

# THE GREAT SILENCE: U.S. POPULATION POLICY

An NPG Forum Paper  
By Lindsey Grant

My attention was called recently to a Department of State position paper that said simply that “The U.S. does not endorse population ‘stabilization’ or ‘control.’ The ‘ideal’ family size should be determined by the desires of couples, not governments.”<sup>1</sup> That is not just a major retrograde step; it is a particularly bad policy in the current and prospective state of the economy. The questions arise: how did the government get there? And what should be done about it?

In the 1970s, our government had a fleeting vision of the dangers of continuing growth on a finite planet. That vision was lost in the welter of competing goals and voices. Now, amid high unemployment and widespread disillusionment with government, our political leaders must veer sharply, acknowledge the validity of that discontent, and offer policies on population, immigration and trade that recognize growth as part of the problem, not the solution. If they don’t, some would-be leader will move in on them.

## THE EMERGENCE FROM COMPLACENCY

**The Age of Exuberance.** Through the 1950s, the U.S. Government didn’t have a population policy. Growth was assumed to be a good thing, and when the possibility was raised that it might end some time, the thought was regarded with dismay rather than relief. President Eisenhower was once asked whether the Government shouldn’t try to discourage the very high fertility of women. (It was the height of the Baby Boom). He responded that he couldn’t think of anything less appropriate for Government to get involved in. (Later, he changed his mind, but that was after he had left office.)

It was a heady time. The United States had won World War II and was on top of the world. Memories of the Great Depression had faded, and we thought we could do anything. We were riding the energy boom generated by rising crude oil extraction. Atomic energy was going to be “too cheap to meter.” Cheap energy lifted all boats, and unemployment – the bane of the 1930s – had substantially ended with World War II. Women were entering the workforce in rising numbers and bringing a second paycheck home to many families. People generally assumed that prosperity, and growth, would go on more or less forever.

**The Seeds of Doubt.** More thoughtful people realized that everything changes, that prosperity itself brings problems, and that perpetual material growth on a finite planet is a logical impossibility. These doubts entered the popular debate when Rachel Carson published *Silent Spring* (1962), which described the environmental horrors that were being generated by the introduction of thousands of new industrial chemicals. On another front, petroleum geologist M. King Hubbert in 1956 predicted that U.S. crude oil production would peak about 1970. He got almost no attention at the time, but suddenly, when his prediction proved right, the petroleum geologists’ world turned upside down, and some other observers began to consider the prospect that perpetual boom and growth might be an illusory mindset.

With that recognition came the question: if production is not slated to rise forever, what does that mean for a rising population? A few people, Margaret Sanger among them, had fought for family planning for two generations. Her primary focus was on women’s well-being, but she was well aware of that other issue: the impact of population growth on resources, the environment and human welfare.

The seeds spread. Starting in the 1960s, various public and private studies, from the UN, the World

Bank, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), the Worldwatch Institute and others, warned of the severe stresses that growing human activity was imposing on resources and the environment.

A series of writers since then has introduced a generation of readers to the idea that population growth is central to the problems being identified. Among them are Paul and Anne Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb* (1968), Donella Meadows et al, *The Limits to Growth* (1972), and the ongoing writings of Lester Brown.

## GOVERNMENT AND POPULATION POLICY

On a piecemeal basis, the U.S. Government began helping less developed countries to slow their population growth in the 1960s, but the idea of an integrated policy on world and U.S. population growth came on the scene from an unexpected source: President Nixon. In a July 18, 1969, speech, he said bluntly that "One of the most serious challenges to human destiny in the last third of this century will be the growth of the population. ...If we now begin our work in an appropriate manner, and if we continue to devote a considerable amount of attention and energy to this problem, then mankind will be able to surmount this problem."

That speech led to the creation of Article X in the Public Health Service Act in 1970, providing family planning services for low-income people.

**The Rockefeller Commission.** It also led Congress and President Nixon to create the Commission on Population Growth and the American Future, with 24 members including four members of Congress, college professors, a CEO, NGO representatives and union leaders, two college students and a housewife. Known as "the Rockefeller Commission" after its Chairman John D. Rockefeller 3<sup>rd</sup>, the Commission on March 27, 1972 submitted its report, titled *Population Growth and the American Future*. It is a remarkable document. It addressed U.S. fertility, immigration, and (briefly) the U.S. role in world population growth. Some members disagreed with specific recommendations, but they all agreed on the fundamental thrust. That such a diverse group could put out a coherent report is a testimonial to its Chairman and to its Staff Director, demographer Charles Westoff. It is some 360 pages long with six volumes of supporting materials. After 38 years it is still perhaps the clearest single summary of the issues

surrounding population policy. It is best remembered for the ringing declaration in Rockefeller's letter of transmission: "After two years of concentrated effort, we have concluded that, in the long run, no substantial benefits will result from the 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." Beyond that, it contained dozens of recommendations for action in every imaginable sphere involving population growth, including stopping illegal immigration, holding legal immigration to the then-existing level,<sup>2</sup> improving the nation's demographic statistics and reproduction science, expanding awareness of the costs of population growth, removing blocks to contraceptive use, creating new government bodies to report on and deal with demographic issues, and – most controversial – legalizing abortion as a backup when contraception fails.

The proposal on abortion torpedoed the report. It was a delicate issue, in an election year. President Nixon did not accept the proposals, and the report sank swiftly into near oblivion.

