

OPINION

To thrive, we must adjust to today's realities

BY BOB DOPPELT

For The Register-Guard

NOV. 25, 2016

Donald Trump won the presidency in part by inflaming bigotry and white nationalism. Thoughtful Republicans, Democrats and independents alike must fiercely oppose these destructive phobias. But Trump also gave voice to millions of people who do not hold those views and want change. Many supporters of Hillary Clinton feel the same. It is imperative to understand the roots of these concerns.

A driving force in the demand for change is many Americans' sense that the deeply held assumptions and beliefs they hold about the way the world works and their role in it are under attack. The election can be seen as an attempt to stop the assault and maintain their traditional ways of perceiving the world.

Three closely linked concepts seem particularly important. The first is the belief in unconstrained freedom. It first emerged when white Europeans came to the Americas and found immense open spaces and loosely applied laws that gave them unlimited freedom to farm, raise cattle, mine, cut forests and generally do as they wished.

From this beginning, economic theories, political ideologies and institutions emerged that strengthened the notion that people should be free to do as they want with little constraint from government or others. Today, extreme individualism dominates many Americans' thinking and behavior.

This belief, however, has crashed headlong into the reality that our nation is now filled with people. As seen throughout Lane County,

from guns to gravel extraction and from pesticide spraying to screaming into cell phones in public spaces, one person's freedom now frequently conflicts with the freedom of others. When those others look or act differently, or are recent arrivals, anger over reduced freedom intensifies.

A closely related concept is the belief in infinite abundance. It also developed when the first Europeans arrived and found what seemed like unlimited supplies of fertile land, forests, minerals and other resources. Few worried about despoiling an area or depleting resources because there were always untouched places to move on to.

But the capacity to extract and consume larger amounts of resources and generate waste grew exponentially. Forests, soils and other resources were depleted, air and water became contaminated, and other ecological effects accelerated. Public demands to protect the environment led Republican President Richard Nixon in 1974 to establish the Environmental Protection Agency. Many states and cities also established regulatory bodies.

Numerous individuals and businesses, however, refused to accept the need for regulation, in part because it conflicted with their fundamental concepts of what freedom meant and the unlimited bounty of nature. Once again, economic theories and political ideologies justified increasing levels of resource extraction, consumption, and waste. Although improvements have occurred in some areas, climate disruption is the ultimate sign that we have exceeded nature's limits. Many people refuse to adjust their core concepts to this reality.

A third belief that feels under threat naturally follows the others: The belief in continual growth and rising living standards. Many Americans are taught that through hard work, initiative and free enterprise, the economy will grow, allowing them to obtain good incomes and prosper.

What is not taught, however, is that when resources are maxed out, gains in productivity are one of the only ways to generate wealth. Increased efficiency and productivity occur by dividing human labor into smaller and more specialized tasks, finding cheaper workers, or replacing them outright with technology. Each can result in stagnant wages or lost jobs.

New technologies and mechanization are the primary cause of job losses and wage stagnation in agriculture, forestry and many other rural businesses. The corporate shift to low-wage countries has produced similar effects in manufacturing and other sectors. Many Americans are struggling to reconcile their support for laissez-faire economic theory and policy with the reality that in practice they often undermine their jobs and livelihoods.

Trump supporters hope his approach will fend off these threats to their traditional ways of seeing and responding to the world. Although his actions might generate some near-term relief, ultimately they will only make things worse unless they address today's realities.

The most important step Americans can take now is to see conditions for what they are. Adjusting our core concepts will open the door to the new policies, institutions and practices that can build a more equitable, just, and ecologically sustainable economy that provides everyone with the opportunity to thrive.

Bob Doppelt of Eugene, executive director of The Resource Innovation Group, writes a monthly column for The Register-Guard.