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Opinion: ‘Oppenheimer’s’ best performance — reminding us that we live in dangerous times

By Jerry Brown and Ernest Moniz

On Oscar night, millions will tune in to see whether the captivating story about the race to create the world’s first nuclear weapon will take home an armload of Academy Awards. As we watch, we must remember this: No matter who lands a golden statuette on March 10, we will *all* wake up on March 11 just one terrible miscalculation, accident or deliberate act of madness away from civilization-ending nuclear destruction.

We deeply appreciate that “Oppenheimer” has brought the atomic bomb origin story to the big screen. Movies have the power to educate and inspire, and Christopher Nolan’s blockbuster is raising awareness that today’s nuclear danger is all too real, as horrific wars rage in two nuclear-armed regions of the world, a new arms race accelerates and global nuclear arsenals become ever more vulnerable to risks associated with cyber- and emerging technologies. Just last week, Vladimir Putin issued a chilling warning to countries considering aid for Ukraine. They must understand, he said, that “all this truly threatens a conflict with the use of nuclear weapons, and therefore the destruction of civilization.”

Not since the height of the Cold War has the threat of nuclear weapons been so ominous. How did we get here — and how can we step back from the brink of catastrophe?

Nolan’s film takes viewers back to World War II, when J. Robert Oppenheimer led a secret project to build the world’s first nuclear bomb. But “Oppenheimer” isn’t just history — it also is a devastating cautionary tale. Oppenheimer himself warned the world about the spread of nuclear weapons and the development of even

more powerful weapons than the two that destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945.

In the aftermath of those bombings, we learned the gut-wrenching stories of those who experienced atomic devastation. For decades, schoolchildren participated in duck-and-cover drills as the United States and the Soviet Union raced to build the biggest nuclear arsenals. In 1962, the world watched as Americans coped with suffocating fear for 13 days during the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Eventually, almost 70,000 nuclear weapons threatened the world. Geopolitics and social action helped change that. With the dismantling of the Soviet Union, the U.S. and Russia reduced their nuclear stockpiles; ultimately 80% of global nuclear arsenals were eliminated. The glaring nuclear weapons threat seemed to fade. But there are still 13,000 nuclear weapons in the world and now the trend line is heading in the wrong direction.

Iran has demonstrated the technological capability to join the “nuclear club” — Russia, China, North Korea, Israel, India, Pakistan, the United Kingdom, France and the United States. Leaders in other countries, from South Korea to Saudi Arabia, have suggested that they too could develop nuclear weapons in response to regional nuclear threats.

Some of the weapons that now exist are up to 80 times more powerful than the ones Oppenheimer built. Some are held by volatile dictators and in unstable regions; some could fall into the hands of nonstate actors. And with cyberthreats and the integration of artificial

intelligence in military systems, the danger looms of nuclear war by accident or blunder.

Just the mere *possession* of thousands of nuclear weapons, spread among nine countries, presents unprecedented danger, and the implications are not widely understood. A small number of fallible human beings and a complex set of technical controls — by no means fail-safe — are all that stand between now and a nuclear apocalypse.

By showing moviegoers the detonation of just one nuclear weapon, “Oppenheimer” serves as a powerful reminder of the nuclear threat at a particularly dangerous moment.

Of course, this isn’t the first time nuclear threats have been a focus in movies and theaters.

In the 1960s, Stanley Kubrick captured people’s attention with his black comedy “Dr. Strangelove,” and Peter Sellars more recently brought the contemporary opera “Doctor Atomic” to life, telling, as “Oppenheimer” does, the story of the Manhattan Project. In the 1980s, “Terminator” envisioned an AI network launching a nuclear war.

The fact is, we are living at the mercy of weapons that could destroy civilization many times over.

It doesn’t have to be this way.

We must wake up to the reality of today’s nuclear threats, raise our voices and seize the opportunity to build a more peaceful world. Politicians must question the assumption that nuclear arsenals keep us safe. Leaders around the world must reenvision and strengthen treaties and nonproliferation agreements. With speed and deliberation, we should take steps toward a world without nuclear weapons. We have done it before. We can do it again.

It is time to heed Oppenheimer’s warnings.

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