

The Oppenheimer Affair

Red Scare in Minnesota

IRIC NATHANSON



Frank Oppenheimer paced up and down in his living room during the interview, pausing from time to time to look out at the Mississippi River bluffs in front of his West River Parkway home.

“Someone has said a person’s decisions are hard to understand and harder to explain later,” the slender, 36-year-old nuclear physicist told a *Minneapolis Star* reporter.¹

The year was 1949. Oppenheimer and his wife, Jacquenette, had just returned to Minneapolis from Washington, D.C., where they had been hauled before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). In dramatic testimony, the Oppenheims confessed that they were former members of the Communist Party. Frank Oppenheimer’s testimony was tacit admission that he had lied two years earlier when he publicly declared that he had never been a Communist.

The Oppenheims were relative newcomers to Minnesota. In March 1947 they had moved from California when Frank accepted a job as assistant professor in the University of Minnesota’s physics department. At the time, Oppenheimer’s appointment was considered quite an academic coup. University President James L. Morrill heralded the scientist, predicting that Oppenheimer was destined to become “one of America’s outstanding nuclear physicists.” Then, four months later, Morrill and rest of the university community were shocked by a dramatic front-page story in the conservative *Washington Times Herald* alleging that the newly hired faculty member had joined the Communist Party in 1937 under the alias Frank Folsom. The newspaper claimed that Oppenheimer had been issued a Communist Party membership card, which he had renewed in 1938 and 1939.²

These allegations were particularly unsettling because Oppenheimer had been involved in highly sensitive work related to the development of the atomic bomb during

World War II in nuclear laboratories at Oak Ridge, Tennessee, and Los Alamos, New Mexico. A widely admired scientist in his own right, he was better known as the brother of an even more renowned nuclear physicist, J. Robert Oppenheimer, considered the father of the atomic bomb. “U.S. ATOM SCIENTIST’S BROTHER EXPOSED AS COMMUNIST WHO WORKED ON A BOMB,” the July 12, 1947, *Times Herald* headline had screamed.

Frank Friedman Oppenheimer was born in New York City on August 12, 1912, the son of a German Jewish immigrant who had become a prosperous textile importer. Frank and his brother had privileged upbringings. Their father, Julius, was a serious art collector, drawn to the works of the French Impressionists. Their mother, Ella, an accomplished artist in her own right, had taught for a time at Hunter College.³

As a youngster, Frank demonstrated an aptitude for music and had considered becoming a professional flutist before embarking on a scientific career. After his undergraduate years at Johns Hopkins University, he decided to follow Robert into the world of physics, doing post-graduate work at Cambridge University and completing a Ph.D. at the California Institute of Technology. While working on his doctorate, Frank met and married Jaquenette Quann, an economics student at the University of California, Berkeley, who was a member of the Young Communist League.

Physicist Frank F. Oppenheimer and the University of Minnesota’s physics building, 1950

Eric Nathanson writes about Minnesota history. His account of Minneapolis’s 1892 Republican National Convention, “The Battle has been Fought and Won,” appeared in the Fall 2006 issue of Hennepin History.

“I am not now and I never have been a member of the Communist Party.”

From 1941 to 1945 Frank worked at the University of California’s radiation laboratory on the problem of uranium isotope separation. Then, after a brief stint at the Oak Ridge nuclear plant, he joined his brother at the secret nuclear laboratory at Los Alamos. There, Frank helped supervise security for the first nuclear-weapons test, the Trinity.

Frank Oppenheimer’s 1949 “outing” during a period of mounting anti-Communist hysteria would seriously wound his brother and help propel the successful campaign to strip J. Robert Oppenheimer of his government security clearance. In Minnesota, the HUAC testimony would embarrass President James Morrill and other university officials who had strongly supported their newly hired faculty member when he had denied the *Times Herald* charges two years earlier.

In 1947 Oppenheimer had immediately responded to the Washington newspaper’s accusation. “I am at a loss to account for such a trumped-up story,” the university professor told the *Minneapolis Times* when he was confronted with the *Times Herald* allegations. “There is not a word of truth in that, except for my physics background and association with the Manhattan project.”⁴ Four days later, on July 16, Oppenheimer issued a more formal denial in a letter to T. R. McConnell, the dean of the university’s College of Science, Literature and Arts (SLA).

I am not now and I never have been a member of the Communist Party. I have never used or gone under any other than my own name. I have never “held,” carried or had issued to me any so-called “Communist Party book.” Any charges claim or inference that any of these things are true is a complete and unequivocal falsehood and a fabrication. I assure you, emphatically, that I do not have and never had any affiliation whatsoever with the Communist Party.⁵

While he denied the *Times Herald* charges, the university physicist said he did not intend to take legal action against the Washington paper. “It is true that charges made by the *Times Herald* have caused me embarrassment and worry and might conceivably affect my professional career. Yet despite these circumstances, from

the personal viewpoint, I am very loath to become further involved in a matter that would certainly result in a protracted interruption of my teaching and my research.”

Oppenheimer’s colleagues in the university’s physics department immediately sprang to his defense. In a statement signed by nine department members, including the chair, J. W. Buchta, the group declared, “It is our belief that the charges made are unsubstantiated, and our confidence in the personal integrity of Dr. Oppenheimer is so great that we do not question his denial.” University President Morrill issued his own somewhat more guarded statement of support, noting that Oppenheimer had received security clearance from the federal government to work on the atomic bomb project: “It would seem inconceivable that Dr. Oppenheimer or any other scientist so close to the heart of the secret project could even be suspected of disloyalty.” University Regent George Lawson was even more outspoken. In referring to Oppenheimer’s security clearance, Lawson said, “The FBI probably went down to his underwear. . . . As it stands today, the accusation doesn’t make any sense.”⁶



*Physics department chairman J. W. Buchta
with two students, 1945*

In July 1947 the university's leaders lined up publicly in support of Oppenheimer. But privately, one high-ranking official had his doubts about the physicist's claim of innocence. That official, Malcolm M. Willey, the university's academic vice president, would become the school's "point person" in the Oppenheimer affair. Behind the scenes, Willey would engage in a genteel struggle with Oppenheimer's faculty supporters, who resisted the vice president's efforts to probe their colleague's veracity.

