “I am become death, the shatterer of worlds.”

Robert Oppenheimer epitomizes the Twentieth Century. He represents the complete triumph of applied science over human affairs at the end of the Millennium. He was a brilliant theoretical physicist who was recruited to build the most destructive weapon in history. He did so with genius. When he saw the results of his work, at the Trinity blast of July 16, 1945, at Alamogordo, New Mexico, he was horrified. Although he supported the use of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Oppenheimer believed their development and use opened a new chapter in human history, that the world now had no choice but to invent mechanisms for international arbitration, tolerance, and peaceful coexistence.

Robert Oppenheimer has the distinction of being a genius, yet the father of the most destructive weapon ever invented.

In the words and costume of Robert Oppenheimer, Clay Jenkinson explores quantum mechanics, America’s breathtaking race to build an atomic weapon before Hitler, the world of Los Alamos, and the balance of science and human values in the industrial world. Although Clay is best known for his portrayals of Thomas Jefferson (“one of the most straightforward men who ever lived”), he believes that Oppenheimer is in some respects the most interesting character he has ever developed.

Suggested reading-

- Peter Goodchild - J. Robert Oppenheimer: Shatterer of Worlds. New York, 1985. This is the best one-volume introduction to Oppenheimer, the development of the atomic bomb, and the tragic destruction of Oppenheimer by Cold War politicians —

For the young-

About Clay S. Jenkinson

Clay Jenkinson is a humanities scholar, author and social commentator who has devoted most of his professional career to public humanities programs and is considered one of the most entertaining public speakers in the United States. His performances are always humorous, educational, thought provoking and enlightening, while maintaining a steady focus on ideas. Jenkinson is widely regarded as one of the most articulate public speakers in the country and he brings a humanities perspective -- partly learned as a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford University -- to everything he does.

Clay is also one of the nation’s leading interpreters of Thomas Jefferson. He has lectured about and portrayed Jefferson in forty-nine states over a period of fifteen years. Clay also portrays Meriwether Lewis, John Wesley Powell, J. Robert Oppenheimer and Theodore Roosevelt. He has performed before Supreme Court justices, presidents, eighteen state legislatures, and countless public, corporate and student audiences as well as appearing on The Today Show, Politically Incorrect, The Colbert Report and CNN.

He is the recipient of one of the first five Charles Frankel Prizes, the National Endowment for the Humanities’ highest award (now called the National Humanities Medal), from President George H Bush. He was the first public humanities scholar to present a program at a White House sponsored event when he presented Thomas Jefferson for a gathering hosted by President and Mrs. Clinton. When award-winning humanities documentary producer Ken Burns turned his attention to Thomas Jefferson, he asked Clay to be the major humanities commentator on that film and others that followed.

Clay has dedicated the better part of his life to researching the historical characters that he portrays and to bringing back and defining the “living theatre” of Chautauqua, which also emphasizes education with audience participation to enhance the learning and entertainment experience. While Clay is currently traveling the country and bringing his unique style of living history to college campuses, and corporate venues across the United States, he has also mentored others in the Chautauqua style of performing through his past position as artistic director of the Nevada Humanities annual Great Basin Chautauqua Festival.

Clay is also the host of the nationally syndicated radio program The Thomas Jefferson Hour and the author of such books as, The Character of Meriwether Lewis- Explorer in the Wilderness, A Free and Hardy Life – Theodore Roosevelt’s Sojourn in the American West, and Becoming Jefferson’s People: Re-Inventing the American Republic in the Twenty-First Century. He is a Distinguished Scholar of The Humanities at Bismarck State College in Bismarck, ND, as well as the president of Dakota Sky Education, Inc, and the founder and Chief Consultant for the Theodore Roosevelt Center through Dickinson State University. He lives and writes in Bismarck, North Dakota.

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