

weapons of mass destruction and abundant energy for mass consumption. Fearing Nazi Germany would initiate a crash program to develop atomic weapons, Wigner urged the United States government to support research on nuclear fission. He found an ally in his fellow countryman Leo Szilard, who in Hungary had attended the same schools as Wigner before emigrating to the United States.

Studying nuclear fission with Enrico Fermi at Columbia University in New York City, Szilard needed additional funds to continue his experiments with uranium and graphite. Wigner gladly lent his support to Szilard's efforts. Because other scientists were lobbying authorities with their own weapon schemes, Wigner and Szilard found their campaign for nuclear fission research moved so slowly they seemed to be "swimming in syrup."

Thinking that Washington officials would be more likely to listen to the famous Albert Einstein, an old acquaintance from Berlin, Wigner and Szilard sought him out in July 1939. Learning he had left Princeton to vacation on Long Island, they drove there, found Einstein's cabin, and explained

to him why the United States should initiate fission research before German scientists developed an atomic weapon. As Wigner later recalled:

Einstein understood it in half a minute. It was really uncanny how he dictated a letter in German with enormous readiness. It is not easy to formulate and phrase things at once in a printable manner. He did. I translated that into English. Szilard and Teller went out, and Einstein signed it. Alexander Sachs took it to Washington. This helped greatly in initiating the uranium project.

In October 1939, President Franklin Roosevelt appointed a committee of prominent scientists and government administrators to manage federally funded scientific research. Wigner, Szilard, and Edward Teller met with the committee and requested \$6000 to purchase graphite for fission experiments. They listened to an Army officer on the committee expound at length upon his theory that civilian and troop morale, not experimental weapons, won wars.



Four nuclear physicists who advanced our understanding of nuclear power: left to right, Walter Zinn, Leo Szilard, Eugene Wigner, and Alvin Weinberg.