

The Cultural & Ethical World of Nuclear Weapons Scientists

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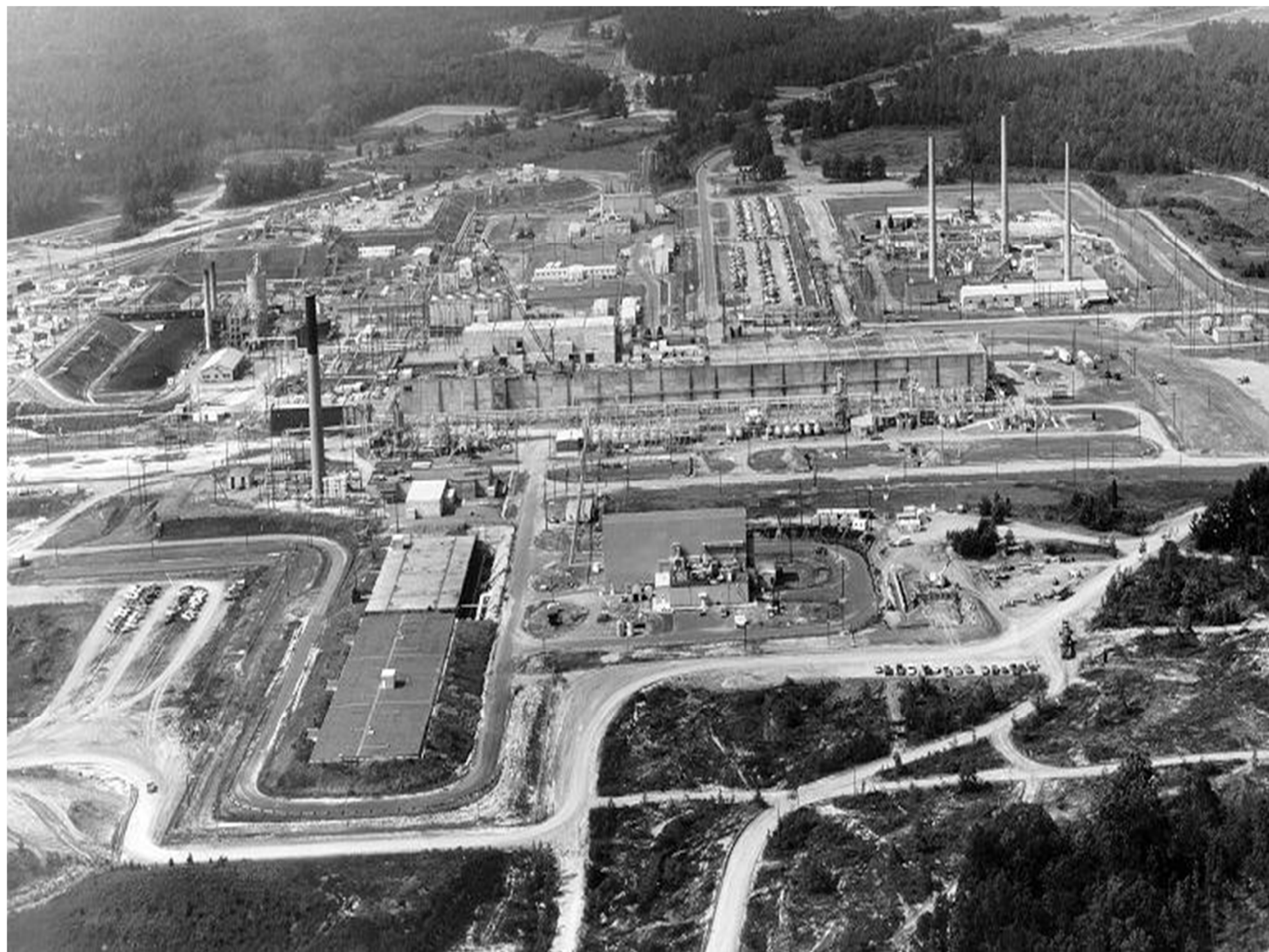
George Mason University

