

Einstein on and off the soapbox

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Einstein on Politics: His private thoughts and public stands on nationalism, Zionism, war, peace, and the bomb by David Rowe and Robert Schulmann

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Einstein: His life and universe by Walter Isaacson

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IN FEBRUARY 1950, a few months after the Soviet Union exploded its first atomic bomb and just after President Truman announced that the US would accelerate the production of a "super" (hydrogen) bomb, Albert Einstein went on nationwide US television to drop his own bombshell. "If these efforts should prove successful," he told his fellow Americans, "radioactive poisoning of the atmosphere and, hence, annihilation of all life on Earth will have been brought within the range of what is technically possible." He also warned of a malaise in the country: "Tremendous financial power is being concentrated in the hands of the military; youth is being militarised; and the loyalty of citizens, particularly civil servants, is carefully supervised by a police growing more powerful every day."

The very next day, J. Edgar Hoover, director of the FBI, sent a top-secret memo to every FBI office in the country requesting any and all "derogatory information" they had on Einstein. Hoover's efforts to prove that the world's most famous scientist was a Communist sympathiser - perhaps an "atom spy" like the recently arrested Klaus Fuchs - and to have him deported from his adopted country would continue for the rest of Einstein's life. When the FBI's file was closed after his death in 1955, it contained more than 1800 pages of public statements by him and unsubstantiated allegations against him. The investigation remained secret until the 1990s. Even now, after the

publication of Fred Jerome's eye-opening *The Einstein File* in 2002, this aspect of Einstein's extraordinary life often provokes surprise and discomfort.

Einstein scholars and biographers have tended to downplay their subject's political activism in favour of his awe-inspiring scientific achievements and tumultuous personal life. The only substantial books on his politics published in English have been collections of his own writings: *Einstein on Peace*, dating from 1960 and long out of print, and *Ideas and Opinions*, a useful but incomplete and somewhat inaccurate publication from 1954, in which all the writings are shorn of their historical context.

The main reason for this gap in the literature appears to be that Einstein's interventions in politics were not decisive - with the single, crucial exception of the letter he wrote in August 1939 to President Roosevelt urging him to set up a government inquiry into the possibility of building an atomic bomb. What's more, Einstein's politics have widely been regarded as naive. He fervently campaigned for a world government - or a reformed United Nations - with the military power to enforce the settlement of disputes between nations and thereby to abolish war. He clung to a belief in the possibility of Arab-Jewish cooperation and firm opposition to the creation of a Jewish nation state in Palestine - which did not stop Israel from offering him its presidency in 1952. These positions earned Einstein the reputation of a wide-eyed and largely irrelevant idealist.

To complicate matters, Einstein never joined a political party or movement, making it difficult for any group to claim him as its own. His closest links were with the Zionists in the 1920s and the pacifists in the 1930s; yet in both cases there was a public falling-out, most notably with the pacifists in 1933, after Hitler's rise to power, when Einstein abruptly changed his mind about compulsory military service and supported it as a necessary bulwark against German rearmament. His deep-rooted individualism is well captured in a letter written in 1920 to the Central Association of German Citizens of the Jewish Faith, who had requested a meeting to discuss anti-Semitism in German universities. "I am neither a German citizen nor do I believe in anything that might be described as 'Jewish faith'," Einstein wrote. "But I am a Jew and am glad to belong to the Jewish people, though I do not regard it in any way as chosen."

Einstein on Politics treats all these issues in detail by combining his most important statements - both public and private - in thematic chapters and by carefully contextualising each statement. The result is fascinating, illuminating and sometimes moving, resonating both with today's noisy debates about nuclear weapons, international terrorism and civil liberties, and with the ethical dilemmas with which we struggle in the quieter recesses of the mind.

In their excellent preface and historical introduction, the editors point to a unity behind what Einstein himself described (in his 1930 essay "What I believe") as an apparent contradiction: "My passionate interest in social justice and social responsibility has always stood in curious contrast to a marked lack of desire for direct association with men and women," Einstein wrote. The editors comment convincingly: "Though he never relented in his lifelong flight from the merely personal, we hope to show that private thoughts and public passions sprang from the same source."

Walter Isaacson, too, searches for unity in *Einstein: His life and universe*. "Just as [Einstein] sought a unified theory in science that could govern the cosmos," Isaacson writes, "so he sought one in politics that could govern the planet, one that would overcome the anarchy of unfettered nationalism through a world federalism based on universal principles." But this view seems to contradict Einstein's consistent separation of science and politics, which is made explicit in *Einstein on Politics*. Isaacson implies that Einstein's motivation in both fields was similar, whereas in fact it differed significantly.

In politics, Einstein believed that the state was needed in order that the creativity of the individual might flourish, not because some universal law could encompass human behaviour. Unfettered personal freedom was the chief attraction of the US for him and the reason he assiduously avoided aligning himself with the Soviet Union despite his socialist sympathies. Governments, like states, were a pragmatic necessity. Just after the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, he wrote, "Do I fear the tyranny of a world government? Of course I do. But I fear still more the coming of another war. Any government is certain to be evil to some extent." He never believed in any "scientific" theory of human society, equivalent to general relativity for nature. "The normal objective of my thought affords no insight into the dark places of human will and feeling", he told Freud in their celebrated 1932 exchange on the causes of war, published by

the League of Nations - and promptly banned in its German edition.

Isaacson's biography is readable and highly professional, based on extensive research and thorough checking by expert physicists and historians. Anyone coming to Einstein's life and work for the first time will be accurately informed and intellectually stimulated. The book is not as comprehensive, however, as its bulk suggests; it neglects, for example, the hostile scientific reaction to relativity in the US in the 1920s, as well as Einstein's significant relationships with Mahatma Gandhi and the poet and composer Rabindranath Tagore. The book contains few surprises, and only one diagram to help the struggling non-physicist understand the intricacies of relativity and quantum theory.

Isaacson's journalistic background at *Time* magazine - he worked his way up to the job of managing editor and wrote the main article on Einstein in its "Person of the century" issue in 1999 - can be glimpsed in the book's style, which tends toward the grandiose. However, there are some compensating flashes of originality and a memorable conclusion: "For some people, miracles serve as evidence of God's existence. For Einstein it was the absence of miracles that reflected divine providence. The fact that the world is comprehensible, that it follows laws, is worthy of awe." This is as pithy as Einstein himself.

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