



The Business of the Atomic Secret: Discerning the Cultural Dimension in the Strategic Economy of the Cold War

Robert Dalton Harris and Diane DeBlois

The Atomic Energy Commission was designed “to get the whole atomic energy business in civilian hands completely.” But once in civilian (that is, political) hands, atomic energy was too linked to defense strategy to avoid military control, and too much “big business” to escape government control. In this paper, we focus on a little-known bureaucrat, Bryan F. LaPlante of the Atomic Energy Commission (to whose personal files we had access), to explore the evolution of the military-industrial complex, 1946-1961. Despite the culture of secrecy, atomic energy policy provided an attractive career alternative for America’s brightest scientists, as well as business and political bases for promoting America as a force for “good.” LaPlante was working within an emerging culture that provided a strategic blend of business, political, and social involvement as an alternative to the market and a limit on the analytics of rational action.

The Cold War was often styled as an economic contest, a struggle between the free-market capitalism of the United States and the Communism of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR).¹ This may have been the case for the respective consumer economies, but for both countries the strategic business of making atom bombs was an invention of the state and conducted in secret. In the United States, then, the “invisible hand” was a mailed fist and our economy was at war for five decades.²

Agency theory, whose proponents articulate the governance of business in the absence of free markets in game theoretic terms of the rational actor, may be used to understand the political economy of the United States during this

¹ Quotation in abstract: President Harry Truman to the Atomic Energy Commission’s first chair, David E. Lilienthal.

² Ann Markusen and Joel Yudken, *Dismantling the Cold War Economy* (New York, 1992), 1.

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period.³ On the other hand, networks have been invoked to explain our victory in the Cold War, suggesting that social and cultural explanations should be sought (as we do in this paper):⁴

Seeking ever better weapons against the Soviet Union, the United States engaged countless corporations, universities, and private laboratories, along with their own internal research laboratories, in developing sophisticated weaponry. In the kind of controlled experiment that rarely happens in the real world, the Soviet Union, a totalitarian state, kept its weapons research within the all-encompassing bureaucracy of the Communist state. By 1989 the experiment was over. . . . Government by network had won; bureaucratic government had lost.⁵

Operation Crossroads

A military-science complex staged a sort of “World’s Fair” in the postwar interregnum of discussions for sharing control over the program inherited from the Commander-in-Chief for the manufacture of strategic weapons during the war. There were just two exhibits: *Able* (July 1, 1946) and *Baker* (July 25, 1946), Nagasaki-type atom bombs that performed in a laboratory setting in the Marshall Islands, obliterating Bikini Atoll and damaging 95 ships.

One of the business observers on the Joint Chiefs of Staff Evaluation Board, Bradley Dewey, rightly concluded that, unlike all other explosive devices, which were tactical weapons, the atom bomb was essentially strategic. But, “because the atomic bomb is a super-weapon it does not follow that we must hold that it means the extinction of civilization. It could mean shorter wars and wars less destructive to our civilization.”⁶ Dewey also endorsed offensive strength being the best defense, and quoted a conclusion from the Board’s second preliminary report (which was deleted from the

³ Linda R. Cohen and Roger G. Noll, *The Technology Pork Barrel* (Washington, D.C., 1991).

⁴ Our research is based on an extensive private library of manuscript material and published books, pamphlets, and ephemera, including the personal correspondence files of Byron F. LaPlante. Most of the books and pamphlets are included in Leif Laudamus and Ramesh S. Krishnamurthy, *The History of Atomic Energy Collection at Oregon State University, A Catalogue of Holdings* (New York, 1999).

⁵ Elaine C. Karmarck, *Applying 21st-Century Government to the Challenge of Homeland Security* (New York, 2002), 30.

⁶ Bradley Dewey, *The Atomic Bomb and Common Sense* (reprint of 11 Sept. 1946 address to the American Chemical Society, provided by the Dewey and Almy Chemical Company of Cambridge, Mass., to its stockholders on 7 Oct. 1946). Tipped-in to the pamphlet is a color U.S. Navy photograph of the Bikini bomb cloud, mentioned by vice-president Charles Almy in a covering letter: “You will be interested, too, in noting the balloon of ours which happened to float across the foreground just as the automatically timed Navy photograph used as our frontispiece was taken.”

government's published version): ". . . so long as atomic bombs *could conceivably be used against this country* the Board urges the continued production of atomic material and research and development in all fields related to atomic warfare."⁷ The clouds of these bombs became icons of both atomic threat and security; they were used to illustrate a broad range of government and civilian publications in the following year (see Figures 1 and 2).⁸


The production of this strategic threat was to be shared between the legislative and executive branches of government. An atomic energy bill was long debated in Congress. Clare Boothe Luce called its final shape "a radical new departure for the American people."⁹ She also characterized the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) as a "commissariat": designed to monopolize innovation.¹⁰ Luce, though trenchant in her observations, was nonetheless a supporter of the AEC. She was called a Socialist-Republican, committed to government control but averse to Communism. The McMahon Act, signed by President Harry S. Truman into law on August 1, 1946, right after *Operation Crossroads*, established the Joint Committee on Atomic Energy (JCAE) for Congressional oversight of every aspect of the national atomic energy program except appropriation, and the AEC, to be appointed by the president, for the management of the atomic industry (under civil control but with a double lock on freedom, in terms of both informational asymmetry and monopoly).

⁷ Emphasis added; this was before any other government had developed an atom bomb: the "concept" was cultural, harking back to H. G. Wells. H. G. Wells, *The World Set Free* (London, U.K., 1914): "One of the first novels depicting an atomic war. The conflict ends with the establishment of a committee of strong men who impose a world government and a monopoly on atomic weapons"; see Paul Briens, *Nuclear Holocausts: Atomic War in Fiction, 1895-1984* (Kent State, Ohio, 1987), 335.

⁸ Among them, the covers of *Your Army Air Forces* (the official recruiting information booklet) "7-11-46"; *Bikini Observations and Their Significance by Haraden Pratt and Arthur Van Dyck* ("Official United States Scientific Observers"). Pamphlet edition of a paper presented November 6 at a joint meeting of the Institute of Radio Engineers, the American Institute of Electrical Engineers, and the Radio Club of America, that would appear in the December issue of the *Proceedings of the I.R.E.*; *Only Then Shall We Find Courage* by Albert Einstein, reprinted from *The New York Times Magazine* by the Emergency Committee of Atomic Scientists; *Bikini and Tomorrow: An Editorial Essay from the San Francisco Chronicle*; pamphlet available from the Special Services Offices of the newspapers. In 1947, the Chrysler Corporation published *Secret*, revealing its role in the Manhattan Project, but with most of the illustrations coming from the Bikini tests.

⁹ Richard G. Hewlett and Oscar E. Anderson, Jr., *A History of the United States Atomic Energy Commission*, vol. 1: *The New World, 1939-1946* (University Park, Pa., 1962), 519.

¹⁰ Harold Orlans, *Contracting for Atoms* (Washington, D.C., 1967), 195.



