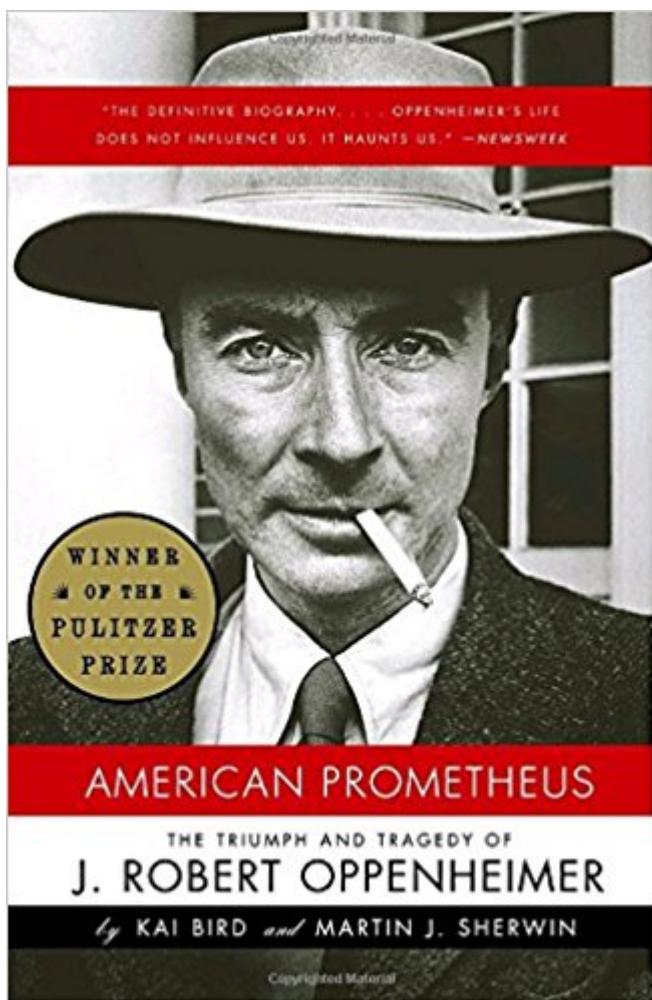


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# American Prometheus: The Triumph And Tragedy Of J. Robert Oppenheimer



## Synopsis

J. Robert Oppenheimer is one of the iconic figures of the twentieth century, a brilliant physicist who led the effort to build the atomic bomb for his country in a time of war, and who later found himself confronting the moral consequences of scientific progress. In this magisterial, acclaimed biography twenty-five years in the making, Kai Bird and Martin Sherwin capture Oppenheimer's life and times, from his early career to his central role in the Cold War. This is biography and history at its finest, riveting and deeply informative.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

In American Prometheus, Kai Bird and Martin J. Sherwin delve deep into J. Robert Oppenheimer's life and deliver a thorough and devastatingly sad biography of the man whose very name has come to represent the culmination of 20th century physics and the irrevocable soiling of science by governments eager to exploit its products. Rich in historical detail and personal narratives, the book paints a picture of Oppenheimer as both a controlling force and victim of the mechanisms of power. By the time the story reaches Oppenheimer's fateful Manhattan Project work, readers have been swept along much as the project's young physicists were by fate and enormous pressure. The authors allow the scientists to speak for themselves about their reactions to the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings, avoiding any sort of preacherly tone while revealing the utter, horrible ambiguity of the situation. For instance, Oppenheimer wrote in a letter to a friend, "The thing had to be done," then, "Circumstances are heavy with misgiving." Many biographies of Oppenheimer end here, with the seeds of his later pacifism sown and the dangers of mixing science with politics

clearly outlined. But Bird and Sherwin devote the second half of this hefty book to what happened to Oppenheimer after the bomb. For a short time, he was lionized as the ultimate patriot by a victorious nation, but things soured as the Cold War crept forward and anti-communist witchhunts focused paranoia and anti-Semitism onto Oppenheimer, destroying his career and disillusioning him about his life's work. Devastated by the atom bomb's legacy of fear, he became a vocal and passionate opponent of the Strangelovian madness that gripped the world because of the weapons he helped develop. Twenty-five years of research went into creating American Prometheus, and there has never been a more honest and complete biography of this tragic scientific giant. The many great ironies of Oppenheimer's life are revealed through the careful reconstruction of a wealth of records, conversations, and ideas, leaving the clearest picture yet of his life. --Therese Littleton --This text refers to an alternate Paperback edition.

