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“Kick That Population Commission in the Ass”: The Nixon Administration, the Commission on Population Growth and the American Future, and the Defusing of the Population Bomb

Postwar America was fertile ground for a resurgent Malthusianism. Between 1900 and 1960, the world's population doubled, and after World War II, a growing cadre of social scientists expressed grave concern that the planet might not withstand another doubling, in a mere thirty years. Especially in the late 1960s—as mass environmentalism emerged, the U.S. population crossed the 200-million mark, global population growth rates peaked, and India endured drought and famine—an American Malthusianism that had been percolating since the late 1940s simmered to the surface.¹ Now infused with an ecological sensibility, this doomsday population discourse emphasized pollution and the prospect of environmental collapse more than simply the supply of natural resources and food (the dominant paradigm since the

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British pastor Thomas Malthus's 1798 *Essay on Human Population*).² The natural scientists, birth-control advocates, foundation officials, and radical economists who shaped this postwar Malthusianism generally assumed that the developing world faced the most urgent population problems. However, most of these experts also insisted that every nation faced population-induced crises in the long run.³ The Stanford biologist Paul Ehrlich expressed this viewpoint in the most famous population treatise since Malthus—*The Population Bomb* (1968)—sparking the organized “zero population growth” movement in the United States.⁴

To some degree, the U.S. government had incorporated Malthusian concerns ever since the Truman administration's “Point Four” foreign aid program, which assumed that population-growth-induced resource scarcity bred communism. But state action came haltingly. Neither President Eisenhower nor Kennedy believed that direct action to combat population growth, whether domestic or international, fell within the proper purview of government policy. President Johnson spoke forcefully about what he saw as the global population crisis; and his administration promoted the inclusion of family planning training and education in overseas USAID programs and, most dramatically, made food aid to India dependent on progress on the population front.⁵ Moreover, the Johnson administration launched federally sponsored family planning programs as part of its War on Poverty. Still, Johnson never seriously considered assertive policies to decelerate domestic population growth, and his administration stalled on even the modest proposal of creating a national commission to study population issues.⁶

From 1969 to 1972, however, disparate actors in the federal government embraced the new Malthusianism and elevated the population-policy debate far beyond the birth-control programs that had emerged in the mid-1960s. Cresting concerns about overpopulation among the general public and expert frustration that global population growth rates were unaffected by two decades of accelerated family planning aid had combined to create a sense that the moment had arrived to move “beyond family planning.”⁷ Lawmakers sympathetic to the population movement now considered not merely managing domestic population growth and its supposed consequences (for example, by stepping up environmental protection), but intervening comprehensively to “control” this growth. Americans' faith in liberal individualism and puritanical resistance to public debate about sex and reproduction prevented draconian measures, such as capping the allowable number of children per family. Nonetheless, the state had several tools at its disposal, including creating tax

disincentives for large families and early marriage, legalizing abortion, dramatically increasing access to family planning, and reducing immigration.

The Nixon administration initially jumped on the population bandwagon. In a special 1969 message on population drafted by his urban affairs adviser Daniel Patrick Moynihan, the president framed the issue in both foreign and domestic terms, calling population growth “one of the most serious challenges to human destiny in the last third of this century.”⁸ At Nixon’s urging, Congress created the Commission on Population Growth and the American Future, chaired by philanthropist and leading Malthusian John D. Rockefeller III, to investigate all facets of the population problem. The commission’s final report, issued in 1972, called for a series of policies designed to encourage population stabilization.⁹

Yet even before the commission’s report, the “overpopulation” critique was rapidly exiting stage right from the administration. Then Nixon all but ended the possibility of state intervention to slow population growth when he perfunctorily thanked the commission for its labors but rejected its final report. Behind the scenes, his administration ensured that the commission’s recommendations never saw the legislative light of day.

The events surrounding the ineffectual population commission are worth studying in their own right as a window into policymaking in the Nixon White House. More broadly, this essay examines a crucial moment in the centuries-old debate about population, natural resources, and the economy that recent global energy, food, and climate crises have spotlighted once again. In particular, these pages illuminate the emergence of a new political economy of population in the United States—a widespread embrace of population growth that survives to this day. It is true that some anxiety about population growth remained in the 1970s, when talk of a “zero-sum society” thrived, some liberals questioned the virtue of “growth,” broadly defined, and oil flowed less freely. By any measure, however, unease with “overpopulation”—especially domestic U.S. overpopulation—dwindled dramatically after 1972 among policymakers, journalists, and the general public.¹⁰ Indeed, by the late 1970s, most policymakers had traded in overpopulation fears for an unabashed embrace of steady population growth, at least in regard to American demographic trends. This article thus explores the major reversal in the modern U.S. population debate from prevailing skepticism to prevailing optimism about population growth.

Moreover, the pages below demonstrate the connection between this reversal and the broader revival of *laissez-faire* economic ideas that dominated the American political economy in the final third of the twentieth century.

Put another way, new optimism about the benefits of population growth not only responded to but also contributed to the resurgence of conservative political economy. More specifically, as I examine the course of the population issue in the Nixon White House within the context of shifting social science expertise, I argue that two developments drove the turnaround in the American population debate. First, the Nixon administration helped defuse the "population bomb": it narrowed the scope of the overpopulation critique by concentrating on the shibboleth of potentially altering the geographic distribution of Americans rather than on the possibility of addressing aggregate growth. In doing so, President Nixon came to reject the goal of zero population growth. In part, this refutation simply revealed an instinctual defense of economic growth, given that some in the population-control movement called for a radical brake on economic activity. However, the administration's dismissal of an overpopulation problem also reflected the second development that spurred an about-face in population thought: the ascendancy of a new pro-population-growth economics that had been building momentum among social scientists since the early 1960s.

My account challenges the conventional wisdom on the demise of the domestic overpopulation critique. (The story told in these pages is explicitly a domestic one, and the reader should bear in mind that the discussion about population growth in the United States took place against the backdrop of continued efforts by both the U.S. government and the philanthropic sector to reduce birthrates in the "developing" nations.)¹¹ The small literature that addresses the waning of 1960s Malthusianism, led by Donald Critchlow's excellent history of family planning and abortion policy and an article in this journal, Roy Beck and Leon Kolankiewicz's "The Environmental Movement's Retreat from Advocating U.S. Population Stabilization," emphasizes two main factors during the Nixon years.¹² The first is shifting demographic fundamentals: the clamor for population control took place during a unique interregnum when a significant slowdown in U.S. aggregate population growth seemed possible. The birthrate of American women declined from 1960 to 1967, briefly increased in 1968 and 1969, and then dropped again from 1970 to 1972, slipping below the replacement level of 2.1 births per woman. This declining birthrate, scholars reasonably conclude, undercut calls for population control.¹³ Moreover, the dramatic and surprising rise in immigration that followed the 1965 Immigration Act was just gathering steam; it was not clear during the late 1960s that immigration would increase to the dramatic extent that it has since then. Second, existing accounts emphasize how the population issue was sucked into the vortex of America's "culture wars." In this interpretation, the new

battle over abortion rights was paramount, both for politicizing the population issue and for creating an organized constituency (the “pro-life” movement) that considered birth control and population control anathema.¹⁴

In accounting for the trajectory of the population issue in recent decades, the demographic and cultural analyses illuminate much of the story but are insufficient. To begin with, the role of the declining birthrate in reducing concern about overpopulation has been exaggerated. Many demographers, lawmakers, and the Nixon administration predicted that birthrate declines would be short-lived and that a new Baby Boom was just around the corner.¹⁵ And in any event, most participants in the debate were not surprised that the birthrate was decreasing; they knew that populations cannot grow indefinitely. Even population alarmists had long conceded that, the Baby Boom aside, American fertility was likely to resume its historic pattern of decline.¹⁶ The question was never whether the U.S. (or world) population would stabilize but at what level, when, and at what cost along the way. The “culture wars” argument is also important. As we will see, Nixon distanced himself from the report of his population commission in part because he opposed its advocacy of legalized abortion and was mindful of criticism from the Catholic Church. Moreover, a stepped-up battle over immigration during the 1970s reinforced the politicization of the population growth issue and, as Beck and Kolankiewicz suggest, drove many environmentalists away from the population issue out of fear of being branded anti-immigrant and racist.

However, the scholarly stress on cultural fissures slights the vital role that broader shifts in economic ideas played in remaking the American population debate—before the culture wars entirely engulfed it. Most accounts of the rise and fall of the overpopulation issue focus on the 1970s, when the transition was most evident, and thus miss the critical developments of the 1960s. That decade witnessed the emergence of a conservative critique of Malthusianism and a concomitant veneration of population growth. Historians have not yet explored in detail the evolution of conservative ideas regarding demographic expansion in the United States, but they were paramount to the vanishing anxiety about “overpopulation.” As with so much of what took place in 1960s America, a veneer of liberal success on the population issue temporarily masked a budding and ultimately even more successful conservative response.