**The World Population Conference, Bucharest (1974).** The U.S. played a leading role in creating the UN Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA). It led the decision to hold decennial international population conferences, the first of which took place in Bucharest. The U.S. pressed for policy declarations in support of population stabilization, while some less developed countries (LDCs) suspected a plot to hold them down. It wound up, however, with a useful consensus as to the benefits of slower population growth in the LDCs and the industrial countries' obligation to help them achieve it. The consensus was a cautious one. Fear of governmental dictation led to a compromise formula that parents should "decide freely and responsibly the number and spacing of their children..." without offering any guidance as to what is "responsible" or how that would lead to a stable population.

**NSSM 200 and NSDM 314.** In his last months in office, in 1974, President Nixon called for a National Security Study Memorandum (NSSM) on the implications of world population growth for U.S. security. Apparently, he still wanted a policy on LDC – if not U.S. – population growth. The result was NSSM 200. It was completed in 1975, after President Ford had taken office, and he responded on November 26, 1975, with NSDM (National Security Decision Memorandum) 314. Among the few people who remember them, that pair of documents

is often described as the apex of U.S. population policy. That is an overstatement. The NSSM (which focused exclusively on LDC population growth) did contain useful guidance as to the procedures, priorities and responsibilities for U.S. aid to LDC population programs. It went beyond that to urge that the U.S. advocate a worldwide goal, applicable to each country, of replacement level fertility by 2000 {Executive Summary paragraph 31(b)}. It also proposed that, to show its good faith, the U.S. should "...announce a U.S. goal to maintain our present average fertility no higher than replacement level and attain near stability by 2000." {paragraph 31(c)}.

However, those proposals never became policy. President Ford accepted most of the recommendations but he modified the international goal by noting that it "does not imply interference in the national policies of other countries." And he wrote that "the announcement of a United States domestic goal is outside the scope of NSSM 200." He also described the NSSM as "a good beginning" but called for "further examination" of U.S. assistance strategy.

Some observers believe that NSSM 200 and NSDM 314 were scuttled by the opposition of the Vatican and the U.S. Council of Bishops.<sup>3</sup> There is certainly some truth in that statement, but it perhaps overstates the intent and importance of the two documents. President Ford and Jimmy Carter were running for the Presidency in 1976. Both sought the support or at least neutrality of the Bishops, and both held meetings with them. (In the event, the Bishops endorsed neither one.) But NSSM 200, as it emerged, was something of a technical document. It was classified CONFIDENTIAL, a low classification by White House standards but one that prevented it from becoming a rallying point for the public. The documents were not cited as justification for subsequent actions or policies, but the classification prevented that until 1980. They were circulated to the governmental departments that needed to know the guidance. Subsequent government actions were in line with the documents' suggestions.

Nevertheless, a certain caution entered government policy from then on. Funding for population programs stagnated after that, and there were no Presidential statements like President Nixon's in 1969. President Carter did, however, call for the Global 2000 report (see below). Title X continued. The population office in HEW stayed on. The USAID (Agency for International Development) Population Office survived

and developed computer presentations (starting with "Plato") to show third world leaders why it was in their interest to slow population growth. An Interagency Committee on Population was created by the NSC and chaired by Ambassador Marshall Green. It produced a set of resolutions to guide and strengthen U.S. population assistance. In the Department of State, a Population Office was created alongside the Office of Environmental Affairs in the Bureau of Oceans, Environment and Science (my old bailiwick) and it promptly put out a booklet, *The Silent Explosion* (1977), summarizing the arguments for smaller populations.

**The Global 2000 Report.** President Carter in 1977 called upon the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) and the Department of State to prepare an interagency study "of the probable changes in the world's population, natural resources and environment through the end of the century." In 1980, they submitted *The Global 2000 Report to the President*.<sup>4</sup> The Report answered his request and incidentally demonstrated why the U.S. Government needed a much better capability to make those connections.

Why go over the same ground that the Rockefeller report had covered so well a few years before? Our intent was to get the government itself to internalize that cross-disciplinary process, rather than simply create *ad hoc* commissions to explore them, so that the players who had reached those conclusions would remain in place and perhaps press for solutions to the problems they identified.

The conclusions of the report are dramatically summarized in its first two paragraphs:

If present trends continue, the world in 2000 will be more crowded, more polluted, less stable ecologically, 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.

For hundreds of millions of the desperately poor, the outlook for food and other necessities of life will be no better. For many it will be worse. Barring revolutionary advances in technology, life for most people on Earth will be more precarious in 2000 than it is now – unless the nations of the world act decisively to alter current trends.

When 2000 did indeed roll around, the report did not seem particularly prophetic, but now in 2010 it is looking frighteningly on target.

**Global Future: Time to Act.** *The Global 2000 Report* was meant to be an exploration of the problems ahead, not a set of policy proposals. At President Carter's request, CEQ and the Department of State followed it with an extensive set of proposals as to how to avoid those dangers. It was titled *Global Future: Time to Act*. Sent to the President in January 1981 just before the Carter/Reagan transition, it went promptly into oblivion.<sup>5</sup> Many of the recommendations tracked those in the Rockefeller report, but they came this time from Carter's Cabinet. The first recommendation was "The United States should develop a national policy which addresses the issues of:

- Population stabilization
- Availability of family planning programs
- Rural and urban migration issues
- Public education on population concerns
- Just, consistent and workable immigration laws
- The role of; the private sector – nonprofit, academic and business
- Improved information needs and capacity to analyze impacts of population growth within the United States
- Institutional arrangements to ensure continued federal attention to domestic population issues." (p.11)

In those last few days of the Presidency, President Carter did not endorse the proposals and may not have seen them, but he did so after leaving office.

