

Meet Kenneth D. Nichols, the Father of Oak Ridge: The Oppenheimer Hearing, Part 2 (1954)

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of June 1, 2026)

Barbara Rogers 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 United Nations 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-ninth installment of several articles covering the life and accomplishments of Kenneth D. Nichols, we continue to learn of his role in Dr. J. Robert Oppenheimer's security clearance issues following World War II (see also 28th article).

Dr. Oppenheimer decided for a hearing with the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC). A hearing board ("Gray Board") was selected. The hearing was conducted April 12- May 6, 1954. AEC General Manager Kenneth D. Nichols said, "In a normal security case, the general manager would have the final decision. But ... I was told, and I certainly concurred, that this should be a Commission decision, not just the General Manager's."

And, Nichols wrote, "Prior to accepting the responsibility of chairmanship [of the hearing board], Gordon Gray asked me what I considered the key issues. He reminded me that I once had told him I believed Oppenheimer to be loyal. I confirmed that I still considered Oppenheimer loyal and that I thought the Chevalier incident was the only issue that might create any doubt about his loyalty.

"I hoped that the board would be able to get to the whole truth of the matter, that to date we had conflicting statements and at best only half truths. Then I voiced my reluctance to include Oppenheimer's opposition to the H-bomb in the letter because it might imply that we were trying to control the thinking of scientists.

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"I let Gray know that I hoped he would accept the chairmanship. It was a difficult, onerous assignment; no matter what he decided, it would be controversial, but considering all the circumstances, the task had to be done."

The hearing board reported its finding that Oppenheimer was a security risk by a decision of 2 to 1. As General Manager, Nichols wrote a letter with the help of attorneys Roger Robb and William Mitchell and Security Staff C. Arthur Rolander to the AEC Commissioners summarizing the hearing board's recommendations; Nichols' recommendation was that Oppenheimer's clearance not be reinstated.

The Commission's decision not to reinstate clearance by a decision of 4 to 1 was released June 19, 1954. Of the nine people making decisions, seven decided not to reinstate Oppenheimer's security clearance. President Dwight D. Eisenhower approved the decision.

Reflecting on the Oppenheimer hearing, Nichols wrote, "There were no winners in the Oppenheimer hearing, except possibly the preservation of the security system for protecting classified data. For Oppenheimer, it was an undeserved tragedy, although he was not blameless. Clearance was denied, but public opinion supported Oppenheimer.

Many people, even today, believe that Oppenheimer was punished for his opinion on the H-bomb. It divided the scientists, some supporting Oppenheimer and others supporting the government. [Dr. Edward] Teller became ostracized by many in the scientific fraternity.

"The hearing should have educated the public to distinguish between 'security risk' and 'loyalty,' but somehow it did not. There should never have been a hearing, but considering the spirit of the time, McCarthyism, and the political campaign concerning 'Communists in government', I have never been able to come up with a procedure whereby it could have been avoided, once J. Edgar Hoover had called the president's attention to [William L.] Borden's letter.

"Oppenheimer was a victim of the political climate of the times. Except for [William L.] Borden's action [Executive Director of the Congressional Committee on Atomic Energy], the probability was good that Oppenheimer gradually would have lost his position of great responsibility in national defense circles. Many thought that his scientific opinions were becoming biased by his moral sense of guilt and his desire to influence political decisions.

"[AEC Chairman Lewis L.] Strauss had already taken steps to curtail his use as an adviser to the Department of Defense and the National Security Council. This type of action is normal with the change in administration. Political advisers and those who try to get in that field (as distinguished from those who confine their advice to their own expertise) frequently find they are no longer wanted by a new administration."

