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Book Reviews

Polenberg, Richard ed. *In the Matter of J. Robert Oppenheimer: the Security Clearance Hearing*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002.

The indispensable key to a good book review, I was once told, is always to begin it with an anecdote or droll observation of some sort. That way, one would capture the readership's attention by doing away with their initial scepticism and, in so doing, make readers much more amenable to the commentary about to follow. "Psychology sells!" My old professor pointed his yellow pencil at me, arched his eyebrows, and smiled, not without a tinge of self-satisfaction at such a pearl of wisdom. Comedy as a soporific: now that was a revelation, at least to a mere teenager like me at the time. "There are exceptions, of course," he mumbled, turning once more to his book and seemingly forgetting my presence, something initially endearing but by now alarmingly customary.

He surely had works such as *In the Matter of J. Robert Oppenheimer* in mind as the exceptions, for, try as I might, I could not bring myself to make light of anything to do with this piece of scholarship, one at once revealing, moving, and deeply disturbing. Adding further relevance to the work of Richard Polenberg - the Goldwin Smith Professor of American History at Cornell University - are some of the unnerving similarities between the situation in America post-11 September 2001 and that same country's anti-communist crusade soon after the Second World War. Then, as now, many constitutionally enshrined rights and freedoms were hurriedly suspended or violated in the name of fighting an ill-defined and supposedly all-encompassing threat. Then, as now, fear and irrationality were deliberately stoked up by a select few, mainly for opportunistic political gain. Polenberg's book - a vivid account of what can happen when the American people allow government to run roughshod over civil liberties in the name of national security - has many timely and salutary lessons for the present.

For four weeks in April and May 1954, over 30 witnesses testified at Dr. Robert Oppenheimer's hearing before the Atomic Energy Commission's (AEC) Personnel Security Board. He had requested this enquiry to defend himself against accusations of communist sympathies and opposition to the continued development of America's atomic arsenal while heading the Manhattan Project. Such allegations had resulted in his security clearance being revoked on 3 December 1953 by President Dwight D. Eisenhower. Only three weeks later was Oppenheimer informed of this and told that he had two options: appeal the suspension or end his contract voluntarily, thus negating the need for a hearing. As the latter option would have implied guilt, Oppenheimer refused to be sidelined and decided to fight for his name and reputation.

Polenberg reveals that the American government at this time "was motivated less by a belief that Oppenheimer's continued clearance imperilled national security than by a fear that failure to act would expose it to attack" (p. xvii) from Senator Joseph McCarthy. There were widespread fears that any prosecution by him would irrevocably alienate

much of America's scientific community, with all that would mean in terms of the need for continued technological supremacy over the Soviet Union. Thus, many of Oppenheimer's supporters were relieved at the announcement that the AEC - and not McCarthy - would conduct the hearing. How misplaced was their faith.

While the appearance of the hearing was one of impartiality and fairness, reality was entirely different: the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), beginning on 1 January 1954, at once placed Oppenheimer under constant physical and technical surveillance. Particularly alarming was that telephone intercepts picked up most of the physicist's discussions with his lawyers, information that eventually reached Roger Robb, the man selected by the AEC to argue its case against the beleaguered Jewish scientist. Such an egregious violation of Oppenheimer's right to confidentiality in discussions with his legal team was justified in terms of trying to learn of any plans to flee the country. Thus, the defence's entire strategy was undermined from the very first moment.

All charges related to the scientist's activities in the years before 1943 and to his alleged opposition to the development of the hydrogen bomb. As one of the FBI agents involved remarked, "we have no substantial information of a pro-communist nature concerning Oppenheimer subsequent to 1943." (p. xix) Even more detestable was the prosecution's exclusive access to secret files compiled by the FBI and other agencies on the physicist. The defence was refused the right to consult such documents on grounds that their security clearances were inadequate. Thus, even if the proceedings themselves were a model of civility, any pretence of fairness fell quickly by the wayside when, on four occasions, Oppenheimer's lawyers had to leave the room while the prosecution presented "secret" evidence.

The main problem, simply put, was that the onus was on the defence, and not on the prosecution, to prove their case - clearly an impossible proposition. Determined to cooperate fully, Oppenheimer - after being assured that all proceedings would remain secret - was very frank about his intimate life and even named some former colleagues and students whom he knew to be communists, or at least sympathizers. Then, by mid-June 1954, the AEC suddenly and inexplicably decided to publish the sessions' transcripts, of which Polenberg here includes what he deems to be the most important segments. While the author suggests that the publication of the proceedings deeply embarrassed Oppenheimer, the impact of the transcripts on public opinion was much more damaging. Unaware of the unfairness of the hearings, many who had initially supported Oppenheimer were now convinced that the government's actions had been justified. In Polenberg's words, throughout this modern-day "Dreyfus affair" "the outcome was never in question." (p. xxiv)

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