

## **AEC and Oppenheimer**

Robert Oppenheimer came under attack by Lewis Strauss, Edward Teller and others for his alleged connections to communism. Gordon Dean, who was chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission, tried to defend Oppenheimer, but was hard pressed to keep the pressure off as others used every avenue available to pursue the removal of his security clearance.

In addition to serving under President Truman, Dean served as chairman of the AEC for a brief period under President Eisenhower as well. He completed his term on June 30, 1953.

When Eisenhower looked for a successor to Dean in 1953, he chose another original commissioner, Lewis Strauss, but Strauss would accept the position only on the condition that Oppenheimer be excluded from any influence within the AEC.

While a commissioner in the Atomic Energy Commission and before being selected to replace Gordon Dean, Lewis Strauss insisted on the need for a technical capability to detect nuclear explosions around the world. His strong leadership here led to just such a system being in place barely in time to detect the first Soviet Union atomic test in August 1949.

This test was named "First Lightning" by the Soviets and "Joe 1" by the United States. It was a replica of "Fat Man" as provided the Soviets by Klaus Fuchs. President Truman announced to the public that the Soviets had exploded an atomic device. This announcement was made on September 23, 1949 four years and one month after Hiroshima.

Lewis Strauss took strong exception to Robert Oppenheimer's continuing involvement in the nuclear weapons program and agreed to serve as its chairman only if Oppenheimer was restricted from participating in any way. He removed all classified materials from Oppenheimer's office and had his clearance revoked.

During the early Cold War Years, the Commission focused on designing and producing nuclear weapons and developing nuclear reactors for naval propulsion. The Atomic Energy Act of 1954 ended exclusive government use of the atom and began the growth of the commercial nuclear power industry, giving the Atomic Energy Commission authority to regulate the new industry..

During the formative years of the AEC the General Advisory Committee, chaired from 1946 to 1952 by Robert Oppenheimer, was used to advise the commission on scientific matters. The committee also worked to increase the United States' supply of fissionable materials.

Thus Oak Ridge continued to produce uranium 235 and Hanford continued to produce plutonium. Nuclear weapons were being fabricated. In addition, the national laboratories at Los Alamos, Oak Ridge and Argonne were strengthened. The new scientific discovery that brought the atomic bomb was seen as having tremendous potential for both military superiority and untold possibilities in other areas.

Brookhaven National Laboratory came into being. The Radiation Laboratory at Berkeley was an important research tool for the AEC. Rapid expansion of basic physics research was promoted by the AEC in many arenas, including university projects and high energy accelerators.

Much of this expansion was the result of recommendations from the GAC with Oppenheimer in the lead. He also promoted the idea of a detection system intended to know if and when nuclear tests were conducted by other countries, as was the case when the Soviet Union exploded its test.

In Oak Ridge, the Oak Ridge Operations, the most diverse of the AEC field offices, was officially formed on September 15, 1947. While the Manhattan Project in its entirety was managed from the Oak Ridge office by Colonel Nichols, General Groves had attempted to broaden the scope of the effort after the war ended, but Colonel Nichols remained at the center of the overall operations.

When the AEC formed, the scope of the work at Oak Ridge was reduced and it became a field office. We will look more closely at that role next.