

## MEMORANDUM

August 1, 2010

Does our consumer society require an ever bigger population to fuel prosperity? This is the question raised in this communication from William B. Dickinson, a former Washington editor and journalism professor. There are those who argue that the imperatives of consumer demand require a constant stream of new buyers, most of them emboldened by easy credit. Others seek a reappraisal of population policies to save the planet from overcrowding, depletion of resources and irreversible pollution.

“The great silence on U.S. population growth has given way to a lively debate that, for the first time in decades, could help shape our demographic future,” Dickinson writes. The controversy is hardly a new one. Economist John Kenneth Galbraith addressed it in *The Affluent Society* 52 years ago, when he noted with alarm that the old consumer needs of food, shelter and housing had shifted to cravings for “the entire modern range of sensuous, edifying and lethal desires.” He worried about the quality of public decisions in a society “which sets as its highest goal the production of private consumer goods.”

In a new book, *The Next Hundred Million: America in 2050*, Joel Kotkin takes a different tack. He believes that the projected rise in U.S. population from today’s 308 million to more than 400 million in the next 40 years “will add to the work force, boost consumer spending and generate new entrepreneurial business.” Writing from populous India for *Mother Jones* magazine, Julia Whitty takes exception to the view that more people equals more prosperity. “Here (India), before anywhere else on Earth,” she writes, “the challenges of 20<sup>th</sup> century family planning will become a 21<sup>st</sup>-century fight for survival.” India’s population, now 1.17 billion is projected to increase by 400 million by 2050, and surpass China’s population in just 20 years. And world population, 6.8 billion today, is projected to reach more than 9 billion by 2050.

“America’s population remains on a path for substantial growth in the coming decades,” Dickinson concludes. He wonders how living standards and quality of life can be maintained amid declining middle-class incomes and in the face of cheap foreign labor and goods. “John Kenneth Galbraith’s concerns a half-century ago resonate today as we struggle to map a sustainable future.”

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*Economic theory has managed to transfer the sense of urgency in meeting consumer need that once was felt in a world where more production meant more food for the hungry, more clothing for the cold, and more houses for the homeless to a world where increased output satisfies the craving for more elegant automobiles, more exotic food, more erotic clothing, more elaborate entertainment—indeed for the entire modern range of sensuous, edifying, and lethal desires. – John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Affluent Society* (1958)*

Living in a society dependent on consumer spending posed a special set of problems when the U.S. economy turned sour more than two years ago. The imperatives of consumer demand require a constant stream of new buyers, most of them emboldened by easy credit. About 70 percent of the U.S. economy can be attributed to consumers. In the Great Recession, persistent high levels of unemployment, tight lending standards and a fear factor have combined to cripple this reliable source for a recovery.

Americans don't take well to living in a time of diminished expectations. Not surprisingly, some are placing their hopes on big increases in population, both in this country and abroad. More people, more consumers – or so that argument goes. Others seek a reappraisal of population policies that will save the planet from overcrowding, depletion of resources and irreversible pollution. The great silence on U.S. population growth has given way to a lively debate that, for the first time in decades, could help shape our demographic future.

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That future will see major increases in U.S. population, by at least 100 million in the next 40 years to a total of more than 400 million. Recession did lower the birth rate by 2 percent in 2008 from the year before. One 2009 survey found that 14 percent of people in their prime child-bearing years had put off having a child because of the downturn. But it will take a persistent shift in patterns of domestic childbearing and of immigration to alter the 2050 outlook. A new Smithsonian/Pew nationwide poll (see *Smithsonian magazine*, July/August 2010) revealed that 42 percent of respondents said the projected U.S. population growth would be harmful, compared to 16 percent who thought it would be beneficial.

A decidedly upbeat appraisal comes from Joel Kotkin (*The Next Hundred Million: America in 2050*). He believes the rise in births “will add to the work force, boost consumer spending and generate new entrepreneurial business.” And he points approvingly to a United Nations estimate that two million people a year will move from poorer to developed nations over the next 40 years, with more than half of those immigrating to the United States. “The U.S. minority population, currently 30 percent, is expected to exceed 50 percent before 2050,” he writes. “No other advanced, populous country will see such diversity....The America of 2050 will most likely remain the one truly transcendent superpower in terms of society, technology and culture.” Prof. Jack A. Goldstone made a similar argument in *Foreign Affairs* (Jan./Feb.2010). He believes industrialized nations “should encourage families to have more children” and in addition “promote stability” in overpopulated poor countries by taking in more immigrants.

A less favorable reading of humankind's demographic future comes from provocative articles on population policy in *Mother Jones* magazine (May/June 2010). Julia Whitty takes readers on a tour of the streets of Calcutta before confronting the statistics that will determine India's (and indirectly our nation's) future. "India's population (1.17 billion) is projected to surpass China's by 2030 in a country only a third of China's size – adding 400 million citizens between now and 2050," she writes. "But that's a mid-level projection. A slight uptick in global fertility, and India may be home to a staggering 2 billion people by 2050. Here, before anywhere else on Earth, the challenges of 20<sup>th</sup> century family planning will become a 21<sup>st</sup>-century fight for survival."

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Given the stakes (world population rising from today's 6.8 billion to 9 billion in the next 40 years), the absence of a coherent U.S. population policy is troubling. In a forum paper for Negative Population Growth, Inc. (February 2010), Lindsey Grant calls attention to a U.S. Department of State position paper that decrees a hands-off policy on population. "The U.S. does not endorse population 'stabilization' or 'control,'" the department said. "The 'ideal' family size should be determined by the desires of couples, not governments."

Grant, former deputy assistant secretary of state for environment and population, believes our State Department's position is not just a major retrograde step but is bad policy during troubled economic times. "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," he wrote.

Americans don't like to be lectured to by foreigners, especially Chinese businessmen made rich by sales to U.S. consumers. But attention should be paid to remarks by Zhang Yue, one of the 100 richest Chinese businessmen, at a conference in San Francisco last October. Zhang said that solutions to climate change and other environmental issues could be found by imposition of worldwide population constraints and an end to consumerism sponsored by governments, including his own.

"In the next two or three decades we've got to come down to a one-child policy," he said. "Only through population control can we really address some of these major issues.... Encouraging folks to have kids is an encouragement to have more and more markets to buy more stuff." Without imposition of a one-child policy in China in 1979, that country would have 400 million more people to feed, house and employ than it does today. Even so, its population totals a daunting 1.3 billion, hundreds of millions of them still impoverished.

America's population remains on a path for substantial growth in the coming decades. How will these new citizens be schooled? Where will they find employment that can pay enough for the formation of families? Can living standards and quality of life be maintained amid declining middle-class incomes and in the face of cheap foreign labor and goods? John Kenneth Galbraith worried about the quality of public decisions in a society "which sets as its highest goal the production of private consumer goods." His concern of 52 years ago resonates today as we struggle to map a sustainable future.

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