

*Would immigration and population numbers have been different if Watergate had not happened? In the Summer 1992 issue of The Social Contract David Simcox, who was then executive director of the Center for Immigration Studies, reflected on the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the report of the Rockefeller Commission to President Nixon. Can we learn from the unused recommendations as to what could still be changed?*

# Twenty Years Later: A Lost Opportunity

## *The Commission on Population Growth and the American Future*

by David Simcox

*After two years of concentrated effort, we have concluded that, in the long run, no substantial benefits will result from further growth of the Nation's population, rather that the gradual stabilization of our population would contribute significantly to the Nation's ability to solve its problems.*

John D. Rockefeller III, 1972

This was the central, anti-growth message of the report submitted to President Richard Nixon by the Commission on Population and the American Future when it completed its work two decades ago.

Often called the "Rockefeller Commission" after its chairman, John D. Rockefeller III, the Commission was chartered by Congress in 1970. President Nixon, who appointed most of the Commission's members, was the fourth in a series of U.S. presidents beginning with Eisenhower to voice concern over population growth and to support the principle of family planning assistance. Nixon had highlighted the need for action on population in a 1969 speech:

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*One of the most serious challenges to human destiny in the last third of this century will be the growth of the population. Whether man's response to that challenge will be a cause for pride or for despair in the year 2000 will depend very much on what we do today.*

The concept of a high level national commission on population first took form in President Lyndon Johnson's 1968 Committee on Population and Family Planning. American women were then averaging 2.5 children. The Committee, co-chaired by Rockefeller and Wilbur Cohen, then Secretary of Health and Human Services, concluded its 1986 report with a recommendation for a National Commission for help in "...highlighting for the American people the urgency and importance of the population problem."

Though Nixon ultimately rejected the report of the Commission in 1972, in retrospect the Commission's very existence seems even more remarkable in light of today's environment of complacency and passive pronatalism prevailing among leaders in both parties. The Commission is the closest the United States has come to even acknowledging the desirability of a national population policy. The concept of a commission drew strength from public and congressional concern in the late 1960s that rapid population growth could have serious consequences if the high fertility of the 1950s and early 1960s persisted. (When the Commission was convened the U.S. fertility rate was 2.46. While that was the lowest since 1945, average fertility in the decade up to 1970 had been 2.9. The U.S. population

had grown one-third since 1950.)

### Confronting the Enduring 'Growth Mystique'

The Commission's recommendations were as counter-cultural as they were visionary. Rockefeller and his commissioners frontally attacked the nation's conventional wisdom on population, including what the report called the "ideological addiction to growth." The report saw the stubborn and addictive "growth mystique" as a manifestation of outdated historical reasons. It deplored an inherent pronatalist bias in America's social institutions, such as the poor understanding of sex and consequent lack of control of the reproductive process; and the failure to integrate minorities, which has limited their freedom to choose smaller families.

The Commission also bemoaned a national tendency to greet the prospect of sub-replacement fertility with cries of anxiety over national prosperity, security and virility — even with warnings of "race suicide." So stating, the Commission ironically foretold the rhetoric of the resurgent pronatalism that would pervade the Reagan-Bush era, with its gloomy warnings of the dangers of diminishing consumption, slow labor force growth, inadequate military manpower, and a loss of the critical population mass presumably vital to 'great power' status.

Epitomizing pronatalism's ascendancy in the White House was the 1984 U.S. policy statement at the UN Conference on Population in Mexico City, which characterized the keen population concerns of the 1960s and 1970s as "demographic overreaction" born of pessimism and anxiety over an uncertain future.

The link in the popular mind and in the business community between population growth and economic prosperity was high among the Commission's targets:

*We have looked for, and have not found, any convincing economic argument for continued population growth. The health of our country does not depend on it, nor does the vitality of business nor the welfare of the average person.*

The Commission, which included business leaders, found that no industry would suffer inordinately in adapting to a gradual transition to the two-child family. Per capita income and overall

income would continue to rise during the transition. Labor force growth under the two-child assumption would not fall significantly until after 2000. But the social and environmental costs accompanying the rapid labor force growth under the three-child projection, stemming from increased pressures for consumption, production and employment, would be avoided. The Commission saw no evidence for claims that an older labor force resulting from slower growth would lack the energy, flexibility and imagination of a younger one.

