

PERSONAL AND CONFIDENTIAL

OFFICE OF SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT

1530 P. Street, N. W.

INTER-OFFICE MEMORANDUM

March 9, 1944.

TO: Dr. J. B. Conant  
FROM: V. Bush *V.B.*  
SUBJECT: Historian for Manhattan Project

UNITED STATES ATOMIC ENERGY COMMISSION  
WASHINGTON, D. C. 20545  
HISTORICAL DOCUMENT NUMBER 178

What would you think of the idea of a historian for the Manhattan Project? I know that General Groves is taking steps to see that the records on this matter are kept in very complete form. However, it might be a worthwhile thing to do to supplement this by a scientific record prepared by some scientific historian, not that the whole thing could probably be later published but rather that it would form a good basis for such parts as should be published at the appropriate time. I have in mind that if a man like K. K. Darrow, who is a very careful individual, were duly cleared and put on this job he could produce a much more complete and authoritative record than would be possible by someone entering into the matter later. This, I judge, would have nothing to do with priority in invention which should be determined by the Patent Office. It should be broader than this and should be more concerned with the subject of scientific credit more generally. I have in mind that such a historian would consult with all the individuals who have contributed significantly of their ideas, such as, for example, Fermi, Lawrence, and so on, would look at their memoranda, and would prepare a general summary, including in this comments by prominent men on the work of others, such, for example, as the estimate by Arthur Compton of some of Fermi's contributions to be explicit, and so on. The question arises whether there will be any danger to security in so doing, and also the question whether this would tend to stir up emotions or whether it would, on the contrary, make people feel generally that a really careful and serious job was being done of trying to get the record straight. I had in mind suggesting such a procedure to General Groves if you thought it worth mentioning.

*Swart*

*Hold*

*1/5/44*

OFFICE FOR EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT  
OFFICE OF SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT  
1530 P STREET NW.  
WASHINGTON, D. C.

VANNEVAR BUSH  
Director

Zone 25

March 15, 1944

MEMORANDUM

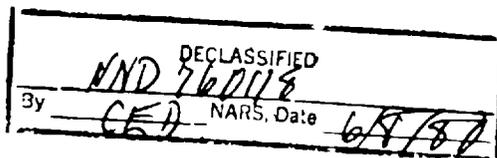
UNITED STATES ATOMIC ENERGY COMMISSION  
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To: Dr. Vannevar Bush  
From: James B. Conant  
Re: Historian for Manhattan Project

Your memorandum of March 9 leads me to put down on paper some thoughts which have been forming in my mind for some time. I have discussed them informally with Arthur Compton and H. D. Smyth of Princeton, who has been working with Compton on certain phases of his project as a sort of compiler and coordinator.

I feel that the immediate task in regard to "writing up" the Manhattan project is the preparation of a pamphlet about as large as the Rubber Report which would set forth in elementary technical language the essential development of the various aspects of the project. I feel that such a report should be ready for issuance to the public at the time when the President of the United States is willing to announce that the gadget has been successfully employed, or it has been proved that it can be successfully employed, or at such time as he may be forced to make a revelation, even if neither of the first two objectives have been reached. It is my thought that the President of the United States should have a message ready for Congress in which he recommends the basic legislation necessary to hold this project in proper national status. The details of that legislation we need not consider now, but to my mind it should consist of the establishment of a special commission with wide powers to license research in this whole area, handling of certain materials and provide by suitable mechanisms and by appropriations from Congress for furtherance of research.

It seems to me that it will be of great importance to the security of the essential military secrets and to the furtherance of rational public discussion to have issued at a given time a first-class document. This document would be somewhat more technical than the reports which have been sent to the President but at the same time would not be as technical as a summary paper addressed to a group of atomic physicists. It would be my



March 15, 1944

idea that when this document were prepared it would be agreed to in advance by perhaps twenty-five or fifty of the leading scientists on the project. Their agreeing to it would mean that they subscribe both to the presentation of the facts and to the assignment of credit implied or directly stated in the document.

When such a document were issued, those in charge of the classified material which has accumulated in this project could decree that no one could reveal or discuss any details of the project which were not covered in the document issued officially through the President. This would tend to put a limit to discussion, both privately and in the Sunday papers, but at the same time provide sufficient material so that the national and international aspects of the project could be debated with a considerable degree of intelligence.

Frankly, I have not thought it wise as yet to present this proposal to the Military Policy Committee or even to General Groves, as it may be that the Army officials will feel either that this is premature or it is the wrong way of proceeding. I hope that you, however, as the chief civilian involved in this whole enterprise will give this point of view careful consideration as I feel that some such move will be considered vital by many of the leading scientists now engaged in the work.

I should remark parenthetically that the subsequent publication of actual scientific papers based on the portion of the work which can be released would, I suppose, be under the control of the commission to be set up by Congressional legislation.

I feel that we should have somebody at work in the near future getting such a document together. In a sense he would also be an historian though unlike the case of Baxter and the MDRC I should place less emphasis on the administrative background for I should question the advisability of bringing anyone now in contact with certain papers which I have accumulated in an-historical file and which I think for the time being should be seen by a very few in the interests of security.

My suggestion would be to get Smyth, who I am sure would be very glad to do the job, to undertake preparing the document I have in mind. I think he would do it well and already has just the right background. Perhaps after the document were prepared and before it were ready for publication then one who was used to presenting popular science, such as Darrow, might be brought in as a collaborator, but I should question the wisdom or need of bringing in another man who would have to know so much at this time.

I shall be glad to discuss this with you, or, when you feel it advisable, with General Groves.

JBC  
J.B.C.