**The Hesburgh Commission.** President Carter in 1978 created the U.S. Select Commission on Immigration and Refugee Policy (SCIRP), usually called the Hesburgh Commission after its Chairman, the President of Notre Dame University. It was highly relevant to population policy because immigration was rapidly becoming, as it is now, the primary driver of population growth. The final report was a strong document, calling for more resources for immigration control and for legislation making it illegal for employers to hire people not legally entitled to work here.<sup>6</sup> That final product of Carter's population policy was not completed until 1981 and therefore like the *Global Future* proposals was still-born as the Reagan administration took over.

Still, it was a great decade for population policy, despite the beginning of resistance exemplified by the Catholic Bishops and the beginnings in 1975 of Presidential caution. Between 1969 and 1981, the U.S. Government identified the problem of population growth in the developing world and tried to do something about it. At the domestic level, Title X was the most concrete achievement on fertility, but Government did raise the right issues. (It is harder politically to pursue a domestic population policy than it is to advise others.) The Presidential studies described the impact of mass immigration on U.S. population growth and well-being and proposed measures to do something about it, even though time ran out and no President formally endorsed a population policy or a more restrictive immigration policy.

**The Jordan Commission.** Later, there were two last echoes of that concern about growth. First was the U.S. Commission on Immigration Reform (USCIR), or Jordan Commission, for its Chair, former Democrat Congresswoman Barbara Jordan. USCIR was created by Congress during the first President Bush's administration and produced four reports from 1994-1997 (in the Clinton administration). It proposed to control illegal immigration, revamp legal immigration categories, limit family migration, favor skilled over unskilled immigrants, and require the Federal government to reimburse states for the costs imposed by immigrants. It proposed an overall ceiling of 550,000 on all categories of immigrants, including refugees.

Had they been adopted, the proposals would have gone far to solve our immigration problems, though the proposed 550,000 limit was probably too high to offer hope for a turnaround in population growth.<sup>7</sup>

The proposals did not attract the attention they deserved, except from their critics. They were bitterly opposed by pro-immigration groups and by businesses that did not want their supply of cheap labor interrupted. President Clinton was courting business to recover from his 1994 election setback. He ignored the reports, and they sank into the oblivion that had swallowed the earlier proposals.

**The PCSD.** The other "echo" was more burlesque than echo. "Sustainability" had become a popular rallying cry (if a rather fuzzy concept) among liberals and intellectuals. In 1993, President Clinton created the Council on Sustainable Development (PCSD), perhaps as a diversion from the Jordan Commission. (There is an old political adage: if you don't want to do something



about a problem, create a committee to study it.) The President's message charged the Council with showing how to "grow the economy and preserve the environment..." objectives that are likely to conflict. The 29 Council members were an even more diverse mix than the Rockefeller Commission, co-chaired by a Vice President of Dow Chemical and the President of the World Resources Institute. (Unfortunate choices, since Dow Chemical was hardly noted for environmental fervor, and WRI did not identify population as an environmental issue.) Moreover, it undertook to proceed by consensus, which usually leads to platitudes. Perhaps fortunately, it had no real authority or role in decision making.

On March 7, 1996, The Council sent to the President a report titled *Sustainable America: A New Consensus*, distilled from hundreds of proposals by its various Task Forces and Work Groups. It was a mishmash of "Beliefs", "Principles", "Goals", Recommendations, Actions and members' pet projects, many of them mutually contradictory and tangentially related, at best, to sustainability.

Population and consumption – key issues in sustainability – were not even in its original scope. A year later, at the insistence of Council member/ Undersecretary of State Timothy Wirth, and over much opposition, a Population and Consumption Task Force was added, and a few population recommendations crept into the 1996 report. Belief #11 was that the U.S. should "contribute to stabilizing global human population..." and Goal 8 was "Move towards stabilization of U.S. population." On the other hand, Belief #1 stated that "some things must grow – jobs, productivity, wages, capital and savings, profits..." and Belief #14 called for a growing economy. More workers with higher productivity are likely to stress the environment even more – even with efforts at amelioration – and growth itself is at some point unsustainable. Not surprisingly, the report did not explore the contradictions.

The penultimate Chapter 6, on U.S. Population and Stability, was a tortured mix of compromise language. It recognized that population growth made sustainability more difficult, but warned of the moral and ethical issues involved in addressing population growth. It suggested that family planning be made available to all (without taking note of Article X, which already existed). On the gritty issues, it punted. It adopted the 1974 Bucharest formula that parents should "decide freely and responsibly the number and spacing of their children..." And it, too, avoided saying what that meant. It explicitly

distanced itself from any position on abortion.

On immigration, the Council simply emphasized the delicacy of the issue and the need for fairness to everybody. It mentioned the work of the Jordan Commission but suggested that its proposals be "reviewed." It made the familiar proposal that the U.S. should "address the factors that encourage people to leave their home countries," but did not try to show how the United States can do much about them.