In a July 18 letter to Morrill, Willey said that he was troubled by Oppenheimer's refusal to take legal action against the *Times Herald*: "As I read and reread his attitude toward the paper and his explanation of why he is not disposed to take action against it, I am disturbed, for it doesn't ring true to me." Willey went on to report that he had met to discuss the Oppenheimer affair with SLA Dean McConnell, who had administrative authority over the physics department and its faculty. "Dean McConnell thus far has not been disposed to move in on the matter administratively and yet I have a strong feeling that we should not let the problem drift," Willey told Morrill. The academic vice president also warned that questions about Oppenheimer could be raised at the upcoming Board of Regents meeting. "I am certain that some Regent is going to ask the questions. . . . What about this charge of being a communist leveled against a man in the physics department, Mr. President? It seems to me the administration has got to be prepared in some measure to meet the question."⁷

Raising the specter of a possible "red witch hunt" on campus, Willey's letter then asked if Morrill had heard the radio address by former Minnesota Governor Harold Stassen earlier in the week. "I didn't," wrote Willey, "but

the newspaper reported that he discussed communism and stated that there was no place for any communist on the payroll of any public agency. It was my judgment that Dean McConnell should move in more vigorously in his relationship to the physics department and Oppenheimer. He has been most loath to do so—but I think after our session this afternoon that my point of view made some impression."

Willey also expressed his concerns directly to McConnell in a July 18 memo. "I think it would be helpful administratively if Dr. Oppenheimer indicated forthrightly his support for the American proposal for the handling of the atomic bomb. . . . If I were in a corresponding position, I would indicate flatfootedly my own allegiance to the country." Willey acknowledged that some university faculty believed that

to ask a man to indicate such allegiance was in a sense to begin a check-up on the loyalty of staff members. . . . I can not quite follow that logic for an allegation has been made. . . . The attitude toward the Communist ranges all the way from the fanatic witch hunters down to the statement made by Mr. Stassen last Monday night when he said flatly that there was no place on any public payroll for a Communist. We are dealing with a very practical situation and a very prevalent attitude.⁸

McConnell clearly believed that Willey was pressing too hard on the Oppenheimer front, but the dean agreed to accompany the vice president to a July 22 meeting with the university's law school dean, Everett Fraser. Willey had asked for the meeting because he



LEFT: Malcolm Willey, the academic vice president who doubted Oppenheimer from the start. RIGHT: T. R. McConnell, dean of the College of Science, Literature and Arts, who disagreed with Willey's handling of the Oppenheimer affair.

“Is there any reason to believe that he is not telling the truth? Is there any question of his loyalty?”

believed that Fraser “would be fully sensitive to the administrative implications of having charges of this type made against members of the staff.” The next day Willey reported to Morrill on this meeting: “Fraser stated flatly that he was confident that the paper [*Times Herald*], knowing its charges were highly libelous if untrue, would certainly have . . . evidence which it believed would hold up in a court of law. It is perfectly clear to me that Fraser believes Oppenheimer is not telling the truth.”⁹

Willey also told Morrill about his own face-to-face meeting with the university physicist. “He is a very strange person, and frankly, after my interview I am more perplexed than ever, and though I hate to admit it, I am less sure than I was before I saw him that he is telling the truth. He is, however, such an out-of-this-world sort of person that perhaps he cannot be judged by the ordinary standards one uses in appraising a staff member.”

At their meeting, Willey, Fraser, and McConnell had considered the possibility of having Morrill fly to Washington to discuss with *Times Herald* reporters or executives the basis for the paper’s charges against Oppenheimer. Willey proposed the trip to Morrill, but the university president was not inclined to go along with the plan. “I think my call would be a ‘story’ in itself which I could not in good grace, a petitioner, ask to have suppressed. It could provoke a new flare-up. . . . I doubt that the newspaper would ‘open up’ anyhow,” Morrill told Willey. “The Patterson-McCormack papers are tricky and utterly irresponsible, dangerous to deal with,” he added.¹⁰

With Morrill’s blessing, Willey did move ahead on another front, however. On July 23 he sent FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover a veiled request for any information that Hoover could provide about Oppenheimer. “I am . . . writing this letter directly to you to ask if there is any advice in this matter that you are in a position to give us; or if there is any suggestion you can make that might be helpful to the University of Minnesota. We are in the position of being subject to incipient criticism,” Willey told Hoover. “We also wish to protect a staff member from any charges that may be unfounded. . . . We do not wish a public issue to arise, nor do we wish to be forced

into action against a member of the staff, dictated by other than fact,” he wrote, somewhat equivocally.¹¹

If Hoover had any pertinent information about Oppenheimer, the FBI chief was not about to share it with university officials. In a July 28 response, Hoover brushed off Willey’s request: “I am unable to furnish you any information concerning this matter, inasmuch as it has long been the practice of this Bureau to hold its files confidential and available for official use only.”¹²

Willey also began checking with academics throughout the country who had worked with Oppenheimer before the young physicist had moved to Minnesota. The same day that he queried Hoover, he also wrote to Dr. K. T. Bainbridge at Harvard University’s physics laboratory and R. L. Tolman at the California Institute of Technology. In these identical letters Willey asked: “Is there any reason to believe that he is not telling the truth? Is there any question of his loyalty? These are strange questions to be asking, and they are not asked in any sense by way of inquisition. Rather, they are motivated by our deep desire to protect a staff member, who, we are assuming, is telling the truth even in the face of a newspaper article which is categorical in its charges.”¹³

By now, McConnell was becoming increasingly uncomfortable with Willey’s approach. The SLA dean expressed his uneasiness directly to Willey in a July 25 memo.

