

## **The Great Population Debate: An Opinion Paper**

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The debate over the ongoing explosion of population in the developing countries of the world has become more muted since the 1960s, but the author claims that population pressure is a major cause of the contemporary problems that plague so much of the Third World. He also argues that the widely disparate birthrates around the world threaten the peace of the world, and advocates the diversion of greater resources toward the provision of contraceptives to those countries that are too poor to provide them to their own people. Many impoverished Third World countries are currently doubling their population every twenty to twenty five years, and funds spent on ameliorating the demographic problem would not only reduce much of the misery afflicting these countries but would result in far greater savings in other areas.

**Key Words:** Demographics, population pressure, Third World poverty, foreign aid, contraceptives, mass migration

The debate over how many people the world can accommodate began to surface after WW II when new life saving drugs such as penicillin cut death rates and populations grew faster than ever before—from about 1 billion at the end of the 19th Century to about 6 billion by 1999.

The talk of what dangers the numbers present has become far more diversified (with the advent of HIV/AIDS) and even somewhat muted (by optimistic views which counter the doomsayers) since the 1960's, but a review of some of the widely differing opinions which are expressed in this article leaves even the expert uncertain of the correct answer to what must be seen as a continuing dilemma: Matching resources and the needs of people in balance well enough to keep the world from exploding into another perhaps fatal nuclear worldwide conflict. As always, the verdict remains in human hands.

Even the most avid “Cornucopians” such as the late Professor Julian Simon might ultimately admit that enlarging the world’s human numbers at the expense of every other living entity might not be a wise

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course.

The wide spectrum of opinion between, say, those who agree with my friend, the late Garrett Hardin, and those backing Julian Simon as to what the optimum level of human population in the world should be are wildly at variance.

In his book, *Living Within Limits* Hardin notes, “There is no pure population problem: the problem is one of population and resources. The well being of a population depends on the ratio of the size of the population to the magnitude of available resources.” Indeed, but of course Simon and his successors claim that humans will adjust and that resources will be found to endlessly meet their needs.<sup>1</sup>

The Simon position still seems to be widely accepted. Recall the story of his earlier bet with Paul Ehrlich, author of *The Population Bomb* about the effects of growing population on the price of strategic raw materials. When commodity prices failed to rise as Ehrlich predicted, Simon collected his bet.<sup>2</sup>

Recently, I heard a speech at the November 2004 Philanthropy Roundtable’s Annual Meeting in Florida by Bjorn Lomborg, the young Danish economist and author of a highly touted book, *The Skeptical Environmentalist*, who quotes Simon at the book’s beginning:

“This is my long-run forecast in brief: The material conditions of life will continue to get better for most people, in most countries, most of the time, indefinitely. Within a century or two, all nations and most of humanity will be at or above today’s Western living standards. I also speculate, however, that many people will continue to think and say that the conditions of life are getting worse.”<sup>3</sup>

I first came upon this long standing debate in the late 1960's when I, as the representative of a large charitable entity, was invited to attend a small, select discussion group at the Population Council offices in New York City on a Saturday.

Then Council President, Frank Notestein, earlier founder of the highly respected Office of Population Research at Princeton University,

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<sup>1</sup> Garrett Hardin, “*Living Within Limits*” (Oxford U. Press, NYC, 1993), page 187

<sup>2</sup> Ed Regis, “*The Doomslayer*”, (Wired Magazine, Issue 502, February 1997)

<sup>3</sup> Bjorn Lomborg, “*The Skeptical Environmentalist*” (Cambridge U. Press, NYC, 2001)  
First page of paperback book’s text

had called forth this expert group to discuss what might be the optimum population size for the world, which at that juncture had about 3.6 billion people versus its 6.4 billion now. World population in 2004 added about 75 million net new humans to the planet, but some predict this growth to decline to a replacement level (i.e. stability) around 2100 . Total world population by 2050 is estimated at 9.1 billion.<sup>4</sup>

It is interesting to note that Notestein, who possessed a wonderful sense of humorous cynicism about demography, had predicted in 1945 that the World's population in the year 2000 would be 3 billion.<sup>5</sup> Garrett Hardin was among the roughly 15 discussants at this Population Council gathering and he was heartily challenged to defend his thesis on the importance of limits by most of the others there, including Bernard Barrelson, who succeeded Notestein as Population Council President.