The President responded that he "was pleased...to accept..." the Council's March report. Presumably, he thus endorsed the above call for population stabilization, but I am not sure it even crossed his mind.<sup>8</sup>

(Under Secretary Wirth doggedly persevered, and his Task Force on Population and Consumption completed a report in December that differed markedly from the Council's line. Unlike the Council report, its recommendations are in line with the conclusions of the earlier Commissions, and it called for strengthening rather than reviewing the Jordan Commission proposals. Wirth was a powerful political figure, and the Council chose simply to ignore his report rather than challenging it.<sup>9</sup>)

The Susquehanna River, they say, is "a mile wide and an inch deep." That seems to be true of the Council's enthusiasm for the population positions it endorsed. The Council included the Secretaries of Agriculture, Commerce, Energy, Interior, the Deputy Secretaries of Agriculture and Education, Under Secretaries from State and Commerce, and the Administrator of EPA (all participating "as individuals"). It published its report just as both houses of Congress were debating legislation on immigration, which is the critical determinant of whether U.S. population growth will stop. The Clinton administration, after vacillating, undercut the effort to reduce legal immigration and accepted language that gutted the effort to control illegal immigration. If the Council was really interested in the population issue, they could perhaps have influenced the administration's position or at least called public attention to the disconnect between their report and what was going on in Congress.

**The Mexico City and Cairo Population Conferences.** The two UN conferences scheduled for 1984 and 1994 reflected the growing resistance to explicit population policies. At Mexico City in 1984, the U.S. position – under President Reagan – reversed, and we denied any impact of population growth on prosperity, while the LDCs called for more help for their population

programs. They reached a compromise, but it was not a memorable meeting.

At least, those two conferences were talking about population. At Cairo in 1994, a determined phalanx of feminists managed to divert the conference to the endorsement of various programs for women, even to the point of proposing that funds designated for population programs go to their proposals. Population programs and women's programs should be mutually supportive, but at Cairo there was confrontation instead. The initial text never mentioned the desirability of stabilizing population, though a sentence to that effect was inserted in the Preamble of the final text. As Under Secretary Wirth observed, "women's groups pretty much drove this."<sup>10</sup>

That was a sad coda to multilateral efforts to cooperate on population policy. The Cairo Conference, apparently, was the last one. No others have been scheduled.

**The End of Population Policy.** I have described an intermittent decline from the population concerns of the 1970s. Since the PCSD, the government has said approximately nothing about population growth.

More from inertia than policy, some of the bureaucratic legacy has survived, mostly with declining funding and tightly circumscribed functions. The Population Division in USAID has been reduced to a Family Planning unit in the Office of Population and Reproductive Health, with a mandate only to help aid recipient countries to meet their presently unmet needs for contraceptive supplies. There is an Assistant Secretary of State for Population, Refugees and Migration, with no staff support on population. He recently designated one of his office directors to serve concurrently as his Senior Adviser on Population Issues. Given the official U.S. position, she will presumably advise him against any population policy.

**The Age of Excess.** Why did the interest in population policy decline? Despite the private and governmental studies on the perils of population growth, the problem never has risen very high in national priorities, and now it seems to have disappeared.

I will venture a five-fold explanation: First, the national addiction to growth and the dream of rising prosperity. Second, the political fears of alienating Hispanic voters, business, and their allies by tackling immigration levels. Third, the increased assertiveness

of interest groups that oppose governmental population policies on principle (such as the Vatican) or, like the feminists at Cairo, do not want population policy advocates diverting attention from their priorities, or who oppose governmental involvement in women's decisions about child bearing.<sup>11</sup> Fourth, the defection of most of the U.S. environmental movement from population advocacy, for fear of losing support from the people I have just described, or from immigration advocates.<sup>12</sup> Fifth, the present confrontational climate in Washington, which dictates that politicians avoid any positions that might lose votes. I will describe the first of those reasons, since the others are self-evident.

As a nation, we have not abandoned the dream of perpetual growth easily. Reagan's cheerful message: "It is morning in America" has reverberated much louder in the national consciousness than the specter of worse things to come – at least until the turmoil introduced by the bank crash of October 2008.

The past 35 years have been a period of soaring incomes for the wealthy, stagnant hourly wages for most people, income differentials rising to levels that a humane observer would call obscene. Why should a financial manipulator, a movie star, or an athlete make tens of millions of dollars a year, or more, while those who provide our water and sewage systems, fight our fires and police our cities are lucky to make \$50,000, and people without jobs must survive on a temporary patchwork of relief programs?

The people on the short end have shown remarkable tolerance for the system, perhaps because they hoped to participate in the bonanza. The impact of stagnant hourly wages was dulled by rising home ownership, risky mortgages and growing debts financed by a rising market...until October 2008.

## A NEW AGE, AN OLD AGE: THE ECONOMICS OF SCARCITY

The era of excess ended very suddenly. As a species, we have multiplied beyond the ability of the system to support us. Now we are being forced back to reality, and we will adjust our demands either deliberately or under the whip of scarcity.

**The Re-emergence of Scarcity.** The failure of wages to rise for a generation was an early warning. Prices are an imperfect measure of scarcity, since they

are a compound of supply, expectations and demand, but they suggest growing scarcity in materials, energy and food. The overall CPI (consumer price index) rose 25 percent from 2000-2008. Metals doubled. Wood products have far outstripped the index for decades. World crude oil output is peaking, probably in 2005 or 2008.<sup>13</sup> The price trebled between 2000 and 2008, with a much higher spike in June 2008. It is now slightly below the 2008 average as a result of the recession, but it is poised to rise again if demand rises. Rising oil prices drove up the price of commercial fertilizer, and that in turn drove up the price of food. The 2008 price of food in the U.S. was about 60 percent above 2000. Corn prices were fairly stable until 2006, but they have also risen about 60 percent – with a sharp spike in 2008 driven up by rising world demand and the competition between ethanol (see below), food and feed. This happened despite record harvests in the U.S. – a dramatic example of the costs of rising demand.<sup>14</sup>

The government has tried to deal with those changes without really recognizing them. Rising oil prices led the Bush II administration to seek cheap technological solutions that wouldn't disturb our way of living. With Archer Daniels Midland and corn state Senators pushing from behind, the government subsidized ethanol as a supplement and eventual substitute for crude oil. The result was a disaster, but the subsidies remain. Ethanol is corrosive and harder to handle and use than crude oil. It contains less energy. Its net energy balance is negative or nearly so; i.e., it takes about as much energy to produce as it yields as fuel. And by now, some 20 percent of U.S. corn production goes into ethanol, to add only 3 percent to our gasoline supply. This helped to drive up corn prices worldwide, and there were food riots in various cities, including Mexico City, where the poor depend on corn for food.

