

CRITICAL THINKING

A TERRIBLE KNOWLEDGE

The anti-Communist hysteria of the Cold War claimed many innocent victims. One of them was a physicist, J. Robert Oppenheimer. Oppenheimer was director of the Manhattan Project in Los Alamos, New Mexico, which developed the atomic bomb. But after the U.S. dropped bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan, in 1945, the destruction and suffering that followed horrified the scientist. He turned against the use of nuclear weapons.

When the U.S. began developing a hydrogen bomb,

Oppenheimer opposed it. Rivals in the scientific community used his opposition as a reason to accuse him of Communist influence. Although Oppenheimer was cleared of that charge, he was still deemed a security risk. In 1954, the government stripped him of his post at the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC).

Many of Oppenheimer's public statements show a deep unease over his role in developing the atomic bomb. Read these quotes, then answer the following questions.

[A] I'm a little scared of what we built . . . [but] a scientist cannot hold back progress because he fears what the world will do with his discoveries. (1946)

[B] In some sort of crude sense . . . the physicists [of the Manhattan Project] have known sin; and this is a knowledge which they cannot lose. (1947)

[C] It did not take atomic weapons to make war terrible. . . . But the atomic bomb was the last turn of the screw. . . . It has led us up those last few steps to the mountain pass; and beyond there is a different country. (1947)

[D] We [the U.S. and the Soviet Union] may be likened to two scorpions in a bottle, each capable of killing the other, but only at the risk of his own life. (1953)

QUESTIONS

1. How does Oppenheimer defend his work on the atomic bomb? _____

2. When Oppenheimer speaks of sin, what do you think he means? _____

3. Why does Oppenheimer liken the U.S. and the Soviet Union to scorpions in a bottle? Which does he think would win in a battle between them? _____

4. What is Oppenheimer saying in quotation C? _____

5. Are we now in that "different country" of which Oppenheimer speaks? Explain. _____
