

Oppenheimer and Groves

Oppenheimer, selected to head the new laboratory, proved to be an excellent director despite initial concerns about his administrative inexperience, leftist political sympathies, and lack of a Nobel Prize when several scientists he would be directing were prizewinners. Groves worked well with Oppenheimer although the two were fundamentally different in temperament. Groves was a practical-minded military man, brusque and goal-oriented. His aide, Colonel Nichols, characterized his heavysset boss as ruthless, egotistical, and confident, "the biggest S.O.B. I have ever worked for. He is most demanding. He is most critical. He is always a driver, never a praiser. He is abrasive and sarcastic." Nichols admitted, however, that if he had it to do over again, he would once again "pick General Groves [as his boss]" because of his unquestioned ability.³⁹ Groves demanded that the Manhattan Project scientists spend all their time on the bomb and resist the temptation, harmless enough in peacetime, to follow lines of research that had no direct applicability to immediate problems. In contrast to Groves, Oppenheimer was a philosophical man, attracted to Eastern mysticism and of a decidedly theoretical inclination and sensitive nature. A chain smoker given to long working hours, Oppenheimer appeared almost emaciated. The Groves-Oppenheimer alliance, though not one of intimacy, was marked by mutual respect and was a major factor in the success of the Manhattan Project.

Oppenheimer insisted, with some success, that scientists at Los Alamos remain as much an academic community as possible, and he proved adept at satisfying the emotional and intellectual needs of his highly distinguished staff. Hans Bethe, head of the theoretical division, remembered that nobody else in that laboratory "... even came close to him. In his knowledge. There was human warmth as well. Everybody certainly had the impression that Oppenheimer cared what each particular person was doing. In talking to someone he made it clear that that person's work was important for the success of the whole project."⁴⁰

Oppenheimer had a chance to display his persuasive abilities early when he had to convince scientists, many of them already deeply involved in war-related research in university laboratories, to join his new organization. Complicating his task were the



Groves and Oppenheimer. Reprinted from Leslie R. Groves, *Now It Can Be Told* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962).

early plans to operate Los Alamos as a military laboratory. Oppenheimer accepted Groves's rationale for this arrangement but soon found that scientists objected to working as commissioned officers and feared that the military chain of command was ill-suited to scientific decision making. The issue came to a head when Oppenheimer tried to convince Robert F. Bacher and Isidor I. Rabi of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Radiation Laboratory to join the Los Alamos team. Neither thought a military environment was conducive to scientific research. At Oppenheimer's request, Conant and Groves wrote a letter explaining that the secret weapon-related research had presidential authority and was of the utmost national importance. The letter promised that the laboratory would remain civilian through 1943, when it was believed that the requirements of security would require militarization of the final stages of the project (in