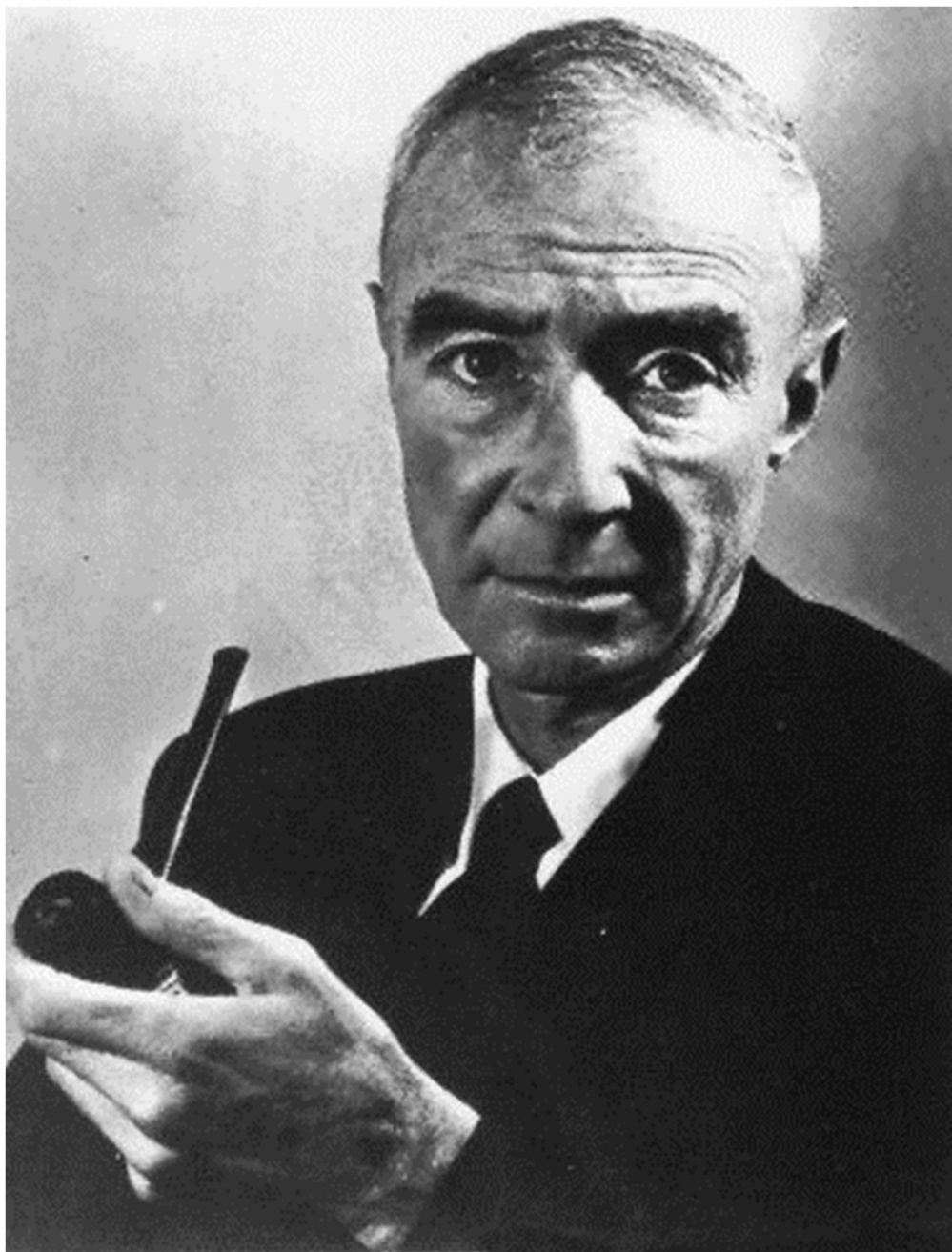
Guster@mit.edu

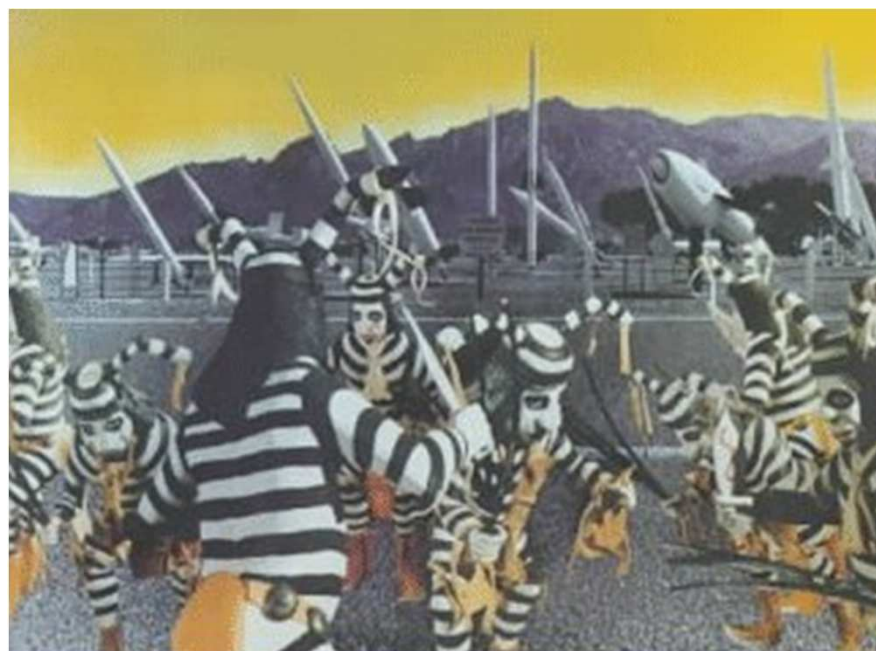












NUCLEAR RITES

A WEAPONS LABORATORY

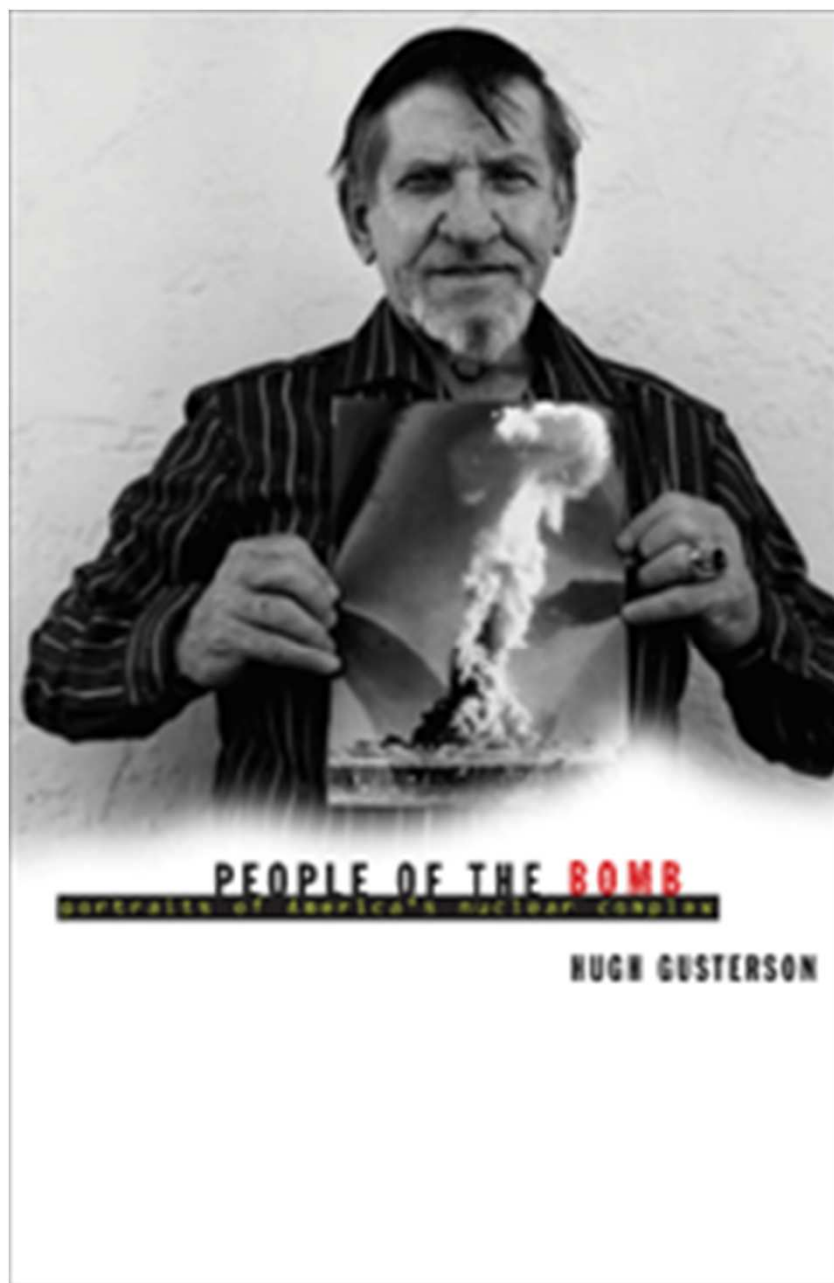
AT THE END OF THE

COLD WAR

HUGH GUSTERSON

"Reading this fascinating and fairly written book is the best way to understand the moral dilemma that has haunted the inventors of high explosives, from Alfred Nobel to J. Robert Oppenheimer."

Robert Rapoport, San Francisco Chronicle



The Question

- How do scientists come to feel they have a vocation to design weapons of mass destruction, and what is the relation of culture to that?

