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# Los Alamos in the Context of State and Nation

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Let me start with the assumption that New Mexico is a genuinely fascinating land. This is something on which long-term residents and first-time visitors can both agree. But what makes New Mexico so fascinating? Some say that it lies with the scenery; some say that it derives from the intermixture of the various cultures; some credit it to the fact that easterners cannot find it on the map. I would suggest, however, that part of the magic of New Mexico rests with its reputation as a "culture of science" and that the town of Los Alamos has emerged as the most visible manifestation of this "culture of science."

New Mexico had numerous connections with the world of science before the creation of Los Alamos. During the early years of the century, both Albuquerque and Las Cruces had become havens for health seekers. In 1900, tuberculosis (TB) ranked as the nation's leading killer, far ahead of its closest rivals, cancer and heart disease. Termed "captain of the men of death," tuberculosis claimed over 150,000 lives every year. There was no cure for TB at the turn of the century save rest and perhaps a high, dry climate. Consequently, about 7,000 people moved to the Southwest every year. Locals termed these people "lungers," who moved to New Mexico to "chase the cure." So many destitute people arrived that both New Mexico and Arizona spokesmen made formal appeals to eastern physicians not to send them any tuberculars who could not support themselves economically.

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In 1925, perhaps 10 percent of Albuquerque consisted of health seekers. Scores of residents rented out their front porches to those "lungers," and both St. Joseph Hospital and Presbyterian Hospital in Albuquerque were founded to aid their recovery. The administration building at the University of New Mexico, Scholes Hall, is named for historian France V. Scholes, a World War I veteran who arrived in Albuquerque in the early 1920s on a stretcher. Doctors gave him six months, but he recovered to live into his late seventies. Scores of others, including Senator Clinton P. Anderson, were equally fortunate. Part of the high survival rate undoubtedly lay with the skills of New Mexican physicians and nurses, but part of the success must be credited to the magic of the climate as well.

Pre-World War II Roswell also boasted a link with the world of science. This began in earnest in 1930 when young Robert M. Goddard from Worcester, Massachusetts, arrived in New Mexico with a train-load of rocketry and tools. Goddard spent the rest of his life testing his rockets in a town where, in historian Richard Rhodes' words, "the land was flat and the wind hardly blew and the sun almost always shone." During the depression decade, Goddard made a number of major advances in the science of rocketry. But when the Second World War broke out, he discovered, to his dismay, that the American government did not seriously pursue his discoveries. This American disinterest in rocketry contrasted sharply with the German efforts along those lines; the Nazis poured a tremendous amount of men and material into the development of the infamous V-1 and V-2 rocket weapons. The American military argued that no rockets could deliver a sufficient bomb payload to warrant a massive, sustained effort. Indeed, the heaviest bombs that a V-1 or V-2 could carry weighed about 2,200 pounds, about half of the famed "blockbuster" weapons carried by the B-29s. Consequently, American scientists focused on the development of nuclear weapons.

After the war, Roswell emerged as the chief locus for what might be termed "almost science." This, of course, involves the notorious "Unidentified Flying Objects" (UFOs) that have so often been spotted darting across New Mexican skies. UFOs have been sighted at Dulce, Aztec, Kirtland, and Socorro, but the most famous of all the sightings came in July 1947 outside of Corona, where an alien spacecraft allegedly crashed and bodies were secretly spirited away. Today one may visit two UFO museums in Roswell, plus another just outside of town. One may also attend an annual UFO festival in Roswell as well. The city enjoys its reputation as the UFO capital of the Southwest.

New Mexico Congressman Steve Schiff achieved national media coverage when he demanded that the federal government's General Accounting Office release full documentation on the "Roswell UFO incident." The official United States Air Force report, recently published, admitted that something did, indeed, crash in 1947 at Corona, but that it was only

part of a top secret surveillance balloon program termed "Project Mogul." Project Mogul's goal was to spy on possible Soviet nuclear detonations. This accounted for the secrecy surrounding the enterprise.

UFO advocates, however, do not accept this explanation. In 1947, they argue, the United States was not really concerned about the Soviet nuclear efforts, for the Soviets did not produce their first atomic bomb until 1949. UFO advocates consider this all part of a federal coverup. There were bodies discovered at Corona, they insist, and they are still being held somewhere, perhaps in Los Alamos in some form of cold storage. Roger Meade, archivist at Los Alamos, insists that there are neither bodies nor a cold storage division at the Los Alamos archives. But can he be trusted? For \$15.00, one may actually camp out near Corona where the UFO crash allegedly occurred. The mystery continues.

