



The General and the Genius: Groves and Oppenheimer, the Unlikely Partnership That Built the Atom Bomb

James Kunetka

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The origin story of nuclear weaponry is brought to compelling light through the experiences of the two men who spearheaded the Manhattan Project.

In the history of science and technology, there may be no more unlikely pairing than the two men who spearheaded the Manhattan Project—a vast enterprise tasked with designing and developing the first atomic bombs. Starting in 1943, General Leslie Richard Groves, a gruff, hard-charging officer of the Army Corps of Engineers, joined with the legendary physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer to lead an extraordinary force of thousands of scientists and military personnel in the creation of the ultimate weapon, which brought an end to the war in the Pacific.

This is the story told in exhaustive and often compelling detail by James Kunetka, a retired associate vice president of the University of Texas and the author of two previous books about Los Alamos and the Manhattan Project.

Kunetka does an excellent job of describing the challenges faced by the odd couple of Groves and Oppenheimer. With a nearly impossible deadline of less than three years, these men oversaw the unprecedented effort of building a weapon beyond anyone's imagination and with consequences no one could accurately predict. Groves had "the expertise and skills necessary for the construction and management necessary to deliver uranium and plutonium, but not for the construction of the bombs themselves." That task required the chain-smoking theoretical physicist known for his "ubiquitous cigarette or pipe and his slightly disheveled tweed jacket."

It's hard to imagine today, but during those fateful years, no one actually knew just how powerful the weapon they were designing might be. Among those present for the detonation of "Fat Man," the first atom bomb prototype, in Alamogordo, New Mexico, some feared the explosion might "ignite the atmosphere." While Kunetka expertly portrays the vast scientific enterprise from beginning to end, in recounting the days leading up to the pioneering test explosion on July 16, 1945, *The General and the Genius* achieves the suspense of a well-crafted thriller. For anyone interested in the "origin story" of nuclear weapons, this is must reading.

LEE POLEVOI (Fall 2015)

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