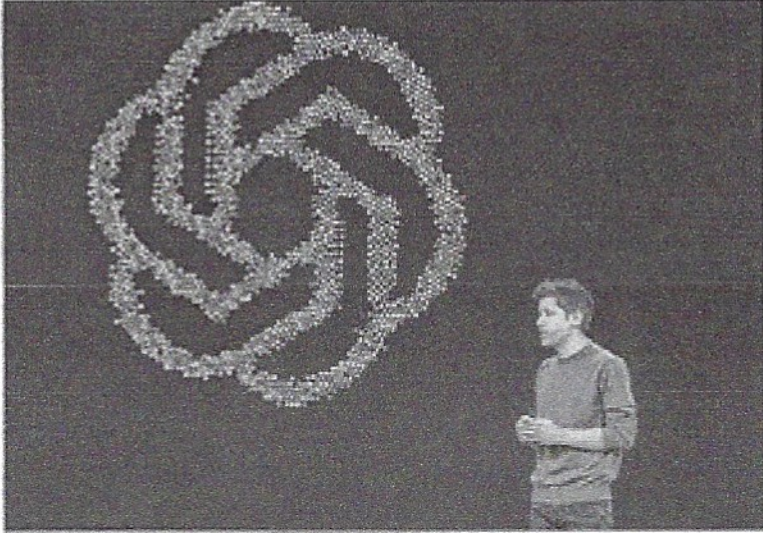


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Neither a scholar nor a scientist, someone like him shouldn't be in charge of the future of humanity.



OpenAI CEO Sam Altman ANDREJ SOKOLOV/ DPA/ ZUMA PRESS



Sam Altman Is No Oppenheimer

DECLARATIONS

By Peggy Noonan

Some compare the development of AI to the development of the first atomic bomb by the Manhattan Project. But the single most crucial fact of both undertakings makes them polar opposites.

The U.S. government initiated and oversaw the entire enterprise that unleashed the atom and made the bomb. After its use, the federal government controlled nuclear technology in the U.S. and attempted to stop or slow its nonpeaceful use in the world. The government understood the exact nature of the science and technology in which it was involved.

Not so in the development of equally world-changing AI. The quest for artificial intelligence was privately initiated, funded, carried out. There was no oversight from a government representing the people and responsible for their physical safety. No high levels of the government have demonstrated full or timely comprehension of what the scientists, engineers and machines are up to even now in the frontier labs.

Those opposed to federal regulation of AI point out that early on, Manhattan Project scientists worried that the first atomic test might ignite the earth's atmosphere. It didn't. So, they argue, with AI: We're at the "exotic fears" part of the debate, which always accompanies technological breakthroughs.

There were scientists in the Manhattan Project who feared what a journalist later called the doomsday hypothesis. But it was a few, not a majority, and their fears were overridden by an originally concerned J. Robert Oppenheimer, the project's director, after consulting with other scientists and reviewing their calculations. The larger context: The U.S. government was trying to end World War II without invading Japan, which could have meant millions of casualties. So time was of the essence.

In contrast not some, not a majority, but *all* of AI's inventors and leaders admit it may bring about physical disaster, and most if not all expect at least one. And there is no historical context, no millions of deaths, pressuring them to race forward.

We are allowing the inventors of AI to see themselves as Oppenheimer. They're Dr. Frankenstein. Though at least he wasn't mindlessly competing with the lab next door for the fattest IPO.

Which gets us to Sam Altman, CEO of OpenAI and the most famous face of the technology. He enjoys Manhattan Project comparisons. When editor Mark Guiducci of Vanity Fair brought Oppenheimer up in an interview this week, Mr. Altman said he didn't want to show "false modesty" but inventing AI was "a collective effort," "a story of a relatively small number of brilliant scientists and engineers that did something amazing."