That is the pattern. As we go from plenty to scarcity, things change in unexpected ways, throughout the system, as we try to make do with technical fixes. Biomass fuel will encounter very sudden limits as we start using biomass that was not previously wasted. Already, users of wood chips and sawdust are suffering as those raw materials (which had been dismissed as “waste”) are diverted to biomass for energy. And the more biofuels expand, the more organic matter they will divert from the soil. That will be a disaster when we must look to green manuring to make up for the decline of chemical fertilizers.

Higher prices depress demand, and then the ripple spreads into unemployment.

We are moving into that new world. In some ways, it is reminiscent of the world before petroleum.

**The Democrats' Confusion.** The first year of the Obama administration focused on two efforts: to restore growth on its old track by pouring stimulus money into the system; and to expand health care insurance. The President and many of his lieutenants are brilliant people. That may have masked how very conventional the Obama cabinet is. The President's initiatives were founded on a faith in growth and mistaken optimism as to how much we can afford to do. “Muddling through” is perhaps the best description.

The massive budgetary deficits of the preceding eight years had already shown that we were living beyond our means, trying to bear the costs of foreign adventures on top of our ongoing domestic obligations. The dream of universal health insurance is a noble one, but its proponents apparently were thinking in terms of unlimited prosperity to support it. The Federal government pays for about half of all U.S. expenditures on health care right now, and most of that is Medicare and Medicaid. The U.S. spends 17.3 percent of its GDP on health care, much more than any other nation, and the actuaries warn that spending is on track to double by the early 2020s. We have a lavish and inefficient medical system that encourages overuse of extremely expensive procedures and spends most of its money on the old, who have the least time to benefit. We should learn to run a more modest system – and include the presently uninsured in it. However, the insurance and health sectors have been among the most profitable parts of the economy. Those who profit don't want to touch the insurance industry. The Republicans hear them, and that is why we have a stalemate in Washington.

The deepest problem the Obama administration faces is not health care or the state of the financial markets, but rather the need to reduce unemployment, even while jobs are being lost in a changing and weakening economy. The President seems to have gotten the message lately, but his new policies are contradictory, as I will discuss later.

**Unemployment: the Real Numbers.** The heart of the problem is unemployment.<sup>15</sup> We must reduce unemployment, and in the meantime help to keep some money in people's pockets and a roof over their heads. The stock market sees an end to the Recession every month that the rate of job loss declines. That is an illusion. The U.S. economy has shed 8.425 million

jobs since December 2007 – six percent of all jobs – and is still losing them. To keep up with population growth in those two years, we should have added about 1.2 million jobs, rather than losing nearly nine million. The “good” months are those when the job loss slows down. January was a “good” month; only 22,000 jobs disappeared.<sup>16</sup> What kind of recovery is that?

The official unemployment figure declined to 9.7 percent in January, which the *Wall Street Journal* celebrated as “signs of hope.” But that too is illusory. The official figure consists only of those who are actively seeking work at official job centers. The figure went down last month because some people stopped applying at those centers, not because the problem got smaller. It got worse, by 22,000 people – plus the new immigrants and entrants into the “working age” population who haven’t found work.

A clearer and less rosy view of unemployment is the Bureau of Labor Statistics’ “U6”, which includes the unemployed, those who want work but aren’t going to the employment centers, and those with part time jobs who can’t find full time work. That rate is 16.8 percent of the labor force, and much higher for minorities and youth.<sup>17</sup>

People define their role in society by the work they do. The lack of a job is perhaps the most disheartening and disorienting of all conditions for those who could work.

And it doesn’t help to see the financial wizards who brought us the crash now rewarding themselves with multi-million dollar bonuses.

**The Great Silence.** Immigration and population growth intensify the competition for jobs, but the Bush II and Obama administrations have been silent about population growth. On January 10<sup>th</sup>, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton gave a belated 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary speech in praise of the 1994 Cairo conference. Even as she resurrected memories of the Conference, she treated it as a memorable assertion of women’s rights and did not mention population. Indeed, she was right. That’s what it was. But that is no tribute either to the meeting or to the present administration’s view of population growth.

The President, in his 2010 State of the Union speech, invoked the goal of restoring economic growth. On immigration, which drives population growth, he said: “We should continue the work of fixing our broken immigration system – to secure our borders, enforce our laws, and ensure that everyone who plays by the rules

can contribute to our economy and enrich our nation.” That statement can mean almost anything, but it certainly suggests that he will propose another amnesty like the ones in the past that simply generated the wave for the next amnesty. He did not mention population growth.

The Obama administration came in on a message of change. It should not allow U.S. population policy to remain stuck in the mud with “The U.S. does not endorse population ‘stabilization’ or ‘control.’” If the President still hesitates to take on population growth, he should listen to his own Science Adviser. John Holdren is well aware of the penalties of population growth and in 1973 wrote an impressive essay warning of them.<sup>18</sup>

Obama tried the politics of cooperation. Zip. Under the lash of party discipline, 40 otherwise normally idiosyncratic Republican senators voted as one. He has turned to a populist theme and now courts public approval with a new emphasis on unemployment and a bit of capitalist-bashing. But he hasn’t turned the page.

