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David K. Hecht. "The Atomic Hero: Robert Oppenheimer and the Making of Scientific Icons in the Early Cold War." *Technology and Culture* 49:4 (October 2008): 943-966. DOI: 10.1353/tech.0.0180. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/tech.0.0180> .

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Review by **Jacob Darwin Hamblin**, Clemson University

At the risk of raising some hackles, one might venture to say that few diplomatic historians are attuned to the lives of scientists. There are a couple of exceptions. Everyone has heard of Albert Einstein, and some may even understand the significance of his equation $E=mc^2$ in igniting the nuclear age. Another is J. Robert Oppenheimer. Even had there been no spate of recent biographies on "Oppie", few would deny that Oppenheimer was an icon of the postwar era. He was the face of the atomic bomb, having led World War II's only successful effort to turn a fission chain reaction into a weapon. Still, who among us could name a single scientific theory or discovery to Oppenheimer's credit? Surely there were some; after all, he was one of the most respected theoreticians at Berkeley in the 1930s and he was chosen to lead some of the world's most impressive minds at Los Alamos. But the truth is, it was the Bomb rather than his science that put him into the historian's field of vision.

In his insightful essay on Oppenheimer, David K. Hecht seeks to understand how Oppenheimer's status as an icon and hero evolved over the first decade after World War II. His central premise is that science had little to do with it. Oppenheimer's admirers latched onto his non-scientific attributes and made him into a hero because of what he represented in postwar American culture. Hecht draws a parallel to Einstein, who, partly because of his pacifism and his opposition to Hitler, was enormously popular in the United States despite the fact that his theories of relativity were incomprehensible even to some physicists. Hecht contends that the non-scientific reasons for Oppenheimer's popularity shifted with the winds of the early Cold War. As such, historians can use his fan mail as a lens through which to understand not only changes in the landscape of politics, but also the nature of America's hopes and fears.

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Hecht has mined news stories and sampled letters from Oppenheimer's well-wishers from the time of his post-Hiroshima superstardom to his hasty expulsion from the corridors of power after his security hearing in 1954. What Hecht finds are three distinct periods in which Oppenheimer's iconic status meant something new. The first (1945-47) was that of the socially responsible scientist. Oppenheimer was one of several high-profile names from the bomb project who tried to promote international control of atomic energy. In Hecht's view, Oppenheimer's sober rationality and sense of social responsibility appealed to those wishing to restore the view that—despite the Bomb—scientists had primarily a progressive, productive role to play in society.

In its second phase (1948-1953), respect turned into gratuitous hagiography. Oppenheimer did not wear a lab coat and spectacles; rather, he was a 'man's man' with a thoughtful side. Media coverage played up Oppenheimer's competence as a horseman who could scout out test sites in the desert. This painted Oppenheimer as technically brilliant and yet in tune with the real and rugged world. True, he bought original paintings and sipped eternal truths from the Sanskrit *Bhagavad Gita*; but the man also liked fast cars and knew how to handle rattlesnakes. Essential to this heroic image was the fact that Oppenheimer seemed torn about the meaning of the nuclear age, which suggested a strong moral grounding. This capacity for deep reflection did not diminish his heroic standing. No one could see Oppenheimer as an emasculated ivory tower type; after all, he built the Bomb.

This all changed when Oppenheimer's pre-war communist sympathies came to light, marking the start of Hecht's third phase (1954 and after). Thankfully Hecht does not go through the motions of the security hearing, and he does not bother putting the obligatory black hats on Lewis Strauss and Edward Teller. He is more interested in showing how Oppenheimer's appeal changed during this period. His devotees clung to him now as a symbol of the excesses of McCarthyism. Here was a national hero who probably had more nuclear secrets in his own head than the Atomic Energy Commission had in its files, yet he was dubbed a security risk. Hecht argues that people also were drawn to Oppenheimer's sincerity and his newfound vulnerability. Americans were changing their views about what it meant to be an admirable scientist and preferred those who were moral, willing to take a stand and concerned about the fate of the world. Suddenly the father of the atomic bomb was a tragic humanist.

Hecht's essay is well-written and can serve as a good primer on Oppenheimer in courses on the Cold War. It does have a detached feel to it, because Hecht is not writing about the man's real life or trying to depict what actually happened. Instead it is a survey of sources written by people who never knew Oppenheimer. Also, Hecht does not discuss Oppenheimer's detractors. Still, this is part of the essay's appeal. There are probably few better ways to understand a person's evolving cultural significance than to examine how and why complete strangers admired him.

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