

Oppenheimer
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Some say the world will end in ice, others say in fire. But when it comes to eschatology, the field of theology concerned with last things and final days, some say the real choice isn't between fire and ice but between Barbie and Oppenheimer, which have been breaking box office records this past summer. Millions bought tickets for the double feature of "Barbenheimer," pairing a flick about the iconic doll from Mattel who could be an astronaut, a fashion model or both at once with the biography of a brilliant but tormented physicist who more than any single man was responsible for the development of the atomic bomb. Dori and I saw both, although not as a double feature. Barbie is great entertainment, a lighthearted if fluffy tribute to girl power and smack down of machismo. Oppenheimer is a realistic and haunting portrait of a scientist who turned theoretical equations into an unparalleled destructive force that changed the course of World War Two and that has bedeviled the world ever since with the prospect of mass annihilation. I recommend both, one for amusement and the other for its power to shock and sober the mind. But what struck me is that critics, pundits and reviewers treated both movies as cinematic scores: more interested in ticket sales, screen credits, Oscar prospects and cultural titillations than in the very real issues the films raise about human survival and our future as a species.

"Oppenheimer" explores the interior dramas of a figure who brought quantum physics from Germany to America, a communist sympathizer whose drive and genius beat Hitler to the invention of the bomb, a secular Jew whose moral scruples led him at the Trinity test site at Alamogordo to recall the words of Lord Vishnu in the *Bhagavad-Gita*, and whose unsuccessful quest to contain the threat of nuclear war during the McCarthy era led to his public humiliation. It is a compelling story. The film was based upon a Pulitzer Prize winning biography of Robert Oppenheimer, *American Prometheus*. Prometheus being the hero in Greek mythology gave humankind the gift of fire and in return was punished by the gods, chained to a rock where a vulture daily pecked out his liver. Oppenheimer, who played a similar role, splitting the atom and unleashing the energy of the stars, was punished both by his own conscience and by an ungrateful nation.

Most commentators focused on this internal drama and on the superb acting of Cillian Murphy. But the film is so much more. Scientists at Los Alamos knew they were literally playing with fire. Some worried that an atomic detonation could actually ignite

the Earth's atmosphere, incinerating the entire planet. And in the movie's finale, viewers overhear a conversation between Oppenheimer and Einstein where they worry that such a chain reaction has already been set in motion, as from a vantage high above the Earth's curvature we see a wall of flame rapidly engulfing the globe.

That nuclear nightmare is closer than ever. There are about fourteen thousand nuclear warheads now deployed around the world, most of them many times more powerful than the so-called "Little Boy" device that killed roughly 140,000 people when it was dropped on Hiroshima. There are presently nine nuclear armed nations, but almost all of those bombs are possessed by our United States and by the former Soviet Union. Most are in the hands of governments that tread a precarious line that is neither war nor peace. Hostilities between Pakistan and India. Between members of the NATO Alliance and the Russian Federation. Between North Korea and China and their neighbors in Japan and the south Pacific. Between Israel and Iran, which is on the doorstep of joining the nuclear club. The doomsday clock which the Union of Concerned Scientists set ticking in 1947 and which was then seven minutes from midnight is today only 90 seconds away from lights out.

Some of you can remember the Cuban missile crisis in 1962, one of many times when we've hovered on the brink. My wife was only five years old but recalls it in detail. Her father, who worked in the Pentagon in charge of Air Force personnel, was one of the few individuals designated to go into the bunker with the President and other essential military staff. Dori and her mother and five brothers and sisters had a family plan. In the event of atomic war, they were to hike on foot the 227 miles from Washington, D.C. to the family's summer cottage in the little town of Nanticoke, Pennsylvania, as though they could escape the fallout or aftermath of even one thermonuclear blast. Some of you may have played at similar games, "duck and cover" beneath your school room desks, as if there were any shelter from the blinding flash, the pressure waves, the scorching heat, or gamma rays.

After Hiroshima and Nagasaki, a worldwide outcry arose. The United Nations, at its very first gathering in the year 1946, adopted a resolution calling for the complete elimination of nuclear weapons. "Ban the Bomb" movements emerged in Britain and Europe. Norman Cousins, a Unitarian, and Clarence Pickett, a Quaker, founded SANE, or the Committee for SANE Nuclear Policy in 1957 to counter the official strategy of M.A.D. or "mutual assured destruction. In the 70's and 80's a nuclear freeze campaign agitated for arms control, led by Dr. Helen Caldicott and Physicians for Social

Responsibility who framed the threat as a public health emergency. The arms race escalated nevertheless, growing to over 70,000 warheads on hair trigger alert.

