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Oppenheimer: the Movie and the Moment to Prevent the Next Nuclear War

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August 18, 2023 Marcy Winograd Nuclear Disarmament

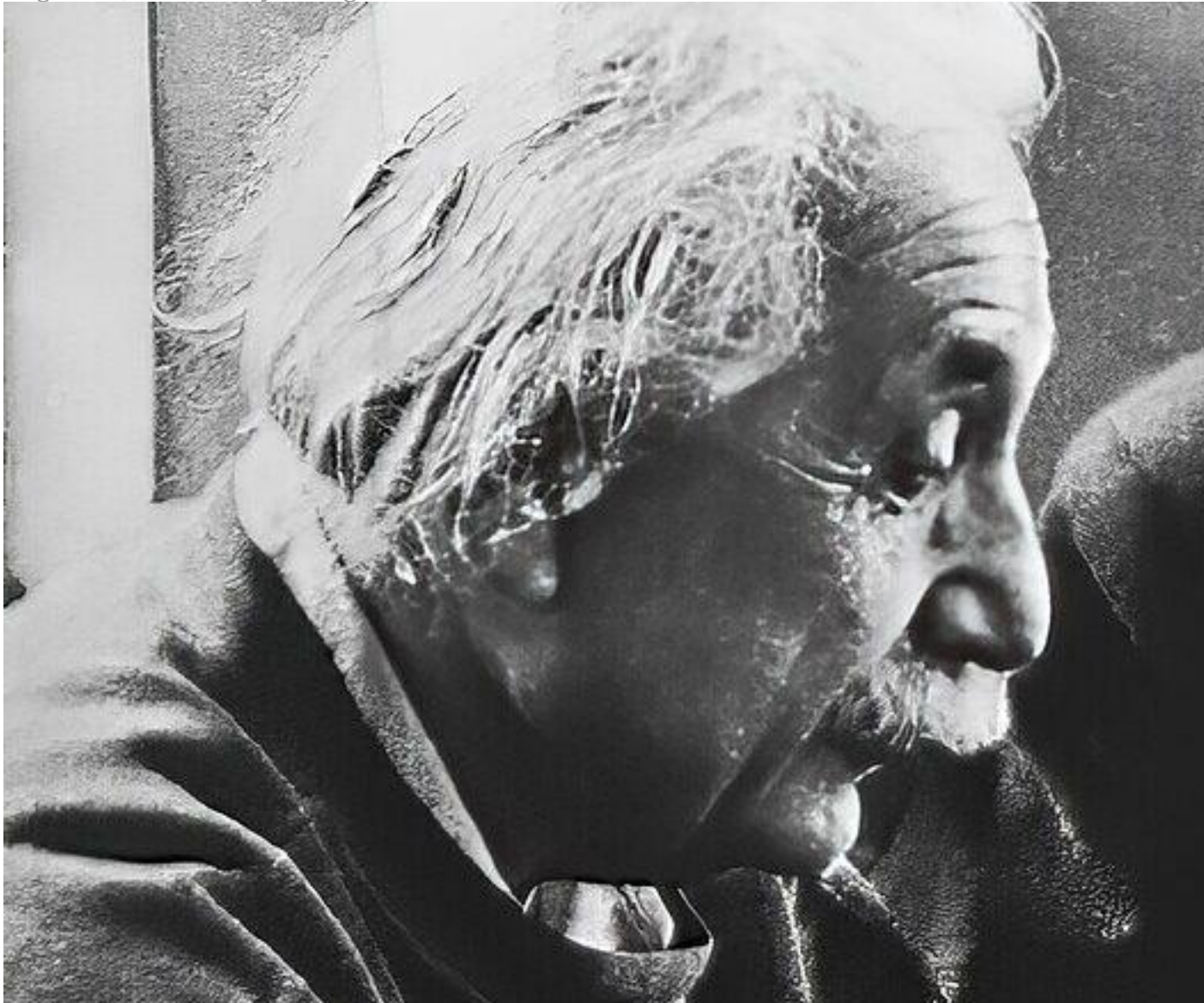


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Unless this Hollywood film sparks a second nuclear-freeze movement, Congress and the White House will raid the treasury to expand our nuclear arsenal.