The final consensus among this group of discussants (sans Hardin) was not particularly stunning: Slower growth was deemed better, but the group refused to agree to limits which Hardin felt were necessary. I recall Frank saying something to me personally later to the effect that "why not 15 billion? We don't know for sure the impact that would make."

I do not remember if Hardin then suggested a desirable world population goal, but he once told me that he felt the United States had exceeded its natural limits or carrying capacity – a subject he wrote much about – when its population surpassed 150 million in about 1950.<sup>6</sup> That the US could now retreat from its present level of 300 million seems to many a utopian dream or nightmare (if you are a real estate developer).

The argument about the need for population control has taken on many faces in the ensuing 30 plus years since my attendance at that

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<sup>4</sup> US Census Bureau: Its Note on HIV/AIDS impact: The Census Bureau application applies assumptions from the WHO/UNAIDS Epidemiological Reference Group about age/sex distribution of HIV incidence, sex ratios of new infections, mother-to-child transmission rate, and disease progression. The model allows for competing risk of death and projects HIV incidence implied by the European People's Party (EPP) estimates of HIV prevalence through 2010, assuming a decline in HIV incidence of 50 percent by 2050. The model can include the impact of antiretroviral therapy, but the current projections assume no one will receive treatment.

<sup>5</sup> Hardin, *Ibid.* Page 32

<sup>6</sup> Hardin, "Ethical Implications of Carrying Capacity" (1977), see web site [www.dicoff.org](http://www.dicoff.org)

Population Council meeting in the late 1960's. Prior to the issuance of the Rockefeller Commission Report on Population Growth and the American Future (1969)<sup>7</sup> and the Supreme Court decision on Roe vs Wade (1973) there had been considerable unanimity politically and among all Americans about the need to assist in the curtailing of world population. Popular writer, Lawrence Lader's 1971 book, "Breeding Ourselves To Death" chronicles that consensus. His book contained a long list of distinguished corporate, political, and social leaders who favored what President Nixon's letter reprinted in Lader's book to Hugh Moore of October 23, 1969 opined, "Your dedication to easing the problems of world population growth has led to significant public service..."<sup>8</sup>

While large funding for the US Agency for International Development (USAID) programs for family planning resulted from this powerful loose coalition's political efforts, there was then and there remains today a substantial antagonism against family planning and particularly against abortion by many religious groups, particularly the Vatican and the US Conference of Catholic Bishops, who have been joined by many conservative Protestant and other religious groups. Carefully funded and professional orchestrated opposition grew much more rapidly after the Roe vs Wade decision. The most sustained and onerous restrictions instituted by their pressure include the so called Helms Amendment added in the early 1970's to the Foreign Assistance Act which prohibits any Federal or private money to be given to foreign non profit organizations who offer women abortion services or counseling. There are many accounts of their activities, but perhaps the most insightful are two books by Dr. Stephan D. Mumford.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> The Rockefeller Commission Report on Population Growth and the American Future, contained the following forwarding letter from President Richard M. Nixon, "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. 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 challenge as it has surmounted so many during the long march of civilization." (Signed) Richard Nixon, July 18, 1969

<sup>8</sup> Lawrence Lader, "Breeding Ourselves To Death" (Ballantine Books, NYC, 1971) pages 87 to 91 for the names and in the foreword for the full Nixon letter to Moore.

