

Our Washington editor interviewed two of the people who worked closely with the Commission on Population Growth and the American Future. The resulting conversations led him to think it might have turned out differently.

STILL NO POPULATION POLICY

Did the Rockefeller Commission Defeat Itself?

By Roy Beck

If a 1972 presidential commission had not been so aggressive in pursuit of the goal of individual freedom and power in fertility matters, might the country have benefitted from at least the beginnings of a national population policy? Or did the commission's recommendations on abortion, contraceptives and sex education merely serve as a convenient excuse for President Nixon to back out of what had previously seemed firm commitments to reducing population growth? If there was a change of heart in the Nixon administration, why?

These questions, which often came up during review of the work of the Commission on Population Growth and the American Future, rose anew upon hearing recollections in a recent conversation with Robert Park, the demographer with the U.S. Bureau of Census who served as deputy director of the population commission. Apparently President Nixon's science advisory committee did not object to the idea of slowing U.S. population growth or even stopping it. But the advisors weren't pleased with the way the commission approached the subject. "The commission was criticized for not establishing a demographic policy objective and for not limiting recommendations to those things that would have a clear bearing on its achievement," Park said. The science advisors had hoped the commission would provide a clear blueprint for federal government action, he said.

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Creating such a blueprint certainly was one way the commission could have approached its task, Park said. But instead, it chose another style, the results of which Nixon summarily rejected, killing — as we now know — any chance for federal population policy through at least the current administration.

Nixon said he would not deal with the population stabilization document because of its calls for more freely available abortion, contraceptives and sex education. Those were thought to be far too

controversial to be practicable. But, as was almost immediately proven, federal encouragement wasn't necessary to bring these goals to pass. Ironically, all three soon became a routine part of American life. And American fertility promptly dropped to replacement levels, quite apart from any government policy. Yet, the less sensationalized recommendations that could be achieved only through government action (such as immigration restrictions) are farther from reality today than in 1972. Without an overall population goal against which to measure actions, the federal government repeatedly has made decisions that have fueled large scale population growth.

With two decades of hindsight, one might wonder how different our population situation would be today had the commission approached its task in a different manner. Without such heavy emphasis on the sexual issues during a presidential election year, might the commission's report and recommendations for overall federal policies to slow down population growth have received more favorable attention from Nixon? Almost any kind of positive action from the president would have been significant because it would have provided a base on which other administrations and future Congresses could have built.

Park indicated that it was no accident that issues like abortion, contraception and sex education jumped out at Nixon. Members of the commission were as committed to those as they were to population stabilization, he said. Stabilization would not have satisfied most members if significant numbers of Americans nonetheless were having unplanned pregnancies, he said.

Although fertility was down by the time the commission finished its work in 1972, members were distressed that Americans still were having babies they didn't want," Park said. "Abortion and sex education were in the report, not because they were necessary for population control, but out of a sense that childbearing was far too uncertain a process in the United States. The folks on the commission were struggling with the problems individuals had in making choices on childbearing. When you look at the controversial recommendations, it is not clear they would be there, if you were working from just a demographic objective."

The commission felt that abortion, contraceptives and sex education were worthwhile in and of

themselves and that it was good that they also tended to help the nation toward desired population stabilization, he said.

Items like immigration were in the report because "they were part of the balancing equation and you couldn't leave them out," Park said. "But there wasn't much discussion about immigration. It's true that immigration is the one thing the government can affect directly and regulate, unlike fertility. But it wasn't that salient a topic for the commission. The work was mostly about fertility and the issues involved with it. That was (chairman John D.) Rockefeller's main interest. And it was the director's main interest."

Park praised the 24 members of the commission for their hard work and willingness to find common ground despite diverse backgrounds: "The discussions were very lively. But in the end, every single commissioner signed. Nobody said this was a commission that went haywire. Rockefeller was the most gracious and gentle chairman. He shepherded the commission far more than he commanded it. This was a burning issue for him. He wanted competent attention to it. The way he went about his work was to get responsible and competent people paying attention to the issues rather than his dictating an outcome."

Is it possible former president Nixon might have acted on a population stabilization goal if it had been presented in a different way? For a better view of that, *The Social Contract* over the last few months has made a concerted effort to talk with Nixon and John Erlichman, his key domestic affairs aide. Erlichman finally said he wasn't interested in discussing the topic, and Nixon eventually sent word that his calendar was "fully committed" through the end of this year.

John Taylor, head of the Nixon Library, said he believes Nixon was serious about limiting population. For example, he said, Nixon rarely countered Ronald Reagan's policies while he was president. But on a number of occasions, he said, Nixon disagreed with Reagan's policy of reducing emphasis on world population.

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Ron Ridker, now with the World Bank and one of the key consultants for the population commission, speculated that Nixon likely would not have had a problem embracing the report except for the abortion part.

When the commission issued an interim report in 1971, Nixon appeared to be very concerned about population growth. Records of the public hearings of

the commission reveal that his counsellor, Donald Rumsfeld, told the commission that Nixon believed that many U.S. problems were due to having only 50 years to accommodate the second hundred million Americans. And he was quite worried about how quickly the country might have to deal with a third and fourth hundred million:

The point this commission must make — that 300 or 400 million Americans is a development not to be taken lightly — is a most important one. The issue is not specific measures that the government might take. Such issues ultimately must be dealt with, but all of them rest on a far more important issue. That is: whether the American people agree that our population growth in the United States is of a serious enough consequence to require a collective decision.

Rumsfeld seemed to be laying out the sequence that would be acceptable: first the commission and then the government would endorse the need for a population policy and perhaps some overall population goals; after that, the arguments about the precise strategies could take place. Instead, the commission presented everything at once, and Nixon rejected the whole package.

Rumsfeld went on to say that the credibility of U.S. efforts to help foreign nations limit their population growth hinged in part upon U.S. efforts at home. He urged the commission to focus on the features of America that its residents would wish to preserve and to "show us the ways in which a de-emphasis on quantity might permit us to devote more of our efforts to improving the quality of life in the United States."

It is haunting speculation to think about what could have happened if that expression of presidential interest in limiting population to improve the per capita living standards had evolved into action. But the commission ultimately was not able to help Nixon move in the direction he and some of his aides so eloquently had shown interest in following.

In 1969, before creating the commission, Nixon said: "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."

Now, only eight years before the year 2000, the "collective decision" about population growth Rumsfeld suggested still has not been given expression in public policy. If not reason for despair, it is certainly no cause for pride. ■