

# Oppenheimer on Ending the Nuclear Arms Race

Joseph P. Baratta

*Posted to the World Orders Forum: 1 May 2024*

Joseph P. Baratta is a professor in the Department of History and Political Science at Worcester State University. He has worked extensively in the World Federalist movement, and among his many publications are *The Politics of World Federation* and *The United Nations System: Meeting the World Constitutional Crisis*.

---

J. Robert Oppenheimer, father of the atomic bomb, has been the subject recently of an important book, film, Oscars, and public discussion. It is understandable that attention should begin with the horrors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, American policy to hasten the end of World War II, and Oppenheimer's almost Faustian bargain with the U.S. government to use the new quantum physics to make a bomb ahead of Nazi Germany. Next came the controversy over his involvement with the Communist Party of the USA during the Great Depression, and finally his trial, managed by Lewis Strauss of the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission, over his security clearance by 1953. That led to his disbarment from the government.

But what is most important for the future is his proposals to avoid a nuclear arms race. When that failed, all that was left was deterrence, the threat of retaliation. Recent statements by Vladimir Putin and Kim Jong Un remind us of how fragile is deterrence. Nuclear war., begun by accident or deliberate policy to defend the state, and perhaps limited at first to tactical use or a strategic demonstration, still portends the ultimate catastrophe.

From 1945 to 1949, Oppenheimer opposed development of the H-bomb, supported the international control of atomic energy, and advocated "world government in the field of nuclear weapon." In the film, Lewis Straus has a throw-away line mocking him for advocating world government. What did Oppenheimer mean by "world government"? And could that be key to a return to policies of disarmament?

J. Robert Oppenheimer was an advisor to Bernard Baruch, who presented the historic U.S. plan for the international control of atomic energy to the new United Nations Atomic Energy Commission on 14 June 1946. Baruch dissented from the preliminary Acheson-Lilienthal plan because it provided only for an early warning system in case a state began to rearm. He wanted some way to enforce international control and even abolish all war. Oppenheimer gave Baruch a clear briefing on the world governmental implications of an effective plan. There could be "no prevention of war unless international law could apply to the citizens of nations, as federal law does to those of states," he said. What was needed was "an appropriate delegation of national sovereignty," a "world government in the field of atomic energy." He followed up with a speech in Pittsburgh on 16 May 1946 (reprinted in the New York Times Magazine in June 1946) and

another speech in Washington to military and foreign service officers on 17 September 1947 (reprinted in *Foreign Affairs* in January 1948). Articles in the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* complemented these public statements.

What is most significant to me, as a historian of the world federalist movement, is that Oppenheimer couched all his arguments for a “partial renunciation of sovereignty,” for “international law applying to the citizens of nations,” in terms that would be acceptable to official policy of the United States, which at the time was committed to finding some novel way to control atomic energy before other nations developed their own weapons. He sought an official plan, led by the United States, that did not ask the U.S.A. to undertake a revolutionary project to establish world democracy. Oppenheimer thought the proposed Atomic Development Authority could be made effective without immediate reform of the new United Nations Organization, especially of Article 27(3) of the U.N. Charter, which defines the veto powers of the five permanent members. He never supported scrapping the Charter, or establishing a world state, or having recourse to the sovereignty of the peoples of the world, which were common to extreme proposals of world government at the time. The alternative of world government to policies of containment and deterrence was lost by the Korean War of 1950, continuing to at least the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

Oppenheimer thought that the Atomic Development Authority could be vested with “sovereign” powers over just atomic energy that would not be subject to the U.N. Security Council veto. It would draw the international community of scientists, with their traditions of openness and rationality, to serve humanity in the new organization. Something like Los Alamos during the war years. “A commitment made in one field,” he wrote, “can be extended to others.”

If this is to happen, the development authority will have to have a healthy life of its own; it will have to flourish, to be technically strong, to be useful to mankind, to have a staff and an organization and way of life in which there is some pride, and some cause for pride. This would not be possible if there were nothing of value to do with atomic energy. This would not be possible if the prevention of atomic armament were its only concern, if all other activity was technically so separable and separate from atomic armament that it could remain in national hands. In the long struggle to find a way of reconciling national and international sovereignty, the peaceful applications of atomic energy can only be a help. It is perhaps doubtful that we should have a federal government had not those functions that could not safely nor effectively be carried out by the States had a certain importance for the people of this country.