The President is now trying to pursue two mutually inconsistent policies: to bolster employment by providing temporary grants to employers; and to control a budget deficit that ballooned under George W. Bush and has since risen to \$1.6 trillion, or one-third of total federal expenditures.

That dual strategy is self-contradictory. We can’t simultaneously find the funds for the stimulus and bring down the deficit. Even declining budget deficits would keep driving up the national debt...and there is not much hope they will decline. The President is indeed in a very hard place, but he has made it much harder by failing to take on immigration and population growth. It probably is not hyperbole to say that, with a rising population driven by immigration and demanding more jobs, the task is impossible.

The Administration is listening to uncertain trumpets. Indeed, with the manufacture of enough paper money, the government might be able to create a brief spasm of economic growth, but it will be short. Inflation will wipe out the gains, as renewed demand presses against static or declining resources. The effort would simply precipitate the future, and make the shock more severe. We won’t get back to sustained real growth. The only tides that are rising are the real tides, as the oceans warm.

**A New Era?** Consider the possibility that stopgaps won’t work. Franklin Roosevelt could get away with it



for years. He launched the New Deal in 1933. We had been on the gold standard, which had limited the growth of governmental debt. From that relatively modest debt base, he took us off the gold standard and launched massive long-term national employment projects such as the WPA and the CCC. Now, in 2010, the government starts with a massive deficit. Work programs of that duration and scale (relative to the economy) would threaten to destroy world confidence in the dollar, if we tried them.

We were eventually saved from the Great Depression not by those programs, but momentarily by World War II and more permanently by the advent of the petroleum era, which made continuing gains in production and wealth possible at a scale that had been unimaginable before. The current Depression, or Recession, is happening as we face Peak Oil. Fossil energy is about to start a secular decline. Renewable energy can meet only a small part of the coming energy shortfalls. That in turn will depress agricultural output and make the extraction of minerals more and more costly. At the same time, other “renewable” resources such as water come under increasing stress, and other non-renewable resources decline. All of them point to a permanent and fundamental decline in productivity and consumption levels, and to a truly sustainable population much smaller than our present U.S. population.<sup>19</sup>

We are facing a permanent shift in the future of employment. Jobs, as a percentage of a smaller population, may eventually return to healthy levels as we reverse the trend of the last three centuries and substitute labor for energy. But the sheer number of jobs will probably not rise, and labor productivity will decline from recent levels, barring some technological breakthroughs that are not in sight. We may be at the point of proving the adage that perpetual material growth on a finite planet is a mathematical impossibility. To survive, humans will have to adjust to a smaller – and less destructive – role on Earth.

The “public” may perhaps not take much interest in these abstractions, but it is showing itself deeply aware of the practical experience of living at a time when these changes are forced upon us. People are lowering their consumption and retiring their debt so as to prepare for an uncertain and probably diminished future. That is prudent behavior, but it does not help generate immediate economic growth.

## POPULATION AND THE POLITICS OF SCARCITY

**The Age of Discontent.** Public tolerance of the wealthy, of politicians’ evasions and of governmental failures has come to a dramatic halt. Polls and votes show that the public doesn’t trust their “leaders” and blames those three groups’ ineptitude for the present plight. Something fundamental has happened: people no longer have the faith that the system works or that things will get better.

Perhaps the public understands more than we credit them with, and more than their “leaders”. They are, after all, the ones who are really hurting.

It is a situation that breeds populist rhetoric. Somebody is going to move in on this with rhetoric or a solution, whether the Republicans, the Democrats or some other political group.

**Population Policy as Deus ex Machina.** We have played ourselves into a dead end by trying to return to growth as a solution for the problems that growth itself generated. We face a daunting array of problems. We have tried to solve them by throwing paper money at them. Let me offer the opposite solution: only by reducing the need for jobs can the President – or any President – extricate us from our problems and from the contradictions that mark the present recovery effort.

Let us start with immigration. The immigration issue will be forced upon us this year or next, if the Administration has its way. If we cannot solve unemployment by growing the economy, perhaps we can start to solve it by reducing the immigration that expands the labor pool. It is, after all, unique among the proposed solutions because it is the only one that the nation can afford.

The new public mood may make this shift not only feasible, but politically profitable. Public attitudes have been out of synch with government policy for decades. Opinion polls for two decades have regularly shown that people wanted less immigration, not more, often in contrast with their self-proclaimed leaders, even as the government has encouraged immigration by legislation or deliberate neglect.<sup>20</sup> Even before the crash of 2008, the public had become so angry at governmental immigration policy that it forced Congress to retreat in haste when Bush introduced a bill in 2007 that was seen as pro-immigration. Now, with unemployment where

it is, I imagine that the reaction will be much fiercer if the Obama administration introduces a bill that does not bring immigration way down.