What the discovery of atomic energy means to you and your children.

I'm A Frightened Man

By Dr. Harold C. Urey
as told to
MICHAEL AMRINE

DR. UREY is one of the scientists who directed the work on the atomic bomb. He is professor of chemistry at the University of Chicago. He has achieved world fame and the Nobel Prize in Science for his work in nuclear energy research.

In this article he speaks for the overwhelming majority of those who released atomic energy—the 1500 scientists who are his fellow members in the Federation of Atomic Scientists. These men feel a deep responsibility to tell every citizen what they know of the tremendous force—for good and evil—which they have released.

Additional copies of this article may be obtained at \$2 per hundred. Kits of material for study and discussion leaders are available at \$1 each. Write: *National Committee on Atomic Information*, 1621 K Street, N. W., Washington, D. C.

U. S. ARMY A.A.F. PHOTO

Figure 1. Atomic Threat

Source: "I'm a Frightened Man," by Harold C. Urey for the Federation of Atomic Scientists, pamphlet distributed by the National Committee on Atomic Information, 1946. U.S. Army A.A.F. Photo of the *Able* atomic explosion at Bikini, July 1, 1946, from the authors' collection.

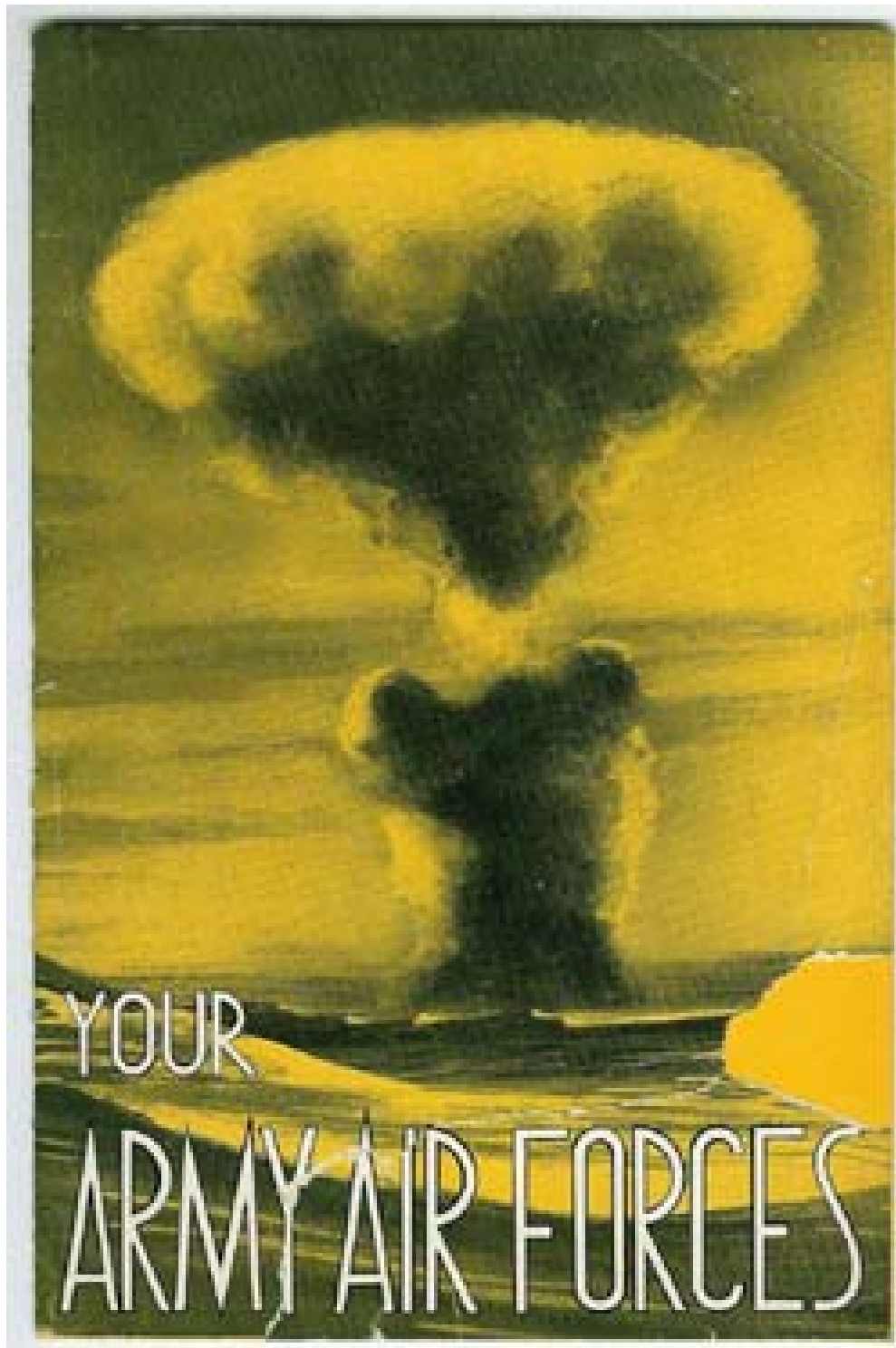


FIGURE 2. Atomic Security

Source: "Your Army Air Forces," official recruitment pamphlet, July 11, 1946. Painting from the Army A.A.F. Photo of the *Able* atomic explosion, from the authors' collection.

Bryan F. LaPlante

The personal papers of Bryan F. LaPlante provide a window into how this non-business business functioned. LaPlante, a Roman Catholic, was invited to join the bureaucratic networks set up in 1946 because of the personal connections he had already formed. He operated as a relatively faceless facilitator for atomic energy policy and became involved in the strategies of Republican politics; although he sought a professional life outside government, his career remained attached to government agencies.

David E. Lilienthal, former director of the Tennessee Valley Authority whose major customer had been the Manhattan Engineering District (MED) facility at Oak Ridge, was appointed by Truman as chair of the AEC. Lilienthal clearly delineated the role of military supervision of the civilian commission in a letter to “all military personnel currently assigned to the Manhattan District” on December 21, 1946.¹¹ Bryan F. LaPlante, then an Army Air Force captain working as a security and intelligence officer in the Corps of Engineers for the Manhattan Engineering District in Washington, D.C., received one of these letters.

LaPlante proffered a job description based on his experience: his previous work as aide to General Groves in charge of MED; his special duties for Bernard M. Baruch, John Hancock, and other members of the U.N. Committee for the International Control of Atomic Energy; for the presidents of du Pont, General Electric, Carbide and Carbon Chemicals Co., Monsanto, Chrysler, Kellogg, and so forth; his acting as “official greeter” for Gen. Groves to numerous college presidents and eminent scientists including Lawrence,

¹¹ The letter, in part:

My associates on the Atomic Energy Commission have asked me to convey to you our welcome to become associated with us in carrying forward the purposes of the Atomic Energy Act. The effective date of your reassignment, as you know, is set for January 1, 1947, but we wanted you to have this message from us before that date. / Although Congress in passing the Atomic Energy Act has established a civilian agency for the development of atomic energy, it is perfectly apparent that a large group of military personnel is needed to assist us in making the transition from Military to civilian operation. Your loyalty and experience are greatly needed to carry out the responsibilities and to make the most of the great opportunities which Congress and the President have given to this Commission. We are now working out an agreement with the Secretary of War regarding a schedule of dates for your release. / General Groves has congratulated you upon your war-time achievements. We join him in praise of your accomplishments and look forward to your loyal and effective support as long as you are detailed to the Commission.

