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by Kai Bird and Martin Sherwin

In his interviews and writings over the past decade, Osama bin Laden has repeatedly talked about America's atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. He believes (incorrectly) that it was the atomic bombings that shocked the Japanese imperial government into an early surrender -- and, he says, he is planning an atomic attack on America that will shock us into retreating from the Middle East.

For an Administration that believes that the only thing it has to fear is the absence of fear, Osama's threat is a helpful reminder that we live in a dangerous world. "It may only be a matter of time," President Bush's recently installed CIA director, Porter Goss, told the Senate Intelligence Committee, "before Al Qaeda or another group attempts to use chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear weapons."

While such threats cannot be ignored, it is important to historicize and contextualize them if we are to understand how we have contributed to undermining our own security. There were alternative policies at the beginning of the nuclear age that our government could have followed -- and could still promote -- that would have mitigated the dangers we face today. There were people then, as now, who recognized that the knowledge of how to construct and deploy atomic bombs could not be kept secret for long. And there were people then, as now, who recognized that such bombs could be smuggled into major urban areas -- meaning there is no defense against nuclear terrorism. Chief among those who clearly saw the nuclear future -- as we have lived and are living it -- was the "father of the atomic bomb," J. Robert Oppenheimer, who developed a plan for a nuclear-free world and did his best to promote this alternative path.

The history of Oppenheimer's failure to contain the nuclear genie makes clear that unilateralism and hubris are hardly unique to the Bush Administration; they have been a recurrent characteristic of US decision-making ever since the latter years of World War II. America's nuclear monopoly was "the great equalizer," Secretary of War Henry Stimson triumphantly declared in July 1945 at the Potsdam conference upon learning of the success of the atomic bomb test at Alamogordo, New Mexico. The bomb was our "trump card," our "ace in the hole," President Truman and his closest advisers believed. But others, more informed and more thoughtful, like Oppenheimer, realized that the bomb was a Trojan horse that would soon threaten our own security as much as it threatened the security of others. Oppenheimer's efforts to prevent the proliferation of nuclear weapons at the beginning of the atomic age are as applicable today as they were then.

On October 25, 1945, Oppenheimer was ushered into the Oval Office to meet Truman to discuss his plans to eliminate nuclear weapons. By one account, Truman opened the conversation by stating, "The first thing is to define the national problem, then the international." Oppenheimer disagreed. "Perhaps it would be best first to define the international problem," he cautiously replied. He meant, of course, that the first imperative was to stop the spread of atomic weapons by placing international controls over all atomic technology. At one point in their conversation, Truman suddenly asked him to guess when the Russians would develop their own atomic bomb. When he replied that he did not know, Truman confidently said he knew the answer: "Never." For Oppenheimer, such foolishness was proof of Truman's limitations. The "incomprehension it showed just knocked the heart out of him," recalled the Los Alamos scientist Willy Higinbotham.

A week later, on November 2, Oppenheimer returned to the Los Alamos nuclear weapons laboratory. Some 500 people packed into the facility's theater to hear "Oppie" talk about what he called "the fix we are in." He spoke for an hour -- much of it extemporaneously -- and his audience was mesmerized; years later, people would say, "I remember Oppie's speech." "It is clear to me," he said, "that wars have changed. It is clear to me that if these first bombs -- the bomb that was dropped on Nagasaki -- that if these can destroy ten square miles, then that is really quite something. It is clear to me that they are going to be very cheap if anyone wants to make them."

A few days earlier, Truman had given a bellicose "Navy Day" speech in New York in which he had reveled in the atomic addition to America's military power. The bomb, Truman said, would be held by the United States as a "sacred trust" for the rest of the world, and "we shall not give our approval to any compromises with evil." Oppenheimer disliked Truman's triumphalist tone: "If you approach the problem and say, 'We know what is right and we would like to use the atomic bomb to persuade you to agree with us,' then you are in a very weak position and you will not succeed.... You will find yourselves attempting by force of arms to prevent a disaster."

In late January 1946 Oppenheimer was nevertheless heartened to learn that negotiations begun several months earlier had resulted in an agreement between the Soviet Union, the United States and other countries to establish a United Nations Atomic Energy Commission. Pressured by veterans of the Manhattan Project and their media supporters, Truman appointed a special committee to draw up a concrete proposal for international control of nuclear weapons.

As the only physicist on the board -- indeed, as the only member of the board who knew anything about atomic energy -- Oppenheimer naturally dominated their discussions, and he quickly persuaded his fellow panel members to endorse a dramatic and comprehensive plan. Turning to the internationalism of modern science as a model, Oppenheimer proposed an international agency that would monopolize all aspects of atomic energy and apportion its benefits as an incentive to individual countries. Oppenheimer believed that in the long run, "without world government there could be no permanent peace, [and] that without peace there would be atomic warfare." Since world government was not a prospect, Oppenheimer

argued that in the field of atomic energy all countries should agree to a "partial renunciation" of sovereignty.