<sup>9</sup> Stephen D. Mumford, "The Pope and The New Apocalypse: The Holy War Against Family Planning" and "The Life And Death of NSSM 200: How the Destruction of Political Will

The irony of withholding widespread support for family planning is well documented in many places. While many are against abortion, eliminating against family planning simply increases the use of abortion to regulate pregnancies, something few would find attractive. A recent case in point is covered in an article I wrote which published in January, 2004. In Vietnam, a safe, simple, affordable method of female sterilization known as quinacrine sterilization or QS which had caused no deaths or life threatening complications after being used by that time by over 75,000 women (now nearly 200,000 women with the same excellent results) was attacked as dangerous with no scientific evidence to back the claim. However, these specious charges caused the national program which was eagerly accepted by the Vietnamese Health Ministry to be cancelled. This resulted in resort to abortion as the primary method of birth control and caused an increase in maternal deaths.<sup>9a</sup>

The argumentation by both sides on the abortion issue offers seemingly convincing insights as to why both are correct. To lay American readers, living in the affluence of the USA, their view of the problem and its urgency becomes a matter of highly subjective opinion, one that often seems not too urgent.

One aspect that will not be treated herein is the vast worldwide human migrations underway. Historically large numbers of poor, often unstable populations located in developing nations feel impelled to seek better lives in developed nations, which are perceived as places of opportunity. There is increasing animosity among citizens of those developed nations to what the majority of their citizens consider illegal and undesirable invasions of their countries.<sup>10</sup>

While widespread poverty, even all out war as in Iraq, and the killing of millions in Africa from HIV/AIDS and internecine tribal wars in failed nations are often presumed by some to be meaningful curbs on

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Doomed A US Population Policy” (Center for Research on Security and Population, Research Triangle Park, 1986 and 1996)

<sup>9a</sup> Donald Collins, “WHO creates demand for abortions” (Pittsburgh Tribune Review article of January 28, 2004)

<sup>10</sup> I have written widely on the topic of American immigration policy in the print media and in journals. My review of a recent book by Frosty Wooldridge on the American immigration situation entitled, “Immigration’s Unarmed Invasion: Deadly Consequences” can be found in the Fall, 2004 Issue of The Social Contract entitled, “Ideas on How to Save America” pages 81-83.

growth, the demographic evidence suggests otherwise. Even the vast losses in the recent tsunami disaster in the Indian Ocean killed fewer people than the number currently added to the world's population every single day.

The question of whether adjustments can be made to fulfill Simon's optimistic prediction for the majority of humankind remains open. Lomborg's response from a questioner at the Philanthropy Roundtable meeting referred to above about the world running out of oil was "We did not run out of stone at the end of the Stone Age" and of course one can only think of the apocryphal story of the person who has just jumped off the Empire State Building. As he passes the 68th floor he thinks to himself, "So far, so good."

My son and his wife have fished commercially for 20 years out of San Francisco for Pacific king salmon from May through September and for dungeness crab from mid-November through January. For a hundred years, these resources have been used to make SF a tourist Mecca and a resident's delight. The idea historically has been to take just enough live, legal sized crab to provide the local market with fresh catch for the months of that season. Starting this last season many large, out of the Bay Area boats appeared, equipped with 1000-2000 crab pots and fished out the resource in a week.<sup>10a</sup>

Point: The free market doesn't have all the answers nor and the equitable balance that can be provided by the Rule of Law. Wise government policies can often make the difference between chaos and survival. I would argue that the same applies to human population management. Hardin again to the rescue with his classic essay, "Tragedy of the Commons" implores us all to see the wisdom of restraint as providing the ultimate benefits for everyone – except the short term gain for the greedy.<sup>11</sup>

A major factor in whether we can get to the population transition nirvana envisioned by Julian Simon must include management of resources under enlightened governments, of which, judging by our own

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<sup>10a</sup> Mary Ann Ostrom, "Bay Area Crab War Reaching Boiling Point—Large, small operations fight over catch sizes", San Jose (CA) Mercury News article, Friday December 17, 2004

<sup>11</sup> "The Tragedy of the Commons," Garrett Hardin, *Science*, 162(1968):1243-1248.

aberrant behavior at times, are few in number. In the struggle for resources, nuclear war is not out of the realm of possibility. And environmental poisonings which are widely described by many writers including Lester Brown bode ill or fatal for the health and safety of the world's population.