NIXON’S BRIEF BOUT OF MALTHUSIANISM

The election of Richard Nixon was initially unsettling to advocates of population control; notwithstanding the mention in the GOP’s 1968 platform of the

“menace” of the “world-wide population explosion,” his views on these matters were inchoate.¹⁷ However, Nixon assumed the presidency as popular and media concern about “overpopulation” crested, and his initial response was in step with the public’s mood. In his 1969 message on population, in which he called for a commission, Nixon stated, “I believe that many of our present social problems may be related to the fact that we have had only fifty years in which to accommodate the second hundred million Americans.”¹⁸ The president predicted that the additional 100 million people expected by the end of the twentieth century would cause further economic and social strains. Nixon indicated elsewhere that he was serious about combating international population growth,¹⁹ and neither government officials nor the press saw any reason to doubt his commitment.²⁰

At this juncture, four factors had tipped the scales in the administration in favor of population alarmism. Most obviously, popular apprehension was peaking. Second, the congressional movement for population control remained bipartisan and vibrant. The late 1960s saw the introduction of dozens of pieces of family-planning legislation, and although several congressional Malthusians were Republican (e.g., Rep. George H. W. Bush),²¹ the White House wanted to “seize the initiative” from Democratic leaders.²² Third, the population establishment, and especially the Population Council (founded by John D. Rockefeller III in 1952, and still an important organization today), continued to highlight what it saw as the overpopulation problem and to lobby aggressively for federal spending on family planning programs and population education. The Republican Rockefeller enjoyed good contacts with several members of the administration friendly to family planning.²³ Fourth, the Cold War sustained the notion that the United States had to put its own population house in order as an example to Third World nations. For instance, Donald Rumsfeld, who headed Nixon’s Office of Economic Opportunity before becoming his counselor, noted that Nixon and his three predecessors had all supported efforts at easing overseas population growth for national security reasons. Rumsfeld eventually testified to the commission that “the credibility of this [presidential] support hinges in part upon the degree of responsibility we in the United States display in population affairs here at home.”²⁴ Commenting on the landmark population legislation of the Nixon era—the 1970 Family Planning Services and Population Research Act, which greatly extended federal support for birth control programs—the *New York Times* concluded: “Perhaps most important of all, the family planning bill demonstrates to a sometimes skeptical international public that the United States intends to practice at home what it has been preaching to the world with increasing urgency in recent years.”²⁵

A vocal minority in Congress promoted even more aggressive population policies. In 1970, for example, Senator Joseph Tydings (D-Md.), one of the issue leaders since the mid-1960s and a sponsor of the Family Planning Services and Population Research Act, introduced a joint resolution declaring it to be the official policy of the federal government to “develop, encourage, and implement, at the earliest possible time, the necessary policies, attitudes, social standards and actions which will, by voluntary means consistent with human rights and individual conscience, stabilize the population of the U.S. and thereby promote the future well-being of this nation and the entire world.”²⁶ That same year, Senator Bob Packwood (D-Ore.) and Representative Pete McCloskey Jr. (R-Calif.) introduced bills to eliminate tax deductions for all but the first two children.²⁷

But the policy window was not that wide. Most lawmakers were content to merely study the population issue, and in 1970 they turned their attention to perhaps the most famous—or infamous—legacy of the population issue during the Nixon years: the Commission on Population Growth and the American Future.²⁸ Nixon’s point person on population was his domestic policy adviser Daniel Patrick Moynihan, the maverick Democrat (and future senator) who had written the well-known “Moynihan Report” on the African American family in Kennedy’s Department of Labor. Moynihan was the main author of Nixon’s population message,²⁹ and in 1969 he steered the commission’s enabling legislation through Congress.³⁰

The legislation did not clarify whether the commission was charged with recommending policies simply to adjust American society to population increase or in fact to slow down this increase. House amendments pointed the commission in a more radical direction, but Nixon’s population message—and his advisers—predominantly thought in terms of planning for population increase rather than arresting it.³¹ Moynihan, for example, advised the president that “the first function of the Commission is to chart the expected growth of the population between now and the year 2000 in terms of numbers and location, and the resources of the public sector that will be required to deal with this anticipated growth.”³² Indeed, Moynihan revealed his technocratic approach to the issue at a press conference on June 4, 1970. Here he told reporters, “By and large, the average cat food company knows more about the demographic structure of the American public and what it is likely to be than does the city of Chicago. We don’t have any forward thinking this way and we are trying to build it into our concerns, medicine and aging and things like that.”³³ At the other end of the spectrum, advocates of population reduction bemoaned what they saw as the commission’s narrow mission.³⁴ Representative Morris

Udall (D-Ariz.), among others, complained about the "implied assumption that these other 100 million Americans, this additional population, is inevitable, that we simply accept it and begin to plan for how we are going to take care of it. I don't think we ask the ultimate question if we make that assumption."³⁵ Udall also introduced more forceful legislation that would have made population stabilization the official policy of the United States, but it received only perfunctory debate.³⁶

During the first half of 1970, a small group within the administration led by Moynihan selected the commission's members.³⁷ The process quickly became politicized, and in June an exasperated Moynihan complained to John Ehrlichman (the Assistant to the President for Domestic Affairs), "With any luck we may yet appoint a Population Commission. That is, after the FBI has gone through its pathetic inquiries into the prospect that a Negro doctor had an Aunt whose girlfriend slept with a Communist."³⁸ In addition to Senator Tydings and three other members of Congress, all of whom were deeply concerned with population growth,³⁹ the commission included a politically correct mix of representatives from various interest groups.⁴⁰ "Politically," its research director concluded, "the group was conservative by college student standards, liberal by national and White House standards. By no stretch of the imagination could the group be characterized as radical."⁴¹ Moynihan's first choice for chair was William Scranton, the former governor of Pennsylvania whom liberal Republicans had drafted in 1964 to unsuccessfully challenge Barry Goldwater (at the time he was a vice chairman of the Urban Institute), but Moynihan also approved of the final selection of John D. Rockefeller.⁴²

In March 1971, the commission's interim report used safe language—and a common moderate critique of population growth rooted in aesthetic (rather than scarcity) concerns—to warn against the dangers of continual population increase. Rather than sounding the resource-exhaustion alarm, that is, this report maintained that population growth acted "as an intensifier or multiplier of many problems impairing the quality of life in the United States."⁴³ As the Commission on Population Growth and the American Future gathered steam, the Nixon administration began to pull away from even this moderate, quality-of-life-centered response to the population question, setting the stage for a collision.

THE URBAN CRISIS AND "BALANCED GROWTH"

As Donald Critchlow has shown, the development of a contentious abortion politics in the United States goes far in explaining the eventual dénouement of the Malthusian moment.⁴⁴ Individuals who today would be called "cultural

conservatives” increasingly rejected the zero population growth movement, seeing it, correctly, as tied to the movement to legalize abortion.⁴⁵ And the abortion-related backlash against population policy filtered into the White House. In April 1971, Nixon issued an order insisting that military bases follow state abortion laws, declaring that abortion was an “unacceptable form of population control.”⁴⁶ Yet abortion was just one of several issues that reshaped population politics. Before a showdown over abortion at the very end of the commission’s life, the White House had reduced the urgency of the zero population growth critique by thinking about population problems primarily in terms of controversial social-demographic issues surrounding the American city (and not, therefore, in terms of aggregate population growth).

On one level, the conceptual links between the population and urban debates were poverty and social decay. During the mid-1960s, and especially after the Watts uprising in Los Angeles, a so-called urban-crisis captured policymakers’ imaginations. The population debate overlapped with this (racialized) urban crisis because several hot-button social issues with demographic overtones (for example, rising teenage pregnancy) were seen primarily as urban problems. The purported connection between population growth and the urban crisis, therefore, injected a fresh dose of racial politics into a population discussion already tainted and racialized via the unfortunate legacy of eugenics.⁴⁷

On another level, however, the population and urban debates linked through the paradigm of controlling “growth.” Because urban and suburban growth accounted for most of the overall population growth in 1960s America (as they did throughout the twentieth century), population controllers and urban planners shared overlapping goals. The former wanted to reduce aggregate population growth, and the latter sought a national growth policy that would reduce urban densities or at least induce “balanced growth” between the city, suburb, and countryside.

Within a Nixon White House engaged in the quest for a national urban policy, the question “Where shall they live?” subsumed the question “How many of them shall there be?” In other words, the administration stressed the geographic distribution of the population—in particular, the increasing concentration of Americans in and around major cities—rather than aggregate growth. That the administration thought about population primarily in terms of geographic location was revealed in a June 1971 meeting of Nixon’s Domestic Council. John Ehrlichman, Nixon’s domestic policy chief, scribbled two notes under the agenda heading of “population” for this meeting: “what growth among poor” and “*where* will growth be in U.S.”⁴⁸

Because of the historical racialization of poverty discourse in the United States, critics of the administration and of the population movement dismissed the population–urban crisis link as race baiting (even though the anxiety about “growth among the poor” was always expressed in race-neutral terms). Moreover, given that one interpretation of Nixon labels him “Tricky Dick”—a clever schemer who undermined policy goals by publicly endorsing them while simultaneously letting his henchmen destroy them—it is tempting to surmise that the administration’s emphasis on population location was a clever way of dooming the population issue through controversy, even as it scored short-term political gains.⁴⁹ However, the emphasis on the question “Where will they live?” should be seen against the backdrop of not only the urban crisis but also of a broad bipartisan movement to develop a comprehensive “growth policy” for the United States.

The quest for a national growth policy fused demographic and environmental planning; proposals for government-induced population redistribution reflected a long-standing belief that more efficient distribution of the U.S. population would protect the land.⁵⁰ More specifically, “growth policy” in the 1960s implied measures to minimize the damage to landscapes that resulted from the nation’s explosive postwar economic growth (and from the localized nature of land-use planning). Advocates of a national growth policy acknowledged the sheer growth of the aggregate population, but their primary concern was the deleterious effects of distribution, for example the “sprawl” created by the expanding megalopolises concentrated along the Atlantic and Pacific coasts.⁵¹ Hence, many proposals for a national growth policy included efforts to subsidize population relocation.⁵² The campaign for growth policy united liberals, who opposed the ecological effects of urban sprawl, and conservatives, who focused on the social ills of the city.

