CAFE standards – poor politics and poor policy

Contributed by George Landrith
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Capitol Hill observers are abuzz with talk that Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) and Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.) are eager to significantly increase Corporate Average Fuel Economy standards (CAFE) prior to the Thanksgiving holiday when millions of Americans take to the roads and notice gasoline prices rising to keep pace with the current $100 per barrel oil price tag.

This is both cynical and counterproductive. Passing feel good legislation that does nothing to solve our nation’s energy problems simply so they can pretend to have done something productive is precisely what gives politicians a bad name. Moreover, increasing CAFE standards will not fix America’s energy woes, because studies show that people with more efficient cars drive more.

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Whenever CAFE standards are discussed, proponents insist that the technology exists to significantly increase efficiency. But if it is true that auto makers can easily produce cars and trucks that get substantially higher mileage, why don’t we see them in the showroom? Wouldn’t a truck that gets better mileage, but does not sacrifice power sell like lemonade on a hot summer day?

Plus, higher CAFE standards have made cars cost a great deal more. A National Academy of Science study has found that CAFE mandates already add up to $2500 to the cost of new cars, and $2750 to the cost of new trucks and SUVs.

Americans should be able to chose the cars that best meet their needs and budgets. They don’t need government bureaucrats telling them what type car to drive. Many families will need larger cars so that they can go to soccer games and visit grandma and grandpa over the holidays. Others live on farms and ranches and need trucks to do their work. Government isn’t well positioned to make wise choices for us.

Then, of course, there are the safety concerns. Forcing American families into small econo-boxes will only mean more highway deaths and more serious injuries. The Department of Transportation estimates that CAFE standards have caused 2,000 deaths and 20,000 serious injuries each year since its inception.

Before lawmakers pass legislation that will make cars more expensive and less safe and that won’t likely do much to reduce gasoline consumption, perhaps they should deal with real issues. Energy prices are going up because the world supply of oil is tight and our refining capacity is limited. Yet, Congress had refused for years to do anything to address these problems. Grandstanding on CAFE standards is pointless.

George Landrith is the President of the Frontiers of Freedom Institute and a graduate of the University of Virginia School of Law, where he was Business Editor of the Virginia Journal of Law and Politics. As an adjunct professor at the George Mason School of Law, Mr. Landrith has taught constitutional law, appellate advocacy, and legal writing. Mr. Landrith appears frequently on television and radio news programs. He has been quoted and published in many of the nation’s leading newspapers. Mr. Landrith published a book entitled, On Politics and Policy: Views on Freedom from an American Conservative.

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