By Marcy Winograd

*This piece was originally published in [Common Dreams](#) and contains spoilers for the movie *Oppenheimer* directed by Christopher Nolan.*

The ground-breaking movie *Oppenheimer*, despite its unsympathetic protagonist, packs a powerful anti-nuclear punch that makes it hard, if not impossible, to sleep after watching the film.

For this reason alone, the movie should be shown on the floor of Congress and in the White House as required viewing by all in D.C. bent on spending \$1.7 trillion over the next decades to build new nuclear weapons to kill us all.

Only those with a global death wish or on the payroll of Northrop Grumman, the military contractor with the nuclear “**modernization**” contract, could watch this film and still root for U.S. nuclear rearmament, a horror show now underway with the blessings of D.C. politicians. Unless people rise up in fury, unless this Hollywood movie sparks a second nuclear-freeze movement, a repeat on steroids of the 80s nuclear weapons freeze, Congress and the White House will raid the treasury to expand our nuclear arsenal.

The White House and a majority of Congress want to rush us, a sleepwalking populace, into WWII with Russia, a nation of 143 million people, 195 different ethnicities, and 6,000 nuclear weapons.

On the agenda is a new sea-launched nuclear cruise missile, a gravity bomb with two-stage radiation implosion, a long range strike bomber, and the replacement of 400 underground nuclear missiles in the Midwest with 600 new Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMS). These new ICBMS—The Sentinel—could each carry up to three warheads 20 times more powerful than the atomic bombs the U.S. dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki to incinerate 200,000 people in a span of three days.

Irish actor Cillian Murphy plays the role of J. Robert Oppenheimer, a hand-wringing scientist, an unfaithful lackluster womanizer, a man with few convictions but lots of demons, who traverses an emotional landscape of ambition, doubt, remorse, and surrender.

Oppenheimer oversees the Manhattan Project, the team of scientists hunkering down in the beautiful desert of Los Alamos, New Mexico, to build the hideous atomic bomb before the Germans or Russians crack the code.

In a scene reminiscent of the absurd 1950s, when pig-tailed school children scrambled under desks in mock nuclear drills, scientists don sunscreen and goggles to protect themselves during the blinding Trinity Test. This was the first atomic test conducted with no warning to the downwinders—the nearby Indigenous people of the Southwest who **developed** cancer as a result of radioactive fall out. This was the test before President Harry Truman ordered a 9,000 pound uranium bomb named “Little Boy” loaded onto a B-29 bomber. This was the trial performance before the same president, depicted in the movie as unctuous and arrogant, orders “Fat Boy,” a second plutonium bomb—prototype for today’s nuclear weapon—dropped on Nagasaki.

Though the movie can be slow, a three-hour endurance test, its historical insights and gut-churning imagery compensate for its lack of likable characters, save for Lt. General Leslie Groves, played by a fun-to-watch Matt Damon as Oppenheimer’s Pentagon handler.

One of the most haunting moments juxtaposes in living color celebrations of the bombings, applause and accolades for Oppenheimer standing at the podium, with the guilt-consumed scientist’s black

and white visions of irradiated souls, skeletal remains, flesh turned to ash—all amid a cacophony of explosions and pounding feet, the death march.

Even more disturbing are the questions that tug at the moviegoer, who wonders, “Where are the Japanese victims in this film? Why are they missing from this picture? Why are they never shown writhing in pain, their lives and cities destroyed?” Instead, the human targets are seen only through the lens of Oppenheimer who imagines faceless x-rayed ghosts torn asunder in the burning wreckage, their skin, their flesh falling off their bones, their bodies disappearing into nothingness.