Within Nixon’s inner circle, Daniel Patrick Moynihan personified the connections between growing fears of an urban crisis, the drive for growth policy, and the broader population debate. Moynihan chaired the White House’s informal Urban Affairs Council, and it was no coincidence that he subsequently spearheaded the population issue; indeed, after Nixon’s special message on population, Moynihan noted that “many of the points the President makes are closely linked to concerns of the Urban Affairs Council.”⁵³ In a 1969 *Public Interest* article, “Toward a National Urban Policy,” Moynihan wrote: “The federal government must assert a specific interest in the movement of people, displaced by technology or driven by poverty, from rural to urban areas, and also in the movement from densely populated central cities to suburban areas.”⁵⁴

In his 1970 State of the Union address, Nixon called for a national “growth policy” to “create a new rural environment which will not only stem the migration to urban centers, but reverse it.”⁵⁵ The congressional drive for such a policy began with promise but ultimately failed, primarily because of the overwhelming antipathy to government planning in the United States.⁵⁶ Yet although the question “Where will they live?” was embedded in an ultimately futile policy campaign, it exerted significant influence over the course of the population debate, deflecting attention away from the traditional discourse centered on aggregate population growth, the economy, and the environment. Nixon explicitly moved toward the position that the “population problem” was primarily one of location. According to historian J. Brooks Flippen, Nixon signed the 1970 Family Planning Act only reluctantly. “Concerned with conservative objections and now questioning whether the problem was distribution and not growth,” Flippen wrote, “Nixon initially resisted the new proposal.”⁵⁷

True, concerns about the geographic location of the population are compatible with a preference for a smaller aggregate population. Nevertheless we may reasonably conclude that within the Nixon White House, the demographic aspects of the “urban crisis” and the interest in population location crowded out the overpopulation critique. Moynihan, for example, vaguely approved of a slower aggregate rate of domestic population growth but advised Nixon to emphasize population redistribution away from the cities as the solution to the “population problem.” In February 1970, the president of the Sierra Club, Phillip Berry, met with Nixon and urged him to pursue aggressive policies to promote national population stabilization. Moynihan followed up with a letter to Berry that revealed the extent to which the White House defined the population issue in geographic terms. This letter is worth quoting at length:

I certainly share your view that the growth of the world’s population, and the consequences of that growth, are among the most critical issues faced by mankind. I do believe we must distinguish between the problems of the developing nations, many of which are severely overcrowded by any measure, and those of the industrially advanced nations. In the United States the distribution of the population is at least as important as its absolute size. We are one of the least densely populated countries in the world and will likely remain so, with one of the slowest rates of growth. Yet we are highly concentrated, with a large majority of our people living on a small fraction of our land. In the past eight years one out of every three countries *lost* population.

If this trend continues unattended, we shall become increasingly concentrated in the coming decades—our large metropolitan regions will become more congested while valuable rural areas continue to decline. It is for this reason that I believe we must plan now to ensure that future population growth, however large or small it may turn out to be, does not compound problems which already exist.⁵⁸

Nixon himself increasingly thought about the population issue in terms of the city, though his analysis of urban population growth contained more of the racial rhetoric that always hovers over population matters in the United States than it did concerns about urban planning. In a taped discussion with Ehrlichman about the commission, Nixon bluntly stated that many people thought about population control in terms of controlling the "Negro masses." After Nixon then suggested that individuals not using birth control "are the people that shouldn't have kids," the conversation immediately turned to Black migration patterns, and Nixon expressed wonderment that the African American population of San Francisco had reached 30 percent due to black in-migration and white flight.⁵⁹ Nixon's casual racism here is not noteworthy. The point is that he thought about population in terms of the increasing concentration of Americans, and especially African Americans, in cities. There is no evidence that Nixon saw the issue of population location as a way to divert attention from the question of aggregate growth (or as a way to create more conservative suburban voters!). Yet Nixon must have known that throughout the twentieth century, calls for government-sponsored population redistribution usually went nowhere, especially after the waning of the New Deal's relocation programs. And he likely knew that Malthusians deemed geographic redistribution a "dangerous pseudosolution to the population problem," as Paul Ehrlich put it.⁶⁰

Not only the racial and geographic-distribution aspects of growth policy but also the evolving macroeconomic discourse surrounding it deflated the overpopulation issue. Early in his tenure, President Nixon had flirted, if not with anti-economic-growth thought, then at least with themes of balance and scarcity. "The time has come for a new quest," Nixon stated in his 1970 State of the Union address: "a quest not for greater quantity of what we have, but for a new quality of life in America."⁶¹ By late 1970, however, in response to recession and the Left's assault on the growth ideal, Nixon returned to the robust celebration of economic growth that dominated the postwar political economy. Nixon's retreat to growthism included a disdain for the zero population growth movement, which, he erroneously assumed, uniformly called for the cessation

of economic growth as well. In 1971, the president specifically told a group of environmentalists that he opposed zero population growth.⁶² In part, this stance simply reflected Nixon's growing antipathy to environmentalism, which he had dismissed by telling the Sierra Club's Berry that "All politics is a fad."⁶³ Nixon and his staff also assumed that population growth and economic growth were concomitants—and thus that zero population growth would lead to unemployment. Because of the perceived tight link between population and economic growth, Nixon's renewed emphasis on economic growth vitiated support for population control.

Nixon's call for "balanced growth" continued to incorporate population concerns, but only the locational concerns stressed by the White House—not a slower rate of population growth or more stress on the quality of life.⁶⁴ Accordingly, Nixon's bureaucracy combined the pursuit of balanced growth, couched in geographic terms, with a minimization of the overpopulation problem. In March 1970, Nixon's National Goals Research Staff (NGRS) reported internally that the United States could handle the population growth expected by the end of the century, even if the potential environmental effects were indeed worrisome. "There is no present need for incentives to reduce population growth in the US," the group concluded.⁶⁵ In its main report, *Toward Balanced Growth: Quantity with Quality*, the NGRS argued that the "question of population size in the United States is not Malthusian" but rather one of paying the price for the problems created by affluence ("congestion and contamination"). The report also suggested that zero population growth would be achieved without any government action. It concluded that among the various decisions facing the nation on population, "One which appears not to be urgent is that of overall size of the population—even after the effects of a considerable amount of immigration are taken into account." As for the question of population redistribution, however, the NGRS labeled it "a different matter, and one to be taken seriously regardless of what may be the upper limit of the population size." Accordingly, the only population policies called for in *Toward Balanced Growth* concerned geographic redistribution. The report advocated subsidizing population relocation to "alternate growth centers" and "new towns."⁶⁶

Well before the Commission on Population Growth and the American Future issued its 1972 final report, therefore, the Nixon White House had changed the tenor of the population issue. Its emphasis on the urban crisis put the question of population location ahead of the question of aggregate growth. No national population distribution policy emerged, and along the way Nixon rejected zero population growth doctrine. This rejection was in

some measure a reaction against the environmentalists who promoted the doctrine. The White House, however, was not simply recoiling against radicalism. It was also increasingly imbibing a new celebration of population growth percolating among conservative economists.

TOWARD A "MARKET-KNOWS-BEST" DEMOGRAPHY

In the 1930s, when the birthrate slumped in the industrialized nations and threatened to eventually snuff out population growth, John Maynard Keynes famously argued that higher birthrates would spur economic recovery. During the 1930s, American economists sympathetic to Keynes's broader anti-laissez-faire project developed a new demographic-economic doctrine that broke from Keynes on the specific question of population growth but still used Keynes's new economics of consumption. The emergent doctrine, which I label Stable Population Keynesianism, held that Keynesian policies, especially the promotion of mass consumption, would render population growth economically irrelevant. The state, not the stork, would sustain economic growth, leaving society to enjoy the environmental and aesthetic benefits of a smaller population.

During the 1960s, Stable Population Keynesianism was eviscerated by the development of a basket of pro-population-growth and pro-market ideas that one scholar has termed "market-knows-best" demography.⁶⁷ This process was in step with the overall decline of Keynesianism in the United States. Market-knows-best demography was not the exclusive domain of conservatives. But guided by the central laissez-faire premise that the invisible hand produces socially optimal results, the doctrine was constitutive of the political "New Right" and the new classical economics that swept American politics in the 1970s. Indeed, market-knows-best demography articulated many themes amenable to the New Right's worldview: faith in the market, the importance of innovation and entrepreneurship, and unabashed celebration of economic growth. Many leaders of the late twentieth-century conservative intellectual movement would subsequently draw on aspects of market-knows-best demography.

Historians' focus on the brief popular fascination with "population bomb" sentiment and the cultural battles that weakened the overpopulation critique has obscured the rising optimism regarding population growth that occurred concurrently—indeed previously.⁶⁸ Historians also generally paint the rise of population optimism as a counterattack against the zero population growth movement. It was that, to be sure, but pro-population views

matured concurrently with the movement. Through the 1960s, anxiety about the economic consequences of population growth remained the norm among economists. A growing minority, however, expressed optimism about population growth in both the developed and less-developed nations. Their market-knows-best demography conceded that population growth can sometimes entail short-term costs (at least when rapid) but maintained that is usually a long-term net good. Market-knows-best demography boils down to five propositions: first, population growth creates economies of scale and hence economic growth. Second, demographic density propels innovation. Short-term population pressure induces creative responses to maintain living standards, and higher population densities encourage the diffusion of information, technology, and skills; lower per capita infrastructure costs (for example, in transportation); and allow industries to reap the benefits of clustering. Moreover, more people equal more geniuses. Third, individual fertility decisions serve the common good. Fourth, even if a healthy economy amid a stable population is theoretically possible (as Stable Population Keynesianism insists), the state cannot be relied upon to make the necessary adjustments. Fifth, population growth advances human liberty.