Bryan F. LaPlante Papers, collection of the authors.

Conant, Bohr, and Oppenheimer.¹² LaPlante sometimes called himself “a messenger boy,” but his liaison work was more nuanced than that.¹³

After eight paragraphs outlining security issues, LaPlante’s formal job description admonished:

Due to the nature of the duties and responsibilities of the Atomic Energy Headquarters Security Office as compared with those of the field security installations, and the fact that it is located in Washington, D.C., incumbent must have a complete and thorough knowledge and background in security training and investigative techniques and procedures as well as an understanding and wide experience in the practical application of those techniques peculiar to the Washington Area where his daily business is primarily concerned with persons of the highest caliber and standing in their field of work, such as diplomatic representatives of the foreign embassies and top representatives of our United States Government agencies. The previous contacts and experience in dealing with these persons more effectively enable incumbent to obtain the strict adherence and cooperation of all persons concerned in these top administrative, diplomatic, and scientific levels, and their compliance with the Atomic Energy Commission Headquarters Security and Intelligence Program.¹⁴

In addition, further, in pencil: “Note. The consequence of error is very serious in this position.”

LaPlante collected doodles “swept” from the meeting rooms of the AEC. Many of these doodles were annotated, with a seating plan, for a meeting of the AEC with its scientific General Advisory Committee (GAC) and with military and budgetary monitors, November 23, 1947.

The basic table seating was for the GAC: J. Robert Oppenheimer as chair sat at a head table (to the left in the plan) with his Los Alamos assistant John Manley as secretary. To his left, near microphone #3, were ranged: Isador Isaac Rabi, the 1944 Nobel Laureate in Physics and a wartime leader at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) Radiation Laboratory and, with Niels Bohr, senior advisors to J. Robert Oppenheimer at Los Alamos (earlier in November he had opposed funding for Ernest Lawrence’s Berkeley lab and its Bevatron in favor of a less expensive accelerator under his wing at the Brookhaven lab); followed by Enrico Fermi, who had won the 1938 Nobel Prize for Physics and had achieved the world’s first self-sustained nuclear reaction in 1942 and who had gone back to teaching in Chicago after leaving Los Alamos; then Cyril Smith, a metallurgist working for the National Defense Research Committee; and Glenn Theodore Seaborg, a chemist from Berkeley whose research team had first isolated plutonium (and who would later chair the AEC).

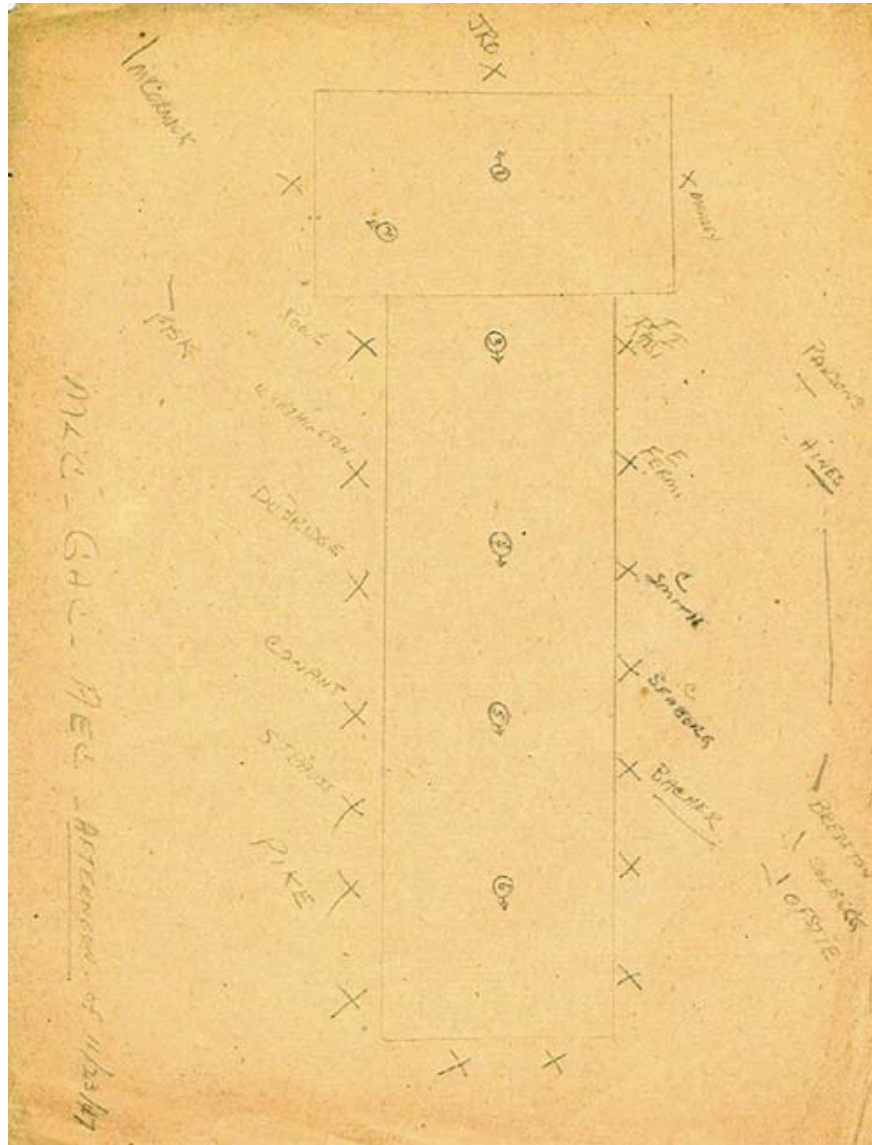
¹² LaPlante Papers: 2-page typed draft, undated, “Special Assistant to the Secretary.”

¹³ LaPlante Papers: 27 Jan. 1954, typed memo copy to Gerard C. Smith about participation in the Science Talent Search.

¹⁴ LaPlante Papers: 2-page typed memo when his salary was raised to CAF 13.

Across the table, to Oppenheimer's right, were seated: James Bryant Conant, a chemist and president of Harvard; Lee DuBridge, a physicist who had been director of MIT's Rad Lab; Hood Worthington of du Pont, who had been responsible for building the atomic facility at Hanford; Hartley Rowe, a physicist from Los Alamos who would spark debate over the morality of the Super at later meetings with the comment: "We built one Frankenstein" (see Figure 3).

FIGURE 3



Sketch by Byran F. LaPlante of the seating arrangement for a joint meeting in Washington of the AEC, GAC, MLC, 23 Nov. 1947.

Source: Bryan F. LaPlante Papers, authors' collection.

