The Terrifying Timeliness of Nolan's 'Oppenheimer'

by Roger L. Simon

I went to see "Oppenheimer" on July 24 and, despite a few longeurs, was riveted by it.

What held my attention during this three-hour movie about J. Robert Oppenheimer, director of the Manhattan Project and "the father of the atomic bomb," wasn't the on-again-off-again, was-he-or-wasn't-he-a-communist thread that goes on perhaps a tad too long.

It was the very thing "Oppy" was building—the bomb itself.

It couldn't be more obvious that this terrifying weapon overwhelms ideology, political preference, religious and ethnic background, and just about everything else with it, whether you're a communist, conservative, Seventh-Day Adventist, or whatever else.

To paraphrase Trotsky, you may not be interested in the bomb,

but the bomb is interested in you.

That bomb, and nuclear weapons in general, as we well know, are as close or closer to being used today than ever since World War II because of the endless war in Ukraine.

And they're now vastly more powerful than those used on Hiroshima and Nagasaki during that war, almost incomprehensibly so, with the potential to destroy human civilization or significant parts of it, making this film, to repeat myself, rather timely.

And at this moment, no one in power seems to want this war with the world's most nuclear-armed power to stop.

Those thoughts were never far away as I watched "Oppenheimer." But from the moment Gen. Leslie Groves, played with complexity by Matt Damon, offers Oppenheimer the job as head of the project, I was on the edge of my seat—or, more specifically, I pressed the button on my theater lounge chair that made it more erect.

Unlike so many I had seen of late, this movie merited paying close attention.

And, yes, there was a certain "liberalism" about it that I would normally reject and have seen criticized in other reviews, but the core issue rendered that pretty much irrelevant to me.

Christopher Nolan's filmmaking was first-rate, this time in the service of something more important than another Batman grand guignol. Despite its also significant subject matter, his "Dunkirk" had left me cold.

This time, it all worked together brilliantly.

Knowing it would be basically inscrutable to the mass movie audience, Mr. Nolan didn't linger greatly on the science of nuclear fission or bomb-making, even though many of the

luminaries of physics from Albert Einstein to Edward Teller appear in the film. He suggests the complexity of their thinking through some scrawled equations and Oppenheimer's cosmic visions that, although inexplicable because so personal, became, well, riveting.

The film focuses instead on the issue that's so compelling now. Was this worth doing? Was it moral to build such an extreme weapon? And, naturally, there's the human psychology at play in such decisions.

We hear all the familiar arguments. Did it save lives by ending the war with Japan more quickly and so forth? But Mr. Nolan doesn't leave us with simple answers or a simple view of Oppenheimer, a man as complex as those issues himself. His adulterous behavior isn't hidden, nor is his problematic relationship with his wife, superbly acted by Emily Blunt.

The limitations of theatrical film make for weaknesses in "Oppenheimer" as well. (How long can you make people sit there? How long is it economically feasible?) For me, I wish I knew more about the roots of his disagreement with Atomic Energy Commission Chair Lewis Strauss—also brilliantly performed by Robert Downey Jr.—other than something about exporting isotopes. Perhaps it's on the cutting room floor.

One can quibble. Some Twitter nitpickers, as reported by the New York Post, are even faulting the director for having 50, rather than 48, stars on flags of that era in a brief celebratory scene. But in most movies, few would be paying that much attention.

What Mr. Nolan has actually done for me is revived my waning faith in movies as a place where complex ideas can really be explored. This movie, based on an extensive biography of Oppenheimer that I haven't read, does that. It lingers in the mind.

I haven't had that experience since the German film "The Lives

of Others," which was made some time ago (2006).

It also makes me think—although I do pretty much all the time now, anyway—about our current presidential race. At this moment, three candidates seem to be seriously questioning our commitment in Ukraine: Donald Trump, Robert F. Kennedy Jr., and Vivek Ramaswamy.

Perhaps the others should take some time off to see "Oppenheimer."

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