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Uncommon Sense

J. Robert Oppenheimer

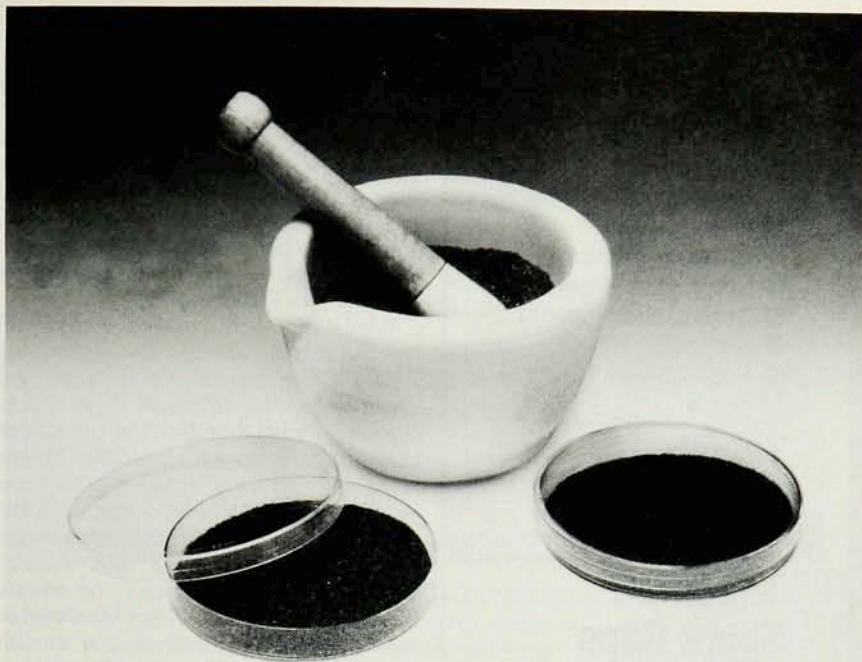
195 pp. Birkhäuser, Boston, 1984.

ISBN 0-8176-3165-8. \$14.95

Of all the scientists propelled into instant celebrity on 6 August 1945, none achieved more lasting fame than J. Robert Oppenheimer. From that memorable day until his death in 1967, Oppenheimer was the very symbol of the scientist as a public man. Apart from the near-mythic Albert Einstein (and setting aside the problematic case of Edward Teller), Oppenheimer was surely the most famous and influential scientist of his era—and perhaps any era. Denied security clearance by the Atomic Energy Commission in 1954, he rebounded to win the Fermi Prize and a citation from President Johnson nine years later. Yet despite several biographies, published collections of letters, and even television documentaries, he remains an enigmatic figure. Our assessment of his character and motivation remains restlessly unresolved two decades after his death. Mention of his name can still stir the passions of those who knew and worked with him.

Uncommon Sense collects 16 Oppenheimer essays and speeches, from a January 1948 *Foreign Affairs* article to an address at Princeton three months before he died. Half the chapters are speeches published here for the first time. The editorial apparatus consists of a brief biographical appreciation and a listing of the chapters' provenances. Some of the essays and speeches have been heavily edited to fit the format of this work, and all have been retitled—not always helpfully. Chapter 12, for example, here called "A world without war," originated as a 1963 speech whose title, "Communication and comprehension of scientific knowledge," more accurately conveys its theme.

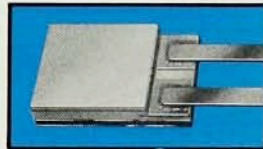
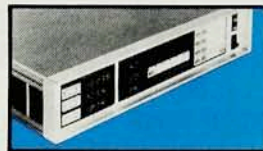
Although directed more to the general reader than to scholars, the collection reveals much about Oppenheimer's intellectual style and the role of seer and sage that he chose (or that society forced upon him) in his years of fame. The essays are for the most part rather abstract, oracular and olympian. The more sweeping pronouncements about society and culture do not always escape the platitudinous. Only rarely does one encounter the specific, the concrete or the personal. (His terse comment on the AEC ordeal in a 1964



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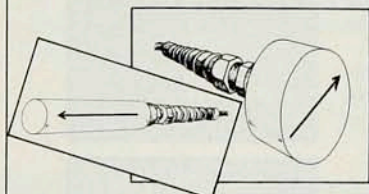


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speech—"Most of what meant most to me never appeared in those hearings"—is a rare exception.) The one explicitly autobiographical and personal essay, a 1965 speech at a National Junior Science and Humanities Symposium sponsored by the US Army, contains a richness of illuminating detail that makes one regret all the more the remote and disembodied quality of most of his public utterances.

While the early postwar essays will interest historians for the light they shed on Oppenheimer's thought and the intellectual milieu of those years, the most engaging from a contemporary perspective will probably be the later ones offering broader reflections on what it means to be a scientist, the nature of the scientific enterprise, and the relation of science and society. Here he challenges those who equate the cultural impact of the Einsteinian revolution with those of the earlier Copernican, Newtonian and Darwinian revolutions. While those earlier transformations in scientific thought were generally comprehensible by nonscientists and challenged the world view of the masses, setting off "great waves of change in human culture," he argues, the arcane and largely inaccessible discoveries of modern physics trans-

formed the intellectual foundations of a specific discipline without a corresponding impact on the larger culture. (The cultural impact of nuclear weapons, the major technological byproduct of these discoveries, is, of course, another matter.)

Toward the end of his life, Oppenheimer called repeatedly for greater scientific literacy, on one occasion offering a utopian vision of a world in which scientific inquiry, like music, art and sports, would be engaged in by amateurs for the sheer intellectual joy of it. In 1965, already a dying man, he spoke movingly of the rewards of the life of the mind: "Whatever trouble life holds for you, that part of your lives which you spend finding out about things, things that you can tell others about, and that you can learn from them, that part will be essentially a gay, a sunny, a happy life."

Uncommon Sense contains some rewarding passages (as well as some less so), but it does not resolve—indeed, in some ways it deepens—the enigma of J. Robert Oppenheimer. We must continue to seek the central springs of his elusive personality and his allusive intellectual style.

PAUL BOYER

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