

Dear Fermi -

This may prepare the way for you a little better than Mr. Compton's explanation to Adm. Hooper.

March 18, 1939

A. B. P.

Admiral S. C. Hooper,
Office of Chief of Naval Operations,
Navy Department,
Washington, D. C.

Dear Sir:

(This morning I had a telephone conversation with Mr. Compton in the office of the Assistant Secretary of the Navy, who has doubtless reported the conversation to you. It had to do with the possibility that experiments in the physics laboratories at Columbia University reveal that conditions may be found under which the chemical element uranium may be able to liberate its large excess of atomic energy, and that this might mean the possibility that uranium might be used as an explosive that would liberate a million times as much energy per pound as any known explosive. My own feeling is that the probabilities are against this, but my colleagues and I think that the bare possibility should not be disregarded, and I therefore telephoned to Mr. Edison's office this morning chiefly to arrange a channel through which the results of our experiments might, if the occasion should arise, be transmitted to the proper authorities in the United States Navy.

Professor Enrico Fermi who, together with Dr. Szilard, Dr. Zinn, Mr. Anderson and others, has been working on this problem in our laboratories, went to Washington this afternoon to lecture before the Philosophical Society in Washington this evening and will be in Washington tomorrow. He will telephone your office, and if you wish to see him will be glad to tell you more definitely what the state of knowledge on this subject is at present.

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[Professor Fermi, formerly of Rome, is Professor of Physics at Columbia University. In December last he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Physics for 1938 for the work that he did on the artificial creation of radioactive elements by means of neutrons.] There is no man more competent in this field of nuclear physics than Professor Fermi.

Professor Fermi has recently arrived to stay permanently in this country and will become an American citizen in due course. [He is very much at home in this country, having visited here often to lecture at the University of Michigan, Stanford University and at Columbia.

Professor Fermi will be staying tomorrow with Professor Edward Teller of George Washington University.]

Sincerely yours,

GBP:H

George B. Pegram
Professor of Physics

March 16, 1939