

## DECONSTRUCTING AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM IN *OPPENHEIMER* (2023): A COMPLEX INTERSECTION OF MORALITY, SCIENCE, AND POLITICS

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### Abstract

Christopher Nolan's *Oppenheimer* (2023) chronicles the journey of J. Robert Oppenheimer, the 'Father of the Atomic Bomb', and his leadership of the Manhattan Project during the Second World War. The film's release has prompted renewed discourse regarding Hollywood's historical role in propagating 'American Exceptionalism'—the belief in the United States' unique moral superiority and status as an inherent global superpower. While traditional war cinema often served as a propaganda tool to glorify US foreign policy, this study argues that *Oppenheimer* adopts a more nuanced approach. Utilising qualitative textual analysis, this paper deconstructs how the film juxtaposes nationalistic ideals with the existential tragedy of nuclear armament. Furthermore, the study employs Cognitive Dissonance Theory to examine *Oppenheimer*'s internal conflict, unravelling the counter-attitudinal behaviour he displayed as he reconciled the scientific advancement of his creation with its devastating humanitarian impact. The analysis finds that by framing the atomic bomb as a tragic 'quagmire' rather than a definitive triumph, the film subverts conventional exceptionalist narratives and exposes the moral complexities of American global dominance.

### Abstrak

Film biopik *Oppenheimer* (2023) karya Christopher Nolan mengisahkan perjalanan J. Robert Oppenheimer, 'Bapak Bom Atom', dalam memimpin Proyek Manhattan untuk mengembangkan senjata nuklir selama Perang Dunia II. Rilisnya film ini membuka kembali diskursus mengenai peran Hollywood dalam melestarikan gagasan 'Eksepsionalisme Amerika'—sebuah keyakinan bahwa Amerika Serikat memiliki keunggulan moral yang unik dan status sebagai adidaya dunia. Jika secara historis

film perang Hollywood kerap menjadi alat propaganda untuk mengagungkan kebijakan luar negeri AS, penelitian ini berargumen bahwa Oppenheimer menawarkan pendekatan yang berbeda. Menggunakan metode analisis teksual kualitatif, artikel ini mendekonstruksi elemen ekspresionalisme ditampilkan sekaligus disejajarkan dengan tragedi eksistensial persenjataan nuklir. Lebih lanjut, penelitian ini menerapkan Teori Disonansi Kognitif untuk membedah konflik internal karakter Oppenheimer, mengungkap perilaku kontra-sikap yang ia tunjukkan saat menghadapi dampak destruktif ciptaannya terhadap kemanusiaan. Hasil analisis menunjukkan bahwa dengan membingkai penemuan bom atom sebagai sebuah tragedi yang kelam ketimbang kemenangan heroik, film ini menjungkirbalikkan narasi ekspresionalisme konvensional dan menyingkap kompleksitas moral di balik dominasi global Amerika.

## 1. Introduction

Prior to the now well-known and civilized practice of diplomacy that was exercised by the United States and the majority of nations worldwide, the way the world worked in resolving conflicts was very much different as wars were not jaw-dropping occurrences. As time progresses, wars can be categorized based on their triggers, objectives, mediums, and scopes (Van der Dennen, 1981). Regardless of the categorization, the aftermath of wars rarely strays from instability and destruction. Therefore, wars have undeniably been a huge contributor to the state of the global order of life in the contemporary world, making them inevitable to disregard, even in sectors that seem entirely unrelated: pop culture and entertainment. One of the most effective forms of entertainment known to disseminate information and influence one's view of life is through films.

Films have been a new form of media that can be used to exert a country's "nation branding" through the implementation of soft diplomacy and power in order to spread information on a country's culture, history, and political tendencies through what they depict. The rising trend of countries resorting to popular culture proves its efficacy in generating nations' appeal through a real and vivid depiction, influencing one's worldview towards certain countries. It enables audiences to experience and dive deep into a whole new culture that could alter and renew their perceptions (Burns, 2016). In the film industry, Hollywood has been dominating the global film market and has cordially maintained its longstanding dominance ever since the end of World War I.

According to Silver (2007), there has never been a real threat to the dominance of Hollywood despite its major players (Universal, Paramount, United Artists, M.G.M., Fox, Warner Brothers, Walt Disney, Fox, and R.K.O.) almost collapsing or even going bankrupt during the era of the Great Depression. It was stated that this is presumably caused by Hollywood's capabilities in generating extraordinary film processing and advanced technologies, which resulted in exceptional output in movie quality, supported by massive strategic marketing. There are lots of external factors (mainly related to geopolitical issues) that halted the development of the film industry in other countries, hence the stagnation.

Not only has Hollywood dominated the film industry then and now, the United States and its history have always been painted as "superior," "unique," and "special". The U.S. was deemed to be different from other countries in how morally upright it is;

**Rennita Kendra**

Deconstructing American Exceptionalism in Oppenheimer (2023):

A Complex Intersection of Morality, Science, and Politics

therefore, assigning a special mission to itself as the world's peacekeeper. In this case, the domination of Hollywood and the idea of American exceptionalism goes hand-in-hand. Films, with the power to shed light on certain narratives and ideologies, possess the capability to influence the opinions of the American public, which will then affect how they react toward America's stance and engagement in foreign policy outlooks (Everett, 2017).

