

George F. Kennan — ambassador to Moscow, Pulitzer Prize-winning writer on U.S./Soviet relations, and highly respected elder-statesman — has recently published a memoir, Around the Cragged Hill: A Personal and Political Philosophy (New York: 1993, W. W. Norton & Company). This excerpt from the book makes some intriguing statements about population size and immigration — commentary made forceful by ambassador Kennan's stature in the political establishment. © 1993 by George F. Kennan. Reprinted with the permission of the publisher, W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.

U.S. Overpopulation Deprives Planet of Helpful Civilization

By George F. Kennan

If I were to be asked by a foreigner what strikes me most about my own people, two points, I think, would come most readily to mind: first, that we are a nation of bad social habits and, second, that there are far too many of us.

Let me stick, at this point, to the second of those assertions. If, as my first ambassadorial chief, Bill Bullitt, once said, mankind is "a skin disease of the earth," then there is an optimal balance, dependent 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.

There is, of course, no way of measuring exactly the burden that man imposes upon nature. It depends in part on the way man lives. But if one looks only at the rate of depletion of vitally important and nonrenewable natural resources — for example, soil and water — it is evident that American society is rapidly consuming its own natural capital. It is exhausting and depleting the very sources of its own abundance. Much of this could be alleviated by changes in the habits of American society, as it exists today. Water could be more economically used; the use of chemical fertilizers could be curtailed; the destruction of grasslands, forests, and wetlands could be stopped; and so forth. But surely, the present environmental crisis is essentially the reflection of a disbalance between human population — its sheer numbers as well as its way of life — and the resources of the territory on which it resides.¹ The American Indian, as he existed before the white man came, was no doubt sometimes environmentally destructive, too. Even more so, I suspect, were the first white frontiersmen. But there were so few of them that nature could tolerate their destruction. It is this relationship that has changed in the United States, as it has changed in the dreadfully overpopulated countries of Western Europe. And it is this that I have in mind when I say that there are too many of us....

I cannot leave this subject of the size and populousness of this country without devoting a few words to the delicate and difficult subject of immigration. Ours is, of course, a country of immigrants. In the pedigree of every non-Native American, other than the first-generation ones, there lies at least one immigrant, often a considerable number of them. We could justly be called an immigrant society.

We have prided ourselves, throughout much of our history, on the welcome we gave to the arriving immigrant, and even on the lack of discrimination we showed in the extension of this welcome. We have gone on the assumption that such were the spaciousness and fertility and the absorbent capacities of this country that there was no limit to either the number or the diversity of ethnic characteristics of the immigrants we could accept. We have gone on the further assumption that such was the universality of the values incorporated into our political system that there could be no immigrant, of whatever culture or race or national tradition, who could not be readily absorbed into our social and political life, could not become infused with understanding for, and confidence in, our political institutions, and could not, consequently, become a useful bearer of the American political tradition. Particularly has the possibility never become apparent to us that in some instances, where the disparity between what these people were leaving behind and what they were coming into was great, the new arrivals, even in the process of adjusting to our political tradition, might actually change it. One need only look at our great-city ghettos or the cities of Miami and Los Angeles to satisfy oneself that what we are confronted with here are real and extensive cultural changes.

I shall not argue about how justifiable these attitudes proved to be in the past. Perhaps there was more to be said for some of them in the early days of this republic than there would be today. But, in any case, that is water over the dam. We must look at these

assumptions in terms of the situation now before us.

***"Suppose there are limits to
our capacity to absorb..."***

If there are any grounds for my belief that the country is already overpopulated — overpopulated, above all, from the environmental standpoint — then that would in itself suggest that we should take a new look at the whole problem of immigration. But we also ought to ask ourselves, before we assure ourselves that we could comfortably accommodate further waves of immigration, where, if anywhere, the limits of this complacency are to be found. This is a big world. Billions — rapidly increasing billions — of people live outside our borders. Obviously, a great number of them, being much poorer than they think most of us are, look enviously over those borders and would like, if they could, to come here.

Just as water seeks its own level, so relative prosperity, anywhere in the world, tends to suck in poverty from adjacent regions to the lowest levels of employment. But since poverty is sometimes a habit, sometimes even an established way of life, the more prosperous society, by indulging this tendency, absorbs not only poverty into itself but other cultures in the bargain, and is sometimes quite overcome, in the long run, by what it has tried to absorb. The inhabitants of the one-time Italian cities along the eastern shore of the Adriatic Sea (the scenes of some of Shakespeare's plays) made it a habit, over several centuries, to take their menial servants and their ditchdiggers from the Slavs of the poorer villages in the adjacent mountains. Today, finally, the last of the Italians have left; and the beautiful cities in question are inhabited entirely by Slavs, who have little relationship to the sort of city and the cultural monuments they have inherited. They have simply displaced the original inhabitants.