While Baruch and his team were examining the Acheson–Lilienthal proposal and inquiring if there were not some more effective kind of international control than an early warning system, they heard Oppenheimer’s proposal of world government in the narrow field of the Atomic Development Authority. At a joint meeting in the Blair–Lee house in mid-May 1946, Dean Acheson, undersecretary of state, retorted that there were only two ways to go further than the Lilienthal board—collective security, in which all nations would bind themselves by treaty to go to war against a violator, and “world government,” which would treat all wars as civil wars. The first meant little, and the second not a “damned thing,” he said. Later, Acheson explained his

contempt for world government. “He said that any organization, any government, is based on the emotional, spiritual acceptance of it by 95% of the people. When you have 20% of the people who are not going along, the government just does not work.... This is true in our own country with our strikes and labor difficulties.... It has been true with the British in Ireland, and [in] Palestine, [and] in India.”

Oppenheimer, in his 1947 address, called his goal a “dynamic approach to security.” There was no consideration of his ideas of an ADA staffed with international scientists, for that provided no international powers to keep the peace short of threats of war, as in the subsequent doctrine of deterrence. The upshot was that Baruch found State extremely reluctant to reconsider its Acheson–Lilienthal proposal. This fact would have disastrous consequences on the subsequent negotiations.

Oppenheimer fell back on remaining efforts, at the height of his prestige, to persuade the U.S. government not to decide to develop the H-bomb. That was narrowly lost by General Advisory Committee report of 9 November 1949, as Kai Bird and Martin Sherwin recount in *American Prometheus*. President Truman announced the new policy of developing the H-bomb on 31 January 1950, a tragic outcome.

Something of Oppenheimer’s ideas for disarmament survived in the proposals for comprehensive disarmament and systemic reform of the U.N. Charter in Grenville Clark and Louis B. Sohn’s *World Peace through World Law* of 1958. Again they banked on the United States’ supreme interest in peace. Clark and Sohn made the General Assembly democratically representative of the peoples of the world. They made the Assembly primarily responsible for the maintenance of peace and security. They assumed that responsible people from participating countries could be elected to the Assembly. They would abolish the Security Council with its veto. In its place they made the Council an Executive Council of the world laws enacted by the Assembly. A careful ten-year, step-wise plan would abolish all military forces and ultimately secure a disarmed world. The world government (though they avoided the term) would gradually acquire a monopoly of force, marked by a new World Peace Force, individually recruited and hence loyal to the union, alone equipped with arms.

To deal with the problem of the current inadequacy of international law, Clark and Sohn provided for two new organs: a World Conciliation Board and a World Equity Tribunal. They would settle by law political disputes, like the Israeli-Palestinian crisis, which they took up as an explanatory example. (They could as well have taken up the whole Cold War as an example.) Those organs would supply what is lacking in the current International Court of Justice, which is limited to legal disputes, like the interpretation of a treaty. What was needed were new institutions to deal with political disputes.

The World Equity Tribunal would be composed of fifteen persons “whose character, experience, and reputation would furnish the best assurance of impartiality and breadth of view.” They would be elected for life by the General Assembly as “representatives of the principal judicial tribunals and legal associations, and of leading academic, scientific, economic, and religious organizations,” drawn from lists of nominees by committees in national states. The fifteen would have jurisdiction under voluntary agreements or, in the hardest cases without regard to

agreement of those involved, if in the judgment of three fifths of the representatives in the General Assembly, the Tribunal should go ahead to make a “reasonable, just and fair” recommendation. That recommendation would then become binding, if approved by a four-fifths majority of the General Assembly. That would be overwhelming public sentiment, hard for a recalcitrant state to resist. In the worst case, it would be enforced by economic and military sanctions, ultimately by the U.N. Peace Force.

The Clark–Sohn plan had some influence on the McCloy–Zorin agreements in 1961, when the United States was preparing to deploy the Minuteman ICBM. The Soviets counter-proposed what became “general and complete disarmament under effective international control.” That led—through the Cuban missile crisis, the assassination of Kennedy, and the beginnings of the Vietnam War—to the unravelling of the whole dream. As Herman Kahn (*On Thermonuclear War*) said, books like Clark and Sohn’s were no longer being read in the defense establishment. Deterrence was the doctrine of the day.