

Climate change rains on Ayn Rand's parade

Recently much of my time has been spent in Washington, D.C. It's been an eye-opener to witness firsthand the intensely partisan debates. Although some congressional Democrats question climate disruption, one of the most perplexing issues is the almost complete refusal of Republicans to acknowledge the problem. Until recently I could not grasp why this was so.

Scientists have known about the greenhouse effect for more than 100 years, and the evidence that dangerous human-induced climate disruption is under way is well established. The National Academy of Sciences has produced numerous reports describing how scientists know it is happening. The U.S. Global Change Research Program just released a draft of the National Climate Assessment that provides ample evidence of human-caused climate disruption and describes many of the likely effects.

The American public gets it, and this understanding cuts across party lines. Opinion polls show that close to 75 percent of Americans now believe that our climate is changing in dangerous ways. A post-election poll from Zogby Analytics found that half of Republicans and 73 percent of independents are worried about the growing cost and risks of extreme weather disasters fueled by climate disruption.

With the scientific evidence unequivocal, and with a majority of Americans recognizing that the Earth is warming and wanting our government to respond, I struggled to understand why most Republican officials remained in denial.

Then, a Republican House staffer referred to novelist Ayn Rand during a meeting, and the answer became clear. Although it is rarely acknowledged, much of the opposition results from the growing influence of Rand's ideology, which is called Objectivism.

Rand wrote a book titled "The Virtue of Selfishness" that perfectly describes this outlook. It claims that altruism, compassion and charity are morally wrong. Self-focused extreme individualism is the only rational, or "objective," approach to life.

The lone social system consistent with the Objectivist view is one that allows individuals to do whatever they want without government interference — radical laissez-faire capitalism. Any "regulation" needed to control harmful economic activities would come about naturally from the self-interested "greed of the businessman." Goods and services would exist only if someone could make money providing them.

If Objectivists had their way, there would be no Wall Street regulations, no consumer protection laws, no food safety requirements, no environmental policies, no public schools, no public transportation, no public parks, no Medicare or Social Security — no public anything.

Of course, with no regulations the fossil fuel industry would be free to generate unlimited greenhouse gases. Communities devastated by the resulting hurricanes, heat waves, droughts, wildfires or rising sea levels would be left to their own devices, with no help from government to prepare beforehand or recover afterwards.

Objectivists don't believe in compromise, because their ideology is seen as the only morally correct view of the world. That's why they deny the science and refuse to acknowledge human-caused climate disruption. To do so would call into question the core principles of extreme individualism and radical capitalism, and that cannot be allowed.

To be sure, not every Republican holds these extreme views. Some still believe in traditional conservative

economic and social principles. A number of officials are desperately searching for ways to distance themselves from this far-right thinking without losing their jobs.

But this is also not merely the view of a fringe element. Former Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan was a colleague and devotee of Ayn Rand. House budget committee chairman and former Republican vice presidential candidate Paul Ryan is a Randian as well. With slight variations, the Objectivist view is pervasive in both chambers.

Objectivists claim we are in a battle for the moral soul of our nation. Given the power their views hold over so many, I could not agree more. This ideology must be openly challenged because it is a profoundly flawed and dangerous fiction.

Apparently even Rand realized this. When she aged and needed help, she enrolled in the Medicare and Social Security programs. So much for moral certitude.

If we are to shrink climate disruption to manageable levels and address today's many other challenges, it is essential that everyone understand that freedom, liberty and happiness can be achieved only when our moral values are grounded in the need for self-control, concern for the welfare of others, and the common good.

In today's interconnected and overstressed world, only by caring for the larger "we" — which includes people here in Lane County and around the world, as well as the natural environment that sustains them — will any of us be safe, secure and meet our personal needs.

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