Behind them, away from the table but with a microphone accessible, were the “big guns” of the AEC: General James McCormack, who was head of the AEC’s Division of Military Application and the AEC’s recently appointed director of research; and James B. Fisk, the watchdog of government spending who had been against further government funding of national civilian laboratories. Three months before this meeting, a revitalized alliance between the government and the Berkeley lab had been drafted under Ernest Lawrence’s leadership at Bohemian Grove in California. Fisk’s presence embodied a challenge for science to become involved in political questions with respect to basic research.

Seated at the foot of the table were three commissioners from the AEC appointed by Truman: Robert Bacher from CalTech, the only scientist on the commission; Lewis Strauss, a self-made millionaire investment banker, former aide to President Herbert Hoover, and rear admiral in the Bureau of Ordnance during the war who would later become the chair of the Commission; and Sumner Pike, who would vote against the hydrogen bomb in subsequent meetings. To Oppenheimer’s left, against the wall, sat a Military Liaison Committee of five, including William “Deacon” Parsons of the U.S. Navy who had been in charge of the design and delivery of the “uranium-gun” bomb, *Little Man*, to Hiroshima. Four of the doodles from that meeting illustrate scientific, political, social, and industrial themes, respectively (see Figures 4-7).

Doodle #1. Rabi played with words like Curie/puerile, synoptic/syncretic, and zeroed in on “Biological.”

One of the first “special projects” of the AEC to involve security issues was the isotope program, and how to regulate the international distribution of information (the first question was whether they could supply isotopes to an avowed Communist, Joliot-Curie in France):

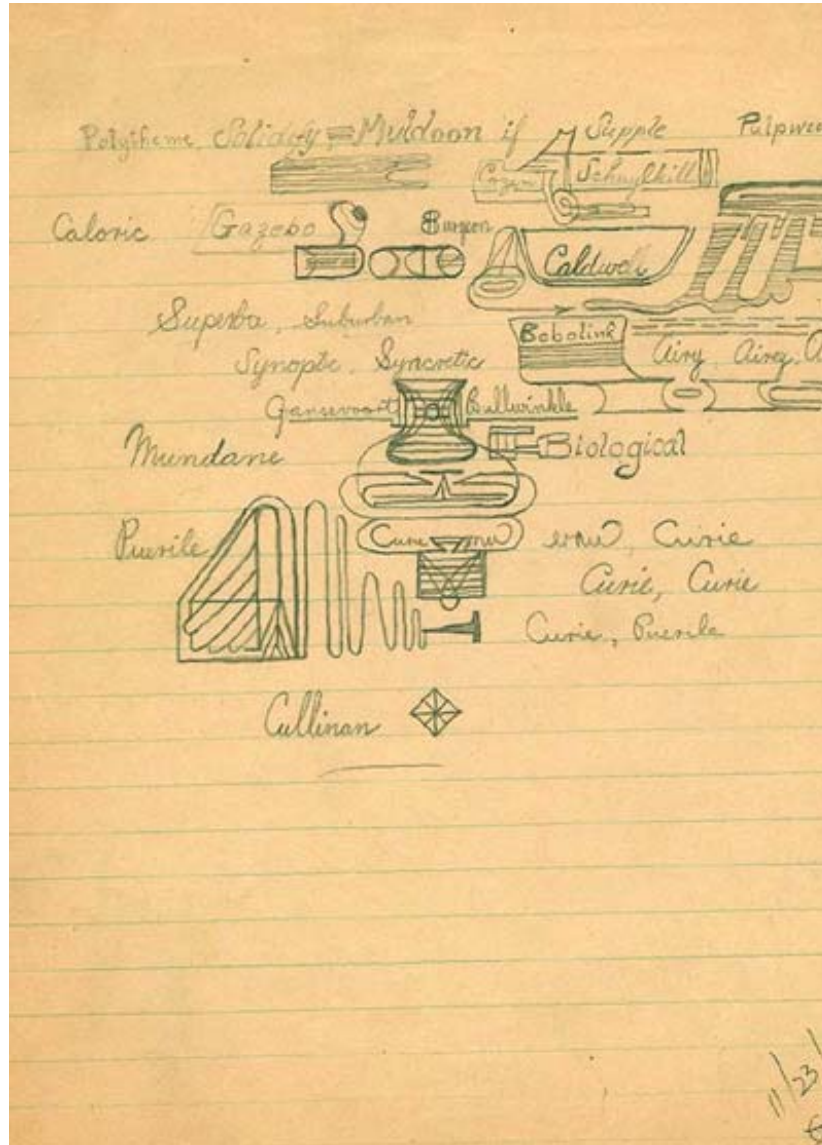
I believe we should take the strong moral position that isotopes are not useful to increase the military potential of other countries, or jeopardize the security of our own, that we are distributing them for the benefit of mankind, that they can be used in research that will be freely published, and that we do not care who discovers a cure for cancer, a French Communist, an Irish priest, or a Swiss democrat.¹⁵

When Dwight Eisenhower became president, national security centered more upon the number of warheads in the stockpile and less on the secret of their design. And Ike could launch his Atoms for Peace initiative to invite private investment and international regulation. Strauss, his choice for chairman of the AEC, was in accord—and made LaPlante his personal

¹⁵ Roy B. Snapp, Office of Special Projects, memo to Carroll L. Wilson, general manager, 11 Sept. 1947. LaPlante Papers. “Confidential” until 10 Oct. 1958, when the classification was deleted, the content having become public knowledge.

security advisor. Their relationship became cordially personal; Strauss named one of his prize bulls *Stockpile* at LaPlante's suggestion.¹⁶