The details of Oppenheimer's security issues are detailed in General Nichols' book, *The Road to Trinity, A Personal Account of How America's Nuclear Policies Were Made* and in multiple interviews. Four significant differences between clearing Oppenheimer in 1943 versus 1953 are provided by Nichols and are summarized below:

1943

- Oppenheimer was absolutely essential to the success of the Manhattan Project, and his veracity was never an issue during the war. As early as June 1942 when Nichols first met Oppenheimer, Oppenheimer described the 'super' (hydrogen) bomb and was ready to support further research;

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but the Military Policy Committee's priority was for a fission bomb because of the urgency of the Project,

- Soviet Russia was our ally,
- The Chevalier incident was unknown when security clearance was given. The Chevalier incident was revealed voluntarily but piecemeal by Oppenheimer during the war. Generals Leslie R. Groves and Nichols doubted he was telling the whole truth but assumed he was protecting his brother. [Specific details concerning the Chevalier incident are covered in General Nichols' book.] After the war, security clearance was granted to Oppenheimer in 1947 by the AEC but at that time the complete record of the Chevalier incident was not made available to the AEC by the FBI, and,
- Brig General Leslie R. Groves established his own security clearance rules during the war; Groves and Nichols waived some of the rules whenever a person was considered essential to the Project.

1953

- Oppenheimer was no longer essential to the work of the AEC. By the time William L. Borden's (Executive Director of the Congressional Committee on Atomic Energy) letter was written, Oppenheimer had been eliminated from practically every committee in the Department of Defense, was no longer an advisor, and consequently his security clearances had been dropped.

He had ceased being a member of the AEC's General Advisory Committee for over two years and had only been utilized by the AEC for two days during 1952 and four days during 1953. One of his few remaining clearances was with the AEC. There was some question about Oppenheimer's veracity involved in his opposition to the H-bomb after the war,

- Soviet Russia was our potential enemy,
- The Chevalier story told by Oppenheimer to the FBI after the war differed from his tape-recorded story told during the war. Oppenheimer admitted to lying to security officers during the hearing. This constituted a felony, and that alone was reason enough not to reinstate his security clearance, and,
- President Eisenhower established rigid rules concerning the definition of a "security risk". Specifically for Oppenheimer, Eisenhower would not lift the 'blank wall' until a security hearing had been conducted, he would not renege on his election campaign promise (see 28th article). The Atomic Energy Act of 1946 made it impossible to consider Oppenheimer not a security risk due to his continued association with Communists, and the Act made no allowance for his wartime contribution.

Final observations on the Oppenheimer security issues:

- Nichols interviewed Oppenheimer for the position of Director of the Los Alamos Laboratory as well as attended various S-1 Committee meetings where final decisions to choose Oppenheimer were made in 1943. He whole heartedly agreed to hire Oppenheimer. (See article 16.)

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Nichols had multiple opportunities to thwart Oppenheimer's Manhattan Project security clearance but did not. He could have refused to sign Oppenheimer's clearance but did not. (See article 16 specifically discussing Nichols signing Oppenheimer's clearance in 1943.)

- After WWII ended, Nichols had multiple opportunities to give unfavorable comments and refuse recommendations to Army or Air Force security when questioned thereby blocking Oppenheimer's post-war military work but did not.
- Harold P. Green, Esq. [drafter of the letter handed to Dr. Oppenheimer on December 21, 1953] said, "When I saw the [Oppenheimer summary] files, looked at them, I was quite willing to agree that he was a bad guy and that going through this exercise was not illegitimate. It's not the way I would have handled it. But my conscience, which is a fairly sophisticated, delicate conscience on these matters, was not offended by the fact that this proceeding was being initiated."

What Green did not see in the FBI's "summary" files were the detailed security records including a tape-recording Brig Generals Groves and Nichols turned over to the FBI when closing the Manhattan Project and Manhattan Engineer District. From the wartime tape-recording of Oppenheimer's meeting with security officers, it was clear that inconsistent statements or outright lies concerning the Chevalier incident were stated by Oppenheimer.

Prior to the hearing, Nichols discovered the omission of the detailed security records and ensured that the FBI find the tape recording for the Gray Board. Nichols sincerely hoped the full story of the Chevalier incident would finally be known, Oppenheimer would clear up the inconsistencies and clear his name; unfortunately, the hearing did not resolve the issues.

