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Ironic Link in Oppenheimer Case

By Stuart H. Loory
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Until now history has not yielded the answer to a tantalizing question: why did the Eisenhower administration strip the late J. Robert Oppenheimer, father of the atomic bomb, of his security clearance in 1953 and publicly disgrace him?

Newly uncovered records indicate there was an ironic link between that act and the loss by a friend of Oppenheimer of a secret document detailing progress on the hydrogen bomb program up to President Eisenhower's inauguration Jan. 20, 1953.

The friend was John

Archibald Wheeler, a Princeton University physics professor who, at the time, was in charge of theoretical physics in the Atomic Energy Commission's crash program to build the H-bomb.

Wheeler lost the document, part of a chronology on H-bomb progress, during an overnight train ride from Philadelphia to Washington. It is believed that among others on the train were supporters of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg en route to the capital to protest the death sentence imposed on the two convicted atom spies.

The loss infuriated Eisenhower and led government officials to worry that the document would fall into

the hands of Soviet agents since, at the time, it was presumed some of Wheeler's trainmates were Communist Party members.

Neither Wheeler nor Oppenheimer, who often lunched together in Princeton, where Oppenheimer was director of the Institute for Advanced Study, understood that there might be a connection between Wheeler's loss and Oppenheimer's troubles, which began 11 months later.

The link ran through William Liscum Borden, then executive director of the staff of the Joint Committee on Atomic Energy. Borden was author of the report Wheeler

lost and the principal accuser of Oppenheimer later in 1953.

The outlines of this story were contained in a paper delivered yesterday by Jack M. Holl, an associate historian for the Energy Research and Development Administration, the AEC's successor, before the American Historical Association's annual meeting in Atlanta.

Holl and Richard G. Hewlett are writing a government-sponsored history of the AEC during the Eisenhower administration. They have access to all of the AEC's classified records.

Holl pieced together the
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OPPENHEIMER, From A1
Oppenheimer connection during his research, but he did not plan to mention Wheeler in the paper until after The Chicago Sun-Times, in an independent investigation, uncovered Wheeler's name.

What follows is an account based on The Sun-Times' inquiry and Holl's paper, detailing for the first time how Borden's pique and Wheeler's misfortune set in motion the chain of events that led to the disgracing of Oppenheimer and the hearing that resulted in permanent lifting of his security clearance.

Though friends, Wheeler and Oppenheimer were on opposite sides of the debate in the late 1940s and early 1950s over whether the United States should undertake the H-bomb crash program.

Wheeler, siding with Edward Teller and others, urged it. Oppenheimer opposed it out of the feeling this country did not yet have the know-how and that construction of the bomb would be morally wrong. He urged concentrating on building up stockpiles of fission weapons instead of putting too much effort into fusion.

In 1951, after Teller and his associates scored a breakthrough in theoretical physics, Oppenheimer changed his view, and the General Advisory Committee to the AEC, which Oppenheimer chaired, recommended the crash program be instituted. The work of Wheeler's group in verifying Teller's idea was a key factor in the decision.

The wounds opened in the previous debate, however, did not heal.

Wheeler's group, at Princeton during the early 1950s and known as Project Matterhorn, developed the document that became the design manual for the early generation of American H-bombs. Their work helped the United States achieve the world's first H-bomb explosion—a 10.4-megaton blast

that wiped the Pacific island of Elugelab off the map—on Nov. 1, 1952.

By that time, Borden, a World War II bomber pilot, Yale Law School graduate and one of the early writers on nuclear weapons strategy, had become the Joint Atomic Energy Committee staff chief. He was unimpressed with the progress. In fact, he felt the United States was rapidly and dangerously losing its lead over the Soviet Union in nuclear weapons development.

After Eisenhower was elected, Borden went to work on a chronology of the U.S. H-bomb program, which he intended for the new President. He hoped to show him that this country was moving too slowly and spur the President to demand more action.

The chronology was finished Jan. 1, 1953, and copies of various parts were apparently sent to various scientists around the country to be checked for accuracy. Two pages were delivered to Wheeler by special courier. He agreed to discuss them with Borden in Washington on Jan. 7.

On the evening of Jan. 6, he drove to Trenton, N.J., and there boarded a train to Philadelphia, where he transferred to a sleeping car for the trip to Washington.

