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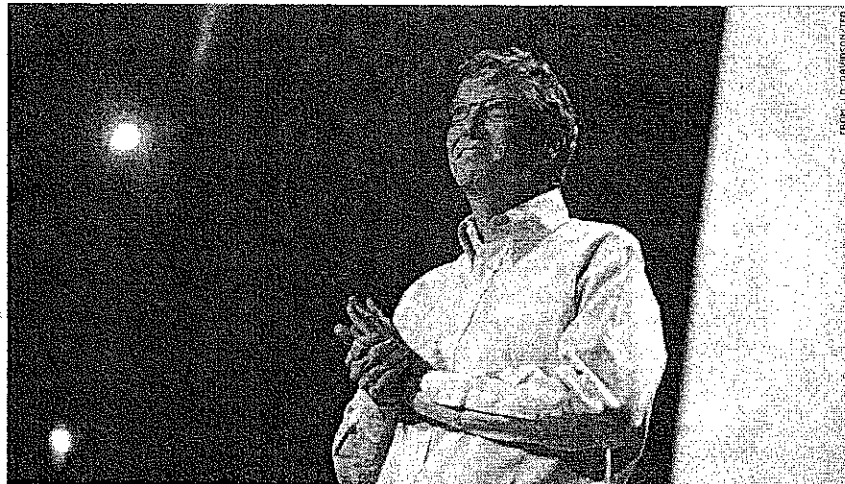
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Bill Gates and the 'nuclear Renaissance'

By John D. Sutter, CNN
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Bill Gates is backing a new kind of nuclear power plant. But some question the plan's viability.

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

Bill Gates calls for investment in experimental nuclear power technologies

Expert says we are on the cusp of a "nuclear Renaissance"

Gates invests in TerraPower, which is developing new nuclear technology

Some say the concept won't work and distracts from proven climate solutions

(CNN) -- Say you were to give Bill Gates a really great present -- like the ability to cure crippling diseases or to pick all U.S. presidents for the next 50 years.

Gates would like those gifts, sure.

But you wouldn't have granted his one, true wish.

The Microsoft-founder-turned-philanthropist said at a recent speech in California that, more than new vaccines for AIDS or malaria or presidential selection power, what he really wants is clean energy at half its current cost.

To do that, he said, we'll need new technology.

Gates -- a father of the personal computer and quite the tech powerhouse -- said one of the brightest hopes for clean, cheap power is a new form of nuclear power plant that reuses waste uranium from existing nuclear reactors.

It's kind of like radioactive recycling, and, on its face, can sound like a miracle.

Gates actually described energy innovation in those terms: To prevent famine, poverty and the hardship that will come with global climate change we need "energy miracles," he said at the TED Conference in Long Beach.

Some nuclear scientists and critics say the nuclear technology Gates highlighted is misguided, naive and expensive.

About the TED Conference

Others, like Craig Smith, a nuclear engineer at the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, said Gates is helping put the world on

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Cochran compared Gates' call for investment in nuclear technology that would reuse uranium to Bernie Madoff's Ponzi scheme. It's a scam, he said.

Researchers have been working on similar, utopian ideas for more than 60 years, he said, and with no tangible result.

Action needs to be taken now to blunt the effects of climate change, he said; and new nuclear power technologies will take too long to develop and will be too expensive.

We need energy miracles.

--Bill Gates

"If you're trying to address climate change mitigation, this is not the way to go in any case because it's too far into the future," he said.

"We need the solutions now. The focus on research and development ought to be on improvements in near-term applications, not these pie-in-the-sky reactor concepts that won't be deployed for decades."

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Michael Mariotte, executive director of the Nuclear Information and Resource Service, an environmental and public-safety group, said the timeline is too slow.

The technology could be ready for testing in 20 years and ready for commercial use 20 years after that, Gates said in California.

"Our belief is that we need to make near-term carbon emissions reductions -- and in that sense, this doesn't help," Mariotte said.

"It diverts resources away from technologies that do work."

Optimism

Others applaud Gates, one of the richest men in the world, for taking on a big problem like climate change with gusto and optimism.

"Look, I think this is the backing of a creative and innovative reactor concept," said Smith, the nuclear engineer at the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory.

"That is a very good thing -- to allow people to stretch their minds and come up with new concepts."

It's unclear where the best clean-energy technology solutions will come from, Smith said, but many varieties of next-generation nuclear tech are under development, and the U.S. government has invested in several.

Ted Quinn, a former president of the American Nuclear Society and a consultant for the nuclear industry, said it's important for the United States to find a valuable use for nuclear waste.

"This is like an ultimate design that can burn a different type of fuel than we burn today. This burns the part of the fuel that we can't burn," he said of the Gates-backed project. "It helps the fuel cycle issues."

In his remarks in California, Gates said there will be no easy fix for climate change.

He encouraged optimism, along with heavier investment in solar, wind, battery and nuclear technologies.

That's the only way he will get his biggest wish, he said. "We have to drive full speed and get a miracle in a pretty tight timeline."

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