Under his plan, the proposed Atomic Development Authority would have sovereign ownership of all uranium mines, atomic power plants and laboratories. No nation would be permitted to build bombs -- but scientists everywhere would still be allowed to exploit the atom for peaceful purposes. Complete and total transparency would make it impossible for any nation to marshal the enormous industrial, technical and material resources necessary to build an atomic weapon in secrecy. Oppenheimer understood that one couldn't un-invent the weapon; the secret was out. But one could construct a system so transparent that it would at least provide ample warning if a rogue regime set about to make an atomic weapon.

Soon afterward, Oppenheimer's draft plan, which became known as the Acheson-Lilienthal Report, was optimistically submitted to the White House. But optimism was misplaced. While Secretary of State James Byrnes made a pretense of saying that he was "favorably impressed," he was in fact shocked by the sweeping scope of the report's recommendations. A day later he persuaded Truman to appoint his business partner, Wall Street financier Bernard Baruch, "to translate" the Administration's proposals to the United Nations. When Oppenheimer read the news, he told his Los Alamos friend Willy Higinbotham, by then president of the newly created Federation of Atomic Scientists, "We're lost."

In private, Baruch was already expressing "great reservations" about the Acheson-Lilienthal Report's recommendations. Like his advisers, Baruch was alarmed by the idea that privately owned mines might be taken over by an international Atomic Development Authority. (Both Baruch and Byrnes happened to be board members of and investors in Newmont Mining Corporation, a major company with a large stake in uranium mines.) And, as far as atomic weapons were concerned, Baruch thought of the US bomb as a "winning weapon." In short order negotiations broke down completely over the question of "penalties." Why, Baruch asked, was there no provision for the punishment of violators of the agreement? He thought a stockpile of nuclear weapons should be set aside and automatically used against any country found in violation.

Disregarding the opinion of most scientists, Baruch decided that the Soviet Union would not be able to build its own atomic weapons for at least two decades, and thus that there was no need to relinquish the American monopoly anytime soon. Consequently, the plan he intended to submit to the UN would substantially amend -- indeed, fundamentally alter -- the Acheson-Lilienthal proposals: The Soviets would have to give up their right to a veto in the Security Council over any actions by the new atomic authority; any nation violating the agreement would immediately be subjected to an attack with atomic weapons; and, before being given access to any of the secrets surrounding the peaceful uses of atomic energy, the Soviets would have to submit to a survey of their uranium resources. What Baruch was proposing was not cooperative control over nuclear energy but an atomic pact designed to prolong the US monopoly.

On June 14, 1946, Baruch presented his plan to the UN, dramatically stating that he offered the world "a choice between the quick and the dead." As Oppenheimer and his colleagues had predicted, it was promptly rejected by the Soviet Union, which proposed as an alternative a simple treaty to ban the production or use of atomic weapons. The Truman Administration rejected the Soviet response out of hand. Negotiations continued in a desultory fashion for many months, but to no end.

An early opportunity had been lost to make a

good-faith effort to prevent an uncontrolled nuclear-arms race between the two major powers. It would take the terrors of the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, and the massive Soviet buildup that followed it, before a US administration in the 1970s would propose a serious and acceptable arms control agreement. But by then it was too late to prevent an arms race and the proliferation of nuclear weapons.

Oppenheimer's anguish was real and deep. Every day the newspaper headlines gave him evidence that the world might once again be on the road to war. "Every American knows that if there is another major war," he wrote in The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists on June 1, 1946, "atomic weapons will be used." This meant, he argued, that the real task at hand was the elimination of war itself. "We know this because in the last war, the two nations which we like to think are the most enlightened and humane in the world -- Great Britain and the United States -- used atomic weapons against an enemy which was essentially defeated."

He had made this observation earlier in a speech at Los Alamos, but to publish it in 1946 was an extraordinary admission. Less than a year after the events of August 1945, the man who had instructed the bombardiers exactly how to drop their atomic bombs on the center of two Japanese cities had come to the conclusion that he had supported the use of atomic weapons against "an enemy which was essentially defeated."

A major war was not Oppenheimer's only worry. Sometime that year he was asked in a closed Senate hearing room "whether three or four men couldn't smuggle units of an [atomic] bomb into New York and blow up the whole city." Oppenheimer responded, "Of course it could be done, and people could destroy New York." When a startled senator then followed by asking, "What instrument would you use to detect an atomic bomb hidden somewhere in a city?" Oppenheimer quipped, "A screwdriver [to open each and every crate or suitcase]." There was no defense against nuclear terrorism -- and he felt there never would be. International control of the bomb, he later told an audience of Foreign Service and military officers, was "the only way in which this country can have security comparable to that which it had in the years before the war. It is the only way in which we will be able to live with bad governments, with new discoveries, with irresponsible governments such as are likely to arise in the next hundred years, without living in fairly constant fear of the surprise use of these weapons." Today he would add Osama bin Laden's terrorists to his list.

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