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OPINION // OPEN FORUM

# No, AI is most certainly not the new Manhattan Project

Nuclear scientists were driven by a sense of duty and patriotic responsibility. The rise of AI is driven by greed.

Theodore Kim, Shelly Leshner  
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This image released by Universal Pictures shows Cillian Murphy as J. Robert Oppenheimer in a scene from "Oppenheimer." Metadata via Getty Images/Universal Pictures

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Christopher Nolan's new movie *Oppenheimer* tells the story of the World War II physicist who led the development of the atomic bomb. The movie arrives just as the conversation around AI, and how it parallels the [development of nuclear weapons](#), comes to a fever pitch.

While AI executives and advocates enthusiastically invoke the [Manhattan Project](#), eager to borrow against the prestige of physics and its most notorious project, their grasp of Cold War history has been facile at best, and misreads both the past and present.

Current and former tech leaders are [quick to use](#) J. Robert Oppenheimer's name to conjure the success of the atomic bomb, but the more appropriate figure is Edward Teller, the architect of the *hydrogen* bomb (H-bomb) who was immortalized as [Dr. Strangelove](#) in Stanley Kubrick's 1964 movie of that same name. Paralleling the Cold War arms race to build ever-larger H-bombs, AI executives are racing to build bigger Large Language Models (LLMs, the technology that powers ChatGPT) while wildly promising that they will make us [healthier, smarter and more productive](#).

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Teller's [Project Plowshare](#) also promised benefits while advocating for astonishingly reckless uses of H-bombs. These included proposals to blast a new harbor into Alaska and nuke an alternative to the Suez Canal through the Negev Desert. Any of these proposals would have caused immediate and immense environmental damage, and the project was scuttled when public opinion turned against nuclear weapons.

We are not in a Manhattan Project moment, where terrified Jewish scientists who had been expelled by the Nazis were racing to build the atomic bomb before Hitler. The current AI race is not a high-stakes gambit to defeat a fascist empire, but a cash-in on the next big Silicon Valley [fad](#). Instead of scientists and generals in charge, we have [venture capitalists](#) and [hedge fund managers](#).

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While AI wonks are happy to make comparisons to nuclear weapons, they immediately add that today's AI is fundamentally different. Supposedly, the analogy falls apart because unlike previous technologies, today's AIs can be used to make tomorrow's more powerful. Thus, we are living in a special historical moment since, as one leading technologist put it, ["nukes don't make stronger nukes."](#)

This claim to exceptionalism is totally ahistorical. Nukes can in fact be used to build stronger nukes. That is exactly how a hydrogen bomb works. An exploding atomic weapon is used to trigger a thermonuclear reaction that is thousands of times more powerful than the bomb that the U.S. dropped on Hiroshima. These nukes can be made exponentially powerful without theoretical limit and have no tactical military value. Their only application is mass genocide.

When Oppenheimer was chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission's General Advisory Committee, he publicly opposed the development of these horrific devices while pushing for [openness and international control](#). In response, the committee [publicly humiliated him](#) by stripping him of his security clearance, citing flimsy evidence that years ago, he had not reported an espionage-tinged conversation with one of his associates, Haakon Chevalier, to the government quickly enough.

This came to be known as the Chevalier Incident, and there are clear similarities with our current AI moment. When the Google Ethical AI team tried to publish a [paper](#) warning against the dangers of progressively larger LLMs, they were slowly [fired over](#) the course of a year. Echoing the Chevalier Incident, the flimsiest procedural pretense was offered: pre-publication protocols on their paper had not been properly followed. If anybody is Oppenheimer in this story, those ethics researchers are.

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The Chevalier Incident casts a long shadow across the present day. Even scientists who hyperbolically believe their AI work might cause the [extinction of the human race](#) forge ahead regardless because they feel powerless to stop the current trajectory of technology. If somebody of Oppenheimer's stature can be destroyed without altering public policy, what chance would the average scientist have? Last year, even the U.S. government acknowledged the [destructive legacy](#) of the Chevalier Incident and [vacated its decision](#), 55 years after Oppenheimer's death.

To play out the nuclear weapons analogy to its full conclusion, the raw material for today's AIs isn't uranium ore, but human data. In place of thousands of young women refining the ore into weapons-grade material, we have vast data labeling operations powered by [millions of precariously paid humans](#). This time, weapons production is under the sole control of non-state actors: massive tech companies. OpenAI is [funded by Microsoft](#), and Stability AI is [powered by Amazon](#).

OpenAI is [advocating](#) for a new regulatory body akin to the International Atomic Energy Agency. While that agency was tasked with enforcing the Non-Proliferation Treaty, it has been criticized for ultimately [consolidating](#) the U.S. and Russia as nuclear superpowers. But companies are not national-states, and the equivalent of a superpower is a monopoly. This is the actual goal of the advocacy: the end of Big Tech, and the beginning of Big AI. Just like Big Brother, except he's watching you for training data, which he'll use to [slowly drain your paycheck](#).

For all their flaws, nuclear scientists were driven by a sense of duty and patriotic responsibility. This is how our current moment truly differs from the past. There is no patriotic or public service imperative for AI. This is the Manhattan Project of greed.

*Theodore Kim is a professor of computer science at Yale University. Shelly Leshner is a professor of physics at the University of Wisconsin, La Crosse and the host of [My Nuclear Life](#).*

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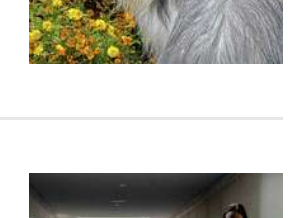
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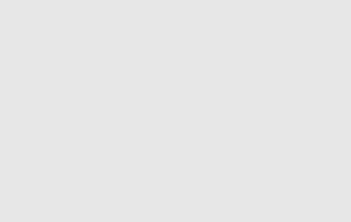
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