According to an article published by CBC Radio (2020), Hollywood is known to become an unofficial medium of U.S. army propaganda. With a unit dedicated exclusively to dissecting and reviewing thousands of scripts, the U.S. Office of War and Information has meticulously scrutinized every narrative it brings, omitting or revising any materials that portray the U.S. in an ill-disposed manner. This modulated propaganda approach defines and disseminates the belief in American exceptionalism effectively. However, this effort was made in the first place because inherently, it is far from the truth, but it is what they want people to believe.

The release of the 2023 movie *Oppenheimer* (a biopic based on J. Robert Oppenheimer, who is known as the "Father of the Atomic Bomb") in major cinemas globally has undoubtedly become a hot topic to pry on. Written using the first-person point of view, Christopher Nolan, the director of the aforementioned film, wishes the audience to see the world through Oppenheimer's eyes in documenting the historical period. The movie garnered the public's attention through its attempt in sticking to historical objectivity, delivering a character-driven story, combined with astounding cinematic techniques. The plot of the movie revolves around the creation and development of the nuclear bomb in the Manhattan Project during World War II, but more aspects of history could be dug deeper to analyze the paradoxical nature of world peace.

Set in the mid-20th century, during America's involvement in World War II, the biopic delineates the coercing nature of the American military's disposition when it comes to the handling of nuclear armaments. In the arms race of technology with the Nazi regime, the United States was unreservedly committed to supporting the development of nuclear weaponry to its utmost capacity. However, regardless of the already-losing life-threatening opponent, the U.S. military chose to alternate the target of execution of the bombing to two pivotal cities in Japan—Hiroshima and Nagasaki—after the Japanese initiated an attack on America's military base in Pearl Harbor, creating a new disastrous epoch. With the justification to end World War II and establish its role as the global savior, America used its technological advancement to assert dominance by annihilating Japan, killing hundreds of thousands of civilians.

This cinematic portrayal showcases how America conducts wars and ostensibly 'resolves' conflicts—a pattern which inevitably grows more and more apparent. In hindsight, this narrative perfectly encapsulates the theory of American exceptionalism, which succinctly emphasizes that "the United States of America is a unique and even morally superior country for historical, ideological, or religious reasons," (Volle, 2023). However, the latter part of the movie proves that, rather than glorifying the U.S.' decision making, it is instead shown to be a tragedy—a quagmire that alters the world order and how it progresses.

After the bombing of Japan was carried out, Oppenheimer was engulfed with internal conflicts upon learning the damage that his creation had caused and the number of lives lost. Despite being convinced otherwise by the then-President Harry S. Truman, he still felt that he had blood on his hands. Since then, the guilt consuming his soul drove him to

hamper America's plan on developing more advanced research, which could potentially result in a more powerful nuclear bomb, in fear of a possible endless arm-race leading to bigger mass destruction.

Generally, moral dilemmas will result in a shift of stance due to the unrelenting internal conflict caused by the tension between one's belief and one's action, and in Oppenheimer's case, new suspicions started to arise (Metin & Camgoz, 2011). Despite his attempts to halt the development of the hydrogen bomb was carried out out of guilt, his former association with several communist allies made the American military deem that he was untrustworthy, disloyal, and betraying his country. This phenomenon was pivotal in the movie, as Oppenheimer was stripped of his security clearance and any involvement in prevalent projects. The assumption is, if he did not support the United States to grow stronger, then he supported the Soviet Union's victory in becoming the world's global superpower (Nolan, 2023).

To examine this phenomenon in the movie, a deconstruction of the American exceptionalism depicted in the movie, and how Oppenheimer's character resonates with the cognitive dissonance theory in relation to his moral dilemmas and conflict of interest, is carried out. The nature of the recently released biopic caused the research novelty to become fairly new. A myriad of research related to wars depicted in movies has been done, mostly portraying the United States as the righteous world savior, such as *Rambo: First Blood* (1982), *Pearl Harbor* (2001), and *American Sniper* (2014). The other commonly used perspective to portray these tragedies is that of the victims and the aftermath of wars, such as *Schindler's List* (1993), *The Pianist* (2002), *Grave of the Fireflies* (1988), and many others. There has been relatively more limited research on movies that take on the perspective of the "perpetrators" of war crimes. Unlike the conventional idea of American exceptionalism that glorifies the United States and its political advances, the big picture of *Oppenheimer* was proven to showcase otherwise.

With the rising trend of anti-hero in the industry, the moral dilemma depicted in the film lies in Oppenheimer's political and moral standing—from being an ideal protagonist who leads a revolutionary discovery to the realization of its devastating impact on humanity, creating a tragedy. On that note, this article focuses on deconstructing the elements of American Exceptionalism, as well as the portrayal of cognitive dissonance in the film. Therefore, this research seeks to answer the following questions: (1) What elements of the movie challenge and allude to the idea of American exceptionalism? (2) In which scenes does the character Oppenheimer picture cognitive dissonance behavior in dealing with moral dilemma

## 2. Literature Review

### a. American Exceptionalism

Everett (2017) argued that American exceptionalism has existed since the United States achieved its sovereignty, dated a few centuries back. However, the development of the term itself has only been exercised recently, as scholars examined the prevalence of this belief when the U.S. was situated in the midst of global warfare and scrutinized the role it took upon themselves (Everett, 2017). American exceptionalism carries its own propaganda—that the U.S. is superior and is in its very own league, far from other nations in the world, thus making it exceptional. An analysis developed by Fyne (1997) dissected the efficacy of Hollywood and films as propaganda devices and its role in disseminating the American Exceptionalism belief. Popular movies during the aforementioned era never failed to glorify the role the United States played and vilified all of its nemesis. Fyne concluded that this idea was accepted with open arms because it resonated with the

people—films that carry these propagandas provide the audience with what they already believe in, resulting in confirmation bias (Fyne, 1997).