Market-knows-best demography matured within four specialized debates. The first, overlapping with the broader postwar evolution of economic growth theory, entailed a rejection of the previously prevailing idea that rapid population growth in the developing world stunted incomes due to an excess of dependent children who drained savings into unproductive investment.⁶⁹ During the 1960s, doubts emerged about whether high fertility produced the shortages of savings and capital purported by the pessimists, and optimists concluded that increased family size motivates families to positively change economic behavior.⁷⁰

The second specialized debate concerned natural resources. By the 1960s, many economists downgraded the importance of natural resources to modern skills-based economies and, separately, suggested that market forces obviate resource scarcity. This debate revealed the developing links between modern conservative ideas and population optimism. For example, Friedrich Hayek, the Austrian economist who remains a hero to antistatist conservatives, argued in *The Constitution of Liberty* (1960) that natural resources could in fact become more plentiful.⁷¹ In a classic cornucopian statement from 1963, two resource economists concluded, “Nature imposes particular scarcities, not an inescapable general scarcity.”⁷²

Also fostering a more optimistic posture toward population growth was the maturation of human-capital theory, which holds that investment in people,

via education, training, etc., unleashes economic growth.⁷³ Led by the University of Chicago’s Theodore Schultz (also an official at the Population Council),⁷⁴ human-capital theorists claimed that population growth promotes the expansion of intermediary institutions (e.g., schools) that enhance human capital.⁷⁵ Moreover, they insisted that the public investment necessitated by rapid population growth is not economic deadwood but in fact is contributive of economic growth. Schultz was not a conservative activist, but he espoused the basic tenets of the “Second Chicago School,” the vigorous advocates of limited government and markets who have reigned at the University of Chicago for the past half century. Schultz’s work on human-capital theory reveals not only an unexplored connection between the population debate and a major component of economic thought since the 1960s but also the affinities between population optimism and an unbridled faith in markets.⁷⁶

The fourth and final debate concerned the microeconomics of fertility—that is, not the *consequences* of population growth but its *causes*. Here market-oriented economist-demographers argued that fertility decisions at the micro family level result in macro efficiencies for society. In short, they located an “invisible hand of fertility.”⁷⁷ Human-capital theorists, especially Chicago’s Gary Becker, Jacob Mincer, and Theodore Schultz, were innovators of what economists often refer to as “new household economics.”⁷⁸ This school of thought did not have an immediate influence on the mainstream population debate, but it would eventually provide an essential plank in pro-population-growth thought. The central idea of the new household economics was that parents are rational actors who weigh the costs and benefits of having children. (The theory largely ignored the reality that the act of producing babies is usually pleasure, not work, and sometimes immune to rational calculation!) In particular, well-off parents treat children as “consumer durable goods” that provide them with “psychic income.” Families thus increasingly prefer to have a few “high quality” children—those on whom they can lavish human capital, whether in the form of better education or piano lessons—rather than many “low quality” children. Higher incomes, in other words, translate into spoiled children, not additional siblings.

Since the 1960s, perhaps the single leading figure in the economics of American fertility has been the economist Richard Easterlin. Building on the consumption theories of Milton Friedman, the dean of the Chicago School—above all, the argument that expected lifetime earnings, not immediate income, guide an individual’s consumption habits—Easterlin posited a cyclical theory of American fertility based upon “relative expectations” or “potential income.” In short, population growth rates naturally adjust to the

economic environment, a conclusion that cuts against concerns about overpopulation.⁷⁹ Individual households rationally maximize their numbers of children, and the end result is a socially optimal population. True to the broader philosophy of the Chicago School, any externalities associated with children (e.g., pollution effects) were deemed marginal.

Apart from their work on fertility, the new household economists also praised the broader economic virtues of population growth.⁸⁰ And whether they focused on population growth's inducement of harder work, technological innovation, or reduced fertility, all the economists discussed in this section stressed the motivations and initiative of the individual—a stress that dovetailed with the ascendant New Right's stress on the entrepreneur.⁸¹ This is not to say that market-knows-best demography became dominant in the late 1960s. A majority of economists remained convinced of population growth's adverse capital-absorbing tendencies, and some even incorporated the metaphors from the new radical ecological economics.⁸² Others rejected the assumptions of the new household economics.⁸³ Still, the rejection of market-knows-best demography increasingly came from an old guard of economist-demographers with links to the population movement. Just when population doomsdayism was enjoying its day in the sun, pro-population-growth views were bubbling to the surface.

THE CONSERVATIVE PRESS AND THE POPULATION ISSUE

The American business community and the business press were more favorable to Malthusian ideas during the late 1960s than is often assumed.⁸⁴ Some business leaders continued to espouse the traditional “chamber of commerce” view in favor of population growth (and implicitly the cheap labor they imagined it engendered). Others, such as the retired CEOs serving on Planned Parenthood's Commerce and Industry Committee, maintained that rapid population growth led to diminishing economic returns.⁸⁵ Even the CEO of the Gerber baby food company favored zero population growth, stating that his company was “not in the least alarmed at the possibilities of population limitation!”⁸⁶ Moreover, the business press offered ample support for zero population growth. In June 1970, for example, the editors of *Fortune* magazine concluded that experts “tend to agree that the birth rate must drop if we are to avoid a ‘popullution’ problem.”⁸⁷ During the height of the population commission's work, the *Wall Street Journal* did express libertarian concerns about population policy, suggesting that Americans “ought also to talk about how the quality of life might be affected by, to take the extreme example,

having a computer or a bureaucrat decide who is and who is not allowed to have a child." And yet the *Journal* concluded, "It seems clear to us that some measures to limit population will be needed."⁸⁸

Organs of the conservative movement were quicker to embrace the new pro-population-growth ideas. Conservative intellectuals had begun the 1960s supporting the general consensus that domestic population growth represented a challenge. Even before the formation of the commission in 1970, however, they had largely reversed course and adopted pro-population-growth themes. The shift can be clearly traced in the pages of the *National Review*.⁸⁹ In 1965, William F. Buckley Jr. argued in the pages of his magazine that population growth was about to outstrip human ingenuity: "Solutions for today and tomorrow are perhaps not so difficult to contrive—send tractors to India, and hybrid corn to Egypt. But the day after tomorrow?" And Buckley warned his readers that the United States was not immune from the population dilemma. "The fact of the matter is that a solution must be found," he wrote. "That old dog Malthus turned out to be very substantially correct in his dire predictions, and there seems to be no point in waiting until the United States is like India before moving in on the problem."⁹⁰ Buckley was thus hopeful that the Catholic Church would reverse its position on birth control.

Also in 1965, the *National Review* printed a supplement called "The Population Explosion," which yielded nothing in apocalyptic rhetoric to the liberal doomsday literature of the era. In the lead article, "The Avalanche," as the editors summarized it, "A science fiction novelist takes a hard look at the earth's skyrocketing birthrate and admits it portends horrors even he finds hard to imagine."⁹¹ The author identified as the true science fiction of the era the food optimism promulgated by the "nutritional technological cohorts—the algae-and-yeast boys, the ranch-the-oceans fellows, and the transmutation-of-petrochemicals-into-proteins enthusiasts."⁹² "The Avalanche" also proffered the typical Cold War–inspired, libertarian argument against population growth: that it would engender big government and Sovietize the United States. "The very presence of these new masses of humanity [in the United States], the weight of their parents' votes and, so soon, their own, makes bigger bureaucracy—bigger Big Brother bureaucracy—so probable that without a miracle it is a certainty."⁹³ Another article in the supplement, meanwhile, affirmed the traditional view that population growth stunted capital formation and economic growth.⁹⁴

Yet just a few years later, even as the population scare achieved critical mass, the *National Review* rejected the overpopulation critique and printed

the conservative economists who argued that population growth expanded the market—and that the market would solve any ecological dilemmas. These included the Australian economist Colin Clark, an early critic of the prevailing wisdom regarding economic development who argued that the world could feed at least 40 billion people. Clark maintained that technological innovation was a function of population.⁹⁵ And he reached deep into the intellectual toolkit of populationists, articulating the militaristic and mercantilist view that the U.S. needed continual population growth to remain a world power.⁹⁶ Further, Clark argued that population expansion enhanced liberty. In contrast, Clark contended, nations with stable populations had less mobility and freedom and more expensive government.⁹⁷

Milton Friedman, one of the leading economists of the American neoliberal revival, echoed the notion that population growth not only grew the economy but also reduced the size of government. In a 1970 *National Review* piece on the new environmentalism, Friedman wrote, “[The] growth of population and improvements in transportation and communication have greatly widened the scope for effective competition and so have reduced the need for governmental concern with monopolist behavior.”⁹⁸ One final example of the new libertarian embrace of population growth came from Robert Moses, the famous urban planner who did more than any other to build (and some say ruin) modern New York City. By the 1960s, Moses was out of favor with the establishment, and he turned against the New Left and its social planners with vigor. Failing to recognize that the vast majority in the population movement embraced a laissez-faire approach to population, in the sense that they had no more ambitious goal than eliminating unwanted fertility, Moses wrote in the *National Review*: “The planners already predict drastic regulation of the population by law to insure a future stable, comfortable, balanced society and economy. This consummation will be arrived at on the basis of scientific, impartial, unbiased study of long-haired, bewhiskered, sideburned experts who will of course be completely divorced from politics.”⁹⁹

Proponents of population control continued to argue that population growth eroded freedom.¹⁰⁰ Nevertheless, conservatives, who increasingly captured the discussion of “liberty” in the United States, effectively built a libertarian case in favor of population growth. Their views represented a shift from the 1950s and 1960s, when many conservatives argued that population growth would lead to Big Government. And if Moynihan’s case is indicative, it seems that many liberals drifting rightward toward neoconservatism were similarly unimpressed by the possibility of state-directed demographic management. Appearing on “Face the Nation” in early 1970, Moynihan noted that

“[t]here is no government in history that has ever had any effect whatever on population.” He continued, “One of the nice things about people is that they don’t pay too much attention to Government . . . particularly with respect to the number of children they have.”¹⁰¹

NIXON SPURNS THE POPULATION COMMISSION

It is against the backdrop of this inchoate conservative critique of the (over) population issue that we return to the dénouement of this issue in the Nixon years. The interim report released by the Commission on Population Growth and the American Future, in March 1971, was well received in the press and stirred few feathers in the administration.¹⁰² That summer, Sen. Tydings (who had just lost his seat) and Milton Eisenhower launched a group called the Coalition for a National Population Policy, and lawmakers continued to advocate a resolution calling for population stabilization.¹⁰³ However, the administration was increasingly thinking about the population issue in terms of geographic redistribution and the urban crisis, and the president specifically rejected the goal of zero population growth. Abortion politics were becoming more salient, and according to the *National Journal*, doomed the population stabilization resolution floating in Congress.¹⁰⁴ In addition, the conservatives in the White House would have been aware of conservative intellectuals’ growing disdain for population control.

The contours of the commission’s final report, *Population and the American Future*, were well known before its official release in the spring of 1972. As it argued that population stabilization would yield environmental and modest economic benefits,¹⁰⁵ *Population and the American Future* called for a series of antinatalist policies.¹⁰⁶ These included population and sex education in schools, the liberalization of abortion laws, passage of the Equal Rights Amendment, more access to contraception, and stepped-up enforcement of existing immigration restrictions.¹⁰⁷ In addition, the commission proposed a series of measure to promote the geographic redistribution of the American population.¹⁰⁸

Initially, the White House and the commission each sought to control the diffusion of the commission’s findings.¹⁰⁹ During March and April, however, the Nixon administration moved toward outright rejection of the body, stonewalling Rockefeller’s designs for a successful launch of *Population and the American Future*.¹¹⁰ To be sure, abortion politics were central to the White House’s posture and the ultimate “fiasco” surrounding the commission’s final report.¹¹¹ The scholarly emphasis on abortion politics, however, belies the

importance of several other factors surrounding the White House's treatment of the commission, including the new conservative economic ideas about population growth and intra-Republican Party politics.