I have just read again the letter to Mr. Edgar Hoover and the one addressed to Professor Bainbridge and Tolman. I am somewhat troubled by both of these letters. I am not sure we should ask Mr. Hoover for “advice.” I am more concerned, however, about the possibility that you have implied that the University will take some “action” with respect to Professor Oppenheimer. Perhaps some sort of “action” may turn out to be necessary, but it may be undesirable to imply it in a letter to Mr. Hoover. I believe I said, when we discussed the matter, that I saw no objection to writing to the men who had recommended Oppenheimer to us. But when I see in cold type the blunt questions, “Is there any reason to believe he is not telling the truth,” and “Is there any question of his loyalty,” I am rather disconcerted and rather doubtful of the soundness of my original attitude.¹⁴



**Federal Bureau of Investigation
United States Department of Justice
Washington 25, D. C.**

July 28, 1947

Mr. Malcolm M. Willey
Vice President
Academic Administration
University of Minnesota
Minneapolis 14, Minnesota

Dear Mr. Willey:

This will acknowledge receipt of your letter of July 23, 1947, concerning an article which recently appeared in the Washington "Times-Herald" on July 12, 1947, in connection with Dr. Frank Oppenheimer.

I regret that I am unable to furnish you any information concerning this matter, inasmuch as it has long been the practice of this Bureau to hold its files confidential and available for official use only. I am sure you will appreciate the soundness of this rule and understand that no inferences should be drawn from the refusal to give such information.

I trust that you will not hesitate to contact me at any time in the future if I can, in any way, be of any service to you.

With best wishes and kind regards,

Sincerely yours,

J. Edgar Hoover

On the same day that he wrote to Willey, McConnell also penned a letter to the university's president, reporting on his recent conversation with Oppenheimer. "He feels that there may be afoot a campaign of intimidation against atomic scientists as a means of stopping their efforts to make people understand what is in store for them in an atomic war," McConnell told Morrill. "Professor Tate told me today that another distinguished physicist, a graduate school dean, is also under fire. I think we may see more of this thing before long." In a somewhat veiled effort to reign in Willey, McConnell suggested to Morrill, "It would be desirable to consult with a faculty group . . . if further steps need to be taken, or if more complications arise."¹⁵

Morrill replied on August 1 from his summer home in Gaylord, Michigan. "It [the Oppenheimer matter] is one of those situations in which anything one does (including doing nothing) is unsatisfactory!" he declared in frustration. "Malcolm has reported, as yet, no replies to the inquiries that I suggested and which I, too, would have worded differently, which I am sure those written to are bound to construe as a plea for usable reassurance." The vacationing president continued, "Your angle . . . on the apparent organized effort to discredit the atomic energy scientists is extremely interesting and significant—and surely we cannot allow ourselves to fall a victim to that sinister game." He concluded,



James Morrill, 1949, who declared in frustration, "Anything one does (including doing nothing) is unsatisfactory!"

"In the middle of all this, too, is the fact that it is not illegal to be a Communist. (It is not illegal, also, I suppose, for a University professor to become publicly and repeatedly intoxicated!)"¹⁶

After the intensity of meetings and correspondence in July and into August, the Oppenheimer affair continued to simmer behind closed doors at the university throughout the rest of 1947 and into 1948. Despite his best efforts, Willey was unable to gather any clear-cut evidence that could help him determine whether Oppenheimer was or was not being truthful when the young physicist denied the *Times Herald* charges of Communist Party membership.

Most members of the university community were not prepared for the bombshell that exploded over campus on June 14, 1949, when Oppenheimer was sworn in as a witness before the House Un-American Activities Committee. In this series of hearings, which had begun in April, HUAC was investigating the "Communist Infiltration of Radiation Laboratory and Atomic Bomb Project at the University of California, Berkeley." Earlier that June, Oppenheimer had received a subpoena to appear before the committee. At that point, unbeknownst to his other departmental colleagues, the young physics professor had shown the subpoena to Buchta, his department chair, and told Buchta that he was ready to admit prior membership in the Communist Party.¹⁷

Representative John S. Wood, a Georgia Democrat and HUAC chair, presided over the June 14 session. At his side was a young Republican congressman from California, Richard M. Nixon, then serving his second term in the U.S. House. Oppenheimer was the first witness called before the committee when it convened at 11:30 A.M. Almost immediately, Louis Russell, the committee's senior investigator, began grilling Oppenheimer. "Have you ever used the name Frank Folsom?" Russell asked, after the university physicist was sworn in and quizzed about his previous education and career.

"I have never used that name expect to write it down on a card," Oppenheimer replied.

"Except what?" asked committee member Burr Harrison, quizzically.

"I have never used the name except that it was written on a card, on an application card," Oppenheimer replied.

Harrison continued to probe: "On an application card?"

"Yes," Oppenheimer responded.

"What was the application filed for? What was the purpose of it?" Russell demanded.

"It was an application for membership in the Communist Party," Oppenheimer replied.

"Did you subsequently become a member of the Communist Party after you filed the application in the name of Frank Folsom?" Russell continued.

"Yes, I did," was the reply.¹⁸

Now the truth had finally come out. Frank Oppenheimer had testified under oath before the House Un-American Activities Committee that he had been a Communist, a charge he had denied two years earlier. While Oppenheimer acknowledged his party membership,

“Did you subsequently become a member of the Communist Party after you filed the application in the name of Frank Folsom?”

he told the committee that he had resigned in the early 1940s and no longer considered himself a Communist.