The concept of American exceptionalism became more generally known amongst Americans ever since it became a point of contention during Obama's presidential run. An article written by Hmjaz & Krstić (2015) argued that the former president adhered to the belief when stating the justification of the military force imposed against Syria at the time. "America is not the world's policeman... But when... we can stop children from being gassed to death... I believe we should act. That's what makes us exceptional," was Barack Obama's closing statement. Obama believed that the United States' intervention in other countries counts as an engagement in active foreign policy. This could be deciphered more clearly in a remark he uttered during the United Nations General Assembly in 2013, "Some may disagree, but I believe America is exceptional, in part because we have shown a willingness through the sacrifice of blood and treasure to stand up not only for our own narrow self-interests, but for the interests of all" which further draws attention to the extent in which the United States carries the role of the world's "peacekeeper".

On the other hand, Ian Tyrrell, a researcher and American exceptionalism historian, released a book in 2022 titled "American Exceptionalism: A New History of an Old Idea," which lays out an in-depth discussion on the term "exceptionalism". He argued that American exceptionalism is not necessarily backed up by data and concrete empirical evidence, but more of a concept that people would choose to believe in, thus always intertwined with historical context. Tyrrell also studied how the United States' executed intervention in other countries to fulfil its "calling" to extend and preserve a proper moral order in the world.

This relates to Tyrrell's argument, in which he stated that American exceptionalism had developed into a quasi-state ideology that showcases how this belief has been ingrained domestically and internationally, reflected in beliefs and values such as "American Dream," "American Idea," and "American Creed," that showcase an idealized and glorified view of the United States. In this book, Tyrrell argued that American exceptionalism has a repressed side, referred to as "settler colonialism," which explains how, prior to the settlement of the United States, the colonizers permanently displaced indigenous people through colonization upon settlement. The view of the United States being exceptional hides the fact that the country's success is attainable with the "help" of systemic oppression.

Tyrrell also puts an emphasis on the gap between what the historians and the general public think of the concept of American exceptionalism. According to him, historians generally focus on the historical context of the United States and a structured analysis of the nation's development, whereas the wider public sees it as a form of patriotism—to see the country as superior or special is to have a deep love and pride towards it. This perspective tends to downplay the shortcomings of the superiority complex since it paints the United States as a morally upstanding and upright nation, mainly focusing on its good deeds (Tyrrell, 2022).

### ***b. Cognitive Dissonance Theory***

To narrow down the implications of the American Exceptionalism belief experienced on an individual level, this paper intertwines this analysis with the Cognitive Dissonance Theory to analyze Oppenheimer's character and how he oscillates between pride (in relations to American moral superiority and its justifications) and guilt (in relations to the undeniable damage to humanity) when it comes to this invention. The Cognitive

Dissonance Theory was initially developed by Festinger (1957) to describe how humans behave in the face of inconsistencies, in the case of what they believe in and what they actually do. In 1959, Festinger & Carlsmith (1959) conducted an experiment to test a group of people to experience cognitive dissonance by telling them to lie—to talk about a monotonous assignment as if it was fun and intriguing. Contrary to popular beliefs, their experiment showcased that people who are paid less to lie about something tend to rationalize their actions and experience a shift of stance to minimize their ambivalence and discomfort compared to those who were given bigger incentives. This would then lead to various controversies and sparked new ideas from various researchers to prove that the result was a mistake, and the opposite result was more prevalent.

According to Metin & Camgoz (2011), Festinger conducted research on Cognitive Dissonance Theory to challenge the prevalent theory at the time, the reinforcement theory, which believed that humans tend to do what they believe and believe what they do. Over the years, a newer revision in Cognitive Dissonance Theory was developed by Aronson (1969). This version of theory highlights the “expectancies regarding the self,” which in simpler words means that results inconsistent with one’s performance and expectations will lead to dissonance. This theory puts an emphasis on one’s self-perception and self-justification; when someone views themselves as insensible, when they choose to lie, dissonance will not happen, because it aligns with their view of themselves (Metin & Camgoz, 2011).

Cognitive Dissonance Theory revolves around the idea of disconcerting feelings that one experiences after going through a series of discrepancies between what they do and what they believe in. In 1984, an article titled “The New Look Model of Dissonance” (Cooper & Fazio, 1984) entailed new discoveries of limitations on dissonance, which stated that dissonance would occur when one unfolds the unwanted consequences of their own actions. An article titled “Cognitive Dissonance: Where We’ve Been and Where We’re Going,” Joel Cooper (2019) reaffirmed that the term “dissonance” refers to the inconsistencies of practice that deter from one’s belief, resulting in counter-attitudinal behavior. In essence, the state of dissonance is achieved when one’s actions contradict their beliefs or *vice versa*. Through this publication, Cooper (2019) introduces the concept of “Roadway to Dissonance” to break down the thought process that leads to dissonance experience. He argues that when one encounters aversive circumstances, the first thing to do is to identify the one responsible for creating such an occurrence. If the person responsible happens to be themselves, then they are more likely to experience dissonance, and when they find themselves in a state of dissonance, they will take measures to minimize the dissonance and discomfort by re-aligning their belief or changing their attitudes toward the matter at hand as a form of compensation. It is believed that this behavior occurs after a choice has been made and created adverse results. However, the main point of contention is whether or not one has been given the freedom or authority on what to do—dissonance may be less likely to occur when one is forced to advocate for a cause that they disagree with due to a subdued sense of responsibility given the circumstance.