FIGURE 4. Scientific Themes



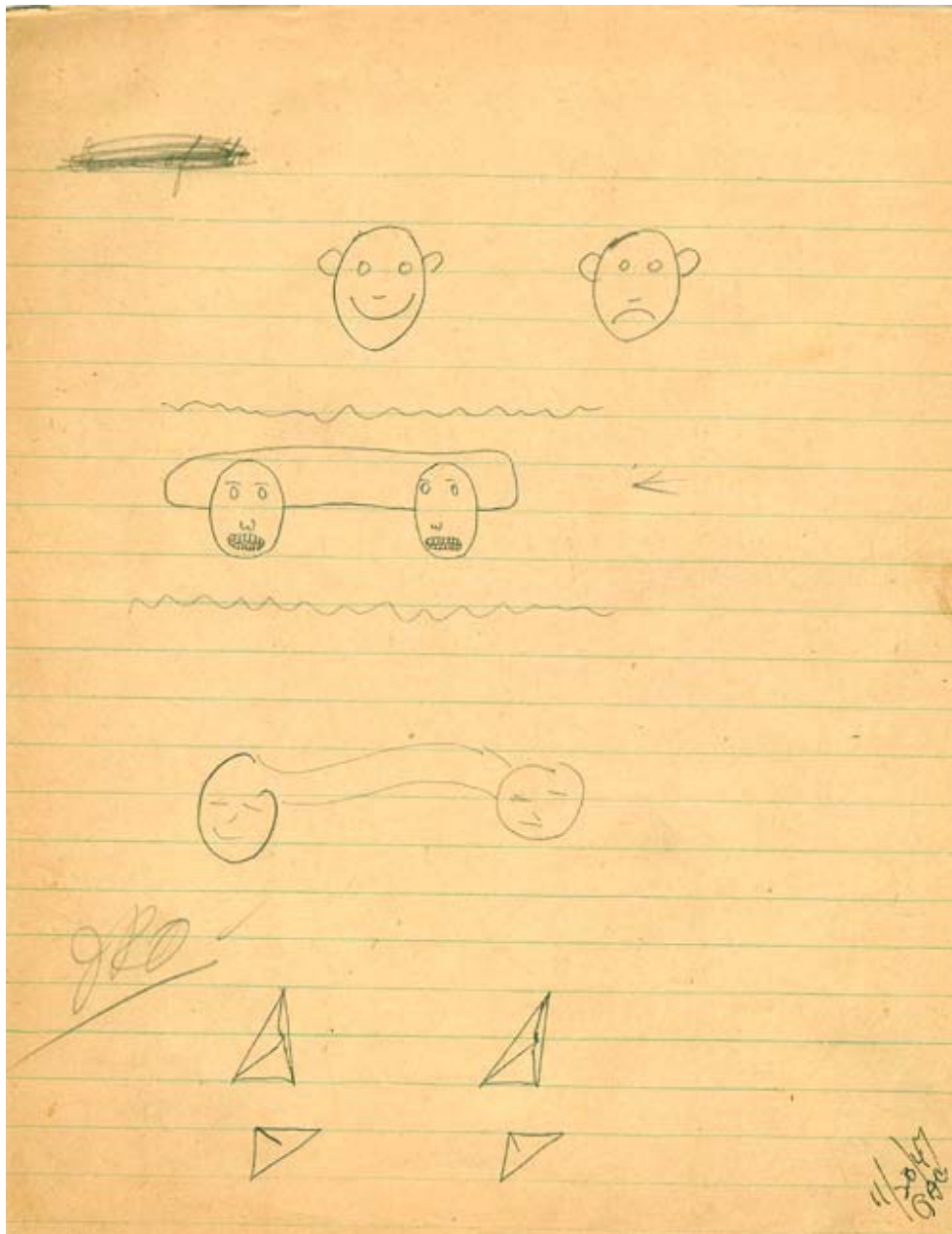
Doodle by Isador Isaac Rabi, from the November 23, 1947, joint meeting of the AEC, GAC, MLC.

Source: LaPlante Papers, 23 Nov. 1947, authors' collection.

¹⁶ LaPlante Papers: 9 June 1955, typed signed memo, Lewis L. Strauss, referring to a 6 Aug 1954 memo from LaPlante.

Doodle #2. Oppenheimer with his comic/tragic Janus faces doodled ambivalence (see Figure 5)—having devoted his professional life to unleashing the atom bomb, certainly, but also because in his fascination for political

FIGURE 5. Political Themes



Doodle by Robert J. Oppenheimer, from the November 23, 1947 joint meeting of the AEC, GAC, MLC.

Source: LaPlante Papers, 23 Nov. 1947, authors' collection.

action he labored under the pall of government scrutiny and of collegial suspicion. In the summer of 1948, when Oppenheimer's security file (a foot high and weighing some 12 pounds) landed on the chairman's desk, Lilienthal's response was: "Suspicion, suspicion, suspicion. And what an opportunity to gouge a man you don't like, one who has disagreed with you. Godalmighty!"

Five years later, when Eisenhower struck against the military-science complex by directing the public ouster of "Oppie," Strauss had called a meeting to decide how to implement the president's directive "to immediately establish a barrier between Subject [Oppenheimer] and AEC classified information."¹⁷ LaPlante wished to simply terminate Oppenheimer's consultant contract on the ground that they no longer needed his services, which was true. He

... did not feel it advisable to have a "test of strength" on the part of the Commission [AEC] with such a controversial individual as the Subject; especially since the entire situation could be handled legally and the President's and the Commission's objective thus accomplished with the least amount of embarrassment to the present Administration, the Commission, and the Subject.¹⁸

But he was overruled in favor of the full weight of a Security Clearance Termination procedure which would involve a hearing and a thousand printed pages of testimony. Lilienthal's journal then recorded: "Of all the despicable things."¹⁹

As Oppenheimer's trial was coming to its conclusion in June 1954, LaPlante had a private meeting in which AEC Commissioner Eugene M. Zuckert elicited LaPlante's analysis of the final vote.²⁰ Zuckert in a published statement to represent the AEC revealed the extent to which he had taken the security advice seriously.²¹

The degree of attention which Dr. Oppenheimer's status has evoked is indication of the extent to which this force has imposed upon us a new degree of intensity of concern with security. There has always been a recognition of the need for security precautions when war threatened or was actually in progress. It is new and disquieting that security must concern us so much in times that have so many of the outward indications of peace. Security must indeed become a daily concern in our lives as far as we can see ahead.

¹⁷ *In the Matter of J. Robert Oppenheimer. Transcript of Hearing before Personnel Security Board, Washington D.C., April 12, 1954, through May 6, 1954* (Washington, D.C., 1954).

¹⁸ LaPlante papers, "Confidential" Office Memorandum, 3 Dec. 1953.

¹⁹ *The Journals of David E. Lilienthal*, vol. 3: *Venturesome Years, 1950-1955* (New York, 1966), 453.

²⁰ LaPlante papers: 23 June 1954, memo to file about a private meeting with Zuckert.

²¹ *United States Atomic Energy Commission, In the Matter of J. Robert Oppenheimer: Transcript of Hearing before Personnel Security Board and Texts of Principal Documents and Letters* (1970), 1052.

The AEC, hoarding information and maintaining strictest security, was the epitome (in the emergent agency theory) of an agency to “market failure justification,” in terms of the “distributive politics” of research and development.²² When the “distributive politics” reached the sensibilities of the JCAE, LaPlante increasingly had to deal with the political struggles between the JCAE and the AEC.²³ Part of the problem was the inefficiency of the doubling of staff dealing with secrecy (which came to an absurd head in the Dixon-Yates affair).²⁴ In 1957 the JCAE’s director James T. Ramey was found to be “out of line” in his demands on AEC and partisan in his conclusions.²⁵ But LaPlante analyzed the problem in November 1957 as an

²² Cohen and Noll, *The Technology Pork Barrel*, 68, Jeffrey S. Banks in chap. 4, “The Politics of Commercial R & D Programs.”

²³ LaPlante Papers, 2 Dec. 1957, memo for the record, copy to Strauss, about JCAE discussing crucial matters at a staff level before being considered by the AEC and leaving Minority Members out of the loop.