Most of the links between science and New Mexico have been forged since World War II. When the war ended, it seemed clear to the federal government that the role of science had been paramount. The inventions of radar, sonar, the proximity fuse, the Higgins landing craft, and the atom bomb all had proved decisive in the victory. It also seemed clear to the government that the key to the victory lay with the combination of United States government funding, civilian scientists, and the rise of both university and national laboratories. With security issues foremost in their minds, government officials hoped to keep this alliance alive. But some of the great wartime installations, such as the Radiation Laboratory at MIT in Cambridge, Massachusetts, began to phase themselves out. There was talk that Los Alamos might follow suit. Yet General Leslie R. Groves, Commander Norris Bradbury, and others said, "no." They argued that if the Los Alamos National Laboratory were ever dismantled, it could never again be reassembled except in wartime. Consequently, Los Alamos became permanent.

While Los Alamos was never the biggest of the great wartime laboratories, after 1945 it assumed the highest profile. In part that was due to the fact that the story of Los Alamos became high theatre. Los Alamos from 1943 to 1945 proved a unique moment in the history of the human race. Never before in humankind's recorded history have so many brilliant people been gathered together in one spot for such a period of time. It was the "American Athens." It has never been duplicated before, and one doubts if it will ever be duplicated again. The story of Los Alamos and its cadre of brilliant scientists possessed a drama that the other wartime installations, such as Hanford, Washington, or Oak Ridge, Tennessee, could never approach. Los Alamos lost little of that luster in the years that followed.

Consequently, Los Alamos and New Mexico became home to fifty years of sustained federal scientific presence. Other states may have received more federal monies for science in the postwar era. One thinks

of Washington State, California, and South Carolina, all of which received greater dollar amounts. But in terms of per capita spending, New Mexico is probably number one. In 1950, estimates were that it took a hundred million dollars to make Los Alamos into a permanent community. In 1961, New Mexico's Senator Clinton P. Anderson estimated that probably two-fifths of all federal spending in New Mexico was somehow atomic-related. The federal government emerged as absolutely essential, because Los Alamos and other defense-related laboratories needed gigantic equipment such as cyclotrons, proton accelerators, and so on. Only the federal government had the budget to provide this equipment.

But the existence of Los Alamos also affected other areas of the state as well. The name "Sandia" is well known to New Mexicans but little known outside the region. Yet Sandia, which began as "Z Division" of Los Alamos and moved to Albuquerque after the war, proved vital to the postwar nuclear arsenal. Sandia essentially perfected the "standardization" of the bomb-making process. As late as 1948, there were just a handful of atomic bombs—weapons that were put together (literally) by hand. The scientists knew the exact location of every minute part. Over the next decade, Sandia engineers and theoreticians borrowed from the tradition forged by the automotive industry and "standardized" weapons production, helping to produce not tens but hundreds and then thousands of nuclear devices. Just before the end of the cold war, the United States and USSR each had about 20,000 weapons in their arsenals. The current goal is to reduce the stockpile to 3,000 by the early twenty-first century.

Los Alamos also had links to the southern part of the state, especially with the White Sands Missile Range. The land confiscated for the war effort was never given back to the ranchers, as had been planned. Instead it became part of a permanent missile range. Ironically, immediately after the war, White Sands became home to several captured German scientists. Wernher von Braun and a group of others who had helped create the V-1 and V-2 rockets were brought to the White Sands Missile Range to similarly perfect America's first missiles. One of those test missiles fired in the southern part of the range went awry and crashed across the line in Mexico. So Mexico has the dubious distinction of being the first foreign country ever hit by an American missile.

The White Sands Missile Range is also the locus of Trinity Site, the birthplace of the atomic bomb on 16 July 1945. The National Park Service once hoped to set up a national park at Trinity Site, but that proved impossible. Some areas, especially the fenced-in region, remain permanently radioactive. A compromise has been reached, however, and visitors may enter the Trinity Site area twice a year, in early spring and in the fall. The United States Army efficiently oversees these mass visitations.

The dominant science community in New Mexico, however, remains Los Alamos. For years, life on "The Hill" reflected yet another legacy from the days of the Manhattan Project—that of secrecy. Los Alamos remained a closed city with armed guards at the gates until 1957. Even today, there are many restricted areas.

Senator Clinton Anderson proved very important in the postwar Los Alamos story. From 1951 to 1972, Anderson served on the Joint Committee on Atomic Energy (JCAE). A former "lunger," he came to the Southwest with grave health problems, and after recovering he maintained a lifelong loyalty to New Mexico. He always felt, not without reason, that the state had saved his life, and he wished to return something to it. Anderson had originally trained as a journalist, and when he achieved the position on the JCAE, he utilized both his radio shows and his newspaper skills to bolster New Mexico's atomic connection. When Dwight Eisenhower put forth his "Atoms for Peace" program in the mid 1950s, Anderson did his best to insure that New Mexico received the lion's share of these proposals.