In March, the White House debated a full range of options for responding to the commission's final report—from issuing no response at all to praising but dissenting on the abortion issue to attacking on all fronts.¹¹² At least two teams drafted the president's potential statement upon receiving *Population and the American Future*. One was written by Ray Waldmann, a White House staffer, and David Gergen, the longtime editor of *US News & World Report*, who served as an adviser to presidents Nixon, Ford, Reagan, and Clinton. The Waldmann-Gergen draft praised the commission for its work, insisted that “questions related to population and economic growth are among my [the president's] concerns,” encouraged further dialogue on population matters, and reaffirmed support for the Equal Rights Amendment. But it stressed the president's firm opposition to “unrestricted abortion rights.”¹¹³ The other draft was written by Patrick Buchanan, the conservative television commentator and sometime candidate for president who was then a young Nixon speechwriter.¹¹⁴

More than anyone in the Nixon White House, Buchanan seems to have engaged the new pro-population-growth economics and the libertarian critique of population control. Buchanan did still assume that rapid population growth would place a “drain upon limited economic and material resources.” He thus pointed to the moderating birthrate—not pro-population-growth theorists—to label “a chimera” the idea that “the American people are in danger of procreating themselves into poverty.” Profiting from the new conservative toolkit of population ideas, however, Buchanan also cast doubt on the entire basket of economic assumptions guiding the population commission. He wrote that “the central conclusion of the commission—that there is nothing to gain from an expanding population—is clearly open to challenge. Just as the commission has enumerated arguments for this novel view—so powerful arguments can be marshaled on behalf of its antithesis.” Elsewhere in this draft Buchanan wrote, “Malthusian specters, like the old soldier of the barracks ballad, as often as not just fade away.”

The Buchanan draft directly challenged several other recommendations of the population commission. It argued that the federal government should assume no role in sex education, and it stated that Nixon was “utterly opposed to abortion.” Buchanan also cleverly tried to steal the “quality of life” argument back from opponents of population growth. He argued that while one child might promote happiness for some people, “To other middle- or

lower-income couples from religious or ethnic or racial minorities, the good life may reside in many children and few material possessions." Finally, the Buchanan draft tried to marginalize the Rockefeller commission. It thanked the group for beginning a national conversation about population but suggested that it had offered "deeply controversial recommendations." It also averred that in a sprawling democracy, population issues were too important to be decided by a commission or even by the president.¹¹⁵

Nixon's growing disdain for the commission and the population issue—and support for the Buchanan position—was evident in the days leading up to the publication of the final report. In a conversation with Ehrlichman on March 30, 1972, Nixon said that Buchanan was the only one capable of writing a speech "to kick that population commission in the ass." The new political calculus surrounding abortion was principal here. Nixon summed up the issue this way: "Those who vote for abortion, except for a few fanatics, are not going to vote for Nixon because he comes out for abortion. Those who are against abortion, however, feel so strongly about it from a moral standpoint that they sure as hell will vote against Nixon because of that issue." Ehrlichman echoed the president's reasoning: "The people that are pushing for zero population growth, like the Sierra Club and others, are never going to be pro-Nixon. . . . The people who are offended by abortion can be won over."¹¹⁶

Nixon's observations came amid a public relations battle between anti-abortion Catholic leaders and the proabortion forces marshaled by Rockefeller and the population lobby. On March 15, the National Catholic Welfare Conference excoriated the commission for walking into an "Ideological Valley of Death." Rockefeller, for his part, met with Catholic leaders, secured the support of the Protestant National Council of Churches, and had his allies at major newspapers write favorable editorials about the commission. Critchlow's account of the politics surrounding the population commission convincingly suggests that Nixon's accurate assessment of abortion politics circa 1972 and his trepidation about supporting the commission were both part of his developing "Catholic Strategy" to win reelection in 1972.¹¹⁷

Apart from the abortion issue, Nixon also voiced his disdain for the general antigrowth thrust of the population movement. In a conversation with Henry Kissinger on March 31, Nixon brought up the recently published Malthusian bestseller *The Limits to Growth*, which he referred to as the "MIT computer study." (The book used a crude computer and even cruder analysis of variables such as the food supply and energy use to predict the collapse of world systems within a century.) "What is the reason, Henry," Nixon asked, "for the total negativism of people in the intellectual community? What in the

heck is the reason for it? May I ask why? You know these people well.”¹¹⁸ At the same time, Nixon’s economic advisers were embracing pro-population-growth positions. For example, Hendrick Houthakker, one of the economists on Nixon’s Council of Economic Advisers, downplayed overpopulation in a speech at American University and called population control a “simple-minded idea” and a “panacea.” “As far as I am aware,” Houthakker maintained, “it has not been demonstrated that there exists any close casual relation between the growth of per capita gross national product and the growth of population, and there is no obvious reason why there should be. The use of facile biological analogies obscures the fact that man is a producer as well as a consumer.”¹¹⁹

Nixon chose the milder response to the commission, but the tapes reveal that he would have preferred the much stronger Buchanan draft that forcefully refuted the economic logic of population pessimists. This is not to say that Nixon came to a great intellectual awakening after reading social science or the *National Review*. His turn against population control partially reflected a perception that radical environmentalists supported the cause, not a well-formed theory about the benefits of population growth. And the decision to soft-pedal the rejection of the commission resulted in part from a desire to appease Nelson Rockefeller, the powerful Republican governor of New York and brother of John D. Rockefeller III—or, more precisely, to appease the liberal, eastern, Rockefeller wing of the Republican Party. On April 3, 1972, Nixon and Ehrlichman discussed the potential results of issuing Buchanan’s strong statement. Ehrlichman informed the president that in his many conversations with Nelson Rockefeller, the latter had frequently expressed his appreciation of the White House for appointing his brother chair of the commission. Ehrlichman told Nixon that it was “as if Nelson were trying to find some healthy activity for his brother.” Ehrlichman noted that “the proposal that’s coming to you is that you blast them out of the water.” He confided, however, “I’m awfully afraid of the effect on our relationship with Nelson if we tee off on this commission.” The president agreed, suggesting that they “treat with kid gloves” all issues other than abortion.¹²⁰

The Commission on Population Growth and the American Future issued its majority report on March 27, 1972. The White House delayed comment, during which time the taped conversations just described took place. The delay prompted several pleading letters from John D. Rockefeller III, who sensed correctly that Catholic leaders were pressuring the White House to denounce the report.¹²¹ On May 5, Nixon released his official statement, which, after bland words of thanks, included the now-familiar statement against unrestricted

abortion rights (as well as against contraception for adolescents).¹²² That same day, Nixon greeted Rockefeller and several members of the commission at the White House, but he failed to invite them to sit on the Oval Office sofa, as was customary on such occasions.¹²³ During this polite but perfunctory meeting, Nixon asked questions only about overseas population growth.¹²⁴

Nixon's statement effectively tabled the issue of domestic population growth. The White House did form an interagency task force to study the commission's finding.¹²⁵ But it blocked the distribution of a film the Department of Health and Human Services had made on population issues and refused to participate in a network television documentary on the commission called "Doom or Boom," which aired in January 1973.¹²⁶ It was thus anticlimactic when the task force's chair wrote the White House that the "Commission's primary recommendation, namely 'that the nation welcome and plan for a stable population' seems premature and is not adequately supported by the arguments set forth in the report."¹²⁷

CONCLUSION

An unrecognized irony of the population maelstrom in the Nixon years is that even as the White House rejected the Commission on Population Growth and the American Future, this body was turning away from the prevailing overpopulation critique. Put another way, the commission was historically significant not only as an initial skirmish in the culture wars but also because it provided evidence of—and in part faltered because of—the progress of pro-population-growth thought. In particular, some of the major studies commissioned by the commission undercut population alarmism. One study undertaken by the think tank Resources for the Future, for example, concluded that population growth would play only a minor role in determining pollution levels over the next thirty to fifty years compared to technological development and government resource policy. And a majority of papers published by the commission that served as the basis for a conference at the National Bureau of Economic Research cut against the overpopulation paradigm that had launched the commission.¹²⁸ Building on the expertise described in this article, these papers insisted that continued population growth would spur entrepreneurship, new knowledge, and technological innovation; increase savings (and hence investment) while increasing consumption; augment economies of scale; create a more productive labor force; and foster optimism in the future.¹²⁹

Allen Kelley, who would emerge in the 1970s as a leading "revisionist" economic demographer, actually switched from an anti- to a pro-population-growth

position in the course of his commission-sponsored research. This left him, as he put it, “in an uncomfortable position” of rejecting the basic intellectual premise of the commission’s work. As Kelly saw it, “The population problem as commonly conceived—too many people—may be a non-problem.”¹³⁰ Commenting on Kelley’s about-face, Richard Easterlin wrote, “Kelley’s experience is representative, I think, of that of many of us who have tried to look into the arguments and evidence of the ‘population problem.’”¹³¹

Population and the American Future did argue that slowing the rate of population growth would yield macroeconomic benefits. And yet growing uncertainty regarding the deleterious effects of population growth seems to have produced an important shift in perspective. Instead of bemoaning the costs of continued demographic expansion, commission members were more comfortable challenging critics to explain why more people would be beneficial. Research director Charles Westoff put it this way: “The ‘costs’ of the most likely magnitudes of population growth for the U.S. to the year 2000 will probably not add up to an overwhelming case for a national population policy aimed at achieving ZPG as soon as possible. . . . One change in the frame of reference that might finesse these difficulties is to try to shift the burden of proof to question the argument that increasing the rate of growth or continuing current rates of growth are desirable.”¹³² In its letter transmitting its final report to Congress, the commission adopted this strange posture of pointing out the lack of future benefits rather than tallying present or future costs: “After two years of concentrated effort, we have concluded that, in the long run, no substantial benefits will result from further growth of the Nation’s population, rather that the gradual stabilization of our population through voluntary means would contribute significantly to the Nation’s ability to solve its problems. We have looked for, and have not found, any convincing economic argument for continued population growth.”¹³³ Privately, Rockefeller seemed perplexed that this was the strongest language a commission created to study the population crisis could muster. “Sort of backdoor approach,” he scribbled across a draft.¹³⁴

Regardless of these subtle distinctions, the commission’s moderate (and increasingly challenged) arguments in favor of slowing population growth, as well as its stress on population redistribution, were caught between rejuvenated economic neoliberalism on the Right and population doomsdayism on the Left. The Commission on Population Growth and the American Future—and the “center” of the population debate that it embodied—was stillborn even before Nixon dismissed its final report.