When asked why he had resigned, Oppenheimer said that the party “did not seem to me to be effectively achieving the objectives for which I had joined it. The kind of atmosphere which could arrive at an effective solution of the problems at that time, which demanded a great deal of free discussion, did not seem to be adequate.”¹⁹

HUAC’s chief investigator spent most of his time during the committee’s day-long session presenting the university physicist with a list of names and asking whether the people on the list were known Communists. But Oppenheimer firmly declined to be drawn into this red-baiting effort. At one point, Oppenheimer told Russell: “The people whom I have known throughout my life have been decent thinking and well meaning people. I know of no instances where they have thought, discussed or said anything which was inimical to the purposes of the Constitution or the laws of the United States.”²⁰

Congressman Nixon joined in the questioning only once during the hearing, asking Oppenheimer if he was refusing to answer when Russell asked if he knew whether Joseph Weinberg and David Bohm were members of the Communist Party. Using a double negative, Nixon asked

“In those two cases are you not refusing to answer?”

“I am not refusing to answer,” Oppenheimer replied.

“You are stating that you have no knowledge of their membership in the Communist Party? Nixon asked.

“That is right,” Oppenheimer replied.

“In the other cases you have declined to answer?”

Nixon continued.

“Yes,” Oppenheimer said.²¹

Toward the end of his grueling session on the witness stand, Oppenheimer decided that the time had come to refute the implied charges that he was a security risk to the United States because of his former party membership. He told the committee: “One point I would like to make clear is that during the war I knew of no Communist activity, nobody ever approached me to get information and I gave none and I worked very hard and I believe made a valuable contribution.”²²



Minneapolis Tribune cartoon, published two days before Oppenheimer took the witness stand

That afternoon, Jacquenette Oppenheimer was brought before the committee. Like her husband, she admitted that she had been a member of the Communist Party but that she had resigned her membership in the early 1940s.²³

Now the *Times Herald* was vindicated. Immediately, the paper rushed into print with a headline announcing: “Dr. Frank Oppenheimer Admits He Was a Commie for 3 Years.” The next day, another *Times Herald* headline declared: “F. Oppenheimer Red Link Denial Exposed as a Lie.”²⁴

On the eve of the HUAC hearing, knowing that he was about to be exposed, Oppenheimer wrote a letter of resignation to his department chair.

(Page One, July 12, 1947
of the Times-Herald)

Times Herald

U.S. ATOM SCIENTIST'S BROTHER EXPOSED AS COMMUNIST WHO WORKED ON A-BOMB

U.S. Spends Arms In Greece on Eve of Paris Parley on Aid

U.S. Spends Arms In Greece on Eve of Paris Parley on Aid

Frank Oppenheimer Was at Oak Ridge, Los Alamos Plants

U.S. Spends Arms In Greece on Eve of Paris Parley on Aid

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(From the Times-Herald, Tuesday, June 16, 1949)

Dr. Frank Oppenheimer Admits He Was a Commie for 3 Years

Atom Expert Says He Quit Organization

For International News Service
A key atom bomb scientist, Dr. Frank F. Oppenheimer, today told House spy probes he formerly belonged to the Communist party but declared he never engaged in espionage or gave away secret information.

Oppenheimer, who worked during the war at the University of California radiation laboratory, Los Alamos, and Oak Ridge in developing the bomb, said he left the party "long before the establishment of the Manhattan project."

(The Times-Herald revealed Oppenheimer's Communist party membership in 1947. At that time he referred to the Times-Herald story as a "complete fabrication.")

Submits Resignation

He told newsmen after testifying before the House un-American activities committee in a closed session that he has submitted his resignation as an associate professor of physics at the University of Minnesota.

He said he did so in order to allow the university full freedom of action on his case. Within an hour after his admission, university officials announced the resignation would be accepted.

In a press statement Oppenheimer related that he and his wife joined the Communist Party in 1937 "seeking an answer to the problems of unemployment and want in the wealthiest and most productive country in the world."

(From the Times-Herald, Wednesday, June 15, 1949)

F. Oppenheimer Red Link Denial Exposed as a Lie

Dr. Frank Oppenheimer, two years ago called the Times Herald a liar when this news exposed him as a Communist, today admitted he had been a member of the Red party. He brother of J. Robert Oppenheimer, famed atom bomb scientist.

In July, 1947, this newspaper published an exclusive "lighted" story in which pointed out Oppenheimer's former Communist and the number of the Party carried.

In response to the Oppenheimer said: "The allegation Washington Times have been a member of the Communist party is a lie. During the development of the atomic bomb at Berkeley, Los Alamos, I had much intensity of and spent 10 hours a week in "I and my so feverishly, were scared nation and winning war in the hope of aborting the war American."

"After pertinent question of developed country."

"I with I had to pay am to of"

'U' Scientist Admits He Was Communist

Oppenheimer's 'U' Career Recalled; Page 18.

By NAT S. FENNEY
Minneapolis Star Staff Writer

WASHINGTON—Dr. Frank F. Oppenheimer, University of Minnesota physicist, admitted today to the house un-American activities committee that he was a member of the Communist party from 1937 to 1940.

This admission is contrary to earlier statements by Dr. Oppenheimer that he had never been a card-carrying Communist.

Dr. Oppenheimer declared that before leaving Minneapolis to make his statement to the un-American activities committee, he tendered his resignation from the university to President J. L. Morrill for such action as President Morrill may wish to take.

(In Minneapolis, Dr. Morrill's office issued the following statement: "Dr. Frank Oppenheimer has tendered his resignation from the staff and service of the University of Minnesota, and this resignation will be accepted.")

Dr. Frank Oppenheimer is the younger brother of Dr. J. Robert Oppenheimer who headed the atomic bomb laboratory at Los Alamos during the war and is now director of the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton, New Jersey.