The 1950s was an era of wonderful dreams: atomic locomotives, atomic jet planes, atomic automobiles, atomic rockets, and atomic refrigerators. Anderson once prepared a talk during which he would pause and ask: "Does anyone here make ice cream?" Someone presumably would raise his hand and then Anderson would reply, as historian Anthony Mora has discovered, "... if you make ice cream you can use radio strontium to give it that proper consistency in a minimum of time." Anderson was naturally fascinated with health issues, so he pushed all kinds of programs to use things nuclear for health purposes. He tried especially to direct Plowshare monies to New Mexico, and he often succeeded, but with dubious results. In Project "Gnome" near Carlsbad (1961), scientists set off an underground atomic blast. The cavern created has now been sealed up and no one quite knows what to do with it. In Project "Gasbuggy" near Farmington (1967), nuclear scientists teamed with geologists to detonate an underground atomic explosion to re-shuffle the natural gas fields. It worked moderately well, but today the gas is radioactive and is still not useful. Anderson's most successful venture was probably the establishment in 1972 of the Meson Cancer Facility at Los Alamos, which bears his name.

A decade earlier, Anderson had hoped to turn the little town of Madrid into an Atomic Energy Commission test site where scientists would spread radioactive isotopes across the region to determine the best way to gather them up. Fortunately, the scheme failed. After World War II, however, Anderson emerged as a vital figure in New Mexico's "culture of science." He brought in millions of federal dollars to the state and to Los Alamos.

Today, Los Alamos joins Santa Fe as the two New Mexico cities that are recognized around the world. Santa Fe has been termed "America's Salzburg," but how does one characterize Los Alamos? Is it a town to be cursed? Is it a town to be praised? It is fair to say that Los Alamos is probably one of the most controversial cities in the entire nation, ranking with Oak Ridge, Tennessee; Hanford, Washington; and Las Vegas, Nevada. There are those who curse Los Alamos. If one drives up The Hill, one may still see the graffiti, "D.O.E. Kills," on the underside of various bridges. Historian Chris Dietz and others who praise Los Alamos argue that the presence of the federal economy allowed both the Indians and the Hispanos of the region the choice to maintain or change their lifestyles. Others note that the cold war is officially over; that since 1945, atomic weapons have never again been used in anger, and that the West, if this is a proper verb, "won." The Bradbury Science Museum in Los Alamos, perhaps the best example of creative museology in the nation, has an anti-nuclear room where one can write pro or con responses to the exhibits. Indeed, there should be a dissertation on the exchanges that people have written in these books.

So, it seems safe to say that the ultimate legacy of Los Alamos to the world is "ambiguous." How then should we confront the ambiguity of the atomic world as represented by Los Alamos? Perhaps the best way to accommodate it is through what has been termed "the poetry of remembered words." Here one turns to Cherokee poet Marilou Awiakta. She writes primarily about the Oak Ridge area, as that is her home region, but her comments can be applied to any other section of atomic culture. Awiakta's "Test Cow," from her book *Abiding Appalachia*, reads:

She'd like to be a friendly cow, I know.  
But she's radioactive now and locked  
behind a fence. It makes sense to use  
her instead of us. But does she care  
she cannot share her cream with me  
to eat an apple tart? And does she know  
she's "hot" and dying? It hurts my heart  
that I can't even stroke her head  
but as mother said,  
radiation's just not friendly.

Awiakta has also noted in another essay that the best response to the atomic world is simply to accept it. It has become, in her phrase, part of God's creation. The atomic bomb was conceived at Los Alamos in 1943-45. It was birthed at Trinity Site on 16 July 1945. It was announced to the world at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan, on 6 and 9 August. But it is now here, and she argues that it should be accepted as part of creation. To accept it, however, does not necessarily mean to love it, for

there are parts of nature we may or may not love. The same botanical family produces both the potato and the deadly nightshade. The same mushroom family produces both the truffle and numerous poisonous varieties. The vineyards of New Mexico produce both wine for table as well as for drunk drivers. But, as Awiakta has noted, the atomic age needs to be accepted.

"The price of liberty," Thomas Jefferson once said, "is eternal vigilance." In 1996, the price of both liberty and survival may equally be eternal vigilance. And vigilance depends on memory. It depends on the records of those people who were there. This sustained memory is central if we should not fall to the mercy of those powers who are temporarily in control of our government. Memory is crucial also as we make changes, especially as democracy so often requires, when we are called on to make mid-course changes in the affairs of the nation. Moreover, we must ever use memory to improve that most essential of all conversations, that between the present, the past, and the future, between the grandparents, the parents, and the children. Indeed, in the 1990s, the field of oral history has emerged as the equivalent of the nineteenth-century diaries and memoirs that people no longer keep. Because Americans are no longer writing the diaries and memoirs that they did in earlier times, oral history has become more and more important. Consequently, New Mexicans owe a great debt of thanks to Professor Carlos Vásquez and the UNM Oral History Program's "Impact Los Alamos." It has provided us with memory, and it is the presence of this memory that allows us to continue on into the future.

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