The omission of the real victims in the interest of maintaining a consistent point of view may make sense from a filmmaker’s perspective, but not from the standpoint of historians and truth tellers. Writer-director Christopher Nolan could have shown us photos, authentic aerial footage of the Japanese, blinded and burned, before the final credits rolled to remind us the horror is real, not just a Hollywood movie bound for several Oscar nominations.

In the name of truth the movie does, however, smash the persistent myth that the U.S. had no other choice but to drop the atomic bombs to end WWII. Through dialogue, we learn Japan was about to surrender, the Emperor simply needed to save face; the point of irradiating Hiroshima and Nagasaki, targeting civilians in far off cities, was not to save the world but to show the Soviets the U.S. possessed the technology to destroy the world, so better not cross the aspiring empire.

In closed door sessions, all filmed in black and white, we watch as crusading anti-communist politicians—determined to stop Oppenheimer from advocating for arms control talks with the Soviets—crucify their atomic hero for his association with members of the Communist Party, leftist trade unions, and a long ago anti-capitalist lover who threw his bourgeois flowers in the trash.

When the McCarthyites strip Oppenheimer of his security clearance, it’s a big “who cares” shrug for a movie audience weary of Oppenheimer’s internal conflicts over whether science can be divorced from politics, from the consequences of a scientist’s research. How can anyone with a heart want to continue this line of work? To hell with the security clearance.

The movie *Oppenheimer* is compelling and powerful in its timeliness, though one can’t help but think it would have been exponentially more powerful had it been told from a different point of view, from the point of view of a scientist who opposed the death-march mission.

We see glimpses of a pond-staring, fate-warning Albert Einstein, who in real life lobbied to fund the atomic bomb research only to later oppose the project. It could have been his story—or the story of one of the 70 scientists who signed a “Truman, don’t drop the bomb” petition that Oppenheimer squelched, persuading Edward Teller, the “father of the hydrogen bomb” not to present Truman with the petition drafted by Leo Szilard, the chief physicist at the Manhattan Project’s Chicago laboratory. The movie’s reference to the petition was so fast, so quiet, so mumbled, the audience could have missed it.

If we are not careful, more mindful, more awake, we might miss our moment to avert another nuclear holocaust, this one a far worse nightmare in which 5 billion of the Earth’s 8 billion people **perish**, either immediately from radiation burns and fire or in the months that follow during a famine in which soot blocks the sun.

The White House and a majority of Congress want to rush us, a sleepwalking populace, into WWII with Russia, a nation of 143 million people, 195 different ethnicities, and 6,000 nuclear weapons. For those, like the shameful editors of *The Washington Post*, who insist we continue to forever fund the proxy war, for those in high places who refuse calls for a ceasefire, this movie reminds us of the existential danger we confront in a sea of denial, complicity, and exceptionalism.

Despite campaigning on a platform of no first use of nuclear weapons, President Joe Biden's Nuclear Posture Review **echoes** his predecessor Donald Trump's approval of first use should our allies' interests be threatened.

CODEPINK activists are distributing flyers outside showings of *Oppenheimer* to invite stunned moviegoers leaving the theater in a daze to take action; to join our organization; and to amplify our peace-building campaigns to **ground** the nuclear-capable F-35, to declare **China is Not our Enemy**, and to partner with the **Peace in Ukraine Coalition**.

This is the movie, this is the moment, this is the time to challenge the euphemistic nuclear modernization program, to expose the madness of militarism that abandons urgent needs at home to line the pockets of military contractors gorging at the Pentagon trough. This is the time to demand a ceasefire and peace talks to end the war in Ukraine, to stop preparations for war with China, to finally pass legislation to ban first use, to take our ICBM's off hair trigger alert, to abide by our disarmament obligations under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, and to campaign for the U.S. to become a signatory to the **U.N. Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons** (TPNW).

Opposed by NATO—a huckster for nuclear proliferation—the TPNW has been signed by 95 state parties wishing to outlaw the development, deployment, and use of nuclear weapons.

Unlike *Oppenheimer*, we can make the right choice; the choice that saves the human race from immediate extinction.

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