

# It's Light Bulb Liberation Day

The Department of Energy is putting down its guns and withdrawing troops in the war on the incandescent bulb that began in 2007. It's pretty late in the day; the last factory to make them in the U.S. shut down in 2010. It's hard to find them in a store, in which case: thank goodness for Amazon!

Still, the damage can be reversed. Our houses can again be warm and beautiful, and legally. You can turn on the lights in the morning and not have your eyes lacerated by blindingly fake electric "light." As the Wall Street Journal [summed up](#) the current moment: "If you like old-fashioned incandescent light bulbs, you can keep buying them."

As a huge fan of Ayn Rand's short novel *Anthem*, the liberation of the light bulb means so much to me. It was published in 1937 but mostly drafted in the 1920s in Russia. In the dystopian story, a cruel government committee comes down hard on a young man who has re-discovered the light bulb. They condemn him for daring to think for himself and presuming to override the planned poverty of the social order. This society ruled by the total state is perfectly happy with its candles, and desires that no steps forward can be taken that are not explicitly approved by the ruling class.

Ayn Rand used the example of the light bulb because it is such a great symbol of the power of the human mind. It is within our power to harness the energy that comes from the heavens. "The power of the sky can be made to do men's bidding," observes the *Anthem* protagonist. "There are no limits to its secrets and its might, and it can be made to grant us anything if we but choose to ask."

As Murray Rothbard observed, riffing on Rand's insight, the

light bulb finally freed humanity from having to defer to the earth's rotations to determine work hours. It allowed night baseball, made our highways safer, and put civilization on a 24/7 basis. The light bulb means much more than what it is in its physical essence. It was the dawn of humankind's mastery of the world.

A few years ago, I was contemplating Rand's novel and looked up at my ceiling fan. Three glorious incandescent bulbs were lighting up the room in a warm glow. These particular bulbs lacked blue and white frosting. The glass was clear and the curved filament burned like a miniature flame. And yet that flame is caged and is made to be a servant of human dreams and aspirations.

The deeper story is about a thoroughly insidious attempt by bureaucracies together with a gaggle of politicians to ban the light bulb as we've always known it. In other words, it's the plot of *Anthem* lived in real time.

It all began with the Energy Independence and Security Act of 2007, which called for a phaseout of the incandescent bulb by 2012 (variously amended by Congress to push out the deadline). The law banned light bulbs by wattage but not by name. In practice, it meant death for the kind of light we've enjoyed since the 19th century.

Gone from the shelves were the incandescent bulbs of 100 watts. Then it got worse as 40- and 60-watt incandescent light bulbs were killed off. Factories that once produced them were shut.

Once you dig more deeply, you find something remarkable: there was no scientific basis for this ban at all. Consider the ten-years ago [analysis](#) of Howard Brandston, a fellow of the Illuminating Engineering Society of North America and the brains behind the refurbishment of the Statue of Liberty in the 1980s.

Brandston argued that the government's metric of lumens-per-watt was completely bogus. It doesn't consider the quality of light for a room. It doesn't consider the costs of making replacements or the environmental danger of more "efficient" bulbs (fluorescent bulbs contain mercury), and doesn't consider the whole reason we have light bulbs to begin with: to light up a space. It focuses on one narrow point at the expense of all these broader considerations.

"The calculations used by the government and others promulgating or promoting the use of compact fluorescents," he said, "is strictly mathematical conjecture and has nothing to do with reality."

That rings true to me. So how can the consumer tell which are the best bulbs? Brandston says that a person's subjective judgment, tempered by a consideration of how long bulbs last, is more than enough. You don't need bureaucracies and you don't need experts.

But even if the new bulbs are awful, don't they save energy? Brandston said: "hoping that lighting is going to make a major contribution borders on ridiculous. ...We'd be better off promoting occupancy sensors and dimming controls and recommending all dimmers be set to only provide 95 percent of the power to the light sources."

Why did the government do this to us? It fits with everything else about federal policy for the last 60 years. It seems to have put the goal of increasing human misery as a main policy goal. This is why our toilets, faucets, detergent, and washers have been wrecked with water-use controls – even though none of these policies make a significant difference in overall water usage. Just look at [what government has done to our bathrooms.](#)

It's why we are [pushed to recycle](#) even though no one has ever demonstrated that the mandates help the environment. It's why

we are taxed on things we want to do like drive cars. It's why we can no longer medicate ourselves in normal ways without a doctor's permission. It's why we must endure hectoring lectures from public officials about fast food, sweets, and our trash generation.

What do all these policies have in common? They target things that we enjoy and that make our life better, then force on us inferior products and services. It's the penance we must do in the interest of the common good – and never mind whether the common good is actually enhanced in real life.

Which gets us back to Ayn Rand and the light bulb. She had a prophetic way of seeing the truth about government. She grew up under a regime that promised heaven on earth but ended up making a hell for everyone not part of the ruling class. She saw that governments could not produce imaginative goods and would eventually fall back on celebrating the poverty and destruction they cause – and inventing an ethic of sacrifice for the whole as a means of covering up their crimes. If you don't go along, you are an enemy of the people.

It's rather incredible that we have come full circle. Just as in Anthem, the U.S. government actually almost banned the light bulb as we've known it. Just think about the awesome implications of that and ask yourself why we put up with it.

On a personal note, my own dear mother replaced all her incandescents with fluorescents several years ago. I was sitting in her house feeling vaguely irritated by the searing lights in the room – cold and dreary – and had to turn them off.

Sitting in the dimly lit room, my thought was: This is what the government has done to us. A great invention from the dawn of modernity is being driven out of use. Do I have to bring my own candles next holiday season?

Why should governments be in the position of deciding what

technologies can and cannot be used, as if consumers are too stupid to make such decisions for themselves? Who is to decide what is efficient, and what the proper tradeoff should be between the energy expended and the light produced? More fundamentally, why should governments be in the business of picking right and wrong technologies at all?

There is a grave cost to regulation and it's not just about freedom itself. It's about experimentation and innovation. A vast regulatory apparatus on cell phone technology in 1990 could never have imagined something like a modern smartphone. Regulations on digital commerce in 2000 might have stopped the rise of peer-to-peer services like Uber. Bitcoin is another example of a technology that blasted through the nationalization of money to show us something entirely new.

Indeed, one of the reasons that the digital world was so innovative until a few years ago was precisely because the regulators were not yet caught up with the pace of innovation. That's probably changing with the new antitrust push.

Regulations on technology freeze the status quo in place and make it permanent. In government, a ban is a ban, something to be enforced, not tweaked according to new discoveries and approaches. Regulatory interventions stop the progress of history by disabling the limitless possibilities of the human imagination.

We live in times without much good news in politics. Let's at least take the weekend to celebrate the embrace of progress, acquiescence to the wisdom of markets, the new freedom found for this hugely important symbol of humankind's triumph over the poverty of nature.

—

*This [article](#) has been republished with permission from the American Institute for Economic Research.*

*Dear Readers,*

*Big Tech is suppressing our reach, refusing to let us advertise and squelching our ability to serve up a steady diet of truth and ideas. Help us fight back by [becoming a member](#) for just \$5 a month and then join the discussion on Parler [@CharlemagneInstitute](#) and Gab [@CharlemagneInstitute](#)!*

Image Credit:

Pixabay