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Studying Up Revisited:

Hugh Gusterson

Research methods

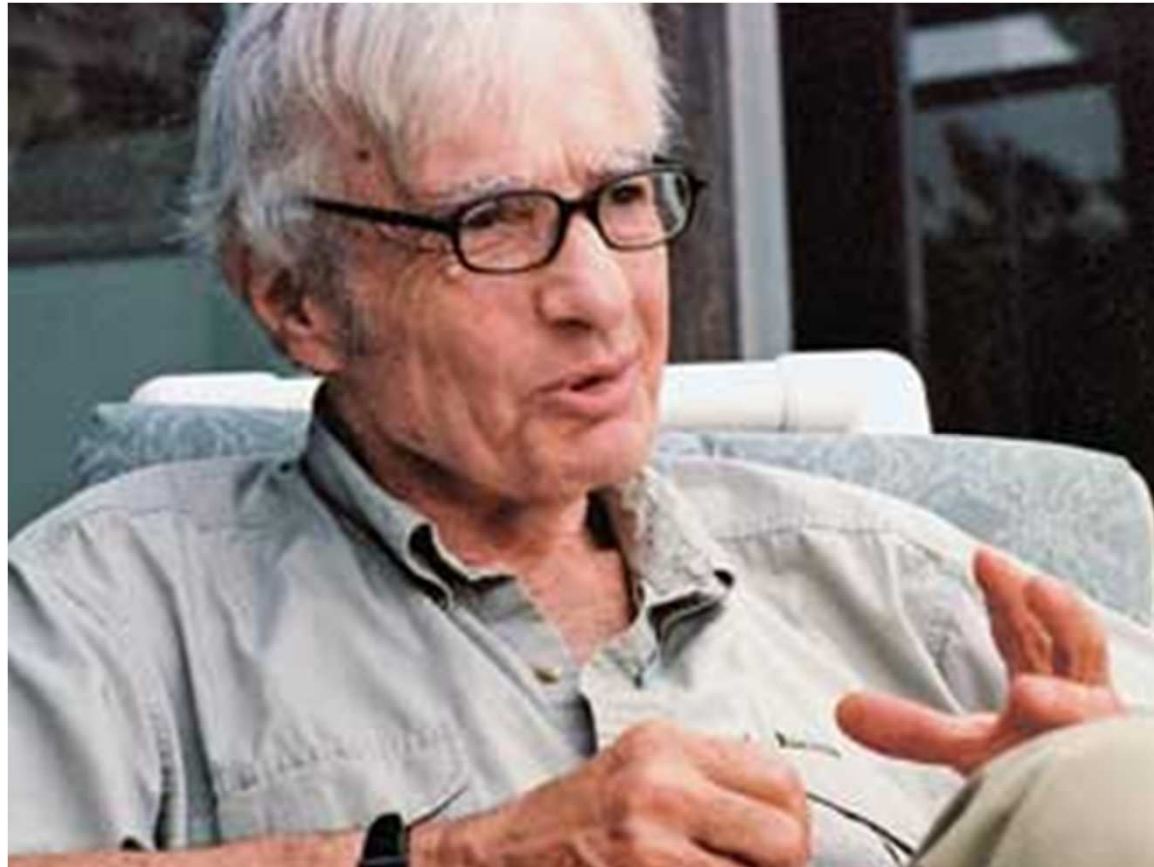
- Informant zero, snowball samples, diversity
- Life histories
- Roommates
- Church
- Baseball
- “deep hanging out” (James Clifford)
- Newspapers
- Activists

Elements of Weapons Scientists' Culture

- No political uniformity
 - Euphemism
 - Black humor
 - Religion
 - Rationality and the racial other
 - Practices of secrecy
-
- Also: anti-authoritarian, high value on autonomy

Choosing the Lab

- Little on national security imperative
- Constrained options
- Salary
- Dislike of universities
- Resources
- Interesting work
- Interview: “getting their interest in the physics to outweigh their natural repugnance at the task.”



Robert Jay Lifton

Author, *Indefensible Weapons* (1982), *The Genocidal Mentality* (1990),
the Broken Connection (1983)

Ethics

- Lifton: Numbness and denial
- Little public discussion, but...
- “You’re lucky you’re talking to me”
- “The central axiom”
- Consequentialism versus deontology

Ethics (2)

- Fundamental belief weapons won't be used
 - With one exception
 - And get-out clauses
- Nuclear weapons MORE moral than conventional weapons
- Immoral to leave Americans undefended
- In a democracy...
- Weapons already exist, but can be safer

Local pastors

- Catholic and episcopalian misunderstood national church's position
- Presbyterian disagreed with national church
- Methodist cast peacemaking as refraining from judgment
- Evangelical doubted possibility of peace and focused on individual salvation

The End

- Questions?