Then the Berlin Wall fell. The Soviet Union collapsed. And the United States paid former nuclear engineers in Russia to stop making nukes. In a deal called “megatons for megawatts,” 500 tons of enriched uranium from former Soviet warheads were converted into fuel for U.S. power plants. For two decades, ten percent of all the electricity in this country came from defunct Russian stockpiles.

The threat seemingly diminished. The urgency disappeared. What the psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton called “psychic numbing” took over. Ordinary citizens became complacent, anesthetized to the reality that the world was still just one deranged dictator, one radar operator’s over reaction to a weather balloon, one faulty computer chip away from the unthinkable.

Nuclear arsenals shrank when the Cold War ended, but not enough. Because even one bomb could destroy a large city, exploding with temperatures hotter than the sun to a radius of two miles and igniting every flammable material to ten times that distance. A hundred such weapons would throw up a cloud of soot and ash that would send the earth into perpetual winter, meaning a cessation of photosynthesis and life itself. Nonetheless, the United States is now spending billions to modernize and upgrade its 5,224 warheads. No wonder the film critics don’t want to address the real conundrums of Robert Oppenheimer’s legacy. Easier to comment on the sex scenes and cinematography.

The good news is that an effective global effort to contain the atomic threat has made progress in recent years. The International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons was founded in 2007. Just as protocols have been established against the use of chemical and biological weapons—not perfect but backed by a consensus of almost two hundred signatory nations that have certifiably relinquished their stores of nerve agents and the microbes designed for germ warfare—the Campaign aims to create a new convention that will outlaw this remaining class of WMDs, or weapons of mass destruction. With over six hundred partner organizations from civil society ranging from the International Red Cross and Red Crescent to Pax Christi and the World Council of Churches, the Campaign reached a major milestone in 2017, when after a decade of advocacy, 135 of the United Nations member states adopted a landmark global agreement known as the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. The Treaty, which became effective two

years ago, “prohibits nations from developing, testing, producing, manufacturing, transferring, possessing, stockpiling, using or threatening to use nuclear weapons, or allowing nuclear weapons to be stationed on their territory.” Signatories agree to a time-bound, legally binding and verifiable process for dismantling their nuclear programs. For this work, the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize as well as receiving acclaim from religious leaders ranging from Pope Francis to the Dalai Lama along with letters of support from thousands of the world’s leading scientists and from at least one former U.S. Secretary of Defense.

But this is hardly a done deal. Sixty-three nations abstained from voting to ratify the treaty, including all nine of the nuclear powers and all of NATO. After all, why would any country voluntarily give up the ultimate deterrent? Perhaps the best answer came from the former Prime Minister of South Africa, F.W. de Klerk. De Klerk helped to navigate the end of apartheid to bring his homeland out of international isolation and ostracism. And he dismantled South Africa’s nuclear arsenal, which had ramped up in the ‘70s to counter Russian and Cuban influence on the continent, out of simple pragmatism and expediency. He realized the danger of having the bomb was greater than the risk of not having it. Africa would have a better chance at peace and prosperity as a nuclear free zone. “Ultimately,” he said, the world will be safe only when all the nuclear states follow South Africa’s example and dismantle their nuclear weapons.”

The goal of the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons is to make South Africa the rule rather than the exception, to apply moral suasion along with the appeal to rational self-interest and an actual mechanism for disarmament that will encourage more and more governments to turn back the hand of the doomsday clock to some reasonable, tolerable hour, perhaps three in the afternoon rather than 90 seconds to midnight, knowing that the human race can never put the nuclear genie entirely back into the bottle, but that we can and must do better.

What should be done? Speak up. Put disarmament back on the agenda. Talk to our local officials about joining the dozens of American cities from Denver to Philadelphia to Tucson that have passed resolutions in support of the treaty to prohibit nuclear weapons. Voice support for New Mexico’s downwinders and other victims of atmospheric testing who are predominantly indigenous and Third World. Join one of the many local grassroots organizations questioning the push for more plutonium pit production at Los Alamos: Nuclear Watch New Mexico, Retake Our Democracy, or the

Los Alamos Study Group. Use social media. Talk with your neighbors. And I would say at the risk of sounding alarmist, learn again to be afraid. Because denial, not fear, is the real enemy now.

Apprehension is warranted. But my advice is, don't panic. Panic doesn't help. You can still go to the movies. Take the afternoon off. Watch Barbie and enjoy a little old-fashioned Hollywood escapism. Eat some popcorn. Have an ice cream cone. Settle into your seat and relax. Relish the world, appreciate the spectacle, let it wash over your senses, savor it so deeply that you'll want to go out and save it too. Because as a famous nuclear physicist remarked, there is no planet B.