

TIME

Nuclear Energy's Moment Has Come



Diablo Canyon nuclear power plant owned by PG&E is scheduled to close in 2024 and 2025, but an effort is underway to extend the life of the plant. David Middlecamp-San Luis Obispo Tribune/Tribune News Service

BY **CHARLES OPPENHEIMER** MAY 11, 2023 6:05 AM EDT

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For all the recent talk about clean energy and a shift away from coal, there's a major problem in our goal to transition to a net zero-carbon economy. Despite all the growth and advances in renewable energy, globally we consume more fossil fuels than ever, and our rate of CO₂ production is in fact increasing, not heading to zero.

But there's a bipartisan, environmentally friendly solution still sitting on the table, still waiting for its moment — if only we can overcome our predetermined bias.

As J. Robert Oppenheimer's grandson, I believe that my grandfather would support the expansion of nuclear energy as an environmentally friendly solution to address both the world's energy problems and, perhaps counterintuitively, as a catalyst for peace and unity.

Most known as the physicist in charge of the Manhattan Project's Los Alamos Laboratory during WWII, JRO (as we refer to him in the family) and many other prominent scientists noted that humanity reached a new milestone following the detonation of the first atomic bomb. In witnessing a technology sufficiently powerful to destroy humanity, they also recognized its potential for collective good — that it required a new level of unity to address common threats. JRO and others recommended that the only safe path forward was global scientific cooperation, especially in an effort to avoid international arms races. That level of cooperation is necessary to face today's threats from exponential technological growth.

Indeed, nuclear energy has the ability to be scaled at an industrial level, globally: Uranium 235 has millions more times energy than coal or oil.

It's also important to underscore that nuclear energy became unpopular in part due to its association with nuclear weapons and fears about its safety. But the actual safety record shows it is one of the safest sources of energy, and it is becoming more popular to be an environmentalist and pro-nuclear. We must get over our cognitive and political bias: Nuclear energy is necessary and safe, and not the same as nuclear weapons.

In a new documentary released last week and available on VOD starting June 6 from director Oliver Stone, "Nuclear Now," we see a comprehensive and compelling history of the rise of the anti-nuclear movement, and a thoughtful argument for the utility in nuclear energy to address today's severe energy crises. "Nuclear Now" also shows us that energy expansion is becoming a

unifying issue, domestically and abroad. Today, we must expand the development of nuclear energy to meet our carbon-free energy transition, because nuclear energy is indeed environmentally friendly, and necessary.

The support for nuclear energy has risen to 60 percent across the country — practically unheard of in modern political terms — including a spike among Democrats support from roughly 38 percent in 2018 to 59 percent today. Despite the decades of ringing alarm bells over the perceived dangers that nuclear energy might bring—in part of course due to its association with nuclear weapons—our energy crisis is too urgent to ignore nuclear anymore. And more than that, it's equally important to dispel the misinformation surrounding it.

With rising bipartisan support, it can only go up from here.

It will take a huge effort for us to support the energy transition to carbon-free sources like nuclear energy, a process the historian Richard Rhodes has said takes 50 to 100 years on average. That should include all types of renewables, carbon capture for petroleum, and scientific research into fusion and advanced nuclear. And there should be an immediate expansion in fission energy, a proven, already-existing technology both in the U.S. and worldwide. There is a great opportunity right now to pursue nuclear energy expansion as a bipartisan issue.

As my family observes my grandfather's birthday, it's time to call for a "Manhattan Project" for carbon-free energy production. For as much doom and gloom the climate change narrative brings, we can also focus on what can be done to plan for a more sustainable future. Chief among them is an industrial-scale production of carbon-free nuclear energy. We've done it for defense, we can do it for energy.

Internationally there is great hope for nuclear energy development increasing cooperation that my grandfather, Neils Bohr, Einstein, and other scientists said was our path to a safe future. They recognized that there was only one

way humans could survive when we possessed technology as powerful as atomic bombs: and that is to cooperate on a shared, safer, cleaner future.

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