

LITTLE KNOWN PRESIDENTIAL POPULATION LEADERSHIP

By Otis L. Graham

Those of us familiar with the issue of U.S. population growth are well-acquainted with seeing it summarily ignored by each successive White House administration. Less commonly known are the presidents who initiated studies which led, in some cases, toward policy innovation and broader discussion of the issue of population growth.

In this Forum, Otis L. Graham, Jr. (Professor Emeritus of history at the University of California, Santa Barbara) examines several presidential administrations over the last 75 years and their involvement with this issue. This essay was adapted from material originally published in Professor Graham's *Toward a Planned Society* (1976), as well as his new research for an upcoming book titled *Presidents and the Environment*.

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All of our presidents are politicians who yearn for voter approval and contemporary esteem. But they also lust for a high place in the historians' rankings inaugurated by Harvard historian Arthur M. Schlesinger in 1948. When Bill Clinton entered the White House in 1993 there was not on the horizon a national crisis of the sort our great presidents such as Washington, Lincoln and FDR engaged with memorable leadership. But surely a Near Great ranking might be earned with a storehouse of achievements short of wartime leadership.

We know William Jefferson Clinton (whom I focus on for a reason) well enough to recognize that he yearned for opportunities to rise toward the Greatness category. We know also that since first grade he had been an insatiable resume builder for whom any opening for a political success was not to be overlooked.

And that he liked to talk, late at night or any other time, especially talk about how he could continue to expand his political achievement and reputation. Taylor Branch has compiled a hefty book out of his after-work conversations with Clinton, and Branch was only one of Clinton's well-educated late-night conversationalists during the years he spent at Georgetown and Oxford universities, as Governor of Arkansas, then at the White House. It seems likely that, as Clinton moved into the presidency, he probed friends for ideas for his future policy triumphs. It is easy to imagine a history-soaked friend or aide mentioning to pre-president or President Clinton that a bloc of six consecutive modern presidents had qualified (in some circles) for extra credit from president-rankers for White House quiet leadership in an almost hidden but important subfield of environmental protection – we might call it Population Stabilization Policy (PSP), lacking an accepted label.

If told this, one can readily imagine Clinton's appetite for more information on this little discussed tradition of president-led innovation. His informant perhaps tells him that Nixon in 1969 commissioned the fourth and best known of the PSP initiatives – which had taken the form of a population growth report from a group chaired by John D. Rockefeller, III. Little had been said about the first four presidential initiatives, or of Truman's conversion on the issue after he was no longer president (so, seven supportive presidents, some would say). There had been some sort of controversy when the Nixon-Rockefeller report was published in 1972 as Population and the American Future. The report's basic recommendation was memorable – that “the nation welcome and plan for a stabilized population.”

Why was FDR not the initiator of this almost secret history of policy innovation, given his long-standing interest in social planning? His natural resource conservation commitments did not translate into activism on population growth concerns in America, chiefly because in FDR's twelve-year presidency (1933-45) declining American birth rates and the virtual end of immigration seemed to be solving any demographic problems at home. He had a keen interest in where people lived and the New Deal was active in settlement patterns. But population growth abroad? FDR's America expected its presidents (Hoover and Roosevelt) to be concerned about a decade-long depression at home.

This soon changed. Rising global fertility and longevity rates and larger immigration flows after World War II attracted the worried attention of presidents from Eisenhower (Truman, if post-presidential conversion counts) to Nixon who incrementally and cautiously took the lead in policy reassessments on the demographic dimension of environmental protection.

How did demography – population numbers and how they are trending, with what costs and benefits – get on the agenda of these presidents?

How not! There were 4 million Americans at the time of George Washington's presidency, 151 million when Truman took the oath, and the numbers mounted on. The global population numbers and trends were even more alarming. Two best selling and widely influential books, William Vogt's Road to Survival and Fairfield Osborn's Our Plundered Planet in 1948, told millions of Americans where the global numbers were going, and the grim implications. I have not found direct evidence that President Truman read either book but they were topics of discussion among his foreign policy advisors and Washington elites. In 1953, at least, Truman wrote a letter to Osborn expressing a desire to explain to him that the president's Point IV economic aid program would soon reduce world poverty and ease the population problem so troubling the author of Our Plundered Planet. Demographers searched for ways to simplify the basic numbers telling the planetary population story. One version: The global human population reached 1 billion by Jesus' day, doubled to 2 billion by 1830, accelerated to add a 3rd billion again in 100 years (1930), and the 4th billion came in just 30 years (1960). Truman, like many others, slowly came to regard this as a crisis for humanity.