Dr. Frank Oppenheimer told the committee today that both he and his wife, Jaqueline, were members of the Communist party at Pasadena, Calif. They joined while Dr. Oppenheimer was working for his Ph. D. degree. Dr. Oppenheimer said they left the party three and a half years later when he was teaching at Stanford university.

"During the period of our membership, neither I nor any of my friends did anything, nor were we asked to do anything, inconsistent with the behavior of any loyal American concerned with the welfare of his fellow man," he said.

He explicitly denied he ever engaged "in espionage" or turned over any secret information to any unauthorized person.

Dr. and Mrs. Oppenheimer will testify further before the un-American activities committee in closed session today. Mrs. Oppenheimer was not questioned at the earlier session.

Dr. Oppenheimer said he had dropped membership in the Communist party by the time he began work on atomic problems at the California radiation laboratory at Berkeley in 1941, and before he worked at the top secret Los Alamos, N. M., laboratory.

Dr. Oppenheimer testified that he and his wife joined the party in 1937 "seeking an answer to the problems of unemployment and want in the wealthiest and most productive country in the world."

He said they had dropped out of the party because it did not accomplish their objectives.

Nothing in Dr. Oppenheimer's testimony indicated his political objectives have changed, or that he has a less intense interest in social welfare.

Dr. Oppenheimer attended the 1948 convention of Henry A. Wallace's Progressive party in Chicago, and he was subsequently interested in the Wallace campaign.

There was no indication what action may be taken by the un-American activities committee or others about the conflict between Dr. Oppenheimer's earlier denial of previous Communist membership and the statement today.

Dr. Oppenheimer handed reporters a photograph of a letter which he received from Maj. Gen. Leslie R. Groves Sept. 28, 1945. Groves was then head of the army's Manhattan District — the organization that produced the atomic bomb.



DR. FRANK OPPENHEIMER Resigns 'U' position

The letter said that Oppenheimer's work at Berkeley, Oak Ridge, Tenn., and Los Alamos, N. M., was "of great value."

"Your skill and judgment in the field of science are beyond praise," Groves wrote.

Oppenheimer was accompanied by his attorney, Clifford J. Durr, former member of the federal communications commission.

Oppenheimer was more than a little vague when he tried to talk about his earlier denial of Communist Party membership.

After a great deal of thought, it has seemed to me best to tender my resignation as a member of the University of Minnesota faculty.

The events of the past years have placed both the University and myself in a position where my continued employment by the University might confuse and endanger the strong and fine stand it has persistently taken on all matters relating to academic freedom.

I, therefore, tender my resignation, not with any sense of guilt but with deep regret, in order that the University might be free to avoid any embarrassment that the continuance of my appointment might incur.²⁵

On June 14, while the HUAC hearings were still underway, President Morrill released a brief statement to the press in Minneapolis, saying that Oppenheimer's resignation would be accepted. At the same time in Washington, during a break in the hearings, Oppenheimer was telling *Minneapolis Star* reporter Nat Finney that during his period of Communist Party membership neither he nor his friends were "asked to do anything inconsistent with the behavior of any loyal American concerned with the welfare of his fellow man." Oppenheimer went on to deny that he had ever "engaged in espionage or turned over any secret information to any unauthorized person," Finney recounted.²⁶

The next day, reporter Victor Cohn told *Minneapolis Tribune* readers that university officials had not asked Oppenheimer to resign: "The decision was his own." Cohn wrote that Oppenheimer's friends and associates at the university had received the news of his HUAC testimony, his resignation, and its immediate acceptance with "shock and dismay." Had he told his story two years ago, Oppenheimer's supporters believed the university would have stood by him, Cohn reported. With a sympathetic tone toward his subject, the journalist wrote

Frank Oppenheimer admitted his onetime Communist party membership in full knowledge that it would halt

Clippings from the Times Herald, now in Oppenheimer's biography file, University of Minnesota Archives, and front-page story in the Minneapolis Star, June 14, 1949, the day of Oppenheimer's testimony

his present career, and tortured by the fear that it would embarrass his famous brother. Frank Oppenheimer's story is the story of hundreds of intellectuals who turned to communism in the 1930s, who later quit the Communist party and who now find themselves facing disgrace and suspicion when their histories are told.²⁷

On June 16, however, President Morrill issued a more detailed statement at a Minneapolis news conference. "I think that Dr. Oppenheimer has done the honorable and wise thing in submitting his resignation, and I agree with his judgment as to the implications of the situation. I, therefore, felt it right and sound to recommend acceptance of his resignation although I greatly regret the circumstances which make that so."²⁸

While he defended his decision, Morrill declared that the case would not be used "as a springboard for an investigation of the politics of faculty members." The *Minneapolis Star* reported that, when asked if the university had "inquired of present members whether they are or ever have been Communists," Morrill answered firmly, "No!" Pressed as to whether university administration "planned to ask such a question of new faculty in the future," he again forcefully demurred.²⁹

Oppenheimer's resignation and his HUAC testimony were front-page news in the *Star* and *Tribune*, but the general reaction on campus was rather subdued—at least as reported in the university newspaper, the *Minnesota Daily*. The *Daily's* lead story on June 16, "Oppenheimer's Ray Project to Continue," dealt more with the future of the physicist's work on campus than with his resignation. The next day, the *Daily's* lead story reported an increase in campus parking fees, while a less prominent article noted "Regents OK Oppenheimer Resignation."³⁰

Back in Minneapolis, Oppenheimer expressed no remorse about his actions of the last two years while he was a member of the university faculty. "My wife thinks I am an awful optimist, but I feel that what I have done is decent and that it will in fact help to clear the air," the now-former faculty member told a *Minneapolis Star* reporter. "I hope things are not so bad that I will have to retire. Maybe some other University will have a place for me," he added. Oppenheimer was more than a little vague when he tried to talk about his earlier denial of Commu-

nist Party membership. “When this stuff first came up in a Washington newspaper two years ago, I felt that wasn’t the way to do it. There were other things involved—the whole issue of atomic energy and who would control it, the military or the civilians, was under discussion.”³¹