No one ever accused Mr. Altman of humility, but he is a remarkable figure, 41 and a veteran giant of Silicon Valley. Unlike Oppenheimer he isn't a scientist or professor but a businessman—a discoverer of internet products, a strategist of startups, a first-rate judge of technical talent, and an understander of the flow of money, where it pools, where it can be found to fund innovation.

In a largely friendly 2016 profile in the New Yorker, Tad Friend wrote that "Altman's great strengths are clarity of thought and an intuitive grasp of complex systems." His superpower is "his ability to see people as chess pieces and work out their lines of play."

In a less friendly profile for the same magazine published this April, titled "Sam Altman May Control Our Future—Can He Be Trusted?," Ronan Farrow and Andrew Marantz wrote that Mr. Altman is "often described, either with reverence or with suspicion, as the greatest pitchman of his generation." Many around him say he lacks extensive expertise in coding or machine learning. Messrs. Farrow and Marantz report "multiple engineers recalled him misusing or confusing basic technical terms."

Most of those interviewed shared the critics' judgment that "Altman has a relentless will to power that, even among industrialists who put their names on spaceships, sets him apart." A board member who had worked with Mr. Altman told the authors: "He's unconstrained by truth."

Messrs. Farrow and Marantz report that in the fall of 2023, when the OpenAI board famously fired Mr. Altman as CEO, the company's chief scientist told another board member: "I don't think Sam is the guy who should have his finger on the button." Board members believed he had "deceived them about internal safety protocols."

Mr. Altman famously fought back and was reinstated. Still, "the colleagues who facilitated his ouster accuse him of a degree of deception that is untenable for any executive and dangerous for a leader of such a transformative technology."

Early on, Mr. Altman compared AI to nuclear power and was concerned that if the technology went rogue, it could cause devastation. By last year he'd changed his tone. "We'll all get better stuff," he wrote in a blog post. "We will build ever-more-wonderful things for each other."

Publicly Mr. Altman called for regulation, including a federal agency to oversee advanced AI models. At the same time, Messrs. Farrow and Marantz report, he was applying influence in different directions. Long a donor to Democratic candidates and causes, Mr. Altman has shifted. Now he is one of President Trump's favorite tycoons. On Inauguration Day 2025 Mr. Trump repealed his predecessor's executive order on AI. "He's found an effective way for the Trump Administration to do his bidding," a senior Biden administration official told Messrs. Farrow and Marantz.

In the Vanity Fair interview, Mr. Altman seemed to put an odd and repeated emphasis on how much he loves his children, as if he sensed this as a humanizing tool. Since becoming a father he finds himself thinking, "Obviously we don't want to destroy the world, but what do we want to preserve and what kind of world do we want to build?"

What do we want to preserve? This reminded me of the passage of Mr. Friend's New Yorker piece in which Mr. Altman spoke of the advantages to being a machine. "We humans are limited by our input-output rate—we learn only two bits a second, so a ton is lost. To a machine we must seem like slowed-down whale songs."

That is a thought beautifully expressed, but harrowing. Mr. Altman has written that the ideal endpoint of the AI age might be a human merging with machines. "We will be the first species ever to design our own descendants."

Mr. Friend reports that in 2012 he gave up the idea that human beings are singular creations. "When I realized intelligence can be simulated, I let the idea of our uniqueness go, and it wasn't as traumatic as I thought."

In the Vanity Fair interview he was asked a hypothetical question. Suppose there was a big red button that he and all competitors could hit, and say, "We're going to pause for now and we're going to get safe." Would he hit the button?

He responded with the squishyworded, comprehension-killing language he often deploys in public, but he mixed in one fully clear phrase. "We'll need things like antitrust exemptions" before such discussions begin.

This is no visionary, this is a lawyered- up billionaire. Should he be in charge of the human future? If we keep going down this path at this rate, he will be. Then we can make more Oppenheimer comparisons when he winds up pacing the frontier, wringing his hands and muttering the Bhagavad Gita about what he's unleashed.

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