NOTES

1. For overviews of post-World War II Malthusianism, see Donald T. Critchlow, *Intended Consequences: Birth Control, Abortion, and the Federal Government in Modern America* (New York, 1999); Derek Hoff, "Are We Too Many? The Population Debate and Policymaking in the Twentieth-Century United States" (Ph.D. diss., University of Virginia, 2006); Matthew Connelly, *Fatal Misconception: The Struggle to Control World Population* (Cambridge, Mass., 2008); Oscar Harkavy, *Curbing Population Growth: An Insider's Perspective on the Population Movement* (New York, 1995); and Björn-Ola Linnér, *The Return of Malthus: Environmentalism and Post-war Population-Resource Crises* (Isle of Harris, UK, 2003).

2. Thomas Robert Malthus, *Population: The First Essay* (1798; reprint, with a foreword by Kenneth E. Boulding, Ann Arbor, 1959).

3. For example, draft language of Lyndon Johnson's 1965 State of the Union Address insisted, "We cannot successfully wage war on poverty abroad or at home if we are indifferent to the unprecedented increase in man's numbers. As the National Academy of Sciences has declared, this problem is no less grave for the technically advanced nations than for the less developed" (Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library, Austin, Texas [hereafter LBJ Library], National Security Files, Subject Files, Box 38, Folder "Population"). For a scholarly example of the perceived commonalities between the problem in the developing and developing worlds, see Kenneth E. Boulding, *The Meaning of the Twentieth Century: The Great Transition* (New York, 1964), 121–25.

4. Paul R. Ehrlich, *The Population Bomb* (New York, 1968).

5. For the food aid–population tie-in, see Connelly, *Fatal Misconception*, 221–28. Johnson told his adviser Joseph Califano Jr., "I'm not going to piss away foreign aid in nations where they refuse to deal with their own population problems" (221).

6. For the integration of federal family planning programs into the 1960s War on Poverty, see Critchlow, *Intended Consequences*, chap. 3. Late in its tenure, reflecting much internal disagreement on population matters, and in lieu of a formal commission proposed by John D. Rockefeller, the Johnson administration convened an internal population task force to take stock of family planning and population issues. Its report, *Population and Family Planning: The Transition from Concern to Action: Report of the President's Committee on Population and Family Planning* (Washington, D.C., November 1968), called for the expansion of family planning and population research programs. Archival records of this committee may be found in LBJ Library, White House Central Files (hereafter WHCF), Federal Government Operations, Box 382, Folder "FG 659 Committee on Population and Family Planning (I)." Johnson's personal interest in the population movement grew as his administration waned. For example, U.S. Aid administrator William Gaud wrote Johnson in February 1968, "When I saw you in Austin a couple weeks ago, you emphasized the importance of doing everything we can in the area of family planning" (LBJ Library, WHCF, Welfare, Box 2, Folder "1/1/68–2/29/68"). Johnson also signed the UN's "World Leader's Statement Declaration on Population" (1967) and even asked Secretary of State Dean Rusk to urge the Soviets to do so (Dean Rusk to LBJ, 9 October 1967, LBJ Library, National Security Files, Subject Files, Box 38, Folder "Population"). Yet the administration was reluctant to take significant additional action. See, for example, Phillip

Hughes, Deputy Director Bureau of the Budget, to Harry McPherson, Special Counsel to the President, 1 February 1967, LBJ Library, WHCF, Legislation, Box 164, Folder "LE/WE." For more on the internal debates within the White House, see LBJ Library, WHCF, Welfare, Box 2, and Office Files of White House Aids, Files of Ervin Duggan, Box 12, Folder "John D. Rockefeller 3rd Proposal on Population Comm."

7. This phrase is the title of Connelly's excellent chapter 7 in *Fatal Misconception* and originally comes from an article by the president of the Population Council (Bernard Berelson, "Beyond Family Planning," *Studies in Family Planning* 1 [February 1969]: 1–16).

8. "Special Message to the Congress on Problems of Population Growth," 18 July 1969, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Richard Nixon, 1969* (Washington, D.C., 1971), 529.

9. Commission on Population Growth and the American Future, *Population and the American Future* (Washington, D.C., 1972).

10. For a review of the declining interest in population matters, see T. Michael Maher, "How and Why Journalists Avoid the Population-Environment Connection," *Population and Environment* 18 (March 1997): 339–72. Overseas population growth continued to be a matter of high-level discussion. In 1975, President Ford approved National Security Study Memorandum 200, which maintained that global population growth was "a current danger of the highest magnitude calling for urgent measures." But little action came of its directives. See Stephen D. Mumford, *The Life and Death of NSSM 200: How the Destruction of Political Will Doomed a U.S. Population Policy* (Research Triangle Park, N.C., 1996).

11. The most recent and best examination of this long campaign is Connelly, *Fatal Misconception*.

12. Critchlow, *Intended Consequences*; and Roy Beck and Leon Kolankiewicz, "The Environmental Movement's Retreat from Advocating U.S. Population Stabilization (1970–1998): A First Draft of History," *Journal of Policy History* 12 (January 2000): 123–56.

13. For example, Critchlow concluded in *Intended Consequences* that the "continuing decline in the American birthrate belied the urgency of the [Rockefeller] commission" (148).

14. In addition, several scholars, most recently Connelly in *Fatal Misconception*, have argued that the population movement's lingering eugenic mind-set eroded its political capital. My own work suggests that while eugenic ideas did survive as a motivating force on the modern population movement, they were less important than other impulses, such as a genuine concern with ecological crisis and a philanthropic desire to lessen poverty and hasten development in the Third World.

15. For example, during hearings on the population commission legislation, Lewis Butler, an assistant secretary at HEW, testified before the House Subcommittee on Government Operations that "we are on the threshold of another period of rapid growth" (quoted in "Testimony by the Honorable Lewis H. Butler, Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, before the Executive and Legislative Reorganization Subcommittee of the House Committee on Government Operations, Nov. 19, 1969," Richard Nixon Presidential Materials, National Archives II, College Park, Md. [hereafter Nixon Papers], WHCF, Subject Files, FG 275, Commission on Population Growth and the American Future [hereafter Nixon Commission Papers], Box 1, Folder "FG 275 4/1/70–8/31/70 Oversize Attachment 2973 November 1969." See also Conrad Tauber, Associate Director, Bureau

of the Census, to Daniel Patrick Moynihan, 1 July 1969, Daniel Patrick Moynihan Papers, Library of Congress Manuscript Room, Washington, D.C. (hereafter DPM Papers), Box 295, Folder "Population: General 1969 3." Such predictions of pending growth were off the mark, but only by a few years. The birthrate would actually bottom out in 1976, at 1.7, before turning back upward. See Michael S. Teitelbaum and Jay M. Winter, *The Fear of Population Decline* (New York, 1985), 159.

16. For an example of the widespread assumption that "at some point the population of the United States will have to stop growing," see the comments of Herman Miller, the head of the population division of the U.S. Census Bureau, in H. Erich Heinemann, "Babies vs. the GNP," *New York Times*, 3 June 1970.

17. The 1968 platform may be read online at the University of California, Santa Barbara's American Presidency Project, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=25841>.

18. "Special Message to the Congress on Problems of Population Growth," 524.

19. Nixon appointed as the U.S. representative to the United Nations Population Fund General William Draper, a Malthusian whose 1959 report on military preparedness and foreign aid helped spur federal intervention in the family planning issue. Draper seems to have had Nixon's ear. John R. Brown III, White House staff assistant, told Moynihan on 3 February 1970: "The President noted that he feels Draper has been right on this issue for years" (Nixon Commission Papers, Box 2, Folder "FG 275 4/1/70-8/31/70 Oversize Attachment 2973 February 1970").

20. James Reston, "Washington: Who Said 'Love Makes the World Go Round?'" *New York Times*, 21 January 1970, observed that "it is interesting that the population question is being faced more directly by a conservative administration than by any before it."

21. The population policy leaders in Congress were Senators Joseph Clark (D-Pa.) and Ernest Gruening (D-Alaska), though they lost their reelection bids in 1968; Senator Joseph Tydings (D-Md.); Senator Ralph Yarborough (D-Tex.), the liberal chairman of the Senate Committee on Labor and Public Welfare and its Health Subcommittee; Senator Jacob Javits (R-N.Y.), the ranking minority member of the Senate Committee on Labor and Public Welfare; Senator Alan Cranston (D-Wyo.); Representative James Scheuer (D-N.Y.), who would emerge as the primary leader in Congress on population during the 1970s; and Representative Morris Udall (D-Ariz.), whose brother Stewart was Kennedy's and Johnson's secretary of the interior.

22. Chester Finn to Moynihan, 14 July 1969, DPM Papers, Box 294, Folder "Population: Family Planning 1969 3": "One reason for the reorganization and expanded family planning services promised in our population Message is because we need to seize the initiative from Senator Tydings."