It is to be expected that a social change that momentous would come to the attention of society's leaders, including our president. These numbers did concern Harry Truman, but not until he left the White House could he convince himself it was government's business. The pathway to both concern and engagement for President Dwight Eisenhower was also steep and cluttered with reservations.

This was a decade filled with the challenges of the Cold War, which all of Washington was intensely preoccupied with winning. How could we win if the impoverished Third World was hampered in economic development by relentless population growth? Several members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee pressed

Eisenhower to appoint a special group to study the work of the rudderless military assistance program. Ike agreed, and as chair appointed Wall Street investor William Draper, who just happened to be a close friend of John D. Rockefeller III, who just happened to be a passionate worrier about population growth and supporter of birth control, who converted Draper, whose report to Eisenhower endorsed an expansion of U.S. foreign aid to include contraceptive technology and education. Eisenhower's first thought about government engagement with population size was negative, and he forcefully rebuffed this suggestion: "I cannot imagine anything more emphatically a subject that is not a proper political or governmental function...." But Draper and his Report were persuasive, and led to an expansion of the tools employed in American foreign aid to include birth control. Eisenhower explained his change of mind in a September, 1963 article in the *Saturday Evening Post*: "It may be that I was carrying that conviction too far.... We should tell [aid receiving] nations how population growth threatens them and what can be done about it."

Just months earlier, President John F. Kennedy, responding to arguments from his own State Department, announced his view that population increases [abroad] "were of serious concern." Foreign aid legislation under Kennedy began to include family planning assistance, and President Lyndon Johnson, pressed by Secretary of State Dean Rusk, added this sentence to his State of the Union Address in 1965: "I will seek new ways to use our knowledge to help deal with the explosion in world population." Just months before, in 1964, Eisenhower convinced Harry Truman – who had also changed his mind – to join him in serving as honorary co-chairs of Planned Parenthood.

How many presidents was that, who opened this new policy issue involving human fertility? Three in a row, so far – four, if we count ex-president Truman's public statements. Congressional leadership was also forthcoming. Senator Ernest

Gruening, braver than his colleagues, held Senate hearings in 1965 on birth control availability for Americans and opened the hearings with a supporting letter from Eisenhower. The idea gained momentum that the U.S. needed to aim part of its foreign aid toward lowering birth rates in the Third World, and also needed to support birth control access for American women. These new population policy impulses were strengthened by the enormous impact of Paul Ehrlich's 1968 book *The Population Bomb*. The environmental movement quickly took to the idea that curbing population growth was a central key to the protection of nature, and learned the I=PAT formula created by Ehrlich and John Holdren (Environmental Impact (I) = (P)Population X (A) Affluence X (T)Technology). When Earth Day annually gathered crowds of young and green people beginning in 1970, population limitation and environmentalism were routinely linked. British writer C. P. Snow ignited a rhythmic chant in a Midwestern university crowd on the first Earth Day when he responded to their question: "What is the Cause?" with the words: "Peace! Food! No More people than the earth can take!"

One more president was then added, like the others cautiously nervous that "overpopulation" concerns might be politically hazardous. In 1969 newly elected President Richard Nixon's Aide Daniel P. Moynihan convinced his boss to take what could have been the largest (yet) presidential step on the population growth question. Nixon agreed to appoint (as we have seen) a Commission on Population Growth and the American Future, chaired by John D. Rockefeller III, and sent a special population message to Congress.

Four presidents now had cautiously explored demographic strategies for winning the global struggle against communism and for environmental protection – restraining population growth. The Rockefeller group's document was the boldest "report" of any the presidents had commissioned, for it discovered that immigration at the end of

the 1960s was bringing in 400,000 new Americans a year (this was an undercount), or 25% of our annual growth. Clearly, a stable population would require lower levels of immigration, a discovery that came just seven years after Congress ill-advisably passed a major immigration expansion in 1965.

Nixon, believing himself threatened with political reprisals by the Catholic hierarchy overseas, decided that “birth control” might be politically toxic to a significant portion of the American electorate, and declined to receive the report, fatally undermining his own leadership claims. The report was widely circulated and discussed, but not from the Bully Pulpit.

Now we can count four presidents as active in policy exploration engaging “the population problem” – then five, when Nixon in April, 1974, ordered a study of the national security implications of population growth. When the report (National Security Study Memorandum 200) arrived in the Oval Office in 1975 the president behind the desk was Gerald R. Ford, who endorsed the findings of NSSM and called for the U.S. to exert world leadership in population control, including stabilization of our own population by 2000. President #5.