During the rapidly unfolding events following the HUAC hearings, Malcolm Willey maintained a low profile while President Morrill served as the university’s spokesman. Willey did not record his immediate reactions to the June events, but he must have felt vindicated. Ten years later he would report to Morrill a conversation with Dean Malott, the president of Cornell University. Malott had called to say that Cornell was considering offering Oppenheimer a one-year appointment and wanted to know about “the situation” in Minnesota. “I . . . explained that Professor Oppenheimer had lied to us in a most flagrant way,” Willey told Morrill. “I stated that I was confident that you would not want to re-employ him here at the University of Minnesota.” Other members of the university community were less harsh in their view of Oppenheimer, but even his supporters acknowledged that he had caused considerable distress on campus.³²

In the days following what appeared to some as Oppenheimer’s forced resignation, several national editorialists sprang to his defense, implying that he had been the victim of a witch-hunt. The widely read Joseph Alsop, writing in the *New York Herald Tribune*, declared

Frank Oppenheimer and his wife, Jacquenette, are the most incidental casualties of the House Un-American Activities clamorous headline hunts. Last week, the committee disclosed that the Oppenheims had briefly belonged to the Communist Party when they were both young and foolish before the war. It did not matter that both Oppenheims had learned better and left the party eight years ago. It did not matter that Oppenheimer was emphatically not a party member when he was one of the physicists working on the Manhattan project. It did not matter that Oppenheimer’s temporary aberration had no slightest connection with his brother, the great physicist, Dr. J. Robert Oppenheimer. What mattered was just one thing. Frank Oppenheimer’s position caused the committee’s revelation to make the most wonderfully satisfying headlines.³³

Rather casually, Alsop dismissed Oppenheimer’s earlier denial of Communist Party membership. “One more



Clifford Durr, the Oppenheimers’ attorney, in Washington with Frank and Jacquenette

detail finishes the portrait of two people who are guilty of misdirected, perhaps rather self-righteous good intentions. A couple of years ago, when Oppenheimer was confronted point blank and by surprise with his former party membership, he was foolish enough to deny it. The denial, of course, intensified the effects of the subsequent revelations and he has been punished as though for a great crime against the state.”

The *Washington Post* also editorialized in support of Oppenheimer without referring to his resignation or his previous denial of Communist Party membership.

In the 1930s, many a young man, appalled by the Great Depression and joblessness and misery that accompanied it, saw the illusion of a remedy in Marxism. It was even possible then, in good faith, to join the Communist Party, unaware of its absolute subservience to the Kremlin and its adherence to the ugliest doctrines of police state dictatorship.

In the 1940s, the true character of the Communist Party became too clear for men of integrity to remain in it. Like many others who were disillusioned, Dr. Oppenheimer quit the party in 1940. His subsequent service to the United States as well as his repudiation of Communist dogma attest to his loyalty to democratic ideas. There is no more reason to condemn him now for his past Communist Party membership than for any other youthful folly long repented.³⁴

Back in Minnesota, some faculty members viewed these editorials as implied criticisms of the university and

“In the 1930s, many a young man, appalled by the Great Depression and joblessness and misery that accompanied it, saw the illusion of a remedy in Marxism.”

its handling of the Oppenheimer affair. Dean McConnell reported that he had been the recipient of “one or two pretty severe digs” when he visited New York. “I regret the impression that people in other institutions may have formed over the case,” McConnell told Morrill.³⁵

At home, the local press quickly defended the university. The *St. Paul Pioneer Press* on June 18 acknowledged that Oppenheimer was “a gifted young scientist” but noted that he had “placed himself under a cloud which makes him a poor risk for public employment in a national defense science.” Likewise, “President Morrill and the University of Minnesota regents not only took the right action in accepting Dr. Frank Oppenheimer’s resignation, but in our opinion they had no alternative,” the *Minneapolis Star* editorialized. “It is tragic for Dr. Oppenheimer that his career at the University of Minnesota has terminated under the circumstances that it has. It is clear, however, that he himself appreciates that no question of infringement of academic freedom is involved.”³⁶

In fact, it was not clear that Oppenheimer was so accepting of the university’s position. In an August 7 letter

to a friend, Oppenheimer implied that he had hoped his letter of resignation would not be accepted when he presented to his department chairman. “I feel the administration has acted very timorously in not reconsidering favorably my reappointment. I cannot help but feel that President Morrill and those who advise him were guided in this matter by pressures and fears that should be wholly foreign to the administration of a great state University. . . . I am very disappointed in the lack of intellectual robustness which the University administration has shown in my case.”³⁷

While many of Oppenheimer’s friends and supporters in the academic world would rally to his defense in the weeks following his resignation, the young physicist was discovering that he was very much “damaged goods” in the academic job market. In October, four months after Oppenheimer resigned, physics chairman Buchta sent a handwritten note to Morrill floating the idea of bringing Oppenheimer back to the university as an unpaid researcher. “The staff of our department, the graduate students here and physicists elsewhere have asked me about the possibility of returning Dr. Oppenheimer to physics as a productive research worker,” Buchta told Morrill. “His abilities are recognized by others, yet there seems to be a real reluctance to make any move to employ him elsewhere. One suggestion, in which our group would concur, was that he be permitted to step back into the research program on cosmic rays but without appointment of any kind from the University and without salary.”³⁸

Morrill wasted no time in shooting down Buchta’s trial balloon. Immediately, the university president scribbled his own brief note on Buchta’s letter and sent it back to the department chairman: “The proposal made herein seems to be unwise and not feasible at this time.”