23. These included Lee Dubridge, Nixon's scientific adviser; Robert Finch, secretary of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare until 1970; and Arthur Burns, a counselor to Nixon who was former chair of the Council of Economic Advisers under Eisenhower and later chairman of the Federal Reserve. According to *U.S. News and World Report*, DuBridage stated that "it would be very desirable as a goal in this country to reduce the population growth-rate to zero" ("How to Control Population: Interview with President's Science Adviser," 19 January 1970, 49). Finch testified in 1971 to the Commission on Population Growth that in order to reduce the average number of

children per family to two, a “sustained Federal effort is essential; occasional actions are no longer sufficient” (Jerry Lipson and Diane Wolman to Commissioners, 14 September 1971, “The Commission’s National Public Opinion Survey, and the New York Hearing,” Records of the Commission on Population Growth and the American Future, 1970–1972, RG 220, Records of Temporary Committees, Commissions, and Boards, National Archives II, College Park, Md. [hereafter Records of the Commission on Population Growth], Box 5, Folder “September,” 2). Burns advocated creating a population commission early in the administration and was charged with studying the merits of it. See Alexander Butterfield to Burns, 2 April 1969, in Nixon Papers, WHCF, Subject Files, FG 96, 97, 98, and 99, Box 1, Folder 22, “FG 99 Committee on Population and Family Planning.”

24. Lipson and Wolman, “The Commission’s National Public Opinion Survey,” 6.

25. “Family-Planning Breakthrough,” *New York Times*, 11 January 1971. The Family Planning Services and Population Research Act, Public Law 572, 91st Cong., 2nd sess. (24 December 1970), followed through on most of the requests in Nixon’s special message. See “Statement on Signing the Family Planning Services and Population Research Act of 1970,” 26 December 1970, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Richard Nixon, 1970* (Washington, D.C., 1971), 1156–57. The law consolidated and expanded a scattered array of family planning programs by creating two new agencies in the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare: the National Center for Population and Family Planning and the National Center for Family Planning Services. In addition, the act provided for increased family planning services through direct federal grants to providers, increased research and manpower training in the population field, and enhanced population education. Congress, though, consistently underfunded it.

26. Untitled press release from the Office of Senator Joseph D. Tydings, 18 June 1970, Joseph Tydings Papers, University of Maryland Special Collections, College Park (hereafter Tydings Papers), Series 6, Box 12, Folder “Press Releases—Obscenity; Population; Post Office; Public Works (1965–1970).” See also the next year’s S.J. Res. 108, introduced 2 June 1971; H.J. Res. 789 was introduced in the House on 19 July 1971. Many lawmakers were public Malthusians. In *Look* magazine, for example, Senator George McGovern (D-S.Dak.) wrote: “The world is running out of food. That is a fact of life, and of death” (“We Are Losing the Race Against Hunger,” 7 March 1967).

27. The bills were S. 3632 and H.R. 16668. For descriptions, see *ZPG National Reporter* (the newsletter of the organization Zero Population Growth), May 1970. (I read this copy in the Records of the Wilderness Society, Conservation Collection, Denver Public Library [hereafter, Wilderness Society Records], Box 43, Folder 18.) The bulletin was initially called the *ZPG Communicator*, became the *ZPG Newsletter* in September 1969, and was finally renamed the *ZPG National Reporter* in February 1970.

28. The idea of a national population commission had been floating around for some time, and to some degree it was an extension of President Johnson’s Committee on Population and Family Planning. Early in Nixon’s presidency, the White House debated the merits of creating a commission and generally concluded that such a body would give the president the upper hand on the population issue while, as one staffer put it, “absorbing much of the political animosity that ‘population’ creates.” Chester Finn Jr. to Daniel Patrick Moynihan, 1 April 1969, Nixon Papers, WHCF, Subject Files, FG 96, 97, 98, and 99, Box 1, Folder 22, “FG 99 Committee on Population and Family Planning.”

29. Moynihan claimed authorship in his “The Most Important Decision-Making Process,” *Policy Review* 1 (Summer 1977): 92. Robert Finch also helped draft the special message. See Charles Westoff to Finch, 30 March 1971, Records of the Commission on Population Growth, Box 1, Folder “1971 Meeting.”

30. The hearings were House Committee on Government Operations, Executive and Legislative Reorganization Subcommittee, *Establishing a Commission on Population Growth, and Related Matters: Hearings on S. 2701 to Establish a Commission on Population Growth and the American Future and Related House Bills*, 91st Cong., 1st sess., 19 and 20 November 1969.

31. The *New Republic* concluded that “the problem as it is officially defined is essentially one of accommodating the growth by intelligent planning and use of available resources, and of curbing only the addition of ‘unwanted children’ to the domestic population” (“Unwanted People,” 2 August 1969, 7).

32. Moynihan to Nixon, 12 March 1970, DPM Papers, Box 294, Folder “Population: Commission on Population Growth and the American Future 1970 2.”

33. “The White House Press Conference of Dr. Daniel P. Moynihan,” 4 June 1970, DPM Papers, Box 295, Folder “Population: Commission on Population Growth and the American Future 1970 5.”

34. Senator Bob Packwood (D-Ore.) expressed fears that the commission would be merely technocratic and concerned only about the logistical issues of population growth. He wrote to Moynihan on 28 April 1970, “It is my sincere hope that those *concerned* over the population problem will be as well represented as those merely interested in aspects of the population growth” (DPM Papers, Box 294, Folder “Population: Commission on Population Growth and the American Future 1970 3”).

35. House Committee on Government Operations, *Establishing a Commission on Population Growth*, 33. Udall had earlier noted, “President Nixon says we ought to start preparing for the next 100 million Americans. I say: let’s see if we can’t slow down the assembly line” (Udall to Stewart Brandborg, Executive Director of the Wilderness Society, 31 July 1969, Wilderness Society Records, Box 43, Folder 14).

36. The text of Udall’s bill, H.R. 10515, appears in House Committee on Government Operations, *Establishing a Commission on Population Growth*, 24–29. As the Senate had already passed commission legislation, however, Udall did not fight for his bill. He testified: “I would prefer to incorporate in this [legislation] my congressional finding and statement of national policy that our goal is stabilization of population. But since the President has taken really unprecedented leadership here in urging this . . . I would say let’s go ahead and pass it and get it out, even though I would prefer more far-reaching action” (46).

37. Moynihan had the primary responsibility of vetting possible commissioners. See William H. Timmons to Representative John McCormack (Speaker of the House), 9 March 1970, DPM Papers, Box 294, Folder “Population: Commission on Population Growth and the American Future 1970 2.”

38. Moynihan to John D. Ehrlichman, 1 June 1970, DPM Papers, Box 294, Folder “Population: Commission on Population Growth and the American Future 1970 4.” Recommendations and requests to serve from members of the population community, academia, the federal family planning bureaucracy, and politicians deluged the White House, which exacerbated the usual party politics. The best documents detailing the various nominees are “Single Political Recommendations,” Nixon Commission Papers, Box 2, Folder

“FG 275 4/1/70–8/31/70 Oversize Attachment 2973 March 1970,” and Moynihan to Nixon, 5 March 1970, in DPM Papers, Box 294, Folder “Population: Commission on Population Growth and the American Future 1970 2.” Moynihan complained in May to the president, “It is just one awful struggle to get anyone approved who is not a solid no-nonsense Republican” (Moynihan to Nixon, 8 May 1970, Nixon Commission Papers, Box 1, Folder “FG 275 4/1/70–8/31/70”). *Washington Star* reporter Carl Rowan accused the White House of stalling and playing it safe despite the clear mandate for “more than a tea-and-crumpets commission.” Rowan reported that “the foot-dragging comes about because Daniel P. Moynihan, the presidential counselor in charge of this matter, reportedly is having potential commission members investigated and checked out the way Supreme Court nominees ought to be.” Rowan also accused the White House of turning the selection of members into a patronage machine for GOP donors. Carl Rowan, “What Has Become of the Population Commission?” *Sunday Evening Star*, 24 May 1970. The historian Gareth Davies told me that Rowan’s charges were likely inaccurate—it was Harry Flemming who would have insisted on the investigation of potential members.

39. After his defeat in the 1970 elections, Tydings was replaced by Senator Alan Cranston (D-Wyo.). The other congressional members on the commission were Senator Robert Packwood (R-Ore.); Representative John Blatnik (D-Minn.), who was replaced a year later by Representative James Scheuer (R-N.Y.); and Representative John Erlenborn (R-Ill.).

40. The members included business leaders (one of them Puerto Rican), a labor leader, an Hispanic lawyer and activist, a Ford Foundation economist, who oversaw the foundation’s overseas population work, several additional social scientists, an African American college president, a housewife, a Catholic scholar, a social worker, and two college students.

41. Charles F. Westoff, “The Commission on Population Growth and the American Future: Its Origins, Operations, and Aftermath,” in *Sociology and Public Policy: The Case of Presidential Commissions*, ed. Mirra Komarovsky (New York, 1975), 47–48. According to Moynihan, the “public” members, as opposed to the academics, were stacked with Republicans. See Moynihan to Harry Fleming, 20 April 1970, DPM Papers, Box 294, Folder “Population: Commission on Population Growth and the American Future 1970 2.”

42. On Scranton, see Moynihan to Nixon, 12 February 1970, DPM Papers, Box 294, Folder “Population: Commission on Population Growth and the American Future 1970 4.” For Moynihan’s thoughts on Rockefeller, see Moynihan to Nixon, 5 March 1970, in DPM Papers, Box 294, Folder “Population: Commission on Population Growth and the American Future 1970 2.”

43. Commission on Population Growth and the American Future, *An Interim Report to the President and the Congress* (Washington, D.C., 1971), 24.

44. For a balanced overview of the Catholics’ engagement with the population issue, see Critchlow, *Intended Consequences*, chap. 4. For an excellent treatment of the maintenance of Catholic leaders’ antiabortion consensus throughout the tumultuous 1960s, see William McGreevy, *Catholicism and American Freedom: A History* (New York, 2003), chap. 9. The creation of federal family planning programs in the mid-1960s had already engendered a backlash from the Catholic Church. Widespread optimism regarding a possible change in the church’s position on birth control had dissipated abruptly with Pope Paul VI’s 1968 statement, *Humanae Vitae*, which defended the traditionally defined nuclear family and

reaffirmed the church’s long-standing opposition to all forms of birth control. See Garry Wills, “Is Our Civilization Oversubscribed?” *National Review*, 16 June 1970, 631–32. In the late 1960s, the developing battle over abortion rights (and then the legalization of abortion in several states) crystallized Catholic opposition to population policy, further politicizing and weakening support for population control.