### 3. Methodology

This article uses a qualitative research method to challenge and compare the biopic to the initial concept of the American Exceptionalism ideology which will be combined with a textual analysis to understand Oppenheimer’s conflict of interest and shift of stance in science, politics, and morals through the use of Cognitive Dissonance Theory. To

discover the correlations between the aforementioned variables, the author delves into Ian Tyrell's concept to debunk the initial conservative belief of American exceptionalism as applied to the dynamic World War II setting of the movie. Moreover, to analyze the complexity of Oppenheimer's stance on his own creations, the author uses the more recent version of the Cognitive Dissonance Theory developed by Joel Cooper to focus on Oppenheimer's self-perception and how it affects his decision to change his stance, therefore alluding to cognitive dissonance.

In addition, this paper also analyzes the redemption advances that Oppenheimer attempted to make to compensate for his counter-attitudinal practices. This paper would do so by focusing on the scenes and events that follow the execution of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, particularly highlighting the troubles Oppenheimer had to face after revealing his stance against the further development of nuclear armaments. The findings and discussion will be divided into two main sections, which are 1) Oppenheimer, American Exceptionalism, and the Silver Screen; and 2) Dissecting the Complexities of Moral Dilemma through Cognitive Dissonance.

#### 4. Result and Discussion

##### a. *Oppenheimer, American Exceptionalism, and the Silver Screen*

Although it might not have been widely renowned during the era of World War II, the conventional idea of exceptionalism manifested and was reflected through the United States' foreign policy outlook at the time—and still does now. However, unlike most Hollywood movies surrounding the theme of war, *Oppenheimer* does not convey the glorification of the United States as the world's savior. In contrast, the biopic sees this as a tragedy, as it was a portrayal of the world through Oppenheimer's eyes, reflected in the quote at the beginning of the movie, "Prometheus stole fire from the Gods and gifted it to man, for this he was chained to a rock and tortured for eternity." It must be acknowledged that the movie referenced the *American Prometheus: The Triumph and Tragedy of J. Robert Oppenheimer*, which was written by Kai Bird and Martin J. Sherwin (2005). Oppenheimer's relation with the Greek God lies in the similarity of their tragedies—bringing (what initially seems like) benevolence with a great purpose to humanity, but having to endure eternal torture as a consequence of their own actions (Martin, 2023). Due to their similar fate, Oppenheimer becomes the embodiment of Prometheus. In addition, the quote from an ancient Hindu scripture, the *Bhagavad Gita*, which was shared by Oppenheimer after witnessing the successful Trinity test in testing the atomic bomb became a hot discourse, "Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds." This statement showcases that real-life Oppenheimer acknowledges the extent to how his creation harms humanity and embodies death.

With that being said, Oppenheimer juxtaposes the notion of American exceptionalism by admitting that he and the United States, with this newfound deadly weapon, will contribute to the destruction of the world. Although it could be argued that the use of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki was a stride necessary to quickly end the prolonged war, the casualties and destruction it caused to humanity are irreversible. During the early stages of its development, Oppenheimer justified proceeding with the development of nuclear weaponry while upholding a similar premise that this weaponry serves humankind. This argument also comes from a place of believing in the United States' superiority as a nation—as it was, *and is*, as well as being the one that could create world peace, thus this burden to end the war quickly had to be shouldered.

According to Lifton (2023), “Oppenheimer’s greatest tragedy was the success of his leadership in the creation of the weapon,”—he used his gifted mind to create a weapon that destroys and leaves an adverse impact on humanity. However, as tragedies happen during wars, and just like what other countries would do in a high-risk circumstance, the United States committed atrocious acts that contradict what it stands for. Hence, it takes away its “uniqueness”—the United States does not embody peace and is not the epitome nor the beacon of democracy. With the shift of nations’ interest and implementation of cultural diplomacy in the 21st century, spreading the narrative of “exceptionalism” or any idea that insinuates a nation’s superiority will potentially be a topic for controversy. Hence, in hindsight, showcasing the dilemma behind the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the terror it causes to the perpetrators *is* the right move.

Hollywood has always been a powerful tool to living the fantasy of American exceptionalism by misrepresenting the violations they did by defining it as “necessary steps” needed to be taken to maintain world peace (Hwang, 2017). However, through its tragic portrayal, *Oppenheimer* provided “other” American perspectives aside from films that lauded the United State’s “heroic” approach to the world. Humanizing a tragedy, showcasing the “unseen” sides of historical figures, and attempting to stick to historical objectivity will garner more of the audience’s sympathy and forgiveness, although it might not be the main reason why the biopic was created in the first place.

