

Racing for the Bomb
General Leslie R. Groves,
The Manhattan Project's Indispensable Man

by
Robert S. Norris

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12:15 p.m. – 1:45 p.m.
Carnegie Endowment for International Peace
1779 Massachusetts Avenue NW
Choate Room, 1st Floor

Robert Norris:

It's good to be here. Thank you Joseph Cirincione, who's been a great supporter of this project for a few years. Mr. Cirincione has had me present here to talk about this book as it was in progress. Also, it's good to see some old faces on the CDI Board that I have known for a while.

To Joe's charge I plead guilty. It is obsessive, but that is what happens. On the table outside there are a couple reviews about the book. I also brought a couple of copies to sell at the end of the session. Mother's day is coming up. I gave a copy of the book to my Mom – and she thought it was great.

Now some of you know that this book release event was originally a two-man show. Coordinating with the Center for Defense Board. Paul Newman was to be here with me. Paul was bound by another engagement and could not be here. The plan was to have Paul talk about Leslie Groves from the perspective of an actor, since he played Mr. Groves in "Fatman the Little Boy", 1989 film. And I would talk about Leslie Groves as a biographer. Then we would see what would happen in the interchange. I've decided to keep my side of the bargain and pursue that theme.

This is the first biography that I've written, and maybe the last, nevertheless, it was quite an adventure. At the start up you set yourself goals and responsibilities of things you want to accomplish -- feeling some sort of relationship with the audience that will be reading the book, and they expect things of you. What are those things? First and foremost, a biographer is expected to provide an accurate account of the major facts of the person's life. Leslie Groves was born in Albany in 1896; his father was an army chaplain. He grew up over the next twenty years on army post all around the country. His first goal in life was to attend West Point, which he attends in 1916. Groves had a short career there, due to the pressure of World War I. He graduated in November 1918 (Ten days before the end of World War I).

In the book you can see that in his early life there was a pattern forming. He graduated fourth in his class and went on to choose corps engineer as his military branch. The twenty-years between the wars, he had a career with the corps of engineers in various projects throughout the country. He attended Army War College. On the eve of World War II he graduated from the Army War College and receives a position on a General's staff. I believe he was at the right place, at the right time, as the United States is mobilizing for war.

Three years prior to U.S. entry into the war, 1939-1941, Groves rises through the engineer ranks to basically oversee all army construction in the United States. When it comes time to go for the bomb, his superiors chooses him to handle the situation. He is off to the races!

The title *Racing for the Bomb* captures what this was all about. This was about speed; every day counted. After about one thousand days, the bomb is developed, tested and used, and no longer a secret. Groves is now a more public figure. He is involved in a few more controversies after the war, with regard to the transfer of who's going to be responsible for the atomic energy in civilian hands.

You would think that other sources that I started to rely on could get those basic facts right. For example, the American National biography has thousands of persons noted in the book, but it is in absolute shambles, in terms of getting almost all the fact wrong about Groves. These are disappointments when you come across them. First you're not sure what is right or wrong, but then you learn and you see that you have a job to do, to get the facts right -- the big ones and the small ones. When it comes to tracing a man's life obviously there are going to be thousands of facts. Opportunity for mistakes are infinite, but you do your best and try to check everything, even his sons lacrosse score. This is the first responsibility a biographer has, which is trying to get the facts right. Secondly, a biographer is expected to capture and reveal details of character, time and place. I tried to tell a good story. I wrote this for everyone. I wrote the book for people to read and enjoy. Hoping that they feel that their time was well spent and that they learned something. As Joseph said for the period of Grove's life we are basically talking about the first half of the twentieth century. And the core place was Washington during World War II, including MIT, Army Post, West Post and Nicaragua. I started out choosing one day in Grove's life to embrace the reader to come in and see what the book is about. I reviewed the available dates and I chose April 27, 1945. I tried to capture a sense of place. He lived only a few miles from Carnegie Endowment during the War. For twenty-years I lived in Washington. We walked the same streets. It gave me a sense of first hand familiarity and I tried to capture just that.

