

# AMERICAN EXPERIENCE



## *The Trials of J. Robert Oppenheimer*

Monday, January 12, 2009 at 9pm (check local listings)

J. Robert Oppenheimer was brilliant, arrogant, proud, charismatic—and a national hero. Under his leadership during World War II, the United States succeeded in becoming the first nation to harness the power of nuclear energy to create the ultimate weapon of mass destruction — the atomic bomb. But after the bomb brought the war to an end, in spite of his renown and his enormous achievement, America turned on him, humiliated him, and cast him aside. The question the film asks is, “Why?”

*“The country asked him to do something and he did it brilliantly, and they repaid him for the tremendous job he did by breaking him.” Marvin L. Goldberger, Los Alamos scientist and former director, The Institute for Advanced Studies*

On Monday, January 12, PBS's AMERICAN EXPERIENCE premieres *The Trials of J. Robert Oppenheimer*, featuring Academy Award-nominated actor David Strathairn (*Good Night and Good Luck*, *The Bourne Ultimatum*) as Robert Oppenheimer. From multiple Emmy Award-winning producer David Grubin (*RFK*, *LBJ*, *Abraham and Mary Lincoln: A House Divided*), *The Trials of J. Robert Oppenheimer* features interviews with the scientist's former colleagues and eminent scholars to present a complex and revealing portrait of one of the most important and controversial scientists of the twentieth century. The two-hour film traces the course of Oppenheimer's life: his rarefied childhood, his troubled adolescence, his emergence as one of America's leading nuclear physicists, his leadership of the Los Alamos laboratory, and his tragic humiliation.

In 1939, the discovery of nuclear fission launched an international race to build the atomic bomb. In England, Germany, France, Japan, and the Soviet Union, the world's best scientists were working covertly to create a weapon of awesome destructive power. In the United States, the man leading that race was J. Robert Oppenheimer, the atomic scientist handpicked to head up The Manhattan Project's top-secret laboratory in Los Alamos, New Mexico.

America got there first. On July 16, 1945, the first atomic bomb was tested in the Alamogordo desert. Less than a month later, on August 6 and 9, the United States exploded two atomic bombs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan, putting an end to World War II. Overnight, Robert Oppenheimer was transformed into a national hero. But his newfound fame did not relieve his personal anguish over the destructive power he had helped unleash.

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*“He was a great supporter of using the bomb. But he understood all along that he was on the cusp of a new terror,” says historian Martin J. Sherwin in the film.*

After the war, Oppenheimer recommended putting control over atomic energy into the hands of an international agency. Appointed a key advisor to the newly created Atomic Energy Commission, a position that offered him an important voice in Washington and a top-secret security clearance, he spoke out for moderation as tensions between the Soviet Union and the United States began to escalate. He advised against the development of the hydrogen bomb, a device with unlimited destructive power, and took a stand against building nuclear powered aircraft and submarines. But to powerful Washington insiders, Oppenheimer was standing in the way of America’s ability to defend itself, and they wanted him gone.

He was already under a cloud of suspicion because of his connections to Communists when he was a professor at the University of California at Berkeley in the 1930s. Although Oppenheimer himself never joined the Communist party, many of those close to him had, including his wife and brother. Both Army Intelligence and the FBI considered the eminent scientist a security risk, and at Los Alamos, his phones were tapped, his office was wired, his mail was opened, and his comings and goings were closely monitored. In 1953 his past connections to Communists became a pretext to revoke his security clearance. It was the height of the “Red Scare,” and a group of powerful Washington insiders built a case against him. When he insisted on a hearing to regain his reputation, they made certain that he wouldn’t stand a chance.

*“It was the worst kind of kangaroo court,” says Pulitzer Prize-winning author Richard Rhodes in the film.*

Throughout the hearings, the FBI bugged Oppenheimer’s lawyers’ offices, home, and nearly everywhere he went, and delivered information, even the defense strategy, to the prosecutor bent on bringing him down. A parade of forty witnesses testified on both sides, including Edward Teller, a scientist who resented Oppenheimer from their days together at Los Alamos. Teller’s testimony would drive the final nail into Oppenheimer’s coffin. On June 29, 1954, the security board ruled two to one that although Oppenheimer was a “loyal citizen,” and was owed a “great debt of gratitude” for his magnificent service, his security clearance should be permanently revoked.

*“The Oppenheimer hearings had a tremendous impact on the nuclear arms race,” says Mark Samels, executive producer of AMERICAN EXPERIENCE. “Once Robert Oppenheimer’s voice of moderation was silenced, the U.S. began building an arsenal of tens of thousands of nuclear weapons, and the Soviet Union followed suit. The result was a standoff between the world’s two largest superpowers that lasted for nearly fifty years.”*

*“There are so many ways to look at the Oppenheimer story,” Grubin says. “For me, the idea that the loyalty of one of our most distinguished scientists could be called into question and the rules of justice set aside, all justified because we were in a war against Communism, is a tragic reminder of how staunchly we must protect our freedoms, especially in perilous times.”*

[more](#)



# AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

## CREDITS

Starring David Strathairn as J. Robert Oppenheimer

Written, directed, and produced by  
David Grubin

Co-produced by  
Tania Castellanos and Dan Cogan

Edited by  
Deborah Peretz and Kate Taverna

Cinematography by  
James Callanan

Music by  
Michael Bacon

Narrated by  
Campbell Scott

AMERICAN EXPERIENCE is a production of WGBH Boston  
Series producer Sharon Grimberg  
Executive producer Mark Samels

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## ACCESSIBILITY

AMERICAN EXPERIENCE is closed captioned for deaf and hard-of-hearing viewers, and described for people who are blind or visually impaired by the Media Access Group at WGBH. The descriptive narration is available on the SAP channel of stereo TVs and VCRs.

## ABOUT AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

Television's most-watched history series, AMERICAN EXPERIENCE has been hailed as "peerless" (*Wall Street Journal*), "the most consistently enriching program on television" (*Chicago Tribune*), and "a beacon of intelligence and purpose" (*Houston Chronicle*). On air and online, the series brings to life the incredible characters and epic stories that have shaped America's past and present. Acclaimed by viewers and critics alike, AMERICAN EXPERIENCE documentaries have been honored with every major broadcast award, including twenty-four Emmy Awards, four duPont-Columbia Awards, and fourteen George Foster Peabody Awards, one most recently for *Two Days in October*.

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## ABOUT WGBH BOSTON

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For more information about AMERICAN EXPERIENCE and *The Trials of J. Robert Oppenheimer*, visit [pbs.org/americanexperience](http://pbs.org/americanexperience)

Promotional photography is available for download from [pbs.org/pressroom](http://pbs.org/pressroom) and [pressroom.wgbh.org](http://pressroom.wgbh.org).

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