The report itself and the accompanying research papers concluded that the costs to the nation of the three-child family would exceed any economic benefits, warning that infrastructure, quality of services, resources and individual prosperity would be threatened. Among its findings:

- **Water** - Growing population and economic activity would cause the areas of water shortage in the southwest to spread eastward and northward in the ensuing decades, affecting Texas and most of the prairie states by 2020. The deficits would spread faster if population growth continued to follow the three-child projection.
- **Outdoor recreation** - The two-child family would markedly ease the already heavy pressure on parks and other outdoor recreation by diminishing overall numbers and by lowering the percentage of the population in young age groups, who make disproportionate use of facilities.
- **Pollution** - Whatever the assumptions about post-1972 treatment policy, pollution emissions in 2000 would be less with the two-child family than with the three-child rate of population growth — from 5 to 12 percent less, depending on the pollutant.
- **Public Services** - The country would have to spend more in absolute terms to provide public services, particularly education, at the three-child rate of growth. Slower growth, while lessening pressure on public services, would also yield higher per capita income and higher per capita government revenues.

The report warned that the population could reach 400 million as early as 2013 if Americans retained the

three-child family as the norm. Appealing for acceptance of the obvious fact that the population cannot grow indefinitely, the commissioners recommended that the nation “welcome and plan for a stabilized population.”

### **Abortion, Contraception and Sex Education: Belling the Porcupine**

Meeting head-on the fiercest dragons of public opinion on reproduction, the commissioners recommended: emulation by all state governments of New York’s lead in legalizing abortion; an end to the remaining bans on contraceptives (the Federal government had only the year before repealed the last of the 1873 Comstock Law’s restrictions on contraceptives); and government affirmation of ready access by all to contraceptive information, procedures and supplies.

Other major recommendations to aid family planning and give prospective parents more information and greater choice included:

1. Availability of sex education to all through the schools and other community institutions.
2. Approval of the Equal Rights Amendment to the Constitution and government efforts to end all discrimination based on sex.
3. Development of a national policy and voluntary program to reduce unwanted fertility, to improve the outcome of pregnancy, and to improve child health.
4. Creation of an Office of Population Growth and Distribution in the White House, and stronger bureaucratic and committee machinery for population matters in the executive branch and Congress.

The report hit Congress, the White House and the public at an inauspicious time. Concern about population within Congress and the White House, absorbed as they were by election matters, was waning. The prospect that had earlier alarmed the public and Congress — that the “Baby Boom” might resume — collided with mounting evidence of falling fertility in the early 1970s.

Fertility fell below replacement level in 1972 for the first time, ushering in the so-called sub-replacement “birth dearth” that persisted into the late

1980s. Liberalization of abortion laws in a number of states, followed by *Roe v. Wade* in 1973, further aroused a powerful pro-life movement that chilled legislative initiatives on population. Except for its Joint Economic Committee, where Rockefeller Commission member Rep. Jim Scheuer had a key position, Congress showed little interest in following up on the report.

The Commission rejected the common notion that “the problem will take care of itself.” It agreed that historically high fertility had declined on its own in other western industrial nations, but saw this as no reason for inaction:

*On the basis of these facts (about Europe’s lower fertility), the Nation might ask, “why worry,” and decide to wait and see what happens. Our judgement is that we should not wait. Acting now, we encourage a desirable trend. Acting later, we may find ourselves in a position of trying to reverse an undesirable trend. We should take advantage of the opportunity the moment presents rather than wait for what the unknown future holds.*

### **A ‘Liberal’ Commission in a ‘Conservative’ Administration**

Despite Nixon’s early words of encouragement, during the Commission’s two-year life the White House cooled on population issues and on the Commission itself, ultimately rejecting its report. Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who as a key Nixon aide had been a leading advocate for the Commission, had left the White House.

Population policy had become the ward of the more conservative John Ehrlichman of Watergate renown, who was less congenial to the Commission’s perspective. The conservative ideologues of the White House were uncomfortable with some of the positions the Commission was taking on liberalized abortion, contraception, and sex education policies, and on greater rights and opportunities for women and minorities. Some of the Commission’s recommendations for greater population and land use planning and increased government involvement were too “dirigiste,” too radical feminist, or too costly for the White House’s anti-bureaucracy, *laissez faire* instincts.

Within a month of its release, the U.S. Catholic Bishops blasted the report for its permissive attitude toward abortion and contraception, charging the commissioners with a “confined view of the inherent value of every person.” On May 4, 1992, the White House rejected the report with a statement stressing that “abortion is an unacceptable means of birth control,” and that distribution of contraceptives to minors “will do nothing to strengthen close family relations.”