²⁴ Eisenhower wished to remove the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) and GAC power over atomic decisions in favor of securing the atomic bomb in military hands. He directed the AEC, which consumed 30% of the TVA output of power, to make arrangements with private power providers, ostensibly for electricity to the city of Memphis. AEC would block TVA by partnering with private industry to supply AEC’s current needs for electrical power, and as a platform from which to encourage private construction of plants for atomic-powered generation of electrical energy. TVA was a Sacred Cow, Strauss judged, “an untaxed socialized operation”—a political affront. The TVA lobbied the JCAE to investigate the AEC and their new affiliation with private industry, the Mississippi Valley Generating Company formed by Eugene A. Yates and Edgar Dixon. The public stock offerings of this new company were to be handled by the First Boston Corporation and Lehman Brothers [where Strauss had helped place Gordon Dean whom he had succeeded as AEC Chairman], and suspicion settled on Adolphe Wenzell, a consultant to First Boston who had also visited AEC headquarters in Washington.) LaPlante’s papers tell in detail how an investigation into the affair created antagonism between the AEC and the JCAE. The JCAE investigators wanted to privately inspect 140,000 clearance cards for visitors to the AEC, without revealing who was under suspicion. To comply, LaPlante’s staff made a meticulous count of the cards before and after examination to make sure nothing had been removed, making their own lists of suspects from evidence of disturbed cards. According to Strauss, the whole unwieldy and adversarial process was a “shocking example” of Congressional bullying of public servants, and the misuse of government oversight: “No such system could operate in industry.”

²⁵ Frustration with Ramey came to a head in November 1957 with extensive memos and recommendations on how to improve communication between the executive and legislative arms of control. “The problem thus continues to be one of living with the present provisions of the law, of finding a means both of neutralizing the sometimes excessive demands of over-eager Committee employees and of satisfying the Joint Committee that proper procedures or actions are being taken, without at the same time subjecting all operating levels of the agency to incessant review and criticism, sometimes after the fact, sometimes during the effort, often even ahead of time, and more often than not at the expense of efficiency of operations.” LaPlante memo, 25 Nov. 1957, p. 7.

essential distrust between the executive branch of government and Congressional committees—exacerbated by “the magnitude of the AEC program which was a Government-owned and operated monopoly.” It was that “magnitude” which provided the scale for the “distributive politics.” His solution was to “arrange frequent informal social meetings between the key Commission Personnel and Members of the Committee” while making sure that the lesser personnel did not fraternize.²⁶ LaPlante had anticipated the analysis of what would later be called agency theory, but the question of security by which he specifically inveighed against unwarranted fraternization between the staffs of the Commission and of the Committee violated an important hypothesis of agency theory: “debureaucratization.” This “exception to the rule” of agency theory suggests that social and cultural issues might take precedence in fields that might be free of the market but not free to be dominated by rational actors.

Doodle # 3. General McCormack, the warrior hedonist, doodled the good life of a country estate with tennis courts (see Figure 6; in other meetings he doodled golf games and pinup girls).

LaPlante’s papers show that his job of “security” was often socio-cultural, from his recommendation of Oliver M. Schriver for membership in the Manor Country Club in Rockville, Maryland, to his arrangements for the construction of recreational facilities at the AEC headquarters in Germantown, Maryland. There was no golf course at staff headquarters, but for the Commissioners the Army-Navy Country Club became a preferred venue for vetting personnel in the Washington, D.C. area.²⁷ In addition, cocktail parties became the venue for the subtle influencing of decisions.²⁸ The niceties of social interaction were considered vital enough that the JCAE’s Ramey was criticized for not adequately entering into the morale-building bonhomie of birthday wishes and thank you notes that pepper LaPlante’s files.

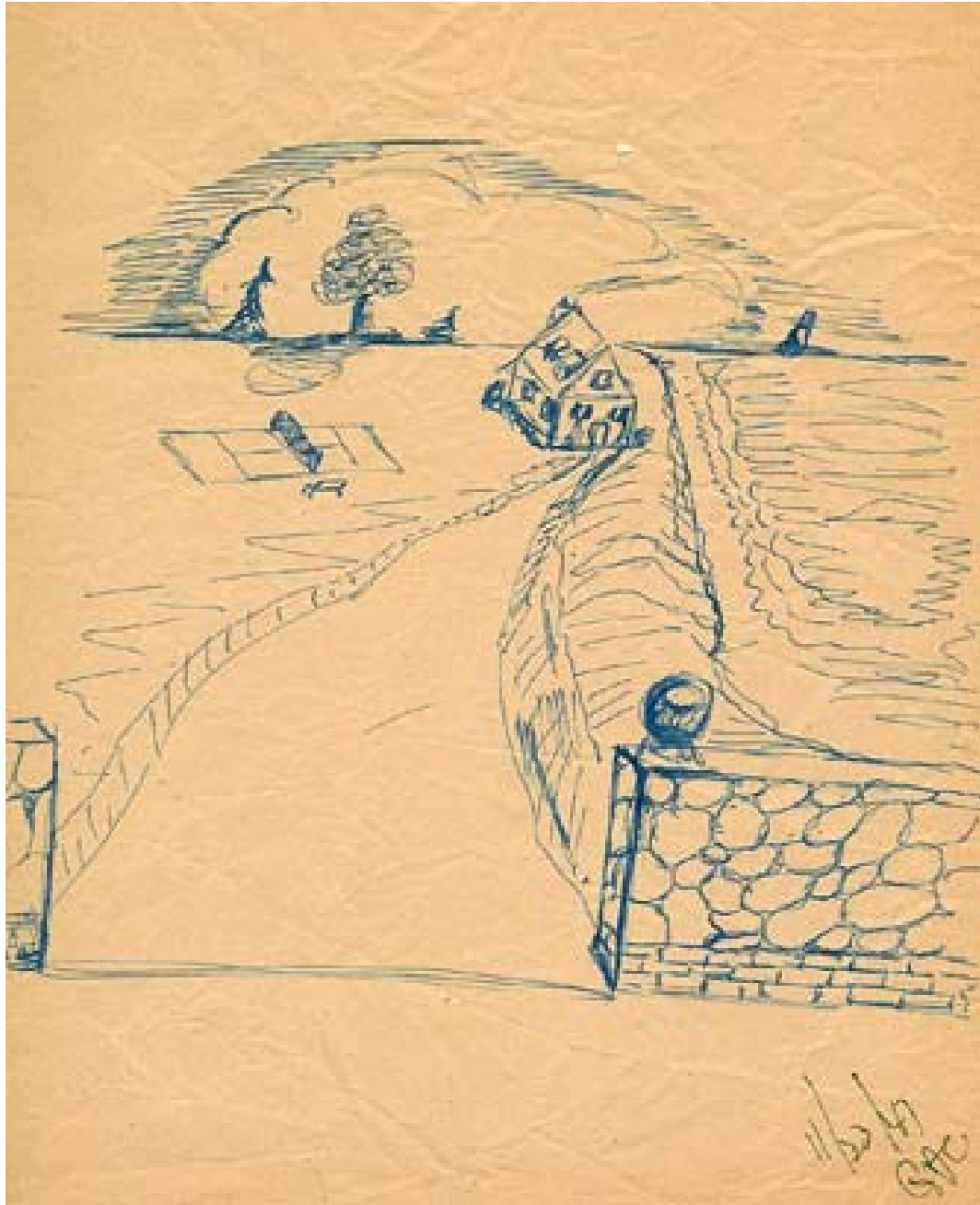
Beginning in 1950 with his attendance at social functions of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and their Liaison Representatives, LaPlante

²⁶ LaPlante Papers, 25 Nov. 1957, memo to Strauss in response to a report on recommendations on reorganization “prepared by Mr. Adams.”