According to Tyrrell (2022), the concept of American exceptionalism has generally grown to be closely associated with patriotism. In the context of World War II, patriotism is reflected through loyalty and devotion that one puts in supporting the United States’ road to victory. This also involved downplaying the atrocities of the war crimes the United States had committed against its nemesis. Later in the movie, after learning the real impact of what his invention had created, consumed by guilt, Oppenheimer wished for the hydrogen bomb that was suspected to be much more powerful than the atomic bomb to have never been produced. Although this action comes from a place of fear, moral dilemma, and genuine concern on the development of a weapon that enables genocide and world destruction, Oppenheimer was seen as a traitor to the country, accused of siding with the Communist Party and the Soviet Union alliances. It is not explicitly portrayed in the movie whether the United States’ officials ever saw the abomination of the bombing on the same level as Oppenheimer did, but with the fear of being behind the Soviet Union in terms of armaments, they decided to push on the production. This tight rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union at the time contributed to the level of cautious measures taken to ensure that no double agents or traitors had access to the highly confidential research documents. A series of accusations and hearings with the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) discussing revoking his security clearance shows how the United States’ officials were hastened and apprehensive of the Manhattan Project leader due to his shift of stance. In other words, Oppenheimer was being reprimanded for not adhering to American exceptionalism by being an “opposition” to the development of the H-bomb. In this case, it showcases how the United States officials embody the patriotism that is associated with American exceptionalism—they see Oppenheimer’s act of disloyalty and display of untrustworthiness as a threat to the country. Paradoxically, later in the movie, after various hearings and being told that he would not stand a chance against the high-ranking officials, Oppenheimer persisted in proceeding with more court hearings, expressing his concern and love for his country—afraid that if arms control was not imposed, then there will be more harm caused rather

than the greater good. Oppenheimer expresses his values on American exceptionalism differently as it is the opposite of what the government expects of him.

### ***b. Dissecting the Complexities of Moral Dilemma through Cognitive Dissonance***

Cognitive Dissonance Theory plays a huge role to identify Oppenheimer's oscillating stance in regards to upholding the belief of American exceptionalism and the excruciating moral dilemmas throughout the movie surrounding his role in the development of the deadly weaponry. As a scientist, Oppenheimer has proclivity for hard work and strives to explore new discoveries. He introduced the theory of quantum physics to the United States, relentlessly tying the knots between particles of knowledge to create a tapestry in the form of a strategic weaponry: the atomic bomb. Being the leader of the Manhattan Project, Oppenheimer has contributed effort, time, and energy to its whole planning, including attempts to make scientists from all over the U.S. reside in Los Alamos. Due to the nature of the atomic bomb as a new invention, Oppenheimer has yet to grasp the extent of destruction that his creation is capable of doing. Under the belief of loyalty to his country and wanting to help win the war, Oppenheimer justifies the creation of nuclear bombs and their usage. There were a handful of scenes in the movie in which Oppenheimer blatantly stated his stance on the development and use of nuclear armaments.

*OPPENHEIMER : "Hitler's dead. It's true. But the Japanese fight on."*

*TEACHER : "Their defeat seems assured."*

*OPPENHEIMER : "Not if you're a G.I. preparing to invade. We can end this war."*

*STUDENT : "But how do we justify using this weapon on human beings?"*

*OPPENHEIMER : "We're theorists, yes? We imagine a future, and our imaginings horrify us. They won't fear it until they understand it, and they won't understand it until they've used it. When the world learns the terrible secret of Los Alamos, our work here will ensure a peace mankind has never seen. A peace based on the kind of international cooperation that Roosevelt always envisaged."*

Germany has been defeated, yet Oppenheimer still appraises the dropping of the atomic bomb as necessary. Through this excerpt from the movie, Oppenheimer shows no hesitation in justifying using atomic bombs against humans. In the last sentence of the excerpt, Oppenheimer refers to Roosevelt, a former U.S. President, emphasizing his sense of nationality and loyalty to the United States. He once again reiterates that the whole execution is to reassure America's role in the global power dynamics, namely to realize peacekeeping advances for the world's greater good. During the building of the bomb, Oppenheimer refused to delve further into knowing who the bomb will be used against. Leo Szilard, the chief physicist at the Chicago Metallurgical Laboratory at the time, was against the atomic bomb due to the possible geopolitical consequences it would have caused.

*OPPENHEIMER : "You're a long way from Chicago, Leo."*

*LEO SZILARD : "If we don't act now, they're going to use this thing against Japan. We booked a meeting with Truman, but somebody killed it. You're meeting the Secretary of War."*

*OPPENHEIMER : "Just because we're building it, doesn't mean we get to decide how it's used."*

*LEO SZILARD : "History will judge us, Robert. In Chicago, we put together a petition."*

*OPPENHEIMER : "I'm not... I'm not getting into this. Just tell me your concerns, and I'll relate them."*

*LEO SZILARD : "My concerns? Germany's defeated. Japan's not going to hold out alone."*

*OPPENHEIMER : "How could you know that? You got us into this. You and Einstein, with your letter to Roosevelt saying we could build a bomb."*

LEO SZILARD : "Against Germany."  
 OPPENHEIMER : "That's not how weapons manufacture works, Szilard."  
 LEO SZILARD : "Oppie, you have to help."  
 OPPENHEIMER : "Fermi's in the meeting. Lawrence is in the meeting."  
 LEO SZILARD : "They're not you. You're the great salesman of science. You can convince anyone of anything. Even yourself."