Brown is particularly persuasive in his recent book, *Plan B: Rescuing a Planet under Stress and a Civilization in Trouble* when he talks about pending water shortages due to the over pumping of the world's aquifers, "a practice that virtually guarantees a future drop in production when aquifers are depleted." His alternative is "Plan B", "a worldwide mobilization to stabilize population and climate before these issues spiral out of control. The goal is to stabilize population close to the UN's low projection of 7.4 billion, to reduce carbon emissions by half by 2015, and to raise water productivity by half." Despite many endorsing voices from respected environmental and family planning leaders, it is highly doubtful that the actions he has outlined will be taken in any serious coordinated international way.<sup>12</sup>

In November 2003, my wife and I spent several days on Easter Island, a tiny dot in mid Pacific, only 6.9 miles long and perhaps 2 plus miles wide. Could its history be a microcosm of what could happen to the larger world? This volcanic rocky triangle was by the late 17th Century overcrowded with an estimated 20,000 people. Resources shrank, so the numerous family tribes, collectively called Rapanuians, vied for food, ending up by killing each other in large numbers. When the shortages got acute on Easter Island, the dying pace increased rapidly. By then, no trees were left to build fires, often earlier used by victors for fuel to cook captured tribesmen. Finally, only 110 Rapanuians were left by the mid 19th Century, when a Catholic missionary came to minister to the few remaining men and women.<sup>12a</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Lester Brown, "Plan B: Rescuing A Planet under Stress and a Civilization in Trouble" (Earth Policy Institute, Washington, DC, 2003)

<sup>12a</sup> Easter Island was first settled by a few natives from the Polynesian Islands around 400 AD. The first European to see it arrived there on Easter Sunday, 1722, hence its name. By the time the native population reached its nadir, all of its cultural icons, the famous Moai stone statues had been toppled by the warring tribesmen. Remember, these were not ethnic conflicts, since all these islanders were of the same ethnic origin, all Polynesians from the Marquise, most anthropologists now agree.

Ravaged by killings, starvation and disease, there were only 110 survivors. Of these only 36

Albert Einstein was quite optimistic when he opined, "I do not believe that civilization will be wiped out in a war fought with the atomic bomb. Perhaps two thirds (2/3rds) of the people of the earth might be killed, but enough men capable of thinking and enough books, would be left to start again, and civilization could be restored." So Dr. Einstein's estimate bodes better for us than what happened to the Rapanuians, since by Einstein's estimate there would be somewhere between 2 to 4 billion of us left, hopefully without an enduring nuclear winter and a prolonged scarcity of food.

The idea of a population "bomb" is now often dismissed by some as one NY Times reporter did recently. Donald G. McNeil Jr.'s "Demographic 'Bomb' May Only Go 'Pop!'" in the August 29, 2004 New York Times discusses how the slow down in the birth rate has reached almost replacement or even below-replacement rates in the most developed nations and is declining in most developed countries. Demographically, he is of course correct; declines are occurring, but 90% of the growth still comes from women having babies in the so-called "developing" countries.

However, I assume that McNeil thinks that anything short of all-out world war is just a "pop." How many "pops" make a bomb? It is empirically the fact that these "pops" are going off in profusion world wide and are likely to continue generating the terrorism we read about daily in the papers. Soon, many experts, predict, terrorism will begin happening regularly in the US. The promotion of family planning measures for the over-populated regions of the earth is the most effective long term solution to the conflict and rising tide of terrorism that seems to be inherently linked to the struggle to survive in regions that are averaging five or six or more live births per female.

It has long been evident from the record of the Twentieth Century, when half the births were unintended, that the growth of sheer numbers of people from just over 1 billion at its outset to 6 billion at its close was

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had offspring. So, to do a simple comparison, if the world has 6.4 billion inhabitants now and the same happens at the same ratio, then just over 11 million of us would be left, mostly Chinese and Indians, but still plenty to keep the planet going if they can survive a nuclear winter. If the world's population rises to 12 billion, as some predict, then after a similar fall off, around 23 million people would be left! Will any World Trade Towers be left if the world follows suit?



going to create huge problems. "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure" perfectly defines what family planning has already done and what it could do if truly made a first priority. It can be cogently argued that being anti-family planning is basically being pro-terrorist and pro-massive immigration. Both phenomena are increasing on a world wide basis today.

