

Meet Kenneth D. Nichols, the Father of Oak Ridge: The Oppenheimer Hearing, Part 1 (1953)

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of May 18, 2026)

Barbara Scollin, grandniece of Major General Kenneth D. Nichols, continues her series on his life.

Ample reasons, most notably leadership skills, personality traits and qualifications, led to choosing General (then Colonel) Kenneth D. Nichols as Deputy District Engineer and subsequently as District Engineer of the Manhattan Engineer District (MED). The responsibility of his position during World War II was massive as he oversaw a workforce of both military and civilian personnel of approximately 125,000.

His Oak Ridge office became the center of the wartime atomic energy's activities. He also was responsible for internal security operations in the production facilities that helped keep the development of the atomic bomb secret.

Following the war, Nichols kept close watch over the MED's production facilities as well as atomic weapon stockpiles until handing over responsibility to the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC). In New York, assisting the American representative to the U.N. Atomic Energy Commission, Nichols made numerous presentations to UN delegates on certain treaty provisions that were very successful in gaining support for international control of atomic energy.

Ordered back to Washington D.C., Major General Nichols was key in developing doctrine with the Pentagon and the U.S. Congress for the use of atomic and hydrogen weapons to protect our nation and allies. Serving as Chief of the Armed Forces Special Weapons Project (AFSWP), Deputy Director of Guided Missiles, and other key positions, General Nichols played a major role in the development of missiles for delivery of nuclear weapons and what is today called anti-ballistic missile (ABM) defense.

Serving as General Manager of the Atomic Energy Commission 1953-1955, Nichols remained a fierce advocate of peacetime development of atomic power to meet and exceed our nation's growing energy needs. He assisted with the Atoms for Peace project and helped formulate the Atomic Energy Act of 1954.

In this twenty-eighth installment of several articles covering the life and accomplishments of Kenneth D. Nichols, we begin to learn of his role in Dr. J. Robert Oppenheimer's security clearance issues after World War II.

General Nichols gave multiple recommendations for Dr. Oppenheimer when called upon, especially after World War II. Nichols, wrote, "After World War II I had been questioned several times about Oppenheimer's earlier Communist associations. Whenever his record was reviewed by Army or Air Force security, they raised the issue of not clearing him.

"Eventually the matter would reach the Secretary level and on several occasions, I was called in and asked if I knew about Oppenheimer's questionable record and did I recommend clearing him. Invariably I answered, I probably know Oppenheimer's record as well as or better than anyone else. He could be considered a security risk by almost any reasonable security standards, but I think that in spite of his record he is loyal to the United States.

"If you consider his services essential, as [General Leslie R.] Groves and I did during the Manhattan Project, I recommend that you clear him. He is one of our most outstanding scientists."

Running for President on the Republican ticket, Dwight D. Eisenhower's platform included a strong American defense, containing the spread of Communism, and fiscal responsibility. Harry Dexter White was accused in 1939, 1945 and 1948 of Soviet espionage while serving in the Treasury Department and

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the International Monetary Fund under Presidents Roosevelt and Truman. Alger Hiss was convicted in January 1950 of espionage for Soviet Russia while he was serving in the State Department under President Roosevelt. Klaus Fuchs' arrest in early 1950 for Soviet espionage activities led to the discovery of an American spy ring of Harry Gold, David Greenglass, Morton Sobol, and Julius & Ethel Rosenberg working in the Manhattan Project. These stories held national attention for months and candidate Eisenhower vowed to rid the federal government of Communists.

On April 27, 1953, President Eisenhower signed Executive Order 10450. Nichols summarized the impact of the Order was to "eliminate security risks from government services, and all government agencies were to review personnel files to determine those who might be security risks. Eisenhower emphasized that just being a 'security risk' was the basis for not granting clearance. It was not necessary to prove disloyalty. The [1946] Atomic Energy Act was similar; under it, it must be determined that clearance of an individual will not endanger the common defense or security. As a result, well over a thousand individuals had left government service either as a result of a hearing or by resignation."

On Friday, October 31, 1953, Maj General Kenneth D. Nichols resigned from the military as directed by President Eisenhower (see article 27) and was sworn in as General Manager of the Atomic Energy Commission on Monday, November 2, 1953. He had to hit the ground running as the AEC required his full attention. His time required for the AEC's ongoing business would have to be stretched to include the J. Robert Oppenheimer matter.

