

Earlier this month, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) issued its first nuclear construction permit in a decade. It [approved](#) an innovative modular nuclear reactor by a company cofounded by Bill Gates. Will the reactor be safe? Hopefully, Gates knows what he's doing, but it's hard to give a lot of credence to the NRC these days. The NRC used to be an independent agency relying on its own expertise and judgment. Due to the unitary executive theory, it's now under Trump's control.

The problem is that the Commission's marching orders have been [changed](#), so it no longer prioritizes reactor safety. Last year, Trump issued an [executive order](#) "reforming" the NRC. Here are some key features. Trump announced a national policy to make the United States the global leader in nuclear energy and increase deployment of new reactor designs. While he paid lip service to safety, he also made it clear that the NRC had given too much weight to reactor safety and radiation risks in the past. He ordered NRC to make major staff cuts, reduce the functions of the Advisory Committee on Reactor Design to a minimum, impose an 18-month limit on decisions no matter how complex the issues, adopt more lenient radiation limits, and "streamline" the public hearing process.

The NRC followed the new fast-track permitting procedures for the Gates reactor. The agency staff noted "some remaining areas of uncertainty" in the reactor design and analysis. It said that these issues could be decided later in the process, but it's hard to place much faith in that plan. It's unrealistic to expect the NRC to require major changes once the \$10 billion construction project is underway. Moreover, Trump's executive order warns the Commission against mandating changes during construction. It requires the NRC to adopt new regulations that "establish stringent thresholds for circumstances in which the NRC may demand changes to reactor design once construction is underway."

I don't mean to diss the Commissioners or their staff. I'm sure that they're trying their best to do their jobs properly. But in the end, it no longer really matters what they think, since the White House is calling the shots.