

World view

Bill Gates's climate comments are a distraction



By Michael E. Mann

People do not have to dismiss or exaggerate the climate threat to justify concerted action.

Fifteen years ago, my friend and mentor, climate scientist Stephen Schneider, said something that has stuck with me. When it comes to climate change, the “end of the world” and “good for you” are “the two lowest-probability outcomes”.

Steve’s aphorism feels especially prescient today. As the 30th United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP30) plays out in Belém, Brazil, this month, misleading climate messaging in the media espouses both these extremes.

At one end, take the actions of billionaire philanthropist Bill Gates. On 28 October, he astounded climate advocates by publishing a manifesto arguing that the climate crisis is less urgent than other major problems that humanity faces (see go.nature.com/23xed). Jarringly, its publication coincided with the devastating Jamaican landfall of potentially the strongest Atlantic hurricane on record, an event that human-caused warming made more likely to happen.

Gates wasn’t implying that global warming is “good for you”, but his arguments are adjacent to that sentiment: there has already been enough progress on climate, and we should instead prioritize addressing what he feels are more pressing issues, such as poverty and disease.

Despite substantial criticism from me and other climate specialists that this presented a false trade-off between climate action and public health, Gates dug in his heels. “What world do they live in?” he said in an interview with the news outlet Axios, telling reporters that he would “let the temperature go up 0.1 degree to get rid of malaria”.

Indeed, what world is Gates living in? The idea that climate action must come at the expense of efforts to address human health is a provable fallacy. In our book *Science Under Siege* (2025), public-health scientist Peter Hotez at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston, Texas, and I detail how these challenges are, in fact, inseparable. Human-caused climate change will exacerbate pandemics, as it did for COVID-19, and vector-borne diseases, such as malaria. How Gates or anyone else proposes to “get rid of malaria” in a rapidly warming world is anyone’s guess. This is a strawman argument.

Gates’ pivot has been celebrated by climate-change downplayers and fossil-fuel proponents in politics, including US President Donald Trump, and in segments of the media, including the newspapers *The Wall Street Journal* and *New York Post* – even if Gates has disavowed their characterizations of his position.

Meanwhile, those at the opposite ‘end of the world’ extreme are hardly any more helpful. “It may be too late”

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announced Robert Hunziker, a freelance writer in Los Angeles, California, just one month ago on the news site Counterpunch. Such narratives of doom are often reinforced by media outlets that overstate the dire nature of the impacts that are baked in, with breathless headlines about supposed tipping points that have already been crossed. This feeds a collective sense of hopelessness.

I have long been critical of this sort of climate doomism: it could lead humanity down the same path as outright denial. After all, if it’s too late to act, then why act at all? We have even seen doomism increasingly weaponized against climate action – depicting it as a hopeless cause. One example is petrostates such as Saudi Arabia and Russia, which have long lobbied against global climate agreements. Regrettably, they are now joined by the United States under Trump.

Humanity has made progress toward decarbonizing societal infrastructure – but not nearly enough. Current agreements are wholly inadequate to limit warming to below dangerous levels. Current policies will lead to roughly 3 °C of warming, and backsliding of the sort we’re now seeing – for example, by the world’s largest historical polluter, the United States – could plausibly result in 4–5 °C of warming of the planet by the end of the century (C. R. Schwalm *et al. Proc. Natl Acad. Sci. USA* **117**, 19656–19657; 2020).

That’s enough warming to place our ‘planet on the brink’, to quote the title of a peer-reviewed assessment by me and more than a dozen other leading climate researchers, published the day after Gates’s memo (W. J. Ripple *et al. Bioscience* <https://doi.org/qd3w>; 2025). That report finds that 22 of 34 of “the planet’s vital signs are flashing red”.

Yet, the best available climate science suggests that it is not too late. The obstacles to limiting warming to below ever-more-dangerous levels remain political, rather than physical or technological.

As I’m fond of saying, we must communicate both the urgency and the agency. As Schneider used to say: “The truth is bad enough.” We don’t have to exaggerate the threat to justify concerted action.

At the COP30 opening, UN secretary-general António Guterres issued a stark condemnation of the policymakers there who “remain captive to the fossil-fuel interests, rather than protecting the public interest”. Allowing warming to exceed the 1.5 °C danger level, he said, would constitute a “moral failure and deadly negligence”.

Perhaps even addressing Gates himself, Guterres added that “every fraction of a degree higher means more hunger, displacement and loss”. That obviously speaks to the urgency of action. But it’s also a reminder that every fraction of a degree of warming we prevent means tremendous amounts of avoided damage. That’s the agency we hold.