Surely there is a lesson in this. The situation has been, or threatens to be, repeated in a number of the advanced countries. It is obviously easier, for the short run, to draw cheap labor from adjacent pools of poverty, such as North Africa or Central America, than to find it among one's own people. And to the millions of such prospective immigrants from poverty to prosperity, there is, rightly or wrongly, no place that looks more attractive than the United States. Given its head, and subject to no restrictions, this pressure will find its termination only when the levels of overpopulation and poverty in the United States are equal to those of the countries from which these people are now anxious to escape.

There will be those who will say, "Oh, it is our duty to receive as many as possible of these people and to share our prosperity with them, as we have so long been doing." But suppose there are limits to our

capacity to absorb. Suppose the effect of such a policy is to create, in the end, conditions within this country no better than those of the places the masses of immigrants have left: the same poverty, the same distress. What we shall then have accomplished is not to have appreciably improved conditions in the Third World (for even the maximum numbers we could conceivably take would be only a drop from the bucket of the planet's overpopulation) but to make this country itself a part of the Third World (as certain parts of it already are), thus depriving the planet of one of the few great regions that might have continued, as it now does, to be helpful to much of the remainder of the world by its relatively high standard of civilization, by its quality as example, by its ability to shed insight on the problems of the others and to help them find their answers to their own problems.

Actually, the inability of any society to resist immigration, the inability to find other solutions to the problem of employment at the lower, more physical, and menial levels of the economic process, is a serious weakness, and possibly even a fatal one, in any national society. The fully healthy society would find ways to meet those needs out of its own resources. The acceptance of this sort of dependence on labor imported from outside is, for the respective society, the evidence of a lack of will — in a sense, a lack of confidence in itself. And this acceptance, like the weakness of the Romans in allowing themselves to become dependent on the barbarians to fill the ranks of their own armies, can become, if not checked betimes, the beginning of the end.

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However one cuts it, the question is not whether there are limits to this country's ability to absorb immigrants; the question is only where those limits lie, and how they should be determined and enforced — whether by rational decision at this end or by the ultimate achievement of some sort of balance of misery between this country and the vast pools of poverty elsewhere that now confront it.

Unfortunately it appears, as things stand today, to lie beyond the vigor, and the capacity for firm decision, of the American political establishment to draw any rational limits to further immigration. This is partly because the U.S. government, while not loath to putting half a million armed troops into the Middle East to expel the armed Iraqis from Kuwait, confesses itself unable to defend its own south-western border from illegal immigration by large numbers of people armed with nothing more formidable than a strong

desire to get across it. But behind this rather strange helplessness there lie, of course, domestic political pressures or inhibitions that work in the same direction: notably, the thirst for cheap labor among American employers and the tendency of recently immigrated people, now here in such numbers that they are not without political clout, to demand the ongoing admission of others like themselves.

Let me make it clear that I am not objecting, here, to the quality of the people whose continued arrival, as things now stand, is to be anticipated (although I would point out that the conditions in our major urban ghettos would suggest that there might be limits to our capacity for assimilation). We are already, for better or for worse, very much a polyglot country; and nothing of that is now to be changed. What I have in mind here are sheer numbers. There *is* such a thing as overcrowding. It has its psychic effects as well as its physical ones. There *are* limits to what the environment can stand: the tolerable levels of pollution, the strain on water supplies, and so on. There *are* limits to the desirable magnitude of urbanization; and it is, after all, to the great urban regions that the bulk of these immigrants proceed.

I might point out that these are problems that might more easily be coped with if the United States, as was fancifully suggested above, were to be divided into a relatively small number of constituent republics, and if each of these were to be given control over immigration, at least in the sense of controlling the rights of residence. In that case, it is not inconceivable that certain of the major southern regions where things have already gone too far would themselves become, in effect, linguistically and culturally, Latin-American countries, and would find in that way their own level with relation to the adjacent already Latin-American regions (which might for them, incidentally, not be the worst of solutions).

But since there obviously will be, in the foreseeable future, no such decentralization of the country, these speculations are idle. And the reason why I bring up the subject at all is to emphasize something that gives me considerable uneasiness: and that is the growing evidence that there are grave problems of the American future that are not going to be and probably cannot be, as things stand today, adequately anticipated or confronted at the *national* political level.

This conclusion, if well founded, is an extremely serious one. It says something about the enduring viability of American democracy, as we now know it.

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¹ The *New York Times*, on April 11, 1991, cited the former governor and senator Daniel Evans, who chaired the National Academy of Sciences panel that prepared the report for President Bush on global warming, as saying that population growth was "the biggest single driver of atmospheric pollution."