Massacres in Rwanda, the Congo, and now the Sudan are partly manifestations of our failure to provide choices to women and their families about when and under what circumstances to bear children. Naturally, other aspects of development are important, but family planning is critical.

Certainly the failure of Western governments, and notably that of the U.S., to address this issue by providing adequate contraceptive resources is part of the problem. Well over 90 percent of the expected additional 3 billion to be added to the planet in this century, probably before the end of this century, will come from developing nations already struggling to feed, cloth, house and educate their people.

As Population Institute President and 2003 UN Population Laureate Werner Fornos noted in a September 5, 2004 letter in reply to the NY Times' "Pop" article, of the present world population of 6.4 billion "840 million are malnourished, 2.8 billion (two in five) struggle to survive on less than \$2 a day, 1.1 billion lack safe drinking water and 2.4 billion are without basic sanitation."

We can confidently predict more Darfurs and more Rwandas, more terrorism, more massive legal and illegal migration from poor to rich nations. Reasonable migration is perhaps manageable, but this increasingly massive, desperate, flight from poor to rich is culturally and economically disruptive and particularly injurious to the poorest citizens of any nation so invaded. And in the US the issue remains largely unaddressed by the leaders of both major political parties, with illegal immigrants in the US very conservatively estimated at over ten million in 2004. and increasing by close to half a million a year. Some put the number of illegal aliens here at 20 million and the annual influx at 3 million.<sup>13a</sup>

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<sup>13a</sup> Donald Collins, "Pruning the roots of terror" (Pittsburgh Tribune Review, article of

Many scholars have long understood these looming and dangerous limits, but no state, region, nation or ethnic group wants to say "Enough." So now, Western medical technology having cut disease and the death rate around the world drastically in the last century, the resulting boom in population has put the average age of people in developing nations at under twenty.

This century will likely be the most dangerous in world history.

The "Pop" then, is the gap between the affluent and the afflicted, a gap that is driving desperate people (many of whom are young and unsocialized) into acts of violence that are sequential and not likely to subside for at least two generations.

A very possible outcome of these widespread instabilities is increasing loss of civility, civil rights and the Rule of Law in developed countries and the continued growth of tyranny in the less developed. And dangerous "pops" everywhere, including suicide bombers here in the U.S.

If military action is our principal solution to these terrorist threats, the 21st century will be bloodier and more dangerous than the 20th. And don't think these desperate folks will flinch at using any means, including supporting tyrants ready to use nuclear weapons. Only a concerted and effective expansion of family planning in these less-developed nations will offer a possible long-term road to peace. The ultimate concept of population limits is simply a matter of physical limits.

Again the question, should we worry at all about human numbers? My long held view is that slower population growth means fewer children, and children who are truly wanted by their parents. Having widespread, inexpensive, easy access to family planning is but an insurance policy for the world, offering access to those who need it and want it, free from coercion of any kind. That would certainly aid the transition from present horrors to the more halcyon future Simon predicted, although he implied that the finite Earth could tolerate unlimited growth of human numbers, which few see as desirable, or even possible.

Regardless of which side of this great debate one takes, the ultimate

answer lies in overall human behavior. Do we gently, safely, but firmly say, “Let’s try to give everyone the options they can live with” or do we continue to ignore conditions that force women to bear large numbers of children they neither want nor can care for. If, as some believe, at least half the births of the 20th Century were unplanned, the advances in contraception, starting with the introduction of the birth control pill in 1960, make the option of birth control for all who need it a realistic goal, restricted not by the relatively small financial cost, but by the unrealistic cultural precepts and the selfishness of male domination and the religions in certain cultures.

Urbanization has sucked billions of people into larger and larger cities where perhaps numbers can be technologically handled more efficiently with less environmental impact. Having seen most of the world’s largest cities firsthand, I am impressed with how well (but also in many cases how poorly) masses of people are served, but, again, successful transition rests on imponderables such as stability of governance and resource allocations.