Oppenheimer acknowledges that his involvement in the making of the atomic bomb does not give him the right to say who the bomb will be used against—he is assigned to build an atomic bomb, so that is what he is going to do. Nevertheless, since the actual extent to what atomic bombs are capable of still remains undiscovered at this point, he demonstrates no opposition to whom the bomb may be used upon.

EDWARD TELLER: "Have you seen Szilard's petition?"  
 OPPENHEIMER : "How the hell does Szilard know about the Japanese? You're not signing it, are you?"  
 EDWARD TELLER: "Many people have. A lot of people."  
 OPPENHEIMER : "Edward... the fact that we built this bomb does not give us any more, any more right or responsibility to decide how it's used than anyone else."  
 EDWARD TELLER: "But we're the only people who know about it."  
 OPPENHEIMER : "I've told Stimson the various opinions of the community."  
 EDWARD TELLER: But what's your opinion?"  
 OPPENHEIMER : "Once it's used... nuclear war, perhaps... all war... becomes unthinkable."  
 EDWARD TELLER: "Until somebody builds a bigger one."

This excerpt shows that Oppenheimer's view on the development of the atomic bomb fairly remains idealistic. It is most likely caused by the inconceivable effects of what the atomic could actually do, as theory could only explain so much. Wars remain unthinkable until someone builds a bigger one, which could have led to an endless arms race.

OPPENHEIMER : "General?"  
 GENERAL LESLIE: "I'm very proud of you, and all of your people."  
 OPPENHEIMER : "It went alright?"  
 GENERAL LESLIE: "Apparently it went with a tremendous bang."  
 OPPENHEIMER : "Well, everyone here is feeling reasonably good about it. It's been a long road."  
 GENERAL LESLIE: "I think one of the wisest things I ever did was when I selected the director of Los Alamos."

PRESIDENT TRUMAN: [On the radio] "We have spent more than two billion dollars on the greatest scientific gamble in history, and we have won."

According to an article written by Josh Weiss from NBC Insider (2023) titled "Why Oppenheimer Didn't Show the Bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki," Christopher Nolan clarified that just like the rest of the world, Oppenheimer found out about the bombing through the radio. In the movie, it is also portrayed that right after President Truman announced the bombing of Hiroshima, Oppenheimer was immediately contacted by General Leslie who entrusted him with the Manhattan Project. Throughout the call, despite all the compliments and affirmations that General Leslie forwarded to Oppenheimer and his team, Oppenheimer did not pester a single hint of contentment, unlike the evident exuberance that he showcased after the success of the Trinity Test.



This reaction is a noticeable contrast to the cheering and triumphant smiles and handshakes exchanged by those who were involved in the project and possibly American citizens in general. This scene is a prevalent turning point in Oppenheimer's stance, causing cognitive dissonance, in which the unfamiliarity of moral and ethical dilemmas resulted in his initial indifference: "The world... will remember this day. It's too soon to... It's too soon to determine what the results of the bombing are. But I'll bet the Japanese didn't like it."

As the crowd gathered, chanted his name, and stomped in unison out of excitement, Oppenheimer walked into the room, greeted by hopeful looks from the audience. The scene is followed by the crescendo of the audience' stomping which—in Oppenheimer's head —mimics the sound of the bomb explosion, making him stuck in a trance. In Oppenheimer's supposed celebratory speech, he hesitated, took pauses to state his celebratory remarks—unable to finish the speech in one go—knowing very well that the stronger feeling he had about the whole altercation was anguish. As a scientist, he regarded himself as an individual with a high moral ground, but his actions and inventions show otherwise. Dissonance occurred when he realized the abhorrence of what had been done, but he refrained himself from showing it by forcing a smile on his face and saying, "I'm so proud. So proud of what you have accomplished. I just wish we had it in time to use against the Germans." *[Crowd cheers weren't audible to Oppenheimer]*.



Oppenheimer ought to finish his speech with a bang. The scene pans on to the audience who are visibly cheering, but inaudible to Oppenheimer. As if wanting to internalize Leo Szilard's statement about him from the previous excerpts, he attempted to gaslight himself into believing that this is what he wanted—for the United States to achieve victory, assert dominance, and end the war. However, this reaction to that self-psychological manipulation is a testament that, deep down, he knows that what he says contradicts what he believes in. Hence, he is engulfed by the deafening silence as he tries to finish that sentence. Oppenheimer's dissonance grew bigger as the focus in this scene falters, followed by a scene in which he vividly imagined the audience becoming the victim of the atomic bomb, reflecting his guilt.

*PRESIDENT TRUMAN* : “How’s it feel to be the most famous man in the world? You helped save a lot of American lives.”

*OPPENHEIMER* : “What we did at Hiroshima was...”

*PRESIDENT TRUMAN* : “What?”

*OPPENHEIMER* : “And Nagasaki.”

*PRESIDENT TRUMAN* : “Obviously. Your invention let us bring our boys home.”

*OPPENHEIMER* : “Well, it was hardly... my invention.”

*PRESIDENT TRUMAN* : “It was you on the cover of Time.”

After the perplexing experience during his victorious speech, Oppenheimer is met with President Truman. In this scene, Oppenheimer reluctantly wanted to bring up the conflicting feelings he had that had been bottled within him. Although in hindsight it could have been interpreted as him not wanting to get all the credits just for himself, the statement also insinuates that he wanted to disengage and distance himself from the creation of the atomic bomb to convince himself that he is *not* a sole or huge contributor to the development of the deadly weapon. According to Cooper (2019), when someone assures themselves that they are forced by an authoritative power to act upon something they disagree with, they will most likely minimize their responsibility on the act to minimize dissonance. President Truman was seemingly content enough to give appraisals upon the scientist’s success.