Starred Review. Though many recognize Oppenheimer (1904-1967) as the father of the atomic bomb, few are as familiar with his career before and after Los Alamos. Sherwin (A World Destroyed) has spent 25 years researching every facet of Oppenheimer's life, from his childhood on Manhattan's Upper West Side and his prewar years as a Berkeley physicist to his public humiliation when he was branded a security risk at the height of anticommunist hysteria in 1954. Teaming up with Bird, an acclaimed Cold War historian (The Color of Truth), Sherwin examines the evidence surrounding Oppenheimer's "hazy and vague" connections to the Communist Party in the 1930s--loose interactions consistent with the activities of contemporary progressives. But those politics, in combination with Oppenheimer's abrasive personality, were enough for conservatives, from fellow scientist Edward Teller to FBI director J. Edgar Hoover, to work at destroying Oppenheimer's postwar reputation and prevent him from swaying public opinion against the development of a hydrogen bomb. Bird and Sherwin identify Atomic Energy Commission head Lewis Strauss as the ringleader of a "conspiracy" that culminated in a security clearance hearing designed as a "show trial." Strauss's tactics included illegal wiretaps of Oppenheimer's attorney; those transcripts and other government documents are invaluable in debunking the charges against Oppenheimer. The political drama is enhanced by the close attention to Oppenheimer's personal life, and Bird and Sherwin do not conceal their occasional frustration with his arrogant stonewalling and panicky blunders, even as they shed light on the psychological roots for those failures, restoring human complexity to a man who had been both elevated and demonized. 32 pages of photos not seen by PW. (Apr. 10) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an alternate Paperback edition.

Overall, a great biography. I think it spends a bit too much time on his intimate personal life, lovers, etc. He was a complex man with lots of issues, and the book would have been a bit better to focus on his part in both the development of the bomb, and his persecution by McCarthy and HUAC.

This is a very good book. It describes not only the man and his life but explores the events, both tragic and triumphant, that he shaped and that shaped him. From the evolution of democratic and republican thought to attitudes about communism. From development of the bomb to the tragedy of McCarthyism. His public life and his personal life. His brilliance and his failings. Concerning the authors, I can't imagine working that long to produce the product that is this book. If you want a history of this nation from the perspective of someone who changed it, buy this book. Then buy and read other good books covering the same time period to round out your perspective.

I've been reading a lot of biography lately, from Washington to Einstein, Jobs to Truman, and so far I've had good luck (thanks in large part to these reviews!) so I figure I'd give a brief review here. American Prometheus is quite a good read; never really dragging, and equally balanced between the importance of Oppie ('the Triumph') and his relationship with S-1 and 'the gadget,' to his later hearing with the Grey Board and (spoilers!) revocation of his security clearance ('the Tragedy'). While perhaps I don't know Oppie as well as I know Harry S Truman, Bird did an exceptional job of portraying the younger Oppie (in my opinion, the most important and difficult part of a biography) in order to fully appreciate his older self. Highly recommended as a biography, a history, and a scientific read.

Very interesting background on a very complex man. It seems history brings forward the right men at the right time when the world needs them the most. Robert Oppenheimer is one of those men. This book dives deep into his background and the genius that pulled together the science necessary to develop the atom bomb. The author does an excellent job on documenting and putting into perspective Oppenheimer's beliefs (social, economical, and political). This book saddens me that a man of his caliber had to defend his patriotism and in his later years was never given the scientific credit that he so justly deserved. Regardless of his ideology, Oppenheimer was a patriot and did what he needed to do during war time. This is a well written book that should be on anyone's shelf if you are interested in the Manhattan Project.

J. Robert Oppenheimer was a fascinating individual. The way he could take complex thoughts, pull the most important details out, and then come up with an action plan is not something you see every day. Definitely a book everyone in business should read to see how he was able to adapt and change management styles based on who he was interacting with.

J. Robert Oppenheimer was born into a wealthy German Jewish family in New York in 1904. Well educated he graduated from Harvard and received his Ph.D. after study abroad. Oppenheimer was trained as a theoretical scientist who became a great physicist. During World War II he headed the Manhattan Project which saw the production of the first Atomic Bomb. The bomb was used two times in Japan in 1945 ending World War II in the Pacific. The bomb is reported to have saved at least a half a million persons. Oppenheimer was a left-wing intellectual whose brother Frank was a member of the Communist Party. Oppenheimer had several extramarital affairs. He and his wife Kitty had two children. Kitty was an alcoholic. The marriage was sometimes stormy as Robert had many affairs. Oppenheimer had a difficult personality being sarcastic and biting to his colleagues but was a man of ethics who regretted the impact of the A Bomb on the world. His reputation suffered during the McCarthy era as he was criticized for his left wing politics. The book is a fine piece of scholarship making the life of a nerdy scientist read like a novel. Americans need to know more about Oppenheimer and the Nuclear Age world that was born in the New Mexico desert in 1945. The print in the book is small and hurts my aged eyes but this long biography is well worth the read. A fine work by Kai Bird and Martin Sherwin. Recommended.

The book is probably one of the best biographies I have read and captures so much of the essence of this historical American figure. A great read for scientists, mathematicians, historians or anyone with an interest in the US father of the bomb. His passions, intellect, personal drive and performance under wartime pressures and personal attacks are vividly recounted. The authors have performed an impressive feat of research from accounts of individuals who were close to him along with those who despised him. This work also serves to vindicate him from his accusers who tried to destroy him when he voiced his compassion and concerns about the new atomic age. A thoroughly good read.

This turns out to be a very sad story. An amazing scientific mind is destroyed by McCarthyism and the ruin it leaves behind affects many lives. An amazing book about a great man

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