Nichols' first month with the AEC (November 2 – December 2, 1953) entailed numerous days (amounting to half that time) away from Washington D.C., traveling to the original Manhattan Project sites, now AEC nuclear sites, around the nation (Idaho; Hanford, Washington; Berkeley and San Francisco, California; Albuquerque, Los Alamos and Santa Fe, New Mexico; Denver, Colorado; Kansas City, Kansas; Burlington, Iowa; and Savannah River Plant in South Carolina) for many meetings and briefings. His days in Washington D.C. were busy reaching out to many individuals to recruit their services for AEC; negotiating contracts (e.g. Sandia nuclear arsenals) and other pressing matters for the AEC.

On November 7, 1953, William L. Borden, Executive Director of the Congressional Committee on Atomic Energy and a Democrat, wrote a letter to J. Edgar Hoover, Director of the FBI.

Nichols wrote, "Borden was seriously apprehensive about the derogatory information in Oppenheimer's personnel file... He outlined the factors that gave him concern about Oppenheimer. . . .

"Borden then stated: From such evidence, considered in detail, the following conclusions are justified:

1. Between 1929 and mid-1942, more probably than not, J. Robert Oppenheimer was a sufficiently hardened Communist that he either volunteered espionage information to the Soviets or complied with a request for such information. (This includes the possibility that when he singled out a weapons aspect of atomic development as his personal specialty he was acting under Soviet instructions.)
2. More probably than not, he has been functioning as an espionage agent; and
3. More probably than not, he has since acted under a Soviet directive in influencing United States military, atomic energy, intelligence and diplomatic policy."

On December 3, 1953, Eisenhower met with AEC Chairman Lewis L. Strauss regarding the Borden letter and directed, "that a 'blank wall' should be placed between Oppenheimer and any further access to secret or top-secret information until a hearing had been completed," wrote Nichols.

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December 3rd also marked Nichols' one-month anniversary on the job. He was in meetings all that morning; Strauss then met with Nichols in the afternoon. Nichols' Daily Log records: "1:15 – Mr. Strauss. He informed me re JRO matter and President's directive". The "JRO matter" is the J. Robert Oppenheimer matter and included the Borden letter.

Nichols recalled, "There was essentially nothing in the letter that I had not heard before from one source or another except for Borden's conclusions, in which I did not concur." Strauss and Nichols decided that the AEC "would comply with Order 10450 and follow our own [AEC] procedures. The first step was to prepare a letter listing all the derogatory information about Oppenheimer. William Mitchell, who was our general counsel, was responsible for doing this.

"He was to give consideration to Borden's letter but was to base the list of derogatory information on what was in our files or on what might be furnished by the FBI. I did not intend to sign the letter until Oppenheimer returned from Europe and until Strauss and I had an opportunity to discuss the matter with him. Oppenheimer might decide to resign. That would make the matter moot."

That evening, Nichols traveled to Portsmouth, Ohio, and was fully occupied with AEC nuclear matters December 4 – 10 at the Portsmouth Plant (where he met with U.S. Congressmen from Ohio Thomas A. Jenkins and James Gould Polk); Lockland Plant (Evandale, Ohio); Fernald area in Ohio; Mound Laboratory (Miamisburg, Ohio); Paducah area in Kentucky; and finally, Oak Ridge, Tennessee.

Upon returning to the AEC office in Washington D.C. on December 11th, Nichols attended several meetings in the morning regarding the Oppenheimer matter that included the FBI. That afternoon he was dealing with his own security clearances; salary issues for personnel; a nuclear reactor program; and other ongoing AEC business.

The following day, Saturday morning, December 12th, found Nichols in his office clearing his desk of paperwork that had accumulated during his recent trip. He received phone calls from the FBI regarding Oppenheimer's return to the United States. Late that morning, he called general counsel Mitchell but Mitchell was not in the building. Instead, he met with Harold Green, Esq., a member of Mitchell's staff, regarding the Oppenheimer matter and the AEC's letter to Oppenheimer. Nichols and Green barely knew each other; perhaps they first saw each other at an AEC "Meet the Management" meeting on November 6th when Nichols first joined the AEC.

On Monday and Tuesday, December 14th and 15th Nichols attended staff meetings regarding personnel issues as well as met with Mitchell and Green about the AEC's letter to Oppenheimer. On the afternoon of the 15th, he again conferred with Mitchell followed by a commission meeting to inform them about the letter's contents.

