



Dr. J. Robert Oppenheimer

**ALAS Speech Project**  
A Collaborative Work By:

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### **A Brief Description of the How and Why of My Studying Method**

I learn through repetition, and was finding it ever more difficult to read books enough times to easily recall their contents. One evening back in November 2006, I was doing research online and got directed to Amazon.com. My eyes were drawn to the “Also Available In” box of a particular book title, and I read the following description of an existing edition: audiobook. I rather suddenly got the idea to visit the “Westchester Library Online Catalogue” to see if any of the books I was reading were offered in this format. This way I could borrow these audiobooks from the library and listen to them over and over while working on the piece (or pieces) they feed. I discovered that the Westchester Library System is a seemingly endless resource. After roughly nine months, I am pleased to report that this revised way of learning has increased the amount of information I take in, improved my ability to retain what I study, helped my pronunciation skills, and expanded the breadth of “Six Million” and “576.”

### **The “ALAS Speech Project”**

I have a Fellowes Book Stand on my kitchen table. I use it to hold the books or documents I am currently studying so that I can easily read from them at mealtimes. I have several essays and speeches, either by Dr. J. Robert Oppenheimer or related to his works, in the mix. One of the outstanding pieces in this collection is the unrevised transcript of the lecture he gave to the Association of Los Alamos Scientists (ALAS) on 2 November 1945. *No one left the auditorium that night unmoved. Oppie had spoken to them on intimate terms, articulating many of their doubts, fears and hopes. For decades afterwards, his words would resonate. The world he had described was as*

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*subtle and complicated as the quantum world of the atom itself. He had begun humbly, and yet, like the best of politicians, he had spoken a simple truth that cut to the core of the issue. The world had changed; Americans would behave unilaterally at their peril.* (Kai Bird and Martin J. Sherwin. **American Prometheus: The Triumph and Tragedy of J. Robert Oppenheimer.** Knopf Publishing Group: New York. Copyright © 2005 by Kai Bird and Martin J. Sherwin. p. 335.)

I had not looked at my copy of this transcript since mid-November. On the morning of Sunday, 8 July 2007, I sat down at my kitchen table and was compelled to read it. Before long, I thought of how great it would be to have a recording of it so that I could use my current studying method to learn it through and through. It also occurred to me that I'm not the only person who should be familiar with this speech, and furthermore "it is my duty to document it and spread it around as I would seeds." But who would narrate it? Gee, I could. Now *that* scared me. When one of my ideas scares me that is the almighty signal that it has to be shifted from the mental activity category to the execution category. But who would be willing to work with me? Then I thought of my friend, the singer-songwriter Fred Gillen Jr. His expertise and state of the art recording facilities actually made such a project feasible. We have collaborated before, but on visual arts-related projects. I have always dreamed of working with him in his element and wondered if he would be willing to record my full-length reading of this speech. I marched upstairs to my office and sent Fred an email. I heard back from him later that morning. He wrote that he "would like to work with me on this" and asked when I was available to come to his studio. I considered the fact that I needed to practice reading the transcript out loud and emailed him a few dates in the last two weeks of July. Then, on Tuesday, 10 July 2007 I recognized the fact that Monday, 16 July 2007 was the sixty-second anniversary of Trinity. (Simply put: Trinity was the first test of a nuclear weapon and is usually considered as the dawn of the Atomic Age.) Next, I relived the conclusion of the 1980 film by Jon Else named "The Day After Trinity: J. Robert Oppenheimer & The Atomic Bomb." In this scene, Dr. Oppenheimer recounts what he had thought when he witnessed the power of the Trinity shot:

**We knew the world would not be the same. A few people laughed, a few people cried. Most people were silent. I remembered the line from the Hindu scripture, the "Bhagavad-Gita": Vishnu is trying to persuade the Prince that he should do his duty and to impress him he takes on his multi-armed form and says, "Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds." I suppose we all thought that, one way or another.**

**SPECIAL NOTE:** If you have access to the Internet, I suggest you type in “Oppenheimer Trinity Test” on Google Video and left click on the “You Tube” link named **“in alamogordo, new mexico, on july 16, 1945.”** It’s a two-minute video featuring this very scene. This way you will hear and see Dr. Oppenheimer speak these words.

With all of this in mind, I called Fred to see if he was available on July 16 to record the speech. He was, and I proceeded to practice reading it aloud over the course of the next five days. But there is something more. I also felt it was ever fitting to distribute copies of the it by hand, or with the help of the United States Postal Service, on either 6 August 2007, the sixty-second anniversary of Hiroshima; or 9 August 2007, the sixty-second anniversary of Nagasaki. Why? Well, once again I am going to turn to Dr. Oppenheimer. But this time, by way of an excerpt from “The Making of the Atomic Bomb” by Richard Rhodes:

**When Niels Bohr arrived at Los Alamos in 1943, writes Robert Oppenheimer, “his first serious question was, ‘Is it really big enough?’” The bomb, Bohr meant: big enough to end world war, big enough to challenge mankind to find its way beyond man-made death to a world more open and more humane. “I do not know whether it was,” Oppenheimer adds; “it did finally get to be.” By 1955, if not before, the bomb had worked an essential change upon the world. Oppenheimer had already found succinct metaphoric expression of that change in a commencement address he delivered early in 1946. “It did not take atomic weapons to make war terrible,” he said then. “...It did not take atomic weapons to make man want peace, a peace that would last. But the atomic bomb was the turn of the screw. It has made the prospect of future war unendurable. It has led us up those last few steps to the mountain pass; and beyond there is a different country.” (Richard Rhodes. The Making of the Atomic Bomb. Simon and Schuster, Inc. New York, London, Toronto, Sydney, and Tokyo. 1986. Page 778.)**

I began studying Dr. Oppenheimer’s life and life’s work on Monday, 13 October 2003. I understood on Thursday, 16 October 2003 that he was more than “The Father of the Atomic Bomb.” On the morning of Friday, 17 October 2003 I promised to educate as many people as possible about his contributions as a teacher, physicist, national hero, and public servant. The “ALAS Speech Project” is another way I have chosen to fulfill my promise to Dr. Oppenheimer. Therefore it teaches us the value of maintaining our loyalty to others by following through on the commitments that we make to others.