

# Bill Gates was an AI optimist. Now he's scared of what could go wrong.

In an essay, the Microsoft co-founder sounds the alarm about artificial intelligence's risks to safety and security, jobs and children's well-being.

[Shira Ovide](#) August 26, 2026 at 3:01 a.m. EDTYesterday at 3:01 a.m. EDT

For years, Microsoft co-founder and philanthropist Bill Gates said he was [optimistic](#) that the world would become a better place thanks to artificial intelligence. He imagined the technology [freeing people from work](#) and [speeding up](#) inventions that would fight diseases and climate change.

But in [a new essay](#) published online Wednesday, the philanthropist says he is worried that AI could do more harm than good. Gates said in an interview that it's fair to say he's now scared of what could go wrong with AI absent urgent intervention.

Over the past year, Gates said, he's grown alarmed about the technology's increasing capabilities to [complete workplace](#)

[tasks](#) and [go on hacking spree](#)s. Most of all he's worried about a lack of progress in [regulating](#) AI and minimizing its downsides.

For the first time in his life, Gates said, he finds himself wishing that a new technology would advance more slowly. "I'm surprised to feel this way," Gates said in the interview with The Washington Post. "I've never seen a problem that innovation can't solve."

In his essay, Gates suggests ways to respond to AI's risks, including setting aside some jobs for humans, and writes that he'll have more to say about policy solutions soon.

Though Gates isn't involved in AI companies day-to-day, he remains one of America's most high-profile technologists and philanthropists. His warnings follow those of many active AI company executives who [express](#) ambivalence or fear [about](#) the technology they're developing.

Gates's concerns focus on three major categories: safety threats including AI-enabled hacking, [biological weapons](#) and [fraud](#); [job destruction](#) from AI and [AI-powered robots](#); and risks to children's well-being, including AI [stunting](#) their learning or human relationships.

He is far from the first person to share those concerns about AI. But in his telling, what's different is that he previously

believed AI's downsides were manageable.

That belief waned in recent months as AI leapfrogged ahead of Gates's expectations in [software coding](#) and in enabling [novel cyberattacks](#) that he said were "mind-blowing." He said the AI industry can't regulate itself and called on the U.S. government to play a leading role in intervening to blunt AI's risks to national security, jobs and children's well-being.

"My basic view is nobody's shown up," Gates said. "So this is a shrill call, and I want this to be bipartisan."

Gates acknowledged in the interview that people may disregard his opinions because of the reputational damage from his [association](#) with the deceased sex offender Jeffrey Epstein. He reiterated in the interview that he was "apologetic" for his "very bad mistake" in interacting with Epstein in attempted fundraising efforts. Gates has previously said he had no knowledge of Epstein's crimes.

Gates sketches out in his essay several policy proposals to address his fears about AI. They include broad national and international frameworks to tackle the technology's risks to security, safety, jobs and other areas.

He imagines a collaboration of elected officials, subject matter experts and citizens working on AI oversight. The idea shares some similarities with a [proposal](#) from influential

AI leader [Demis Hassabis](#) for international AI safety standards drawn up by an expert body.

Gates's ideas for more government-led intervention in AI could face pushback from AI boosters in the Trump administration and Silicon Valley who say that light-touch regulation accelerates the benefits of AI and ensures America's dominance in an essential technology. The Trump administration has recently [wavered](#) in how to [handle](#) AI that lets good actors stop cyberattacks but also empowers criminals to launch them.

Gates also outlines ways to potentially blunt the risks of AI-related job dislocation, including [new taxes on AI](#), an approach that has become popular among [progressive liberals](#). He also suggests what he calls "Human Reserved," or setting aside jobs for human workers in certain occupations.

Gates said that he'd spoken to AI industry executives about his concerns and proposals, and that his regulatory ideas aren't concrete enough yet to win their endorsement.

He said that he now plans to spend the majority of his time pushing to tackle AI's problems. That could leave him less time to focus on his Gates Foundation philanthropy.

Gates said he still believes that AI has the potential to do so

much good, including to improve health, government services and educational outcomes. In the poorer countries where his Gates Foundation works, he said, AI is already helping farmers and other people.

But Gates said he had largely focused on AI's potential in the decades ahead. Now he feels an urgency to prioritize more immediate possible AI-related harm and dislocation.

"The good stuff is really there, no exaggeration," Gates said in the interview. "The name of the game here is, can we have a small amount of the bad with the large amounts of the good?"