Tactically, the Commission may have damaged itself by its loud and divisive debate of issues such as day-care, equal rights for women and subsidized housing for low and moderate income people. However important in their own right, these issues discomfited the White House, distracting it from the central issue of rapid population growth.

**Immigration as a Major Population Growth Factor**

The Commission clearly recognized immigration’s potential in fueling population growth, even though legal immigration totaled only 373,000 in 1970:

*The Commission recommends that immigration not be increased and that immigration policy be reviewed periodically to reflect demographic conditions and considerations.*

Some dissenting commissioners, who argued unsuccessfully for reductions of immigration by ten percent a year for five years were troubled by:

*...the inconsistency of planning for population stabilization for our country and at the same time accepting large numbers of immigrants each year.*

In addition to calling for a freeze on legal immigration at about 400,000 a year, the Commission recommended greater resources for enforcement and sanctions on employers hiring illegal aliens. Congress did not enact employer sanctions until 1986. Resources for enforcement have actually shrunk in real dollar terms relative to the volume of illegal movement, the growth of the pool of unemployed in the Caribbean Basin, and the rise in the work load of the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS).

**Have We Missed the Train for Good?**

***“Tactically, the Commission may have damaged itself by its loud and divisive debate of issues such as day-care, equal rights for women and subsidized housing for low and moderate income people.”***

Did the United States miss a unique opportunity twenty years ago to take control of its population future? The three-child family the Commission feared has not returned. But mass immigration and resurgent fertility have made the two-child family a receding prospect. In the twenty years since the Rockefeller commission:

- Fertility fell from 2.01 in 1972 to a low of 1.74 in 1976, but rebounded to 2.1 by 1991. The U.S. birthrate of 17 per thousand was the highest among western industrial countries.
- Minority populations still show fertility significantly above replacement level. 1989 surveys in California showed Hispanic women averaging 3.9 births, compared to 3.2 births for women in Mexico.
- The U.S. population has grown by more than 50 million. Half of that growth represents post-1970 immigrants and their descendants.
- Grants of all categories of permanent residency to aliens have increased from 385,000 in 1972 to 1.8 million in 1991 — an all time high.
- Apprehensions of illegal aliens have more than doubled — from 500,000 in 1972 to 1.1 million in 1991. The settled illegal alien population grows by 300,000 yearly.
- Refugee immigration grew from 29,000 in 1972 to 144,000 in 1992.
- Immigration has increased its annual share of population growth from 25.6 percent in 1970 to

36.3 percent in 1990. The foreign-born population grew from 4.8 percent of the population in 1970 to more than eight percent in 1990.

As the Commission warned, immigration has become a potent ingredient for population growth, with the newcomers both more numerous than foreseen and more fertile than the settled population. A study in 1991 of California's rapid population growth by demographer Leon Bouvier found the well-above-replacement fertility rates of the Hispanic and Asian populations (compared to 1.7 among non-Hispanic whites) to be largely sustained by the very high fertility of the sizable foreign-born segments of those populations.

Under the Census Bureau's "high" series of assumptions in 1988 of fertility of 2.2, life expectancy of 88 years and net immigration of 800,000, the U.S. population would surpass 500 million by 2080. Since then, Census's "high" assumptions have become the most plausible population scenario: fertility in 1991 was 2.1 and net legal and illegal immigration over 900,000 a year. More conservatively, and therefore more alarming, a 1992 Urban Institute study projects a U.S. population of 355.5 million by 2040, assuming fertility of 1.9 and net immigration of 950,000 yearly over the period.

Mass immigration has, in effect, negated much of the population savings from America's turn to the two-child family twenty years ago and has made more likely the troubling population outcome the Commission warned of. In terms of population effects, the United States now has the "two-and-one-half-child" family because of immigration, perhaps more than that in the coming years if the high fertility of the newcomers is slow to fall.

Two decades after the Rockefeller Commission gave its insights to an unimpressed national leadership, the United States faces a future of unending population growth. The Rockefeller Commission can be thanked for stimulating a more open and positive public mind-set on abortion and contraception. Federal courts and enlightened state legislatures accomplished some of the key recommendations that pronatalist federal administrations have ignored.

But mass immigration and rebounding fertility have made the population stability that was central to

the Commission's message, and to the well-being of America's future generations, a remote and receding prospect. The environmental and resource problems that have come to absorb us since 1972 either spring directly from population growth or are ever more difficult to resolve because of it.

The Commission, like the ancient Greek seer Cassandra, twenty years ago prophetically spoke troubling words to those in power. And, like Cassandra's, they tragically went unheeded. ■