The second thing was to get the sense of detail that reveals character, place and time. The third goal for a biographer is to provide judgement about the person and their influence. First to see what influenced him. Obviously his family. He grew up in the army; his father was an army chaplain. He went to West Point -- that shaped him. As a biographer I had to descend into these cultures. Each one was an adventure in itself. Seeing what West Point does to a person. Or even a larger reevaluation to me was the Corps of Engineers. Being from the Natural Resources Defense, this is a shaping influence on Groves and an extraordinary institution, in the first half of the twentieth century. I tried to grasp these cultures, what it was like to be in the Army, at Fort Leavenworth and Army War College. As I entered these places, you could begin to see what was important to Groves as he ran the Manhattan Project. The three years before he had the job, in a chapter I call Final Rehearsal, he was in Washington overseeing about \$8 billion of construction. One month in 1942, which was the peak construction month, Groves was in charge and he knows how to get things accomplished. To build camps, build munitions plants etc.... So he comes to the Manhattan Project as a master bureaucrat. I mean that in a complimentary statement. Someone who knows how Washington works and where to go to solve his problems.

The cast of characters in this story is enormous and filled with very interesting people from Stimson, George Marshall, Grove's fellow army officers, all the scientists, engineers and even people on his staff. His secretary turns out to be a fascinating woman. You would look at all of

these things that would shape him. I came out of this book trying to depict him as an American type, kind of take charge, can do figure who gets the job done; pull up your socks, and roll up your sleeves and do it. We like these kinds of people. We need them also from time to time, to get big jobs done. Groves fits that mold. I say in a sentence “being in the right place at the right time is the secret of winning a place in history, but rarely does a person arrive there by accident.” I think that was Groves’s situation. He was right where he needed to be -- the perfect person, what I call the indispensable person to build the bomb. Also, in providing judgements about people we want to deal with the larger questions: The influence of his time, and on history. I make some rather large claims in this book. I will be interested in seeing how people react to them.

One claim I make is that the Manhattan Project is the formative experience that shapes what comes to be known as the national security state after the war. The series of government departments and agencies that emerge after the World War II and then evolved throughout the Cold War, the practices and procedures that they operate with. These features include the wide spread of concern for security and secrecy, black budgets, reliance on intelligence and counter-intelligence and the interlocking relationship of government, industry, science and the military. All of these firsts emerged as part of the Manhattan Project and are crafted by Leslie Groves.

We should also ask ourselves whether the Manhattan Project was unique or it could be replicated when we decide to take on some other task. Even in the latest discussion of the aftermath of 9/11 and homeland security, I’ve seen numerous references that we need a Manhattan Project. We need to look at what lessons could be learned and whether or not it could be done again.

As Joseph mentioned I did spend a good amount of time in a quite controversial area having to do with the decision to use the bomb. What I mention is that if we use the word “decision” as we usually do, it doesn’t deserve that word. My basic response is dealt with in two chapters. The decision to use the bomb was inherent in the decision to build the bomb, which was taken into consideration in prior years. The momentum was built up, beginning in the summer of 1942 when Groves took over. Groves has the most telling comment about Truman. Who had been the focus of all of this? When you look at when and where Truman made the decision, you’ll never find it, because he never made it. This is what Groves says about Truman, “his decision was one of non-interference, of not upset existing plans.” That was Truman’s role.

A few other comments on writing biographies. A major purpose is to bring some new information to the table. Maybe it involves archival material that hasn’t been used before. There is no need to retell the old tales. We need some new perspective, if this is to be acknowledged and recognized. One major point I made happen is to over turn the science story. The scientists have been in the center of this story for a long time, too long. Oppenheimer is usually given the title “the Father of the Atom Bomb.” The true center of the Manhattan Project was Leslie Groves desk, here in Washington, not Oppenheimer’s lab in New Mexico. This will probably not leave me in good standing with the scientist. You will discover that Groves is in the center of everything and amazingly enough, no one had done a scholarly biography before. He is in the accounts of the Manhattan Project, but had not been given the treatment he deserved, just from the history. We found out that he turned out to be an interesting person. For me it was just right. I could not have imagined taking on Abraham Lincoln, or Franklin Roosevelt. Where would you start? There would be a mountain of books that you would need to review and all the biographies that came before.

