

1963

Monday, December 2nd

WHD

Lyndon presented the Enrico Fermi Award to Dr. Robert Oppenheimer in the Cabinet Room late this afternoon in an atmosphere charged with drama. It's a story that has gone into its third decade, beginning in the 1940's when Dr. Oppenheimer was Director of Los Alamos Scientific Laboratory in New Mexico, where he produced the first atomic bomb.

In the aftermath of the war when so many were being questioned for their association with Communists, he came under public suspicion and President Eisenhower ordered a blank wall placed between him and secret information -- in other words, he took away his security clearance.

Now, in the 60's there is the last act of this drama. Oppenheimer, in receiving the Enrico Fermi Award, is having his name cleared and put before the American public once more as a great scientist who served his country well.

I felt that I was on the front-row seat of a good Broadway production. Dr. Oppenheimer is a lean, pale, grey, white-headed man who looks like he's been seared in the fires of public suspicion and doubt. He's a living example of how somebody survives that, and it must be one of the cruelest ordeals a person can live through.

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Present were Dr. Oppenheimer's wife -- a gentle-faced, happy, sensible-looking woman. She probably helped him keep his sanity when it was all going on. His children, Katherine and Peter, were there as well as a group of his friends; the senior Democrats on the Atomic Energy Committee; Dr. Edward Teller, once his chief adversary on the question of whether to develop the hydrogen bomb; and also Dr. Henry Smyth, the lone dissenter in the 4-to-1 Commission decision when Dr. Oppenheimer lost his security contest. Notably absent were the ranking Republicans -- Senator Hickenlooper had sent word that he could not in good conscience attend.

Lyndon uttered the usual words of praise about Dr. Oppenheimer as a leader of learning and his high standards of achievement. Dr. Oppenheimer responded with a nice reply about Thomas Jefferson and the brotherhood of science and then, speaking in a low voice (and I think entirely personally to Lyndon) he said: "I think it is just possible, Mr. President, that it has taken some charity and some courage for you to make this award today." That would seem to be an ~~accolade~~ ^{August} for all our futures. //

I wonder if he knows how often one has to use that courage and charity and how there are a good many times when you cannot

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foretell the long-term outcome of your actions and cannot be entirely sure you are doing the right thing. That's the painful thing about this job. In this case, I have the happy feeling that it WAS the right thing and I am glad to see him come out from under the shadow.

Lyndon got a laugh when he gave the pretty gold medal to Dr. Oppenheimer and then turned to hand the \$50,000 check to Mrs. Oppenheimer and said: "The wives usually get hold of the money." In this case, Lyndon was only the agent because the citation itself had been signed by President Kennedy just a short while before the assassination and the whole thing had been planned by him.

We went on home to dinner at The Elms with Drew and Luvie Pearson sitting in front of a fire made with Drew's own wood. There were Justice and Mrs. Goldberg and Tyler and Bess. I keep thinking that Justice Goldberg, with his rampant energy and his warm feeling of working for his fellow human beings, his shrewdness and his humor, is oddly removed from the fray of public life in the cool halls of the Supreme Court. I always love to hear Dorothy talk about art and we discussed her book. Luvie Pearson talked about her work with a group of women teaching the rudiments of reading to underprivileged

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children here in the District -- most of them Negroes. She's the spear-head of the movement. I take off my hat to people who really spend the days of their life doing something like that. #