Fertility will probably be addressed, almost inadvertently, as a byproduct of immigration policy. U.S. fertility was a bit below replacement level, which would eventually turn population growth around, until the growing Hispanic community, with average fertility about 50% higher than the U.S. non-Hispanic average, drove the nation's average fertility above replacement level, to 2.122.<sup>21</sup>

I would argue that, at this stage, population reduction advocates should focus on mobilizing opinion in support of stricter immigration laws. Focus on unemployment, and use the arguments about long term penalties simply as a back up. It will resonate with a large sector of American opinion, including minorities and the poor. In other words: get political; get out the vote.<sup>22</sup>

In a spirit of impartiality, if not of modesty, let me offer some gratuitous advice to both parties and to anybody else who will listen:

*Advice to the Democrats:* Go for tougher laws. Mobilize your traditional base; don't be panicked by Hispanic spokesmen. Do you want to break the monolithic pattern of Republican voting? Nothing would do it faster than proposing to mitigate unemployment by reducing immigration. It would exploit a division that is perhaps the deepest schism within the Republican Party, between the conservative base that wants less immigration and the business faction (now discredited) that wants more. You probably won't lose many Hispanic votes. In the '90s, Hispanics voted for less immigration by majorities comparable to other Americans. A plurality of Hispanics still answers polls that way, despite ethnic politicians' efforts to sharpen their sense of ethnic identity.

*Advice to the Republicans:* Do you want that to happen? If not, turn a bit Populist, yourselves. The "Tea Party" faction is pressing you in that direction. Grab that initiative before the Democrats do, and you will have a powerful issue to win the 2010 and 2012 elections. Put a potentially popular policy ahead of the campaign contributions from big business.

*Advice to an unknown who aspires to be President:* (Rand Paul, are you listening?) Does neither major party take my advice? Take it, and act on it soon, and

you may rewrite American politics. Talk it up, and you may be able to build your party by stealing it from the two old parties.

It would be relatively easy to launch such an initiative. At the start, it would not require legislation, which is a great advantage in the present deadlock in Washington. The President could do it with a speech and the announcement that he was proceeding to enforce existing laws. He could revive the "e-verify" program without legislation, and the Republicans could hardly complain, since it started under their administration. He would have excellent cover for his program by pointing out the precedents – those long gone Commissions. Created by four different Presidents, two of them Democrat and two Republican (each presumably with his own motivations), and differing wildly in their composition, they all came to believe: that population growth is not sustainable at this stage in history. And the situation now is demonstrably worse than when they reached that conclusion.

If the Republicans or an outsider launch the initiative, they can take the same line, if not start the actions. And they can promise to take action if they win.

**... to Win a Partial Victory.** A "reduce immigration" platform would win votes, but the task itself would be formidable. Reducing current legal and illegal immigration is doable. (The NPG target is 200,000 per year and calls for a shift of emphasis from "family reunification" to bringing in or retaining skilled individuals.) This would be a good time to do it. Construction and manufacturing – where most immigrants find work – have borne most of the recent decline in jobs, so the "job magnet" pulling immigrants is very weak right now.

A major reduction of the illegal pool already here would be much tougher, as it encounters resistance from illegals already embedded in the society and their allies, and as we wrestle with the problem of "anchor babies" (the American-born children of illegal immigrants). Even a determined government would probably be only partly successful, and we must expect to live with the demographic consequences of our past policies. Nevertheless, any improvement over the present inaction would be welcome.

**Trade and Foreign Investment.** Such an immigration policy by itself is not enough to reduce unemployment and bring our trade and budgetary deficits down. Reducing the numbers of job seekers

will not catch up with the ongoing decline in jobs if we continue to export jobs. The jobs we have sent abroad have been concentrated in heavy and labor-intensive manufacturing, and the process is continuing.

Fifteen years ago, I toyed with the idea of an adjustable compensatory tariff to help level the playing field, particularly in situations such as the China trade, where a wide difference in hourly wages is magnified by the trading partner's deliberate manipulation of exchange rates to make its exports cheaper.<sup>23</sup> Much of the job drain is generated by multinationals moving their factories to where labor is cheap, secure in the expectation that they can sell their products back to the United States. Such a tariff would reduce the advantages of cheap labor, make the move less profitable and make that expectation less confident. That in turn would stanch the exodus of American jobs. It would also reduce our balance-of-payments deficit and, perhaps, bring in some revenue to reduce our towering budgetary deficits.

There would be collateral advantages and disadvantages, some of them profound, involving trade relations and probable retaliation, our budgetary and balance-of-payments deficits, our ability to manage them, our cost of living, our relations with China, the prosperity of the developing world, and indeed the whole structure of world economics. It is tempting to explore them, but this paper is about population, not trade. My tariff proposal is only one possibility. The point to be made here is that some fundamental changes in our trade relationships will be needed, in addition to a new immigration policy, if we are to succeed in protecting American employment.

I will add one addendum. Trading relationships are going to change anyway. "Free trade" (always somewhat mythical) and "globalization" are slogans of the multinational corporations, to promote profits. Their arguments will lose power with the turn of public opinion against them. Immediate national interest will become a more powerful criterion. The major food and raw material exporters – including the U.S. – have suspended or limited exports when domestic supplies are threatened. American Presidents regularly call for "energy independence" – illusory as it is – during oil crises. This protective behavior will become more general in a leaner era, as nations compete to obtain or hold onto diminishing resources. The Chinese are already using their hoard of dollars to lock in long-term energy and mineral supplies. We will be in a tougher, frequently bilateral, trading world: I need your oil; you need my corn. We should make the protection of American labor and the control of our trading deficits an integral part of those negotiations.

## TOWARD A NEW BALANCE

I do not offer these ideas cynically. I am trying to mobilize anybody who will look at the changed scene objectively, as the Rockefeller Commission did 38 years ago, and put us on the way to the population policies that will help us adjust to a leaner new era. We had a vision of the effects of population growth on our future, and we lost it. We have wasted 38 years of good lead time, we have added 104 million new Americans who must find food, shelter, and employment, and we are facing the cataclysm forecast in *The Global 2000 Report*.



