



Why the Department of Government Efficiency Could Be Costly for the Country

Andrew Flachs, Purdue University

The newly proposed Department of Government Efficiency or DOGE promises to make the U.S. government lean and effective. But champions of efficiency would do well to heed the warnings of 19th century British economist William Stanley Jevons: The more efficiently we do something, the more of it we tend to do.

In an 1865 treatise, Jevons worried that the British Empire was using too much coal. Coal might be cheap now, he warned, but if it grew to be expensive, the cost of fueling the military and industrial might of British colonialism could break the empire.

Contemporary experts scoffed. Coal engines were becoming more efficient by the day, and they chided Jevons for his pessimism. Yet Jevons held firm, countering that efficiency is a trap: rather than reducing coal consumption through efficient use, those technological developments would just make it easier and cheaper to burn coal.