Quickly came #6, when President Jimmy Carter in May, 1977 launched a joint Council on Environmental Quality and State Department inquiry which published at the end of 1980 Global 2000. “Environmental problems do not stop at national boundaries,” it began, and then concluded:

If present trends continue, the world in 2000 will be more crowded, and more vulnerable to disruption than the world we live in now. Serious stresses involving population, resources, and environment are clearly visible ahead. Despite greater material output, the world's people will be poorer in many ways than they are today.

The report offered the U.S. government’s best projections on global population, environmental and natural resource trends worldwide as of 2000, an immense effort of data gathering and extrapolation leaving no time, the authors decided, for policy recommendations which in any event would rest in the hands of the world’s independent governments. “Action” was urgently needed to preserve “the carrying capacity of the earth.” But no reader could miss the point that population – the first topic addressed – was the basic driver of the shortages and “global problems of alarming proportions” ahead.

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We have toured a little known part of a larger story, which starts in mid-century with an environmentalist literature warning of overpopulation, producing what some would call a “Malthusian” shelf of books by authors such as Walter Prescott Webb, Osborn, Vojt, Garrett Hardin, Paul Ehrlich, The Club of Rome, and Jared Diamond, with a cascade of essays and articles and the discourse this generated. In the years 1958-1981 six presidential task forces/committees augmented this “overpopulation” literature by launching inquiries into the national security and natural resource dimensions and hazards of global and American demographic trends. The public audience for these presidential studies may have been small, but they were America’s political elites speaking to each other. The other side of the story was the fierce opposition to this “too many people” school. A critique surged through the 80s and 90s in the writings of some demographers, journalists, the uncategorizable Julian Simon, and journalists such as Ben Wattenberg.

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We now return to our main theme, the presidential tradition of population studies. Some time in the early months of his presidency Bill Clinton learned that the 1992 Rio Conference

obliged all signatories to report by 1997 on progress made in having sustainable development strategies in place by 2002.

It was either abide by the international accord struck in Rio or make a fuss, so President Clinton signed an Executive Order in June, 1993 establishing the President's Council on Sustainable Development, a collection of some 25 business executives, government officials and community leaders whose assignment was to "advise the president on sustainable development." This was less than the Earth Summit dreamers had in mind, but it was taken to be compliance.

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What, exactly, was Sustainable Development (SD)? A 1987 UN Commission chaired by Norwegian Prime Minister Gro Brundtland had defined SD, in their book Our Common Future, as "Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." The phrase caught on as a concise and "balanced" statement of goals for human societies with a "fairness" and "sharing" vocabulary that appealed to the Left and the young. The phrase multiplied rapidly during the 1990s. Communities, states, companies, philanthropic and social reform groups declared that they were sustainable, or intended to be by some date certain. Sustainable institutes and centers proliferated on university campuses, as when in Autumn, 2012 my campus (Santa Barbara) of the University of California boasted 35 student organizations working on sustainability. Sustainable high schools in Oregon built haybale-lined classrooms to control air quality. The island Santa Catalina off the California coast, running out of water in 2011, found that their search for a consultant on the water problem turned up an impressive firm specializing in and called Sustainable Communities, based in Colorado. Sustainability was a full-service term of many uses, and at the outset with no enemies. Yet even

the fans of sustainability admitted that it was a fuzzy term much in need of clarification.

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It is not clear from his published presidential papers or from books on his presidency whether or when Clinton understood that in launching his Council he might be wandering into a briarpatch, or, instead, catching up to and engaging a promising social movement. Or both?

If he needed positive encouragement, it could have come from any or all of his top green Lieutenants who had frequently written on the hazards made more acute by global population expansion. The three were the president's Science Advisor John Holdren, who had been in his academic days a frequent writer (often jointly with Paul Ehrlich) on the hazards of global overpopulation. The second was former Colorado Senator Timothy Wirth, whose population interests led Clinton to appoint him as Assistant-Secretary of State for Global Affairs. The third was that fellow down the hall from Clinton, Al Gore, and it was the Vice-President (the Democratic Party presidential nominee in 2000) who managed the PCSD when Clinton was away.

Clinton agreed to launch the Council, effectively getting in line (whether he knew it or not) to be president #7. Or not, depending upon whether he and the group extended the line of argument begun with Eisenhower, or whether Sustainability to them might take a different direction. The emergence of a vigorous "anti-Malthusian" school in the 1980s and 1990s opened the possibility that Clinton's PCSD might steer another way. Because Sustainability was a hot and rising idea and slogan, internationally and in the U.S., and seemed to have no enemies and few critics, Clinton convened his Council, Task Forces were formed, meetings were held, several Task Force reports were published (my university library turned up five) and one assumes that advice

was given to the president at some time(s) during the six years. Interim reports from some Task Forces were requested in 1996.