According to the UN’s Population Division as of March, 2004, “The world’s urban population continues to grow at an even faster rate than the total population of the world. As a consequence, about 3 billion or 48% of humankind are now living in urban settlements.” Urban growth is projected to reach 5 billion by 2030, when it is projected to be 61% of the total world population. Growth in urban areas for 2000-2030 is projected at 1.8% per year, twice the expected average annual growth of world population. So far the world’s rural areas have fed most populations, but that may be a massive future problem.<sup>14</sup>

Another potentially unsettling factor is the disparity in the age of populations. While developed countries such as the US and to a greater extent Europe are growing greyer (higher average age of populations—over 30 for example – due not just to improved longevity but more so to a declining birthrate), the developing nations often have populations where the average age is 20 or even lower. How this young population contracepts will determine future world population growth.

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<sup>14</sup> United Nations. World Population Prospects: The 2000 Revision Highlights. February 2001, pp. 47-50.

Results will unfortunately continue to be uneven from nation to nation, continent to continent. For example, in Africa where HIV/AIDS is most prevalent, mature people, often the best educated, die, leaving untended, uneducated youngsters at loose ends and subject to manipulation by unscrupulous forces.

In a recent provocative book, unbalanced sex ratios in many Asian and Middle Eastern nations, including China and India—"which represent almost 40% of the world's population—are being skewed in favor of males on a scale which is unprecedented in human history. Through offspring sex selection....these countries are acquiring a disproportionate number of low-status young adult males called "Bare Branches" by the Chinese". The book's authors "argue that this surplus male population in Asia's largest countries threatens domestic stability and international security". They postulate unsettling global implications for this disturbing "rogue male" development in this century.<sup>15</sup>

Conclusion: While I am not a complete doomsayer, I think Simon's optimistic "Doomsayer" assessment rests on many future happenings which no scientist, statistician or economist can predict. If breakdowns in resources expand rapidly enough or unevenly enough to precipitate another world war, some desperate nation will surely employ nuclear weapons.

My ardent support for more family planning is based simply on the subjective supposition, which Frank Notestein's group expressed 45 years ago, that slower population growth gives more time for people to work into new patterns of life that of necessity will be vastly different than a time when most of the world's population lived in rural settings. It is also proven to be much cheaper than military action. The idea that humans are endlessly going to expand numerically, cutting down every other living thing in their path will obviously not prevail if humans on Planet Earth are to survive. More comity and partnerships must be our goal and the leadership needed to do that must come from the most powerful nations, something sadly lacking throughout human history.

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<sup>15</sup> Valerie Hudson and Andrea den Boer, "Bare Branches: The Security Implications of Asia's Surplus Male Population" (MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 2004) Quotes from the dust jacket.

I speak only for restraint and available inexpensive reproductive choice. Let the market decide supply and demand, but not a market controlled by those who would limit contraceptive choices. Women worldwide often fail to have the option of the safe, affordable birth control supplies they want. My position is simple. Let's quickly get such help to them. UC Berkeley Professor of International Public Health, Dr. Malcolm Potts, puts it best, "What we need now are big, boring programs", which provide safe, economical, easy to use modern contraceptive methods, methods which would quickly reduce the need for abortions, the primary method used in some countries. Let the women of the world freely have the capacity to decide when and under what conditions they will take on the often dangerous option of childbearing. Annually, 600,000 pregnancy related deaths occur around the world. At present only slightly more than half the fertile women of the world have ready, economical and open access to safe, modern contraceptive methods.

Estimates indicate that the total expenditure required to make family planning assistance available worldwide is extremely modest, a mere \$20 billion annually. This would hugely reduce the costs resulting from war, migration, and the damage to agricultural resources caused by over-farming in so many overcrowded countries. If there were international cooperation, the cost to the United States would be about \$5 billion per year, because of expected contributions from other developed nations and from the international aid agencies. The Iraq war alone is costing much more, and the US government's defense budget for the current fiscal year is \$450 billion.

Ironically, many forces are attacking the widespread use of safe family planning, which if funded could work its magic on the health and unity of women and their families around the world at minimal expense. Too many writers and media sources continually fail to connect the dots between population pressure and so many of the economic and political problems that have brought extreme poverty to the poorer countries of the world. The ongoing population explosion not only condemns the Third World to its misery, it threatens the security of the developed world and the future welfare of all those currently being born into our world.