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BOB DOPPELT: Leaders turn backs on most important issue

BY BOB DOPPELT

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We expect our elected officials to address the real problems of the day. When they ignore or deny reality, big trouble follows. That's what's happening today. Political leaders of all stripes refuse to acknowledge or deal with global warming, which is the most pressing problem facing humanity.

The former governor of Utah, Jon Huntsman, said in an interview with Grist magazine that talking about climate change hurt his bid for the Republican presidential nomination. Indeed, no Republican presidential candidate has been willing to openly talk about climate change — except Rick Santorum, who claims his religious beliefs prove it is a hoax.

This is not just a Republican problem. President Obama rarely mentions the issue.

Congressional Democrats are even worse. When walking the halls of Congress a few months ago, I found few members that would openly talk about the climate crises. After one meeting, a Democratic House staffer took me aside and said the issue is too “politically charged” now to talk about.

Of course the climate emergency is politically charged! What truly important issue isn't?

And this is not like any other problem humanity has ever faced. Our thinking, behaviors and technologies are systematically undermining the processes and conditions that allow life as we know it to flourish on Earth. How could a problem with so much at stake not be a political lightning rod?

Our political leaders tend to follow, not lead. Most will not engage in an issue until there appears to be sufficiently strong political will.

Fossil fuel companies, with allied corporate and financial interests, know this. Just as the tobacco companies acted to prevent legislation that would restrict their deadly product, these powerful entities are spending millions to inflame the natural anxiety that surrounds global warming to create public confusion and prevent action.

So barring a horrific disaster that makes the climate emergency impossible to ignore, a political consensus is not likely anytime soon. However, with the clock ticking and so much at stake, we can't wait for political harmony before taking action.

It is in times of strife that great leaders step forward. Who among our elected officials will

be the Abraham Lincoln or Winston Churchill of our day? Despite divisiveness, these leaders honestly and directly dealt with the reality of their times.

We live in an age of complex interdependency. For most of history, human-caused environmental impacts mostly had local effects. Today, the greenhouse gases we spew in Eugene contribute to escalating droughts, floods, windstorms and other extreme weather events that play a role in the collapse of food systems and other social and economic breakdowns worldwide.

In this new era, it is essential that our elected officials rise above their individual beliefs and ideologies and see these dynamics. They must then enact policies that cut wasted energy use, sequester carbon dioxide, and in other ways slash greenhouse gas emissions while also preparing for the consequences of global warming. This is the only way to sustain the many interconnected ecological, social and economic systems they and their constituents depend on for life.

This is not the norm today.

A new book by U.S. Sen. James Inhoff, R-Okla., exemplifies the problem. In it he claims that the idea that humans could affect the climate is “arrogance” because only God can affect the climate.

Inhoff is a Presbyterian and self-proclaimed man of faith. Yet his own church recognizes man-made climate change as fact. The Presbyterian Church even adopted a resolution that “calls upon all Presbyterians to take this seriously, to pray asking for God’s forgiveness and guidance, to study this issue, to calculate your carbon emissions, to educate others, and to use less energy, striving to make your life carbon neutral.”

Apparently, Inhoff has his own version of church doctrine.

Inhoff’s refusal to acknowledge physical reality is typical of the thinking of many politicians from the right, middle and left. As a result, few federal forest management, job creation, energy security, or other bills promoted by Congress truly account for their impacts on the climate.

Here at home, the Eugene City Council unanimously “accepted” the city’s climate and energy action plan. But many county and municipal elected officials throughout the region fail to acknowledge or meaningfully address the climate emergency.

A doctor who refused to give a cancer patient his diagnosis or recommend treatments because it would be upsetting would be charged with medical malpractice.

It is time for our elected officials to stop committing political malpractice. They must gather the courage to openly acknowledge the reality of the climate crisis and forcefully address it in every program and policy.

Bob Doppelt of Eugene is executive director of The Resource Innovation Group, which is affiliated with the Center for Sustainable Communities at Willamette University, where he is also a senior fellow.