In November, Buchta received a letter from Robert R. Wilson, a physicist at the Cornell University Laboratory of Nuclear Studies. Wilson told Buchta that he tried to get an appointment for Oppenheimer at Cornell, “but the Administration would have no part of it on the bases [*sic*]



Communist rally in St. Paul, March 1930, a time when some disillusioned Americans sought relief in Communist Party doctrine



Frank Oppenheimer removing the center block from a catenary arch at San Francisco's Exploratorium, which he founded in 1969

that such an appointment would jeopardize Cornell's ability to raise funds. I think . . . it is a national disgrace that such a competent man finds it impossible to work in his chosen field regardless of the serious nature of the mistakes he has made," Wilson observed.³⁹

The optimism that Oppenheimer had expressed to a *Minneapolis Star* reporter soon faded, and the young physicist realized that it was time for him to move on, figuratively and literally. He, Jacquenette, and their two children retreated to a secluded ranch in the Colorado hills that Frank had recently purchased, expecting to use it as a summer home. There, he would make an abrupt career shift and become a full-time cattle rancher.

In August, soon after he arrived in Colorado, Op-

penheimer wrote about his new life to one of his former students at the University of Minnesota. "Today was the last day of haying and the women folk of the basin organized a picnic and we stopped haying in the middle of the meadow," Frank reported. "When they arrived it was a remarkable affair: 9 kids, 19 adults, 3 pickups. 2 cars. 3 trucks loaded with hay and three tractors all clustered together in the middle of the new cut meadow. Lots of gossip and chit chat about the hay and all overlaid with a friendliness and pleasure at the hay . . . and what quantities of good food!"⁴⁰

Gradually, Oppenheimer won the trust of his neighbors in the small Colorado community of Pagosa Springs and was elected chairman of the local soil conservation district. While his days in the public spotlight in Minnesota were now behind him, Oppenheimer would

re-emerge as a footnote to an even more significant red scare episode when the Atomic Energy Commission stripped his brother, J. Robert Oppenheimer, of his security clearance in 1954. The AEC's Personnel Security Board would cite Frank's membership in the Communist Party when the board voted to uphold Robert's security-clearance suspension.⁴¹

Frank Oppenheimer slowly worked his way back into the world of science. In 1957 he took a temporary job as a science teacher at Pagosa Springs High School. Two years later he was able to resume his academic career when he was hired as a lecturer at the University of Colorado. A decade had passed since the difficult times in Minnesota, and he would spend the next 25 years doing productive work as a scientist and educator. When Oppenheimer died in 1985 at the age of 72, he was known mainly as the founder of San Francisco's Exploratorium, the first museum of its kind in the country where visitors were en-

couraged to perform their own science experiments and interact with the exhibits.⁴²

In many ways, Frank Oppenheimer and the University of Minnesota were both victims of the red scare that haunted the postwar era in America. Oppenheimer paid a huge personal price for his earlier association with the Communist Party and his futile effort to hide from it. For its part, the university was victimized by the red baiting that would continue to stalk the halls of its Twin Cities campus for several more years after the young physics professor with the famous name was forced to leave the state (see below).⁴³ The anti-Communist hysteria that held Frank Oppenheimer and his academic world in its grip would start to subside only with the Senate's 1954 censure of this country's most notorious red baiter, Wisconsin senator Joseph R. McCarthy. □

More Trouble at the University

No sooner had the Oppenheimer affair subsided than President Morrill was faced with more "loyalty" problems, including another case before the House Un-American Activities Committee.

- The next HUAC suspect was the mysteriously named "Scientist X," who was accused of being a Soviet agent. Scientist X turned out to be Joseph Weinberg, an untenured assistant professor of physics and one of the men Nixon had attempted to get Oppenheimer to implicate. The charges against Weinberg—spying—were more serious than those lodged against Oppenheimer. In 1950 Weinberg was indicted for contempt of court for refusing to answer questions during a grand jury hearing, and Morrill soon suspended him. Weinberg was subsequently cleared of contempt charges and in 1953 was acquitted of perjury, the only charge remaining against him.
- Forrest Wiggins, an African American instructor in the philosophy department, became a legislative target because of his leftist political beliefs. He lost his job in 1950 because of poor scholarship, according to Morrill.
- Two teaching assistants, Eugene Bluestein and Jules Chametzky, were accused of being Communists in 1954. A university board of inquiry cleared them of these charges but a cloud of suspicion continued to hover over them.

Notes

1. *Minneapolis Star*, June 16, 1949, p. 29.
2. Here and below, *Minneapolis Tribune*, Mar. 16, 1947, p. 1, June 15, 1949, p. 1; *Washington Times Herald*, July 12, 1947, p. 1. The *Times Herald* did not claim that Oppenheimer had engaged in espionage, only that he had been a member of the Communist Party.
3. Here and two paragraphs below, Kai Bird and Martin J. Sherwin, *American Prometheus, The Triumph and Tragedy of J. Robert Oppenheimer* (New York: Alfred

A. Knopf, 2005), 11, 12.

4. *Minneapolis Daily Times*, July 12, 1947, p. 1.

5. Here and below, Frank Oppenheimer to T. R. McConnell, July 16, 1947. Unless otherwise noted, all correspondence (mostly copies) cited in this article is in the Frank Oppenheimer Papers, University of Minnesota Archives, Minneapolis.

6. *Minneapolis Tribune*, July 13, 1947, p. 1.

7. Here and below, Malcolm Willey to James Morrill, July 18, 1947. Willey ad-

dressed Morrill as "Dear Lew," using the familiar form of Morrill's middle name, Lewis.

