

OPENING REMARKS

Senator Jeff Bingaman, New Mexico

Let me first say I'm honored to be here, particularly at a symposium like this that is attended by many who lived this history as well as many who have devoted their careers to writing it and bringing it alive for the American public and the whole world. This is an exciting subject and Cindy I complement you, as President of the Atomic Heritage Foundation, for organizing this and for the effort that is being made to put together the matching funds for the \$700,000 challenge grant that was appropriated through the public-private partnership called Save America's Treasures, in order to help preserve the history of the Manhattan Project. There's obviously no more important and more fascinating chapter of American history — American science and engineering history, in particular. For someone like myself, who grew up a hundred miles west of the Trinity site in southwest New Mexico, this has been a subject of fascination for all my life: how this group of extraordinary individuals came together — scientists and engineers primarily, but also others. I know General Groves is going to be spoken about here at length as well, and there are many with a scientific and engineering background who came together to marshal the support of the political leadership of this country to put the country on the path to pursuing the Manhattan Project. It was pursued to a successful conclusion, the bomb was developed, the war was ended, and there are so many exciting aspects to this history that it's hard to know where to begin. I will leave most of the description of the history to the superb group of historians that we have here to speak today.

Let me just relate three of the stories that I've always enjoyed very much that have come out of this history, because they are things that I've encountered in the reading that I've done. The first is right from the book Richard Rhodes did, his extremely well-received book, "The Making of the Atomic Bomb." It talks about the difficult interface between the military establishment, or the military culture, and the scientific culture, and it involves of course Leo Szilard, and I'll just read a very small portion of it:

“Somewhere along the way [General] Groves put Szilard under surveillance. The Brigadier still harbored the incredible notion that Leo Szilard might be a German agent. [...] The surveillance of an innocent but eccentric man makes gumshoe comedy. Szilard traveled to Washington on June 20, 1943, and in preparation for the visit an Army counterintelligence agent reviewed his file: *‘The [...] Subject is of Jewish extraction, has a fondness for delicacies and frequently makes purchases in delicatessen stores, usually eats his breakfast in drug stores and other meals in restaurants, walks a great deal when he cannot secure a taxi, usually is shaved in a barber shop, speaks occasionally in a foreign tongue, and associates mostly with people of Jewish extraction. He is inclined to be rather absent-minded and eccentric, and will start out a door, turn around and come back, go out on the street without his coat or hat and frequently looks up and down the street as if he were watching for someone or did not know for sure where he wanted to go.’*”¹

And it concludes by saying, “Armed with these profundities a Washington agent observed the Subject arriving at the Wardman Park Hotel at [...] 8:30 P.M. on June 20 [...]. Szilard worked the next morning at the Carnegie Institution with Captain Lavender.”² So I think the history makes clear the appropriateness of the site that we are convened in today.

Let me go on to a little different aspect of the history and that is some of the history of the policy and politics that combined to commit the country to the Manhattan Project. I’ve always very much enjoyed the stories of Senator McKellar from Tennessee. Many of you may have heard this story, but it’s one that my former colleague Senator Sasser liked to use very much when he was in the Senate. He’s talking about how they persuaded Congress to appropriate the funds for the Manhattan Project.

“[Secretary of War Henry Stimson] hinted in a meeting with several Senators that he needed McKellar to hide \$2 billion in an appropriation

¹ Richard Rhodes, *The Making of the Atomic Bomb*, 1st ed. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988), pp. 506–7.

² Rhodes 507.

bill for a secret project that might bring the war to an early end. That night, McKellar could not sleep. He returned to Stimson's office the next day to inquire further. 'Can you keep a secret?' Stimson asked. 'We are going to split the atom.' 'Here we are in the middle of a big war,' McKellar shot back, 'and you are fooling around, trying to split the atom.' Legend has it that McKellar took his concerns directly to the top and was actually with the President, who had summoned him to the White House to reiterate the request, when it finally dawned upon McKellar what Stimson had in mind. President Roosevelt asked, 'Senator McKellar, can you hide two billion dollars for this supersecret national defense project?' Senator McKellar, not missing a beat, replied, 'Well, Mr. President, of course I can. And where in Tennessee do you want me to hide it?'³

And the third and final story that I will impose on you is one that Richard Feynman tells. Richard Feynman recounts some of the early problems with security at Los Alamos. That's a subject we've spent a lot of time on in recent years and it's not a new subject, so let me give you this short account of Richard Feynman's:

"[...at] the very beginning we had terribly important secrets. We'd worked out lots of stuff about uranium, how it worked, and all this stuff was in documents that were in filing cabinets that were made out of wood that had on them little ordinary common padlocks. Various things made by the shop were on the cabinets, like a rod that would go down and then a padlock to hold it, but it was always just a padlock. Furthermore, you could get the stuff, without even opening the padlock out of these wooden cabinets: you just tilt it over backwards and from the bottom drawer you could extract the papers. Every time we had a meeting of the whole group [these were the meetings in Los Alamos, of course], every time we had a meeting of the whole group, and everybody together I would get up and I'd say that we have important secrets and we shouldn't keep them in such things. These were such poor locks, that we need better locks. And so one day Teller got up at the meeting and said to me,

³ William Frist and J. Lee Annis, Jr., *Tennessee Senators, 1911–2001: Portraits of Leadership in a Century of Change* (Lanham, MD: Madison Books, 1999), pp. 29–30.

“Well, I don’t keep my most important secrets in my filing cabinet, I keep them in my desk drawer. Isn’t that better?” I said “I don’t know, I haven’t seen your desk drawer.” Well, he’s sitting near the front of the meeting, I’m sitting further back. So the meeting continues and I sneak out of the meeting and I go down to see his desk drawer. I don’t even have to pick the lock on the desk drawer. It turns out that if you put your hand in the back underneath you can pull the paper out like those toilet paper dispensers; you pull out one, it pulls another, it pulls another. I emptied the whole damn drawer, took everything out, and put it away to one side and then went up on the higher floor and came back. The meeting is just ending and everybody is just coming out I run up to catch up with Teller and say, “Oh, by the way, let me see your desk drawer. So he says, ‘Certainly,’ so we walk into his office and he shows me the desk and I look at it and say that looks pretty good to me. I said, “Let’s see what you have in there.” “I’d be very glad to show it to you,” he says putting in the key and opening the drawer, “if you hadn’t already seen it yourself.” The trouble with playing a trick on a highly intelligent man like Mr. Teller is that the time it takes him to figure out from the moment that he sees there is something wrong till he understands exactly what happened is too damn small to give you any real pleasure!”⁴

This is history that each generation needs to know. I’m sure there are extremely important lessons for us in this history, and again I commend the Carnegie Institution for the symposium and I commend all of you for your role in this history, and also for your efforts to be sure that it’s preserved for future generations. Thank you very much.

⁴ Richard P. Feynman, *The Pleasure of Finding Things Out: The Best Short Works of Richard P. Feynman* (Cambridge, MA: Perseus Books, 1999), pp. 70–71.