**Notes:**

1. U.S. Dept. of State <http://www.state.gov/g/prm/c25925.htm>. Circulated by Bill Ryerson of the Population Media Center and Population Institute on 1-12-10.
2. At that time, U.S. population was about 203 million, two-thirds the present level, and immigration (always a guess) was perhaps one-fourth the present level (using the Migration Policy Institute estimate of the current migration rate).
3. See, for instance, Stephen D. Mumford, *"The Life and Death of NSSM 200"*, Center for Research on Population and Security, PO Box 13067, Research Triangle Park, NC 27709, 1996. Dr. Rei Ravenholt, who ran the USAID population program from 1966-1979, makes the same charge.
4. Full disclosure: I admit to a vested involvement in that report. My associate Dr. Donald King and I proposed such a report. I was the State Department coordinator and the writer of the first rough scope paper. The Executive Director was Dr. Gerald O. Barney.
5. It was transmitted to the President in bound typescript form in order to get it published before the administration changed. Like the *Rockefeller Report* and *Global 2000*, it was sold through the Government Printing Office, but all have dropped out of the current catalogue. Look to [Amazon.com](http://Amazon.com) and used book outlets for copies.
6. The Commission did call for the legalization of many illegal immigrants, but underlined that was contingent on the enforcement program, to avoid encouraging more immigration. In a perverse way, the Hesburgh Commission recommendations thus foreshadowed the 1986 immigration act, but the enforcement provisions of that act were sabotaged before enactment, and it became a device to promote a massive increase in legal immigration rather than a control program.
7. See my NPG FORUM paper *The Two Child Family*, May 1994, and *The Collapsing Bubble: Growth and Fossil Energy*" (Santa Ana, CA: Seven Locks Press, 2005), Figure 2, p.66.
8. For a more detailed analysis, see my NPG FOOTNOTE *Population and the PCSD*, April 1996, available on the NPG website [www.npg.org](http://www.npg.org), under Publications, or in hard copy from NPG.
9. The Task Force was funded in part by private foundations. The frontispiece stated that it had not been endorsed by the Council and reflected the views of the Task Force only. The Council ignored the work of this Task Force in its January 1997 summary of what it had done since the March 1996 Council report. The Task Force report apparently was not formally forwarded to the President.
10. See my NPG FORUM article *The Cairo Conference: Feminists vs. the Pope*, July 1994.
11. See *Juggernaut: Growth on a Finite Planet*, (Santa Ana, CA, Seven Locks Press, 1996), Chapters 14-17.
12. See my NPG FORUM paper *The Timid Crusade*, January 1994, or Roy Beck & Leon Kolankiewicz, *The Environmental Movement's Retreat from Advocating U.S. Population Stabilization (1970-1998)*, in the *Journal of Political History*, Vol 12, No.1 2000.
13. For detailed notes, see my NPG FORUM papers *The Edge of the Abyss*, February 2008, and *Population Policy for a Depression*, February 2009, box on p.5. The U.S. Energy Information Administration preliminary figures show world production in 2008 just 1.0007 of 2005, well within the margin of error.
14. Data are from the digital *U.S. Statistical Abstract 2010*.
15. See my NPG FORUM article *Unemployment Policy for a Depression*, February 2009.
16. Data from U.S. Dept. of Labor, cited in the online *Wall Street Journal*, 2-1-10, "Signs of Hope as Jobless Rate Drops".
17. BLS data for June 2009, summarized by the Center for Immigration Studies' Karen Jensenius and Steven Camarota "Worse than It Seems."
18. See [www.npg.org](http://www.npg.org), Notable Papers & Articles, John P. Holdren, "Population and the American Predicament: The Case Against Complacency".
19. For a detailed exposition, see Grant, L., *The Collapsing Bubble: Growth and Fossil Energy* (Santa Ana, CA: Seven Locks Press, 2005), *Valedictory: The Age of Overshoot* (Alexandria, VA: Negative Population Growth, 2007), and my NPG FORUM paper *The Edge of the Abyss*, February 2008.
20. The Center for Immigration Studies has published a study drawing upon a Zogby poll, showing that dramatic majorities of Catholics, Mainline Protestants, Born-Again Protestants and Jews believe that enforcement of immigration laws is inadequate and that immigration is too high, in the face of very different positions held by their church organizations. See CIS BACKGROUNDER *Religious Leaders vs. Members*, by Steven Camarota, December 2009.
21. U.S. National Center for Health Statistics 2007 data; the rate is probably higher now.
22. This is a more explicitly political approach than David Simcox recommended in his March 2009 NPG FORUM paper *President And Congress Should Equip Government To Address Domestic Population Growth* (on [www.npg.org](http://www.npg.org) under Publications) which I agree with but don't have much hope for.
23. Grant, L., *Juggernaut: Growth on a Finite Planet* (op cit, note 10), Chapter 8. At that time, I doubted that any such tariff would be politically possible, given the political and economic strength of the multinational corporations. Given the changed public view of "Wall Street", it might be possible now.

**About the author:** Lindsey Grant is a former National Security Council staff member, State Department Policy Planning Staff member, and Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Environment and Population.

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**Negative Population Growth, Inc.**  
2861 Duke Street, Suite 36  
Alexandria, VA 22314

voice: 703-370-9510  
fax: 703-370-9514  
email: [npg@npg.org](mailto:npg@npg.org)  
[www.npg.org](http://www.npg.org)

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