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In My Opinion: Time is now for cultural change

By Bob Doppelt

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Enough is enough.

The white supremacy, violence and exploitation that have long shaped U.S. history have once again been painfully exposed. We must make deep-seated cultural changes or risk devolving into chaos.

Historians say the patterns began when the white Puritans fled Europe in the early 1600s to free themselves from poverty and control by the Church of England. Many of the first white settlers saw themselves as exceptional because they believed God had bestowed on them a superior civilization. Some white colonists used this belief to justify their use of slaves as cheap labor to enable their prosperity.

The belief in supremacy also led white colonists to think they had the right to do and take what they want because they were destined by God to spread their special form of democracy (for white men), freedom of religion and commerce. When the population moved westward, these beliefs led government troops to forcibly remove or exterminate indigenous peoples from their land to make it safe for white settlement and their economic practices.

We inherited these cultural views from the colonists, and they have shaped many of our nation's actions ever since. The U.S. has continually intervened militarily in non-white countries, often to protect corporate interests. White officers and vigilantes abuse Hispanic migrants. As distressingly seen yet again, Black people are arrested and murdered by white cops at far higher rates than other populations.

The same cultural traits have contributed to the climate emergency that now threatens civilization. Historian Lewis Mumford described how, when white people

moved westward, in addition to eradicating Native Americans, the belief in their superiority over others and the environment led to unrelenting "warfare against nature, cutting down the forest, and slaughtering its living creatures."

Later, when fossil fuels were discovered, these cultural beliefs led to the never-ending extraction and burning of coal, oil and natural gas. The economy grew, but so did damage to ecosystems, organisms and the climate system.

Fast forward to today where the beliefs of superiority, violence and the right to exploit leads to "development" that relentlessly degrades forests and soils, exterminates species, contaminates waterways and oceans and destabilizes the atmosphere. People of color and the poor are consistently forced to bear the most harmful impacts of these practices.

Our nation is the largest total contributor to the climate emergency, generating 25% of cumulative global emissions and the second largest annual emitter. Scientists say that to prevent catastrophic impacts, in less than 10 years we must dramatically slash emissions and restore forests and other ecosystems that sequester carbon. Yet, our cultural beliefs prevent us from doing so.

Altering these psychological and behavioral pathologies will not be easy. But meaningful change always starts by honestly acknowledging the situation.

The formation of a U.S. White Supremacy Truth and Reconciliation Commission could help us come to grips with the racism and exploitation that drives the genocide of Black and brown people. It should be linked with an Ecological Truth and Reconciliation Commission to help us own up to personal, corporate and government destruction of nature and the climate system.

No matter how we proceed, to avoid calamity and begin anew we must openly face the truth of our racist, violent and exploitative cultural beliefs.

Bob Doppelt writes a monthly column for The Register-Guard on climate change-related issues.