The signs of ideological infighting are evident from the start. Someone noticed, it is not clear when, that among the Task Forces on topics such as Education, Global Warming and Conservation of Nature the topic of “population” had been left out. A Task Force on Population and Consumption was belatedly formed, and started work one year after all the others. But it worked vigorously, and when an interim report listing Goals and Policies was requested of all TFs in 1996, the Population/Consumption group was unflinching. “The size of our population and the scale of our consumption are essential determinants of whether the U.S. will be able to achieve sustainability,” read the Executive Summary at the top. “Therefore the two most important steps the U.S. must take are 1) to stabilize U.S. population promptly and 2) to move toward greater material and energy efficiency in all production and use of goods and services.... A great deal of work needs to be done... as America’s population now grows by three million each year – the equivalent of another Connecticut each year, or a California each decade.” For its future, the U.S. must... stabilize population” so that our society “is sustainable.” Goal #1 of the U.S. should be the “stabilization of (our) population as early as possible in the next century.” Since “One-third of U.S. population growth comes from legal and illegal immigration, now at an all-time high... reducing immigration levels is a necessary part of population stabilization and the drive toward sustainability.” We recommend “policies that reduce illegal immigration.” Legal immigration was “a sensitive issue” requiring more “research.”

“Must stabilize population.” That was a mostly sure-footed, quotable and promising beginning by the almost-unborn Population Task Force. Then something happened on the way from the interim report of 1996 to the PCSD final report of 1999. Toward a Sustainable America

was presented at a “National Town Meeting” held in Detroit May 2-5, 1999. The final report presented ten goals, from “a healthy environment” through “Stewardship” and “Education,” with #8 being simply “Population.” That was a peculiar goal, followed by the seven words, “Move toward stabilization of U.S. population.” That was it. Stabilization – but with no entity to do the moving, no timetable. The word stabilization had been uttered once and as a vague direction, in the report of the Council as a whole. In a section labeled “We Believe” came: “We believe some things must grow – jobs, productivity, wages... and some must not... waste, poverty, pollution....” And population? Not listed as must or must not grow. The reader could put it where she wished. The Council as a whole passed up a chance to say.

The media did not know what to make of this list of good things for a nation to want and not want, grow or not grow. The Council website expressed a desire to “catalyze a national movement” which would commit all governments, Federal to local to state, and all communities and stakeholders, to “Sustainability planning.” News outlets gave the rollout of the final report of the Sustainability project one day of skimpy coverage, then moved on.

One sympathizes with the media and with any book reviewers who failed to see Clinton’s PCSD report as a chapter in an important larger, multi-author work on population growth sponsored by Eisenhower/Draper, Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon/Rockefeller, Ford, Carter/Gerald Barney. And Clinton? The run of presidential population commissions crested at seven, barely, if we are very generous with the Clinton Council document. Whether one concludes that Clinton is now #7 or the string has only reached #6, Clinton again earns his nick-names Slick Willy and The Triangulator as he presided over a historic missed opportunity to give life to Sustainability’s invaluable and core idea – nothing is sustainable that grows without limit.

Presidents Bush II and Obama have steered Sustainability at the Federal level into eight years of inactivity followed by a CEQ-coordinated reporting process requiring federal agencies to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Sustainability outside Washington has become a Big Tent containing many good or good-sounding things, but now has (in the U.S.) nothing to do with capping or reducing population numbers.

So Bush II and Obama seem to have ended a long-running presidential book-writing policy-revising project, in Obama's case possibly without fully understanding the policy potential of this new Sustainability framework.

It is a large puzzle why Population Stabilization Policy slipped off the national agenda, not in response to a reversal or ebbing of the demographic trends that activated it, but as the 2 billion humans of 1930 became 4 billion by 1975 then 5.2 billion by 1990 projected to rise to between 7.8 to 12.5 billion by 2030 – a human crowd trying to cope with the multiple-stresses of global warming.

I expect Population Stabilization Policy to come back into the agenda of the White House and Congress with the global turmoil ahead of us all. Bet me on it, Julian Simon.

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What was learned? This reader observes that multi-authored books without an identifiable thesis and whose authors do not know of or read the preceding chapters in the series are not on a sure road to best-sellerdom and influence, even though the core argument of what amounts to a long-running anthology is a stunning repudiation of the nation's basic assumption of the inevitability and desirability of ending population growth, and the calling into question of other arenas of what we falsely call progress.

The movie script will be unusually difficult to write, but there certainly is a epic ending and another beginning story there.

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See <http://clinton2.nara.govPCSD>

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