- The audio (recently released) and written transcript of Harold Green's 1984 interview and Bernstein's *Stanford Law Review* article on the hearing do not provide support for supposed direct quotes by Nichols (concerning Oppenheimer, name calling and the hearing). Various authors attempting to ascribe motives to Nichols for carrying out President Eisenhower's orders in the AEC's handling of the Oppenheimer hearing by misstating Green and Bernstein results in an uncharacteristic and unfair portrayal of Nichols.

Green's lack of a prior working relationship with Nichols (see article 28) apparently led Green to assume Nichols had a pre-determined outcome for the hearing. However, there was nothing disingenuous about Nichols' statement that he did not know how the Commission would decide.

What Green was not privy to at the time he was assigned to read the FBI's Oppenheimer "summary" file and draft a letter of the derogatory information, was Nichols' ten-year history of working with Oppenheimer and intimate knowledge of his detailed security issues. Nichols could either carry out the hearing as required by Eisenhower or resign.

Nichols was not one to chit chat with Green when time was of the essence to draft the letter. Nichols was a man of action and wanted to ensure the Board had complete knowledge of facts and circumstances to make a fair decision.

- Nichols never "despised", "resented" or "loathed" Dr. Oppenheimer. Further, there was never any rivalry, "irritation," "hostility," "changing relationship," or "shift of attitude" between Nichols and Oppenheimer. The use of these words, phrases, descriptions and portrayals in books, articles and film is unsubstantiated.

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President Eisenhower verbally and in writing instructed Strauss to conduct a hearing upon receipt of Borden's letter. Oppenheimer could have resigned, and nothing would be known to history. Oppenheimer chose to have a hearing to clear his name. Once he made that decision, many additional actions had to be taken.

Nichols said, "Due to the national importance of this case to the government, to the scientific community, and to the national security system, the Commission insisted on approving my actions step by step, and Strauss kept the White House informed. J. Edgar Hoover assigned Charles Bates to assist the AEC."

The result of the hearing was not a surprise to Nichols and frankly was a relief for him. As a West Point graduate, Nichols lived his life abiding to the Honor Code "cadets will not lie, cheat, steal, or tolerate those who do." He carried the burden of Oppenheimer's security risk for many years until the hearing resolved the matter.

In 1943, Nichols' judgement (as well as General Groves') thought it best for the safety and security of the country to move forward with ending the war – and Oppenheimer was a significant contributor to that objective. But in 1953 once Eisenhower issued his Executive Order and "security risk" was redefined, the hearing was going to take place unless Oppenheimer privately decided to resign.

Oppenheimer proactively decided for a security hearing with the AEC instead of resigning. Had he resigned from the AEC's contract, nothing further would be known to history, subject to Eisenhower's decision. The situation was held in secrecy for over four months until Oppenheimer's decision was received.

Behind the scenes, Strauss, Nichols and others were working to avoid a security hearing altogether for many reasons including avoiding embarrassment to Oppenheimer or let the AEC contract expire during this time. But Oppenheimer decided for a security hearing and Oppenheimer's attorney (Mr. Garrison) released the Borden letter to *The New York Times* calling the whole matter to the public's attention, especially with the one paragraph Green included on Oppenheimer's veracity published as four separate paragraphs, increasing the impression that having the wrong opinion is a factor in making one a security risk.

- Nichols' working and personal relationship with Oppenheimer during and after the war was of utmost respect, professionalism, and friendship (see especially the 26th article). Nichols outlived Groves, Oppenheimer, Mitchell, Green and others directly involved with the hearing. He had ample time to spin history but did not. He repeatedly stressed that Oppenheimer was loyal to the United States.

Next up: Moving Ahead (1954-2000)

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Thanks for this Historically Speaking column and series goes to Barbara Rogers Scollin, grandniece of General Kenneth D. Nichols. She has done an exceptional research initiative and has compiled the content of a book intended to be published soon. There is one more Historically Speaking column which will be the 30th one produced in this series.



Atomic Energy Commission Meeting, 1954

L>R: AEC Commissioners Thomas Murray, Eugene Zuckert, Joseph Campbell. AEC Chairman Lewis Strauss seated in foreground and AEC General Manager K.D. Nichols seated directly behind Strauss.
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