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Matter Of Fact By Joseph and Stewart Alsop

Oppenheimer's Atom

IT IS unprecedented for a mere magazine article to be passed on by the National Security Council. The highest policy-making organ of the American Government is not in the business of giving clearances. In the past, indeed, the council has only taken advance notice of such portentous official utterances as the announcement of the first Soviet atomic explosion in September, 1949.

In an informal sense, at any rate, the first exception to these rules is an article on "Atomic Weapons and American Policy," by Dr. J. Robert Oppenheimer, appearing in the current issue of Foreign Affairs.

This article by the great scientist who had the largest responsibility for the bomb that fell on Hiroshima, was originally prepared as an address to a select group of students of foreign relations. The address, though off the record, caused expressions of concern by the staff of the National Security Council. Hence the Security Council had to be asked whether there was any obstacle, when Foreign Affairs wanted to give the address to a larger public. A species of "nihil obstat," which was not a formal clearance, and did not imply either approval or disapproval, was granted in the end.

AGAINST this background, there is special interest in Dr. Oppenheimer's efforts to look at the atomic armaments race in "the large light of history, if indeed there is to be history, and to reveal the nature of it, without revealing anything." Dr. Oppenheimer, it should be noted, is neither specific nor sensational. He does not deal in numbers of atomic bombs or precise methods of delivery, in kilowatts or megadeaths. He begins simply by recording his own "rough guess" as to Soviet atomic progress.

"I think," he writes, "that the U. S. S. R. is about four years behind us. And I think that the scale of its operation is not as big as ours was four years ago. It may be something like half as big."

Remarking that "this sounds comfortably reassuring," he then proceeds to show the coldness of the comfort of our so-called "atomic lead." He reminds his readers that the primitive bomb that fell on Hiroshima killed 70,000 people. He suggests that an atomic lead does not matter very much when both sides have enough bombs, much more terrible than the bomb that fell on Hiroshima, so that they can utterly destroy each other. He bleakly remarks that in these circumstances types of bombs and sizes of atomic stockpiles matter much less than "the art of delivery and the art of defense."

There has been relatively little done to secure our defense against the atom," he adds grimly. And a little later, he says further: "We may anticipate a state of af-

fairs in which two great powers will each be in a position to put an end to the civilization and life of the other, though not without risking its own. We may be likened to two scorpions in a bottle, each capable of killing the other, but only at the risk of his own life.

"This prospect does not tend to make for serenity; and the basic fact that needs to be communicated is that the time in which this will happen is short."

WITHIN this short time, Dr. Oppenheimer continues, the highest need is for "the greatest attainable freedom of action." To attain, and to maintain, this national freedom of action, Dr. Oppenheimer offers three prescriptions. First, tell our people the facts. Second, tell our Allies the facts. Third, do what can be done to improve our air defenses.

The main facts are known to the enemy, he declares. Moreover our people and our Allies are owed the facts. The very workings of our free society depend upon the free "interplay, the conflict of opinion and debate," and from a "public opinion (confidence) that it knows the truth."

"I do not think," he says, "that a country like ours can in any real sense survive if we are afraid of our people."

As to the improvement of our air defenses, Dr. Oppenheimer admits that no air defense system now envisioned will constitute "a permanent solution of the problem of the atom." "But," he goes on, "that is no reason for not doing a little better than we are doing."

He points out that "develop-

ment in munitions, aircraft and missiles" (new) "procedures for obtaining and analyzing information," and "above all the effective use of space in air defense," have now been studied by a highly qualified committee headed by Dr. Mervin J. Kelly of the Bell Laboratories. This committee, he indicates, has at least shown the way we should go.

A better air defense, he concludes, "will mean, first of all, some delay in the imminence of the threat; (it) will mean a disincentive—a defensive deterrent—to the Soviet Union; (it) will mean that the time when the Soviet Union can be confident of destroying the productive power of America will be somewhat further off—very much further off than if we did nothing; (it) will mean, even to our Allies, that the continued existence of a strong America will be a solid certainty which should discourage the outbreak of war."

THIS, you would think, ought not to have agitated anyone, much less the eminent staff of the National Security Council. Why then was there a threat of an official attack of nerves, about this rigidly restricted, painfully incomplete speaking-out? The answer is as simple as it is unpleasant. If the plain truth about the national situation is told to the American people, something will have to be done about it. Something cannot be done about it, while we also pursue a happy policy of business-as-usual. So the greatest of our national problems is shoved under the rug. And there the problem grows in darkness.

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