*OPPENHEIMER* : “Mr. President... Umm... I feel that I have blood on my hands.”

*PRESIDENT TRUMAN* : [tauntingly pulls out his pocket square and waves it in front of Oppenheimer] “You think anyone in Hiroshima, or... Nagasaki, gives a shit who built the bomb? They care who dropped it. I did. Hiroshima isn’t about you.”

*PRESIDENT TRUMAN* : [after Oppenheimer leaves] “Don’t let that cry-baby back in here!”

This scene portrays the first time Oppenheimer openly admits his deep feeling of regret and guilt after the bombing which he expressed to President Truman. It is most likely that he chose to confess about this as a form to “resolve” the counter-attitudinal tension between his belief and his actions, a phenomenon of cognitive dissonance. President Truman, however, was taken aback by the sudden confession and sees Oppenheimer’s behavior as rather foul. To further take the ‘sensitivity’ off of Oppenheimer, he completely attempts to diminish the scientist’s involvement in the causing of Japanese civilian casualties. After Oppenheimer left, President Truman used the word ‘cry-baby’ to dismissively describe his confession of guilt.

*NIELS BOHR* : “The power you’re about to reveal will forever outlive the Nazis. And the world is not prepared.”

*OPPENHEIMER* : “You can lift the stone without being ready for the snake that’s revealed.”

*NIELS BOHR* : “We have to make the politicians understand this isn’t a new weapon. It’s a new world. I’ll be out there doing what I can, but you... You’re an American Prometheus. The man who gave them the power to destroy themselves. And they’ll respect that.”

This scene portrays the discussion between Oppenheimer and Niels Bohr *vis-a-vis* the new reality unraveling, arguing that the buildup of the weapon is going to affect the world order, and how they are not ready to face what will unfold following its development in the future. Bohr referenced the infamous “American Prometheus” label that has been bestowed upon the scientist.

*ISIDOR RABI* : “An H-bomb is 1,000 times the power of an A-bomb. Its only intended target would be the largest cities. It’s a weapon of mass genocide.”

*LEWIS STRAUSS* : “Izzy. Draw some circles on this side of the map, where they would target us, starting with New York.”

*OTHERS* : “That’s fair. D.C.”

*FERMI* : “It’s a weapon of attack with no defensive value.”

*LEWIS STRAUSS* : “Deterrence.”

*BUSH* : “Deterrence? Do we really need more deterrence than our current arsenal of atomic bombs?”

*ISIDOR RABI* : “You, you drown in ten feet of water or 10,000, what’s the difference?”

During this meeting, Oppenheimer sat apart from the other parties involved. He stirred his drink, and as he was staring into the void, the sound of deafening feet stomping rings in his ears—those stomps belonged to the ones who cheered the death of Japanese civilians during the celebration of the atomic bombs’ success. Ironically, the stomping noises sound eerily similar to the sound of the atomic bomb explosion as its intensity builds up. The discussion that unfolds on the table highlights the intention to develop an even stronger bomb that is capable of larger mass destruction. Isidor Rabi argues that they have been too deep into the development of nuclear armaments, hence no turning back. He further minimizes the actual impact of the atomic bomb by stating that the destruction has been a protracted occurrence anyway, hence developing an even more powerful weapon would not make any difference. The room agrees as the inevitable arms race with the Soviet Union justifies the United States to keep pushing for the advancement of nuclear armaments.

*OPPENHEIMER* : “As I said, Teller’s designs are still as impractical as they were during the war.”

*E. LAWRENCE* : “A hydrogen bomb can be made to work, Oppie. You know that.”

*OPPENHEIMER* : “I don’t believe we should commit all our resources to that chance.”

*LEWIS STRAUSS* : “Then how would you have Truman reassure the American people?”

*OPPENHEIMER* : “Simply by limiting the spread of atomic weapons through international control on nuclear energy.”

It is evident that Oppenheimer did not want to blatantly express the internal guilt he felt after the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. His statements of rejection were equivocated; he did not explicitly mentioned that he was against the idea of genocide and bombing civilians, knowing that the current arms race was a result of unwanted and unforeseen circumstances. His indirectness is an indication that he did not want to let them see him as a threat to the development of the hydrogen bomb.

On the other hand, this point of conversation marks Oppenheimer’s attempt to find strategies with which he could prevent future occurrences of dissonance from happening. As one of the most renowned pioneers of the atomic bomb, there is an undetachable association between him and the development of future nuclear armaments, and the destruction it causes will indirectly be stringed to him without saying.

*VOLPE* : “Robert, you can’t win this thing. It’s a kangaroo court with a predetermined outcome. Why put yourself through more of it?”

OPPENHEIMER : *"I have my reasons."*  
 VOLPE : *"Alright. Good night."*  
 EINSTEIN : *"He has a point."*  
 OPPENHEIMER : *"I'm not sure you understand, Albert."*  
 EINSTEIN : *"No? I left my country, never to return. You served your country well. If this is the reward she offers you, then... perhaps you should turn your back on her."*  
 OPPENHEIMER : *"Damn it, I happen to love this country."*  
 EINSTEIN : *"Then tell them to go to hell."*

After a hearing-turned-trial that involved Lewis Strauss occurred, Oppenheimer was lightly confronted by Volpe and Albert Einstein, who argued that Oppenheimer did not stand a chance to win against the high-ranking officials that had predetermined his fate. In response, Oppenheimer maintained his stance on proceeding with the hearings, concerned about the country and what it might have caused in the future.