He entered a lower berth in a Pullman car, settled in and began studying his papers in preparation for next day's meeting.

The Borden chronology was classified "secret." The rest of the papers in the same envelope, Wheeler said in a recent interview, were unclassified.

In the morning he awoke and, carrying his envelope with him, went to the lavatory. He stuffed the envelope behind a pipe while he washed. When he returned to his berth, he left the envelope behind. When he realized he had forgotten it, he returned to the lavatory and retrieved it. It was still behind the pipe.

Back at his berth, he

checked the envelope's contents. The unclassified papers were still there. The secret Borden chronology was gone.

With a porter, he searched the car. The papers were not found. When he arrived in Washington, he called the joint committee offices to report the loss. Within minutes, FBI agents joined him at Union Station and together they searched the car again. Still the document was not found.

By the time Wheeler returned to Princeton that night, FBI agents had already appeared at his home and searched it. Within the next few days, they also searched the Matterhorn offices at Princeton. They are said to have searched the entire Pennsylvania Railroad right-of-way between Philadelphia and Washington. The document was never found.

After its loss, the Borden chronology was reclassified

from "secret" to "top secret." Toward the end of January, Borden's chronology was delivered to the White House. It came to the new President's attention on Feb. 14 along with the information from FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover that part of it had been lost.

The President was furious, first at Borden's indiscretion in pulling together so much sensitive information in one place and second over Wheeler's loss of part of it.

He called in the four sitting members of the Atomic Energy Commission and lined them up in front of his desk.

Eisenhower also called in Rep. W. Sterling Cole (R-N.Y.) and Sen. Bourke B. Hickenlooper (R-Iowa), the two ranking Republicans on the joint committee.

"He gave us unshirted hell," recalled Cole, now a Washington consultant on nuclear energy matters.

In any event, Borden's warning had gone for naught. Eisenhower paid little attention to the contents of the chronology, concentrating instead on the security breach.

Later in the spring, Borden, then about to be replaced as the Republican Party took control of the joint committee, requested Oppenheimer's dossier from the AEC. While writing the chronology he had begun to view Oppenheimer as one of the serious obstacles in the H-bomb program.

Oppenheimer's long dossier was packed with information on his pre-World War II associations with Communists and Communist-backed causes. But all of this had been considered first by Army security officers and later by the FBI and, at the highest levels, no objections were raised to granting him the nation's highest security clearance.

The joint committee itself, in 1952, had reviewed the dossier and had not recommended any action against Oppenheimer.

But as Borden studied the record anew, he began to think of Oppenheimer as a Soviet agent. He left the committee in June and moved to Pittsburgh to take a job with Westinghouse Corp. The Holl paper says he used the Oppenheimer charges again to try to focus attention on the H-bomb program.

In the fall, after discussing the matter with Cole, he sent a

registered letter to J. Edgar Hoover that read, in part:

"The purpose of this letter is to state my own exhaustively considered opinion, based upon years of study of the available classified evidence, that more probably than not J. Robert Oppenheimer is an agent of the Soviet Union . . . 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 the weapons aspect of atomic development as his personal speciality, he was acting under Soviet instructions.)"

For Borden, the key to his charge was that Oppenheimer "has worked tirelessly from Jan. 31, 1950, onward to retard the United States H-bomb program."

Hoover received the letter Nov. 7, 1953. He did nothing with it until Nov. 27, when he sent copies to Adm. Lewis L. Strauss, AEC chairman, Defense Secretary Charles E. Wilson and Eisenhower.

Five days later, the President still had not seen it. Wilson called it to his attention. The next day Eisenhower, apparently to show he was firmer in dealing with security risks than had been Harry S. Truman, his predecessor, erected a "blank wall" between Oppenheimer and the secrets the physicist had helped to develop.

Wheeler was among those warned not to talk with him about atomic secrets. Asked now what he thought about the Oppenheimer case in those days, Wheeler, sitting in a living-room chair from which he could see the Institute for Advanced Study, replied:

"I guess I was a worm in those days. I really didn't think much about it at all. I was so involved in my own project, I didn't have the time to think about other people. We were working sometimes 36 hours at a stretch."

Borden was not, during Oppenheimer's hearing in 1954, identified as a key figure. In fact, Oppenheimer's lawyers did not even cross-examine him when he testified.

Today he is a lawyer in Washington, and refused to comment on the case.

Last in a series