²⁷ LaPlante Papers, 29 July 1957, copy of letter to the AEC personnel chief recommending a candidate whose father he had known “out at the Army-Navy Club.”

²⁸ LaPlante Papers, 9 Nov. 1955, memo to file about rumors that LaPlante would be offered the position of Congressional Liaison for the AEC, which circulated at a cocktail party at the Army-Navy Country Club. When Mrs. Strauss repeated the rumor to LaPlante at a cocktail party at the Strauss home and discovered it was not yet fact, he requested she not pressure her husband on his behalf. But a later telephone call from Strauss indicated he had forced his wife to discuss the subject with him, and that he, indeed, was planning on moving LaPlante into the position once he found a way to dispose of the incumbent.

FIGURE 6. Social Themes



Doodle by General James McCormack, from the November 23, 1947, joint meeting of the AEC, GAC, MLC.

Source: LaPlante Papers, 23 Nov. 1947, authors' collection.

courted a relationship with FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover. From a fat file of their “personal” correspondence: in December 1953, LaPlante arranged for an FBI party at the Army-Navy Country Club; by December 1956, Hoover was sending a condolence letter over the death of LaPlante’s brother; by May 1959, Hoover was sending wishes for recovery from a hospital stay.

LaPlante was the man who arranged for the entertainments at, for instance, the inspection of the Las Vegas Proving Grounds by Congress in May 1953. He was the man who arranged for numerous little favors, for example, an autographed photo of Clark Gable for the wife of a visiting British dignitary in June 1953. He organized shopping expeditions for wives and golf tournaments for their husbands—at the same time he was making judgments about security risks. A June 19, 1953, letter from a Dow Chemical manager at Rocky Flats combines problems with clearance for an employee with plans for a weekend jaunt. He received an invitation to cocktails honoring his former boss, Gordon Dean, the same June day in 1953 that he cautioned Strauss against the American Machine and Foundry Company, which was angling to take over the Nuclear Development Associates Co. A February 13, 1956, letter from Frank G. Erskine, managing director of Expanded Shale Clay and Slate Institute, with thanks for information about access permits, observed: “today would certainly be a sweet time to be out on that golf course instead of in this office.”²⁹ In a letter to congratulate Frank Pace as the new president of General Dynamics, LaPlante observed:

My golf game has improved slightly since I last talked with you. One of the reasons is that I was appointed Congressional Liaison for the Atomic Energy Commission by Lewis Strauss over a year ago and had to bear down on my game in order to give some of our lawmakers on the Hill a run for their money.³⁰

It was hard to provide security on a golf course, but it was also reassuringly immune to bugging, unlike other social venues. When LaPlante first became Strauss’s personal adviser he asked to accompany Strauss as part of the U.S. delegation to the International Conference on Peaceful Uses of Atomic Energy at Geneva, August 8-20, 1955.³¹ He stated: “The representation is deemed essential to assuring against any attempts on the part of our

²⁹ Under Eisenhower, golf was the prevailing mode of networking relaxation; while President he played 800 rounds. Shepherd Campbell and Peter Landau, *Presidential Lies, The Illustrated History of White House Golf* (New York, 1996), 93.

³⁰ LaPlante Papers: 2 May 1957, typed copy of letter to Frank Pace.

³¹ LaPlante’s papers do not include any documents that continue to be classified, so that there are tantalizing glimpses of services he provided. A memo of 21 June 1954 from Strauss thanked him warmly for especially meritorious service to the AEC over the June 12-13 weekend: “As a result of your diligence, extending over a twenty-four hour period, the Commission was saved from extreme embarrassment.” A handwritten letter from LaPlante to Strauss reported his unease with the request of a reporter for biographical information. Strauss replied: “I share your feelings. The price of publicity is always a certain amount of exposure as a target. In your work, you don’t need it.”

adversaries to obtain valuable information through the use of many devious methods (e.g., microphones, bar and restaurant details, private cocktail parties, etc.).”³²

Doodle #4. Sumner Pike, the retired executive who had made two fortunes in oil investment, signaled his metronomic boredom with the whole committee process (see Figure 7).

The “Peaceful Atom” posed a related series of issues for LaPlante in conjunction with the business community, where the security of the conversation would not be so important as the classification of its content, and where LaPlante’s value might be worth more outside than inside the agency—the “revolving door” hypothesis of agency theory. Indeed, LaPlante’s files are conspicuous with notices of moves made from his cohort in the AEC into industry. For example, Tom Phillips wrote favorably of his move from the Washington Atomic Security Office to head of security for the Babcock & Wilcox Co. in Lynchburg, Virginia, November 3, 1955; John Gingrich of AEC security became president of the new I.T.T. labs in Clifton, New Jersey, in 1957.

LaPlante himself wanted to move to the private sector. In replying to a California friend in April 1955, who had written for advice about leaving the military, he noted that he was biased after thirteen years of civil service, but: “I do believe that since our AEC licensing program is under way, whereby industry will be able to start participating on a large scale in the industrial applications of atomic energy, the industrial and commercial side of the business is more appealing to me.” He noted in his resumé that the highest AEC salary of \$20,000 was “inadequate for an organizer who wants a personal profitable share in a corporation capitalizing on rapidly expanding U.S. markets.” He felt that his experience both before the AEC (he had designed and operated his own ice cream manufacturing and beverage plant and had been the youngest superintendent in Eastman Kodak’s history) and his AEC contacts (he had reviewed materiel controls of twenty-eight corporations outside the AEC program as well as organizing the scientific controls for billions of dollars in nuclear materiel within it) would stand him in good stead in industry.