In terms of techniques that I applied from my research training and skills: One of my skills came from Center for Defense Information (CDI). There is a research methodology that was re-educated at CDI. A different kind of research, very detailed, very aware of the organization and mission of the military, and how it works and asking certain questions that had not been asked before. This again, the beginning of the 1980's, when there was great interest in nuclear weapons. At that time, a lot of discoveries were made about U.S. nuclear weapon stockpile. We really didn't know about the Department of Energy facilities. A sort of secret empire of Savannah River and Hanford. You all know the phrase "following the money from Watergate." This is "follow the bomb," and that has been a guiding source for me to this day in how I write. Noting where are they, what do they look like, how many, when were they retired, when were they produced? I adopted that outlook with this book. Certain things came out that would not have if I was a diplomatic historian, who wouldn't know what a bomb looked like. You will see this in the book. The driving force behind this all is when was there going to be enough plutonium or uranium for a bomb? Groves is relentless in having enough of it, as soon as possible. You can see his hand in having a bomb ready. For example, the "Little Boy" bomb. It came in two pieces, projectile and a target. He had pressured Oak Ridge to produce 64 Kilograms. It wasn't that they produced it and then did it. The "Little Boy" bomb was a modular bomb. The projectile had nine rings of uranium in it; the target had six rings of uranium in it. Why was that? They did not have it all together enough to make the two pieces. The last machining of the final ring of the target was finished on July 24. It was inspected on July 25; it was flown to Tinian on July 26 and placed in the bomb on July 29 or 30. There was no gap in time from when the bomb was physically completed and having enough uranium. This is all Groves work. He, more than anyone else, is the instrumental person in having the bomb used. This is the research methodology that I had adopted. No one else had done this before in regards to the Manhattan Project.

Some of the challenges of writing are constancy and finding enough time. My wife never thought this would get done. I wrote every where, on the bus, metro; I stole time every where. Finding enough time was difficult, but now its over. Second, staying organized. The archival material, papers on the Manhattan Project is enormous. Groves prides himself that he kept paperwork at a minimum. I couldn't imagine what it would be like if he let it get out of hand. I wonder why he said this. This is deep in the corps of engineers from their training. The colleagues of Groves, such as his seniors and subordinates, communicated orally; keeping all the information in their heads. This is the lesson he was taught by his mentors. Unfortunately, there is much more that we do not know about because orders were conveyed orally. That is another part of all of this. I can assure you that there is a lot of paper about the Manhattan Project, nevertheless, and not to be overwhelmed by it is a daily fight. Finally, off course, when you're at that point, what this book about to look like, you need that structure; you need chapters and parts. Each chapter needs to have a structure. You can't write willy-nilly. With a biography you have a man's life. You start out following him through his years up until he receives the job.

When we get to the Manhattan Project I was confronted with a serious problem. How am I going to tell this story now? If I track the story chronologically, I'm going to get lost; my readers are going to get lost. Then I found my solution. One of Groves's aides, named William Constein, wrote a letter after the war and he's telling his friend about his experience, and he wrote "General Groves planned the project, ran his own construction, his own science, his own army, his own State Department, and his own Treasury Department." And that was my solution. I was going to take the Manhattan Project and break it up this same way. We could look at his activity in each of them. My chapters in the middle, were his own construction, his own science and I added a couple of other things in his portfolio, his own intelligence. His own air force, his

own State and Treasury Department. This is the core of the book and how I dealt with this difficult problem of talking about the different activity of his, through his eyes.

In conclusion, writing is a solitary enterprise, but it is also collegial. I met very interesting persons. I had some great times in the library and archives. That part of it was very fulfilling. I've also decided that books are never finished, you just stop and move on with your life. There are some loose ends. I may write some articles. There are more details to be learned about Groves dealing in uranium when he tried to corner the uranium market. I would like to learn more about the Manhattan relationship with OSS and Wild Bill Donovan. We also need to learn about how the Manhattan Project was funded.

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