

Opinion | It's Time to Cry Wolf Over A.I.

Thomas L. Friedman

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“Looks like by April, you know, in theory, when it gets a little warmer, it miraculously goes away.”

That’s what President Trump said about the Covid-19 outbreak on Feb. 10, 2020, about a month before it forced our country and the world into a lengthy lockdown.

Why do I recall that today? Because when I think back on the biggest disaster stories I have covered —

including 9/11 and Covid-19 — I am struck that they have one big thing in common: a failure of imagination. Sure, government experts prepared for these events in theory, but in practice how many of them imagined that suicidal terrorists would fly commercial airliners into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon? And how many imagined that a respiratory virus that emerged in Wuhan, China, would kill millions of people and drag down the world economy for years? So today, when it comes to the possibility that artificial intelligence, which is falling into the hands of rogue actors and is beginning to manifest a will of its own, could become incredibly destabilizing, my imagination is fully engaged.

Here is what my imagination is telling me. It is telling me that the big A.I. companies in America and China are not being candid with us about how little even they understand the power and reach of the models they have developed, like sorcerers, in their labs. It is telling me that the Trump administration, headed by a man who so often governs by social media post, is uniquely unsuited to the kind of comprehensive, sustained, coordinated governance that keeping A.I. safe demands. And it is telling me that there is so much at stake — economically, militarily and technologically — and so little trust between Washington and Beijing that it would take a miracle for the United States and China to agree on the kind of deep collaboration needed to defuse the most nightmarish threats posed by A.I.

It is still not too late, though, for radical rethinking before something very bad happens that forces all the key players to do things they never imagined, things they will have to do in the middle of a full-blown A.I.-driven crisis. I'd rather be remembered as the boy who cried wolf when the wolf never came than as someone who got eaten by it.

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So here goes: “Wolf, wolf, wolf, wolf.”

I will stand down when I see the United States and China start to address the immediate threat by teaming up to defend critical infrastructure — water systems, power grids, the internet — in their own countries and around the world.

But I will breathe a sigh of relief only when I see Washington and Beijing put their heads together with their respective A.I. companies to draw up a long-term plan for how they can continue to compete on A.I. technologies, while simultaneously agreeing on internal A.I. guardrails to prevent increasingly capable A.I. systems from, on their own, creating catastrophic cybersecurity, biological, nuclear or financial risks. This is a geopolitical, geoeconomic and technological challenge no generation of American and Chinese statesmen has ever before faced. They dodge it at their, and our, peril.

I sincerely hope a strategy along these lines is what comes out of Thursday's summit in Washington between Trump and President Xi Jinping: A.I.'s potential to deliver transformational breakthroughs in energy, biology, new materials and drug discovery is unprecedented. But so too are its risks.

We need a way to get A.I.'s best and cushion against its worst — and we do not have that today.

Until there is a U.S.-China agreement to ensure that the A.I. agents that the world's two A.I. superpowers are developing will operate only in ways that are consonant with human flourishing, and be kept that way, I am in the slow-this-thing-down-until-we-are-sure-we-can-control-it camp. I'm in it for the same reason that the Stanford political theorist Francis Fukuyama [argued](#) in the Substack publication Persuasion on Monday: “A.I. is a tool that can be used for good or bad purposes — and at the moment we have few mechanisms for regulating the bad uses other than the good intentions of the people creating the technology.”

The last time we trusted the good intentions of the tech bros of Silicon Valley, when they told us to “move fast and break things” — regulations be damned — we unleashed social networks that helped fracture our society. I do not trust for one second that these people will put the national interest ahead of their own on A.I.

Anyone who tells you we can't afford regulation now because it might slow down innovation is missing three things. First, those who contend that regulation is, by definition, innovation-destroying and market-destroying are "just ignorant of history," Eric Beinhocker, the executive director of the Institute for New Economic Thinking at the University of Oxford's Martin School, told me. "Good regulations create trust, and trust grows markets. How do you think the airline industry or the pharmaceutical industry grew so big, so fast? Because government regulations created trust among consumers that the planes they fly and the medicines they take are safe."

Would the pharma industry be what it is today if people didn't trust that the drugs they buy at the drugstore, without a second thought, have gone through a regulatory process? Because we have not yet had an A.I. catastrophe, people are going along with the hands-off approach. But when one happens, the pitchforks will be out for the "no-regulations" gurus, like Trump's A.I. whisperer David Sacks — and for good reason.

Any company that creates an A.I. agent that does something bad in the world "should be held liable for it," Beinhocker added. That is precisely what we did not do with the lords of the social networks, and we have paid a huge price for it. I was happy to see Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent [tell](#) CNBC on Monday that the Trump administration won't give A.I. leaders a "liability shield." That may be the best way to slow them down in the near term. I hope China does the same.

Second, A.I. is not just a technology but also, as the [computer scientist](#) Craig Mundie has been saying, "a new species." And like a new species, it is already exhibiting evolutionary properties.

"We've unleashed Darwin in silicon," Beinhocker explained. The latest A.I. models have demonstrated a capacity for "self-improvement, self-replication and self-preservation. When you put those three things together, and their evolution happens at silicon speed, not human speed, you've got something extremely powerful, potentially dangerous and impossible to control."

This becomes even more true as we begin to give our A.I. systems bodies in the form of robots, drones and vehicles. We must ensure that there is always a human in the loop — that they are never fully autonomous — until we can guarantee these systems will always operate in line with human well-being, Beinhocker added.

Third, our president now runs the country the way he is said to have run the Trump Organization, [which had to deal with multiple bankruptcies](#): There is virtually no regular policy process, interagency collaboration is weak, and on most days everyone in the administration just sits around waiting to see what the president posts on social media — often based on the last person he spoke to or something he heard on Fox News — and then tries to frame policies around it. (Thank goodness that at least Bessent, sources tell me, has done a deep dive into A.I. issues and has been talking to the Chinese. But whether he can herd the cats in this administration on this issue remains to be seen.)

My Times colleagues recently [reported](#) that sources close to Trump made clear that his dismissal of fears that A.I. could lead to mass extinction as a "hoax" is driven not by any technological assessment. It is said to be driven, they reported, by his fear that "if the artificial intelligence boom fueling the American economy slows down, the market could crash and recession could quickly follow."

That kind of thinking is begging for trouble. Trump should be thinking about another president. Dwight D. Eisenhower famously [said](#), "Plans are worthless, but planning is everything." What he meant was that no fixed plan can survive all the unanticipated stuff that happens once a war or crisis starts to unfold. But if you've gone through a rigorous planning process — familiarized yourself with the depth of the problem and the kinds of things that could go haywire and built trust within your team — you greatly improve your ability to adapt on the fly.

That is precisely what was missing in the run-up to Trump's war with Iran, and we are paying a huge price for that today. Imagine what could happen if A.I. agents — a thousand times cleverer and more dangerous than Tehran or Trump — go off the rails.

Thomas L. Friedman is the foreign affairs Opinion columnist. He joined the paper in 1981 and has won three Pulitzer Prizes. He is the author of seven books, including “From Beirut to Jerusalem,” which won the National Book Award. [@tomfriedman](#) • [Facebook](#)

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