It Started in 1989 . . .

Peter Hagelstein

Many of us recall the controversy surrounding the announcement of claims of observations of fusion reactions in a test tube that were made in 1989. At the time, these claims were greeted with considerable skepticism on the part of the physics community and the scientific community in general.

The principal claim of Pons and Fleischmann

The principal claim of Pons and Fleischmann in 1989 was that power was produced in palladium cathodes that were loaded electrochemically in a heavy water electrolyte. The evidence in support of this was a measured increase in the temperature in the electrochemical cell. There was no obvious evidence for nuclear reaction products commensurate with the claimed heat production. Fleischmann speculated that perhaps two deuterons were somehow fusing to He-4 through some kind of new mechanism.

Rejection by the physics community

This claim was not accepted by the physics community on theoretical grounds for several reasons:

First, there was no mechanism known by which two deuterons might approach one another close enough to fuse, since the Coulomb barrier prevents them from approaching at room temperature.

Second, if they did approach close enough to fuse, one would expect the conventional dd-fusion reaction products to be observed, since these happen very fast. Essentially, once two deuterons get close enough to touch, reactions occur with near unity probability, and the reaction products (p+t and n+He-3) leave immediately at high relative velocity consistent with the reaction energy released. To account for Fleischmann's claim, the proposed new reaction would seemingly somehow have to make He-4 quietly and cleanly, without any of the conventional reaction products showing up, and would somehow have to arrange for this to happen a billion times faster than the conventional reaction pathway. Most physicists bet against the existence of such a magical new effect.

Third, the normal pathway by which two deuterons fuse to make He-4 normally occurs with the emission of a gamma ray near 24 MeV. There was no evidence for the presence of any such high energy gamma emission from the sample, hence no reason to believe that any helium had been made.

Finally, if one rejects the possibility that any new mechanisms might be operative, then the claim that power was being produced by fusion must be supported by the detection of a commensurate amount of fusion reaction products. Pons and Fleischmann found no significant reaction products, which, given the rejection of new mechanisms, implied an absence of fusion reactions.

An alternate explanation is proposed

The physicists decided in 1989 that the most likely reason that Pons and Fleischmann observed a temperature increase was that they had made an error of some sort in their measurements. When many groups tried to observe the effect and failed, this led most of the physics community to conclude that there was nothing to it whatsoever other than some bad experiments.

The claim of Jones

A second very different claim was made at the same time in 1989 by Steve Jones. This work also involved electrochemistry in heavy water and the observation of reaction products corresponding to the conventional dd-fusion reactions. The initial publication showed a spectrum of neutron emission that Jones had detected from a titanium deuteride cathode loaded electrochemically. The response of the physics community was skeptical, as the signal to noise ratio was not particularly impressive. Given the polarization of the physics community in opposition to the claims of Pons and Fleischmann (which were announced essentially simultaneously), the physicists were not of a mood to accept much of any claims that fusion could happen in an electrochemical experiment at all. Jones went to great lengths to assure fellow scientists that his effect was completely unrelated to the claims of Pons and Fleischmann, and was much more reasonable.

Also rejected

Physicists had reason to be skeptical. Theoretical considerations indicated that the screening effects that Jones was relying on were not expected to be as strong as needed to account for the fusion rates claimed. As this experiment could not seem to be replicated by others at the time, it was easy for the physics community to reject this claim as well.

Cold fusion, weighed and rejected with prejudice

Cold fusion, as the two different claims were termed, was dismissed with prejudice in 1989. The initial claims were made near the end of March in Utah, and the public refutation of the claims was made at the beginning of May. It only took about 40 days for the physics community to consider the new claims, test them experimentally, and then announce loudly to the world that they had been carefully weighed and rejected.

Following this rejection, physicists have treated cold fusion rather badly. For example, Professor John Huizenga of Rochester University was selected to be co-chair of the DOE ERAB committee that met to review cold fusion and issue a report. Shortly afterward, he wrote a book entitled Cold Fusion, The Scientific Fiasco of the Century, in which he discusses the claims, the experiments, and the extreme skepticism with which the new claims were greeted. Robert Park discusses the subject in his book entitled Voodoo Science. You can find many places where physicists and other scientists happily place the cold fusion claims together with claims of psychic phenomena.

A Science Tutorial

Talbot Chubb

First it is important to recognize that there are four distinct types of energy production:
1) chemical energy, that powers our cars and most of our civilization;
2) nuclear fission energy, as used to generate about 15% or our electricity;
3) hot fusion nuclear energy, which powers the sun and most stars;
4) cold fusion nuclear energy, which appears as unexplained heat in a few experimenter's laboratory studies and which most scientists believe is impossible.

The three types of nuclear energy produce 10 million times as much heat per pound of fuel than occurs with chemical energy. How do these types of energy differ? To understand this question you need to know some chemistry and physics.

Lesson 1

Nature has provided us with two types of stable charged particles, the proton and the electron. The proton is heavy, normally tiny, and has a positive charge. The electron is light, normally large and fuzzy, and has a negative charge. The positive charge and the negative charge attract each other, just like the north pole of a magnet attracts the south pole of a magnet. When you bring two magnets together with the north pole of one facing the south pole of the other, they pull together, bang! When they bang into each other they release a little bit of energy in the form of heat, but it is too small an amount to easily measure. To pull the magnets apart you have to do work, which is another way of saying you have to use up energy. It's almost like pulling a rock back up a hill. Rolling the rock down a hill actually creates a little heat, and pulling the rock back up the hill takes energy. In the same way the positive charge of the proton pulls on the negative charge of the electron and they stick together releasing energy in the process. The result is a hydrogen atom, designated H. A hydrogen atom is nothing but a fuzzy electron hugging a compact proton. The proton is the nucleus of the hydrogen atom. If you knock the electron off the hydrogen atom you get a positive ion $H+$, which is nothing more than the original proton. An ion is the name applied to an atom or molecule that has lost or gained one or more electrons, hence is no longer electrically neutral.

Lesson 2

As you know, nature has provided us with more than one type of atom. We have oxygen atoms, nitrogen atoms, iron atoms, helium atoms, etc.. How do these atoms differ? The answer is that they all have different types of nuclei (plural of nucleus, from the Latin). And these different nuclei all have different numbers of protons inside them, which means they all have different plus charges. The nucleus of the helium atom has 2 protons inside it, hence has plus 2 charge, and requires 2 electrons to neutralize its charge. When 2 electrons stick to it, it becomes a helium atom. The oxygen nucleus has 8 protons and has charge 8. When 8 electrons stick to it, it becomes an oxygen atom. The nitrogen atom has 7 electrons, and the iron atoms something like 26. But all the atoms are built more or less the same way, with a compact positively charged nucleus embedded in a cloud of fuzzy electrons. The difference in size between the compact nucleus and the fuzzy electrons is enormous. The sun has a diameter only about 100 times that of the earth. The electron cloud on an atom has a diameter which is about 100,000 times that of the nucleus. Cube these numbers to get the difference in volumes.

Lesson 3

We now are in a position to understand what chemical energy is. The atoms, all electrically neutral, can actually join with each other and release more energy. This is another way of saying that they can join into more stable configurations. The electrons in an atom try to configure themselves so as to get as close as possible to their nucleus, but their fuzzy nature requires that they take up a certain volume of space. However, if they join together with the electrons of another atom they can usually find a tighter configuration that leaves them closer to their beloved