8. Malcolm Willey to T. R. McConnell, July 18, 1947.

9. Here and below, Malcolm Willey to T. R. McConnell, July 18, 1947; Malcolm Willey to James Morrill, July 23, 1947.

10. James Morrill to Malcolm Willey, July 27, 1947. At the time of the Oppenheimer exposé, the *Times Herald* was operated by Eleanor Patterson, a member of a



Cattle ranching in Colorado

prominent newspaper family and cousin of Robert McCormack, publisher of the *Chicago Tribune*. After Patterson's death in 1948, McCormack purchased the *Times Herald* and maintained Patterson's arch-conservative editorial stance.

11. Malcolm Willey to J. Edgar Hoover, July 23, 1947.

12. J. Edgar Hoover to Malcolm Willey, July 28, 1947.

13. Malcolm Willey to K. T. Bainbridge and R. L. Tolman, July 23, 1947. There is no record of a reply from either man.

14. T. R. McConnell to M. M. Willey, July 25, 1947.

15. T. R. McConnell to J. L. Morrill, July 25, 1947.

16. J. L. Morrill to T. R. McConnell, Aug. 1, 1947.

17. House Committee on Un-American Activities, *Hearings Regarding Communist Infiltration of Radiation Laboratory and Atomic Bomb Project at the University of California, Berkeley*, 81st Cong., 1st sess., 1949; *Minneapolis Tribune*, June 15, 1949, p. 1.

18. HUAC, *Hearings Regarding Communist Infiltration*, 356–57.

19. HUAC, *Hearings*, 359.

20. HUAC, *Hearings*, 366. Later in the hearings, Oppenheimer described the issues discussed at Communist Party meetings.

These included aid for the Republican forces fighting in the Spanish Civil War and the plight of agricultural workers in California.

21. HUAC, *Hearings*, 361.

22. HUAC, *Hearings*, 373. As his testimony was drawing to a close, Oppenheimer asked to have a September 1945 letter read into the record from Maj. Gen. L. R. Groves, head of the Manhattan Project, expressing his appreciation for Oppenheimer's contribution to research on the atomic bomb. Oppenheimer was able to achieve at least a small measure of vindication when Russell was forced to acknowledge that Groves had vouched for Oppenheimer's loyalty during World War II.

23. HUAC, *Hearings*, 373–81.

24. *Times Herald*, June 14, 15, 1949, both p. 1.

25. Frank Oppenheimer to J. W. Buchta, June 13, 1949.

26. *Minneapolis Star*, June 14, 1949, p. 1.

27. *Minneapolis Tribune*, June 15, 1949, p. 1, 14.

28. J. L. Morrill, "Press Conference," June 16, 1949, copy in Oppenheimer papers.

29. *Minneapolis Star*, June 17, 1949, p. 11.

30. *Minnesota Daily*, June 16, 17, 1949, p. 1.

31. *Minneapolis Star*, June 16, 1949, p. 29.

32. Malcolm M. Willey to J. L. Morrill, July 17, 1959. One of Oppenheimer's most loyal supporters, J. W. Buchta, said, "Frank made a terrible mistake two years ago in denying any connection with the party. This denial was made in spite of the fact that the Dean and the other members of the staff told him that he would be backed even though he was a member of the party in 1937–38. As a result of Frank's statement the entire department and Administration made representations to the Regents which now place the Administration in a very awkward position"; Buchta to F. W. Barnes, June 30, 1949. On July 7, 1949, Buchta would write to physicist Edward Teller: "There is no question whatsoever about Frank's competence as a physicist. . . . We shall do everything in our power to see that Frank may continue in physics here or elsewhere."

33. Here and below, *New York Herald Tribune*, June 20, 1949, p. 13.

34. *Washington Post* clipping, June 17, 1949, n.p., Oppenheimer papers.

35. T. R. McConnell to J. L. Morrill, June 30, 1949.

36. *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, June 18, 1949, p. 4; *Minneapolis Star*, June 18, 1949, p. 8.

37. Frank Oppenheimer to Dear Jay, Aug. 7, 1949.

38. Here and below, J. W. Buchta to President Morrill, Oct. 9, 1949, including reply from JLM, Oct. 10, 1949. Oppenheimer's supporters came from the top ranks of the physics world in the United States. They included the University of Chicago's Edward Teller, Stanford University's Leonard Schiff, and the University of Rochester's F. W. Barnes.

39. Robert R. Wilson to J. W. Buchta, Nov. 7, 1949.

40. Frank Oppenheimer to Phyllis Freier, Aug. 18, 1949, Phyllis St. Cyr Freier Papers, University of Minnesota Archives.

41. United States Atomic Energy Commission, "Findings and Recommendations of the Personnel Security Board in the matter of Dr. J. Robert Oppenheimer, May 27, 1954," <http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/abomb/opp1>. In *American Prometheus*, Kai Bird and Martin Sherwin discuss Frank's possible connection to a University of California professor, Haakon Chevalier, who had ties to George Eltenton, a British chemical engineer who may have been a Soviet agent. The Chevalier affair was a key focus in the AEC's 1954 investigation of J. Robert Oppenheimer.

42. In September 1958 Oppenheimer wrote to Buchta requesting verification of his teaching experience so that he could obtain a high-school teaching certificate. Alfred O. C. Nier, who had succeeded Buchta, replied with a letter of praise for Oppenheimer and his teaching skills.

A *Los Angeles Times* obituary noted that Oppenheimer "was a physicist who was forced into cattle ranching during the McCarthy era, but in recent years had experienced more pleasant attention through his work in one of the nation's most innovative science museums"; Feb. 15, 1985, p. 15.

43. In *No Ivory Tower: McCarthyism and the Universities* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), Ellen W. Schrecker discusses the harassment of suspected Communists on other college campuses in the post-World War II era. For a fuller look at red baiting at the University of Minnesota, see Gary Paul Hendrickson, "Minnesota in the McCarthy Period: 1946–1954" (Ph.D. diss., University of Minnesota, 1981).

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