



FOOTNOTES

A CONGENIAL JOB FOR THE VICE PRESIDENT

Although it has escaped general notice, Vice President Gore, President Nixon, John D. Rockefeller 3rd and the Commission on Population and the American Future, Ambassador George Kennan and the U.S. Department of State all have something in common. They all have expressed the belief that the United States' population should stop growing, and some of them have stated the proposition in eloquent language.

President Nixon: "In 1917 the total number of Americans passed 100 million, after three full centuries of steady growth. In 1967 — just half a century later — the 200 million mark was passed. If the present rate of growth continues, the third hundred million persons will be added in roughly a thirty-year period. This means that by the year 2000, or shortly thereafter, there will be more than 300 million Americans.

"The growth will produce serious challenges for our society. I believe that many of our present social problems may be related to the fact that we have had only fifty years in which to accommodate the second hundred million Americans..."

"Where, for example, will the next hundred million Americans live? ...

"Other questions confront us. How, for example, will we house the next hundred million Americans? ...

"How will we educate and employ such a large number of people? Will our transportation systems move them about as quickly and economically as necessary? How will we provide adequate health care when our population reaches 300 million? Will our political structures have to be reordered, too, when our society grows to such proportions? ...

"... we should establish as a national goal the provision of adequate family planning services within the next five years to all those who want them but cannot afford them."¹

John D. Rockefeller, 3rd: "After two years of concentrated effort, we have concluded that, in the long run, no substantial benefits will result from the further growth of the Nation's population, rather than the gradual stabilization

of our population would contribute significantly to the Nation's ability to solve its problems."²

Ambassador George Kennan: "... then there is the optimal balance, depending on the manner of man's life, between the density of human population and the tolerances of nature. This balance, in the case of the United States, would seem to me to have been surpassed when the American population reached, at a very maximum, two hundred million people, and perhaps a good deal less.... And there is a real question as to whether "bigness" in a body politic is not an evil in itself, quite aside from the policies pursued in its name..."³

The U.S. Department of State and the Council on Environmental Quality called for "a national population policy which addresses the issues of: population stabilization; Availability of family planning programs;... Just, consistent, and workable immigration laws;"... and five other specific demographic proposals.⁴

This congruence of opinions is not just of historical interest. A number of very perceptive observers have seen the need to stop or reverse population growth, but there has been a decade of slumber, during which the nation's population grew by 23 million people and we passed three major laws promoting immigration and further U.S. population growth. As to poverty in the third world, the U.S. delegate to the U.N. Population Conference in Mexico City in 1984, argued that poverty was a result of "governmental control of economies" rather than population growth. President Bush reiterated that "population growth, in and of itself, is a neutral phenomenon" in dealing with economic development and environmental degradation.⁵

We now have a new administration likely to be more concerned about the environment and the things that affect it, and we are heading toward the third decennial UN population conference, this one scheduled for September 1994 in Cairo.

Vice President Gore should have views on this. He has written at length on the population issue and concluded that "The United States should restore full funding of its share of the costs of international population stabilization programs and increase the effort to make birth control available

throughout the world—... Clearly, it is time for a global effort to create everywhere on earth the conditions conducive to stabilizing population.”⁶

The U.S. Government must prepare a position for the 1994 conference, and the occasion offers a superb opportunity for this country to rejoin the rest of the world community and to develop and announce a U.S. population policy — concerning its own population as well as its population aid to other countries. In world conferences addressing environmental issues such as acid precipitation and climate warming, the United States has been in the unpopular position of arguing for “more study”. Because of our size and high consumption patterns, the U.S. is by far the largest single contributor to such problems. In our own interest and that of the Earth’s other inhabitants, we would be in a much stronger position to advocate world cooperation in meeting those problems if we could announce, not only that we were prepared to cooperate to reduce emissions, but that we were undertaking to put a brake on our own population growth, which drives our consumption levels.

The conference is not really the reason for undertaking the task; it is an occasion for doing something we must do in our own national interest. Presently, we are making U.S. population policy by accident, and with present fertility and immigration patterns, we are headed past 396 million by 2050 — another 140 million in 57 years.⁷

Vice President Gore while in Congress was unique for his combination of vision and a practical understanding of how it could be pursued. He proposed a Critical Trends Assessment Act to successive congresses. Washington is distinguished for tunnel vision; it regularly passes laws and sets policies in motion without considering the consequences. As an example, in 1990 it passed a law increasing immigration without seriously considering how it would impact on the jobless and restless in the cities. And then we wonder why we have riots in Los Angeles. The Gore proposal would have forced Congress and the executive to look at the lateral and long term implications before it passed legislation. It was not a partisan bill; in one of its incarnations it was co-sponsored by (of all people) Congressman Newt Gingrich.⁸

Can anybody nominate a person better qualified and better situated than the Vice President to lead the governmental process of preparing the U.S. position for the forthcoming conference on population?

For that matter, isn’t there somebody in Congress ready to pick up where Senator Gore left it, and reintroduce the Critical Trends Assessment bill in the new Congress? “It is morning in America” is a great pitch but not much policy guidance. Having learned that, Congress and the nation may be ready to give a more serious hearing to a proposal that we learn to look before we leap.

— Lindsey Grant

NOTES

1. U.S. President Richard M. Nixon, “Special Message to the U.S. Congress on Problems of Population Growth, July 18, 1969”, in Public Papers of Presidents of the United States (Washington: Office of the Federal Register, 1969, p.521.)
2. Letter of transmittal from Chairman John D. Rockefeller 3rd of the Report of the Commission on Population Growth and the American Future, to President Nixon, the Senate and the House, March 27, 1972.
3. George F. Kennan, Around the Cragged Hill (New York: W.W. Norton, 1993), pp.142-144.
4. U.S. Council on Environmental Quality and Department of state, Global Future: Time to Act (USGPO, January 1981), p.11.
5. White House press release October 25, 1991, Presidential Proclamation of World Population Awareness Week, 1991.
6. Al Gore, Earth in the Balance. Ecology and the Human Spirit (New York: Penguin Books USA, 1992, 1993) p.317.
7. New projection by Leon F. Bouvier, publication pending. The middle figure for 2050 in the Census Bureau’s latest projections is 383 million.
8. For a discussion of the proposed Act, and indeed of the whole issue of “foresight”, which is a term of art for the broadened decision process described here, see Lindsey Grant, Foresight and National Decisions: the Horseman and the Bureaucrat (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1988.)

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