Nichols wrote, "They approved the letter. The final letter listed the derogatory information concerning Oppenheimer's support of Communist organizations, his association with Communists, the employment of Communists, the Chevalier incident, his veracity, etc. I was not happy with the inclusion of a reference concerning Oppenheimer's opposition to the hydrogen bomb development. Green had inserted it on his own initiative on Sunday, the day after he talked with me. I would not have done so.

"His argument for including it pertained to the question of veracity. That appeared to be a sound reason so I finally concurred with the draft but worried about the possibility that we would be accused of trying to control the thinking of our scientists. I was assured that the way it was written would avoid such an accusation. I had my doubts.

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"It was a fine grammatical point concerning paragraphing, but it lost its significance when *The New York Times* subsequently printed the letter with the reference to the hydrogen bomb divided into four separate paragraphs instead of combined into one, as Green had drafted it. I don't know who was responsible for this editing – Oppenheimer, his attorney or *The New York Times* – but the change supported the adverse effect that I had feared, and judging by subsequent events was deliberate.

"Before we presented the letter to Oppenheimer, the FBI also checked the letter to be certain it did not compromise any of their confidential sources."

The rest of Nichols' week consisted of numerous staff and commission meetings related to nuclear issues, personnel recruitment and security clearances.

The following week, on Monday, December 21, 1953, Strauss and Nichols met with Oppenheimer mid-afternoon. Nichols wrote, "I had agreed with Strauss that he should do most of the talking and that I would write a memo for the record concerning the meeting." The Memorandum prepared by Nichols dated December 21, 1953, and held in General Nichols' archives represents the only known first-hand eyewitness account of the meeting of these three individuals. It is worthy of attention.

Nichols summarized his Memorandum when writing his book as follows:

"Strauss explained to Oppenheimer: the reason for the meeting; the President's Order 10450; that a former government employee had written a letter to the FBI calling attention to Oppenheimer's record; that the FBI had informed the President, who had ordered in writing that we take the necessary action to resolve the matter.

"We were complying with Order 10450.

"A letter containing the derogatory information and explaining our procedures and options open to Oppenheimer had been prepared for my signature; I had not yet signed it. After Oppenheimer read the letter, he consented to including the sentence, 'This classification (Confidential) has been discussed with Dr. J. Robert Oppenheimer, and he presently desires that it be maintained.'

". . . Oppenheimer . . . , asked if the case would be closed if he resigned. Both Strauss and I assured him that it would be. Oppenheimer further discussed the merits of resigning versus a hearing but did not indicate any decision. . . . I noticed that both Strauss and Oppenheimer were composed and polite. Oppenheimer betrayed no emotion other than regret at the possibility of severing his relations with the government."

Later that evening, Oppenheimer phoned Nichols at home. Nichols wrote, "That evening Oppenheimer called me at home and asked me for my advice concerning the course he should take. He specifically asked, 'Should I resign?' Although I hoped that he would resign, I replied, 'Oppie, even though I am your friend I am also now officially your accuser, so I no longer can advise you on this matter. You will have to make the decision.' Perhaps if I had been certain that he did not have a recorder or another person listening on the line I would have given him my advice. However, [AEC's lead counsel William] Mitchell had strongly advised me at no time to advise Oppenheimer to resign."

Next up: The Oppenheimer Hearing, Part 2 (1954)

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Grateful acknowledgements to K. David Nichols, Jr.; D. Ray Smith; Sandy Fye; Dr. Bianka J. Adams, Alisa Whitley, Douglas J. Wilson and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Office of History; Diane Gulley; Gerald A. Potts; and Bruce W. Scollin for their assistance with this article.

Thanks for this Historically Speaking column and series goes to Barbara Rogers Scollin, grandniece of Major General Kenneth D. Nichols.



Atomic Men,

Dr. J. Robert Oppenheimer points to a picture of the atomic bomb explosion over Nagasaki, Japan, as Brig General Kenneth D. Nichols (first left) and Dr. Henry D. Smyth (second left), look on. (Courtesy of American Chemical Society Exhibit on atomic energy, Grand Central Palace, 1946. Public Domain.

Provided by Barbara Rogers Scollin)

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President Dwight D. Eisenhower receives a report from AEC Chairman Lewis L. Strauss on the hydrogen bomb tests (Operation CASTLE) in the Pacific, 30 March 1954. (Courtesy of <https://www.eisenhowerlibrary.gov/media/2997> White House Albums, National Park Service (Abbie Rowe): Photographs. Provided by Barbara Rogers Scollin)