

From Birth to Battle

By Brad Edmondson

The war with Iraq is over. Our diplomats are making treaties with our enemies and sending weapons to our friends, as they have always done. They are missing the cheapest and most effective way to promote peace. They should send teachers.

Emerging research shows that women who can read have fewer babies than women who are illiterate. One of the best examples comes from India, where a group of demographers compared birthrates with illiteracy rates in 326 districts. Indian women in virtually illiterate areas have an average of 6.1 babies, according to William Retherford, a researcher at the East-West Center in Honolulu. When female literacy hits 40 percent, the total fertility rate drops to 4.2. At 80 percent, fertility is just high enough to keep the population growing slowly.

Other research shows that literate women tend to marry later, says Retherford. Once married, they are likely to enroll their children in school rather than putting them to work. Literate women are more likely to have interests outside the family. They know more about hygiene, so their children are more likely to survive. They are also more likely to use birth control.

The literacy-birthrate connection relates to war when you make another connection. The world's most warlike countries also have the world's highest birthrates.

In the 1980s, ten armed conflicts resulted in more than 100,000 deaths.

Five began before 1980, according to *World Military and Social Expenditures*. By far the largest was the Iran-Iraq war, which killed an estimated 1,000,000 civilians and soldiers. The Iraq-US war killed another 120,000, according to the Population Reference Bureau (PRB).

Iran and Iraq have annual birthrates of 45 or 46 births per 1,000 population, and nearly half (45 percent) of their populations are aged 15 or younger. The average birthrate for less-developed countries, excluding China, is 35 per 1,000, with 40 percent of the population aged 15 or younger, according to PRB. Even by Third World standards, Iranian and Iraqi women have a lot of babies.

The birth-to-battle connection also holds true for the other eight warring countries. Afghanistan lost 725,000 people to civil war and Soviet intervention. Ethiopia lost 539,000 to civil war and famine since 1974. Some 506,000 have died in Sudan, followed by Mozambique, 415,000; Angola, 341,000; and Uganda, 308,000. Each of these countries has a birthrate of 44 or more, with 44 to 49 percent of the population aged 15 or younger. Guatemala's birthrate is 40 per 1,000, and 138,000 have died in a civil war since 1955. Indonesia massacred 106,000 residents of East Timor between 1975 and 1989. Indonesia's birthrate is only 27 per 1,000. But in more developed countries such as the United States, Western Europe, and Japan, the annual birthrate averages just 15 per 1,000, according to the PRB.

Saddam Hussein found it easier to wage war than to develop a sound economy. Rather than face widespread unemployment and unrest among young Iraqi men, he simply enlisted them and sent them to die. Young Iraqi women will not check their childbearing as long as Middle Eastern culture discourages their education. The war may be over, but the birth-to-battle machine will keep running until we offer an alternative.

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