ROBB : *"Doctor, during your work on the hydrogen bomb, were you... deterred by any moral qualms?"*

OPPENHEIMER : *"Yes, of course."*  
 ROBB : *"But you still got on with your work, didn't you?"*  
 OPPENHEIMER : *"Yes, because this was work of exploration, it was not the preparation of a weapon."*  
 ROBB : *"You mean it was more of an academic excursion?"*  
 OPPENHEIMER : *"No, it is not an academic thing, whether you can build a hydrogen bomb. It's a matter of life and death."*  
 ROBB : *"By 1942, you were actively pushing the development of the hydrogen bomb, weren't you?"*  
 OPPENHEIMER : *"Pushing is not the right word. Supporting it and working on it, yes."*  
 ROBB : *"So when did these moral qualms become so strong that you actively opposed the development of the hydrogen bomb?"*  
 OPPENHEIMER : *"When it was suggested that it be the policy of the United States to make these things at all costs, without regard to the balance between these weapons and atomic weapons as part of our arsenal."*

During this hearing with the AEC, Oppenheimer restated that he was not inherently against the development of the hydrogen bomb, but what made him altered his stance is the horrifying fact that the United States chose to do what it did to Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and after learning the impact of what the atomic bomb had in 1945. Just like when he was involved in the development of the atomic bomb prior to the bombing, he was still on board with the idea of researching because the impact it had on humanity has yet to be discovered. Given the circumstances, Oppenheimer grew more vocal and persistent on his shift of stance despite the high potential of the revocation of his security clearance. This conversation confirms what Cooper (2019) argues, namely the dissonance one experiences will not be too severe if they are forced to advocate for something that contradicts their stances. Since Oppenheimer actively chose to continue partaking in this project from the beginning, the dissonance he experienced falls on the harder side. This

phenomenon explains the extreme measures he takes to compensate for his incautious decisions—to minimize the sense of guilt as well as align his actions and beliefs.

Oppenheimer had voluntarily received the offer to participate in the Manhattan Project and pursue the discovery of the atomic bomb, hence, the dissonance he experienced was greater than expected—because he was initially not in a situation in which he had absolutely no authoritative power. The lack of coercion and the existence of alternative options in the beginning lead him to burden the moral and ethical conflicts upon himself after learning the real impact of his creation.

## 5. Conclusion

To no surprise, Hollywood war-themed movies have always been a timeless blockbuster. In the past, Hollywood movies became a powerful propaganda tool to influence people's opinion in regards to U.S.' foreign policy and its state as a "superpower" nation, giving the nation a sense of security, superiority, and a genuine belief in American exceptionalism—which in practice was very much flawed due to its own contradictions. Hwang (2017) describes Hollywood's attempts to shed a positive light in justifying the atrocities they committed by the phrase "exceptions to American Exceptionalism". However, as time progresses and the U.S. government puts less burden on Hollywood movies for propaganda, more movies depicting the "other" side of the U.S. have been produced, showcasing the tragedy the U.S. have painted in history. In *Oppenheimer* (2023), the movie contains elements that contradict and allude to Tyrrell's (2022) concept of American exceptionalism. On one hand, the biopic defies the conventional "nature" of war-related Hollywood movies. With the depiction of the bombing through Oppenheimer's point of view as a tragedy rather than a victory, the biopic juxtaposes the concept of American exceptionalism by not portraying the United States as a savior, superior, and special nation as it shares the same tragedies with other countries within the context of committing war crimes. Despite the justifications that had been circulated pertaining to the United States' act of bombing, the adverse impact on humanity is far too significant to outweigh the breakthroughs this invention made. Therefore, instead of using the opportunity to sweep it under the rug, the biopic openly admits to the shortcomings and consequences of the aforementioned bombings.

However, the movie also portrays the relevance of Ian Tyrrell's view on American exceptionalism. What Tyrrell categorizes as the broader and general perception of American exceptionalism was embodied by the United States officials when they deem that Oppenheimer was no longer loyal to the country as he attempted to halt the development of the hydrogen bomb. They had suspicions about his integrity due to his past relationships and close associations with the Communist Party and conducted hearings in which fellow colleagues of Oppenheimer were asked to become witnesses and vouch for his loyalty and integrity. Their behavior reflects a form of Tyrrell's concept of American Exceptionalism to an extent—to be defensive is to protect the country they care about, even if it means disregarding other beliefs and deeming the belief that the United States stands for as the righteous stance.

This research also delves deep into the excerpts and parts of the movie by contextualizing and analyzing the setting and conversations that picture Oppenheimer's shift of stance and experience with cognitive dissonance, starting with instances in which Oppenheimer defended the decision to use the bomb against Japan despite the Nazi—the initial subject of bombing—not being a threat anymore, up until he learned the extent of the damage that the bomb had caused and his attempts to "correct" himself upon realization by refusing to endorse for the development of the hydrogen bomb to align his

actions to what he perceives as the right and ethical thing to do in order to minimize the dissonance.

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