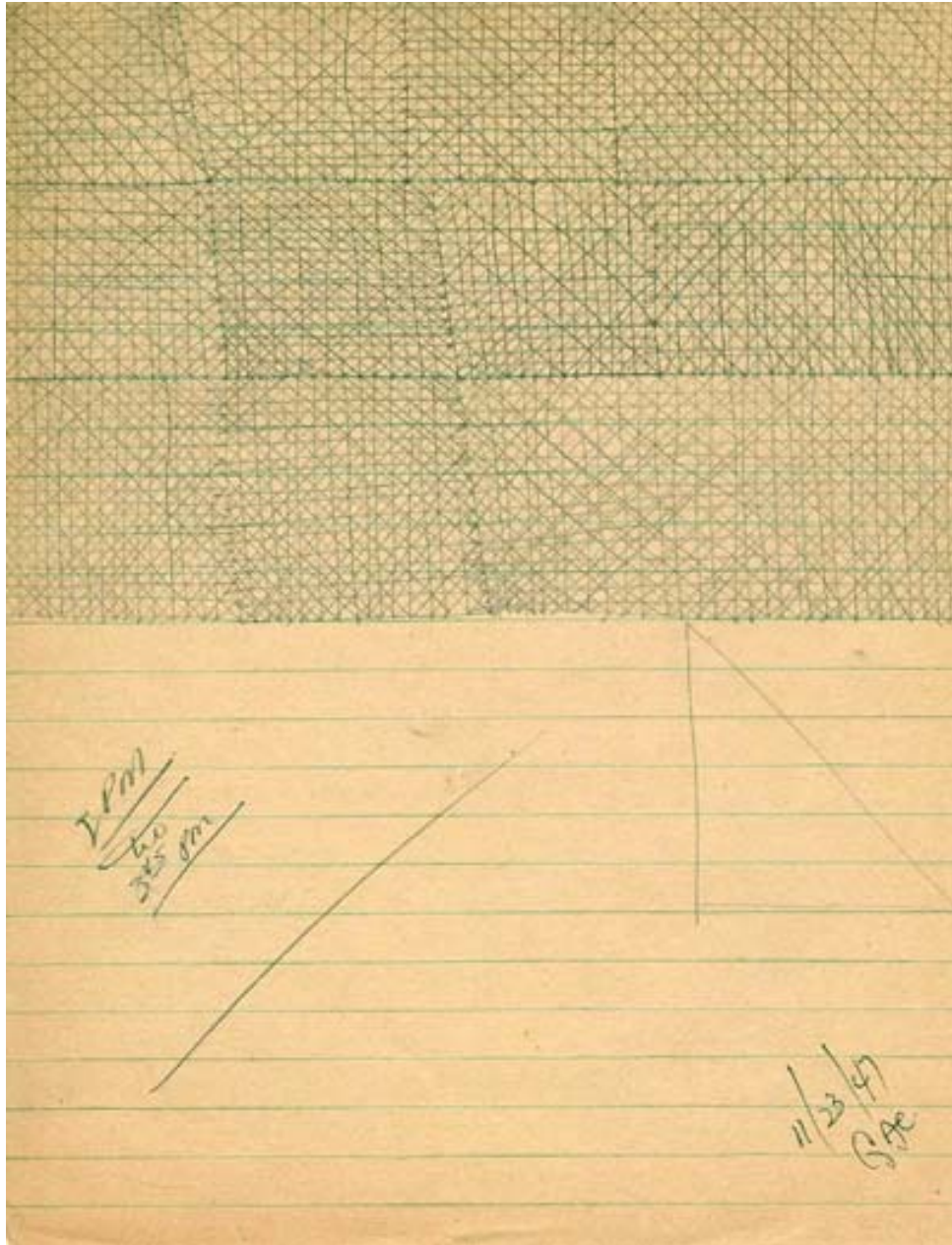
LaPlante courted the various lobbying groups (usually “institutes”)—often at their cocktail parties, which provided him “with the opportunity of meeting so many fine people who mean so much to me in my daily work.”³³ But he did not wish, himself, to become a lobbyist:

I have always had an aversion toward my personally working for a trade association because I feel that on the one hand they lobby for and urge Congress to appropriate large sums to the respective government agencies—Defense Department, etc.—so that their member companies may in turn receive contracts, and on the other hand intercede in behalf of their members

³² LaPlante Papers: memo to Strauss, 8 April 1955.

³³ LaPlante Papers: 20 June 1957, typed letter.

FIGURE 7. Industrial Themes



Doodle by Sumner Pike, from the November 23, 1947, joint meeting of the AEC, GAC, MLC.

Source: LaPlante Papers, 23 Nov. 1947, authors' collection.

with the agencies concerned with a view toward keeping them out of the management end of the business and letting private industry continue to operate as a free entity without the government agency controlling any aspects of the manner in which its funds are being used.³⁴

LaPlante made a fine distinction, in his desire to participate in the private sector, between opportunities to serve as the representative of a particular company and to serve as a lobbyist for a political constituency.

When Strauss announced he would resign in late 1958, LaPlante tried to enlist his advice in winnowing tempting offers for his own next step (in July 1955, Strauss had helped LaPlante's brother secure a job)—with Aerojet-General, Curtiss-Wright, Pennsylvania Power and Light, a possible U.S. Nuclear Industries Trade Association—all assuming that his familiarity with Washington politics would translate well. Strauss's reply was warm, but he declined to offer advice. LaPlante planned that his attendance on Strauss at the Second United Nations Conference on Peaceful Uses of Atomic Energy in September 1958 would be his swansong. He made his move to the private sector shortly thereafter, to Joyce and Fisher Associates in Washington (General Groves, then at Remington Rand, was one of the former associates who wrote congratulations).

In February 1960 LaPlante became director of the Washington office for the MITRE Corporation (a private not-for-profit corporation out of MIT designed to provide engineering and technical services to the federal government). Among the personal letters congratulating him are messages from government, the military, and industry: White House Assistant to the President Wilton B. Persons, Federal Bureau of Investigation Director J. Edgar Hoover as well as from his liaison officer Charlie Bates, who had become a close friend, Senators Leverett Saltonstall and Warren G. Magnuson, Congressmen William H. Bates and Paul R. Foster, Comptroller General Joe Campbell, Assistant Judge Advocate General for the Dept. of the Army Maj. Gen. Stanley W. Jones, administrator of the Federal Aviation Agency E. R. Quesada, chairman of General American Life Insurance Sidney W. Souers, and chairman of the board of General Dynamics Frank Pace.

But LaPlante, the faceless facilitator, was a government man after all, and he ended his career with the Environmental Protection Agency, having begun in 1970 with the Federal Water Control Administration after eight years with the Republican Policy Committee.

Conclusion

The rational actors of agency theory are motivated by the “revolving door” and “debureaucratization.” Under these circumstances, a case-by-case analysis of government-sponsored commercialization programs “constitutes

³⁴ LaPlante Papers: 18 June 1958, typed letter to Strauss.

an argument for favoring generic research activities rather than large-scale commercialization projects.”³⁵ According to this, the AEC/JCAE must look to

FIGURE 8



Photograph of Bryan F. LaPlante, from *The Investigator* (an FBI employee publication) (Dec. 1952), 4; copy sent to LaPlante by J. Edgar Hoover, 9 Dec. 1952.

Source: LaPlante Papers, authors' collection.

their putative victory in the Cold War rather than to their science policy for satisfaction. However, here we have the “revolving door” getting stuck with LaPlante, and “debureaucratization” resisted by him on behalf of security. The ramifications of these exceptions to the rules of agency theory apply not only to its argument, but also to its conclusions: a socio-cultural understanding must inform not only our study of the business economy but also the selection of basic research activities for government sponsorship.³⁶

³⁵ Cohen and Noll, *The Technology Pork Barrel*, vii.

³⁶ Philip Kitchner, *Science, Truth, and Democracy* (New York, 2001).