A popular image persists of Albert Einstein as a loner, someone who avoided the hustle and bustle of everyday life in favor of quiet contemplation. Yet Einstein was deeply engaged with politics throughout his life; indeed, he was so active politically that the FBI kept him under surveillance for decades. His most enduring scientific legacy, the general theory of relativity – physicists’ reigning explanation of gravity and the basis for nearly all our thinking about the cosmos – has likewise been cast as an austere temple standing aloof from the all-too-human dramas of political history. But was it so? By focusing on examples of research on general relativity from the 1950s and 1960s, this lecture will examine some of the ways in which research on Einstein’s theory was embedded in, and at times engulfed by, the tumult of world politics.

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