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BOB DOPPELT: Efficiency in energy use is imperative to staying free

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As with many issues today, debates raging across the nation about “freedom” seem muddled. Case in point is a bill moving through Congress to block the adoption of higher energy efficiency standards for light bulbs.

The bill’s sponsors, reacting to what they say is an attempt to ban incandescent light bulbs, say people should be free to purchase whatever light bulb they desire.

Turns out that the energy efficiency regulations would not actually ban the use of incandescent lights. But that’s not what troubles me. The more important question is whether blocking efforts to increase energy efficiency actually will enhance our freedom, or will just the opposite occur? The latter is more likely.

Americans value personal autonomy, self-reliance and unconstrained choice. These ideas often are fused together under the term “freedom.” All people, we believe, should have the right to decide, on their own, how to live their lives without the control of government or any other source.

This is actually a relatively new idea. Just 350 years ago — a blip in human history — feudal kings and religious doctrine controlled people’s hearts, minds and behavior.

Then, in the mid-1700s, Enlightenment writers such as Immanuel Kant, John Locke and Adam Smith proclaimed that human behavior should not be determined by blind obedience to external authority. Instead, humans should be guided by their own rational thinking. Further, if individuals pursue their own self-interest, everything would work out for the best.

Much of Western society today, especially the United States, remains largely organized around these ideas. Above all else, we value complete independence and the right to pure, unadulterated choice. Researchers have called today’s dominant view “extreme individualism.”

Our belief in extreme individualism has unleashed the tremendous innovation that led to

major advances in the sciences and technology. Most people in our entrepreneurial society enjoy unparalleled material well-being, especially when compared to people in other parts of the world or to conditions 100 years ago.

However, humans often push new concepts to the edge before realizing their downsides — and the belief in extreme individualism also has generated a suite of significant problems.

It was the uncontrolled pursuit of self-interest on the part of Wall Street financial institutions, for example, that led to the recent collapse of the economy. People now have far fewer choices about how to earn a decent living.

But the issue that threatens our freedom the most is the unrestricted consumption of energy and the associated uncontrolled generation of carbon dioxide emissions that are disrupting the Earth's climate.

If we fail to reduce fossil fuel-based energy use and the carbon emissions it generates, our economic infrastructure will suffer increasing damage from floods, rain, snow and windstorms, heat waves, droughts and other extreme weather events.

Medical experts report that climate change already is affecting Americans' health, and many diseases and illnesses will worsen the warmer it gets. Already, the Earth's changing climate creates an estimated \$150 billion annually in direct economic losses.

By 2030, studies predict annual costs will rise to between \$275 billion to \$340 billion due to market instabilities, a rise in sea levels and the impacts of natural disasters. Adapting our health care, food and other systems to these consequences are projected to add \$120 billion to \$510 billion more each year.

In addition, a Center for Naval Analysis study found that climate change presents a serious national security threat that will endanger us here at home and affect U.S. military operations abroad.

These and other changes will threaten everyone's freedom of movement, reduce our economic options, impinge on our personal health and diminish the choices available to our children.

The only way to prevent these constraints on our freedom is to reduce carbon emissions rapidly, and by 50 percent or more. Energy efficiency is the quickest and most reliable way to achieve that goal. If you really believe in freedom, this should be a top priority.

Voluntary efforts are important. But energy efficiency standards on vehicles, machinery, appliances, electronic equipment and, yes, even light bulbs are the most sure-fire way to reduce energy use.

Not coincidentally, dramatically improved energy efficiency offers the prospect of significant cost savings. It would reduce pressure on energy prices, strengthen the economy of Lane County and communities nationwide, and improve the bottom line of businesses. Increased energy efficiency also would protect the poor and those on fixed incomes, and reduce air

pollutants leading to better public health.

We need to think very carefully about what freedom really means today. Only by requiring a dramatic increase in energy efficiency can we protect our freedom.

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