45. During the mid- to late 1960s, the radical Garrett Hardin and other population activists worked with leaders of the women’s movement to spur the creation of the National Association for the Repeal of Abortion Laws (NARAL), founded in 1969. The records of Zero Population Growth at their Washington, D.C., offices (the organization is now called The Population Connection), though undoubtedly inflating the group’s importance, reveal that it took the lead in several lawsuits that helped liberalize abortion at the state level, bussed in abortion advocates to pack state legislative hearings on abortion, and secured a number of state resolutions in favor of population stabilization. The national ZPG organization officially endorsed the repeal of abortion restrictions in 1969. Moreover, local chapters were heavily involved in the abortion issue. I spoke on the connection between the population control and abortion rights movements in “Was *Roe v. Wade* Population Policy? Rethinking the Connection between the Population and Abortion Movements,” paper presented at the Social Science History Association Annual Conference, November 2005, Portland, Ore. See also Hoff, “Are We Too Many?” 308–10; Connelly, *Fatal Misconception*, 269–70; and Critchlow, *Intended Consequences*, 135–37.

46. “Statement about Policy on Abortions at Military Base Hospitals in the United States,” 3 April 1971, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Richard Nixon, 1971* (Washington, D.C., 1972), 500.

47. Reacting to the backlash rhetoric of crisis, for example, a few African American leaders used the word “genocide” to describe federal family planning programs. More moderate leaders shied away from such incendiary language—and the implication that population policy was the eugenic ghost in the closet—but nonetheless worried that family planning programs primarily targeted minorities. Hence the president of the New York Urban Coalition wrote in 1971, “Neither can we fail to believe that ‘population control’ will firstly be aimed at those groups with the least power—namely, the poor and people of color.” Eugene Callender, draft of “Population Control and Black Survival,” 28 September 1971, Rockefeller Family Archives, John D. Rockefeller III Papers, Rockefeller Archive Center, Tarrytown, N.Y. (hereafter JDR III Papers), Series 3, Subseries 4, Box 67, Folder 443, “Population Interests, Background Materials, 1969, 1970–1971.”

48. Ehrlichman’s handwritten note in Nixon Papers, White House Special Files, White House Central Files, Confidential 1969–1974, Box 1, Folder 9. The author thanks Professor Shelley Hurt for bringing this document to my attention.

49. For this interpretation of policymaking in the Nixon White House, see Bruce J. Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (New York, 2001), chap. 1.

50. Federal efforts at population redistribution had begun with the New Deal, and calls for a new policy to shape internal migration returned to the fore during the Johnson administration, primarily due to Agriculture Secretary Orville Freeman’s efforts to highlight rural depopulation—a phenomenon many saw as the equally destructive flipside of the urban crisis.

51. From the end of World War II through the late 1960s, the total U.S. population grew 30 percent, while the coastal population grew 80 percent. This estimate comes from John Brooks Flippen, "Containing the Urban Sprawl: The Nixon Administration's Land Use Policy," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 26 (Winter 1996): 197–207, which offers a good entry point into the growth policy issue.

52. For example, Senator Karl Mundt (R-S.Dak.) proposed the formation of a Commission on Balanced Economic Development to investigate potential policies to influence the geographic location of industry ("The Race for Survival," *New York Times*, 7 July 1969). A plethora of organizations, from the National League of Cities to the National Governors' Conference, came out in favor of new migration policies to address both concentration in the nation's major urban areas and the depopulation of rural America. See Duane Elgin to the commissioners, 1 July 1971, "Past Precedents for Population Distribution Policies," Records of the Commission on Population Growth, Box 4, Folder "July."

53. Moynihan to Dr. Martin Anderson, 18 July 1969, DPM Papers, Box 228, Folder "[Correspondence] May–Dec. 1969 A." For additional evidence of how Moynihan thought about population in geographic terms, see in the same folder his letter to Representative John B. Anderson (R-Ill.), 16 July 1969.

54. Daniel P. Moynihan, "Toward a National Urban Policy," *Public Interest* 17 (Fall 1969): 14.

55. "Annual Message to the Congress on the State of the Union," 22 January 1970, *Public Papers of Richard Nixon, 1970*, 14. Of course, the suburbs were growing much faster than the central cities. National Goals Research Staff, *Toward Balanced Growth: Quantity with Quality* (Washington, D.C., 1970), estimated that since 1960, the former had grown 28 percent and the latter just 1 percent (43).

56. The drive for national growth policy also fell victim to bureaucratic turf battles and tensions between rural and urban interests. See Flippen, "Containing the Urban Sprawl"; James L. Sundquist, *Dispersing Population: What America Can Learn from Europe* (Washington, D.C., 1975), 12–16; and Adam Rome, *The Bulldozer in the Countryside: Suburban Sprawl and the Rise of American Environmentalism* (Cambridge, 2001), 236–53. For a review of the failure of distribution policy that blames America's decentralized politics, see James L. Sundquist, "A Comparison of Policy-Making Capacity in the United States and Five European Countries: The Case of Population Distribution," in *Population Policy Analysis*, ed. Michael E. Kraft and Mark Schneider (Lexington, Mass., 1978), 67–80.

57. The most thorough account of Nixon's cooling toward environmentalism is J. Brooks Flippen, *Nixon and the Environment* (Albuquerque, 2000). The quotation appears on p. 102.

58. Moynihan to Phillip Berry, 2 July 1970, DPM Papers, Box 294, Folder "Population: Commission on Population Growth and the American Future 1970 4." Also see Berry's letter to Nixon, 9 April 1970, in which Berry complained that "the solutions discussed in [Nixon's population] message aim toward *accommodating* expected growth" but "fall far short of a real anecdote for such growth."

59. Conversation 700–10, 3 April 3, 1972, Nixon Presidential Materials, The White House Communications Agency Sound Recordings Collection (hereafter Nixon Tapes). I also listened to the tapes cited in this article on Nixontapes.org.

60. Paul Ehrlich and John R. Holdren, "Impact of Population Growth," JDR III Papers, Series 3, Subseries 4, Box 69, Folder 460, "National Commission on Population Growth and the American Future, Environmental Issues, 1971."

61. "Annual Message to the Congress on the State of the Union," 22 January 1970, 10.

62. Flippen, *Nixon and the Environment*, 102.

63. *Ibid.* Nixon tended to think about a trade-off between a cleaner environment and jobs. In 1971, with the election drawing nearer and the economy muddling through a sluggish recovery, jobs increasing won out. For Nixon's economic calculus of the 1972 elections (and successful efforts to orchestrate an artificial boom in 1972), see Allen J. Matusow, *Nixon's Economy: Booms, Busts, Dollars and Votes* (Lawrence, Kans., 1998), chap. 7.

64. For example, Nixon argued in 1971: "This concentration of population growth in already crowded areas is not a trend that we wish to perpetuate. This administration would prefer a more balanced growth pattern—and we are taking a number of steps to encourage more development and settlement in the less densely populated areas of our country" ("Special Message to the Congress on Special Revenue Sharing for Urban Community Development," 5 March 1971, *Public Papers of Richard Nixon, 1971*, 396).

65. "Toward National Growth Policy: Population Distribution Effects," Progress Report of the National Goals Research Staff, 23 March 1970, Records of the Population Commission, Box 4, Folder "March Meeting," 4; see also 12–13. Nixon had formed this group within the White House and instructed it to report on "what kind of a nation we want to be as we begin our third century." See "Statement by the President upon Announcing the Establishment of the Staff within the White House," 13 July 1969, reprinted in National Goals Research Staff, *Toward Balanced Growth*, 219.

66. All quotations are from National Goals Research Staff, *Toward Balanced Growth*, 60.

67. I first saw the term "market knows best demography" in Marc Linder, *The Dilemmas of Laissez-Faire Population Policy in Capitalist Societies: When the Invisible Hand Controls Reproduction* (Westport, Conn., 1997), 16. Linder used the term to apply specifically to the new household microeconomics that treats children as consumer durables. I use the term more broadly to apply to the whole constellation of overlapping pro-market and pro-population-growth positions. Separately, a crucial treatment (and rejection) of the principles described in this section was Paul Demeny's 1986 address as the outgoing president of the Population Association of America (Paul Demeny, "Population and the Invisible Hand," *Demography* 23 [November 1986]: 473–87).

68. To be sure, scholars have noted challenges to the prevailing anti-population-growth viewpoint. In particular, historically minded demographers have described the development of demographic "revisionism," that is, a more optimistic posture regarding population growth, especially in the Third World. However, studies on these matters generally ignore the links between revisionism and broader economic debates. Moreover, they tend to incorrectly date the intellectual transformation to the 1970s rather than the 1960s. For example, Susan Greenhalgh, "The Social Construction of Population Science: An Intellectual, Institutional, and Political History of Twentieth-Century Demography," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 38 (January 1996), concluded: "During the mid-1970s, the sense of crisis that had created a strong demand for demographers' services in the past began to wane. In the third world, income levels were rising and birth rates falling, putting to rest both popular and governmental fears about a 'population bomb'" (52). Greenhalgh then lists perhaps the most famous example of the new demographic revisionism: the Reagan administration's statement at the 1984 World Population Conference in Mexico City that population growth did not necessarily hinder development. She also

cites the influence on the Reagan administration of Julian Simon, the leading pro-population-growth economist of the 1980s and 1990s. (Simon argued that people are the “ultimate resource” in both the poor and rich nations and that population growth has controlled the rate of economic progress in human history.) Indeed, many other scholars are content, as they basically ignore the 1960s, to practice this Simon-centrism when briefly noting the rise of population optimism. For example, see Otis Graham Jr., “Epilogue: A Look Ahead,” *Journal of Policy History* 12 (January 2000): 159.

69. The classic statement of the earlier view was Ansley J. Coale and Edgar M. Hoover, *Population Growth and Economic Development in Low-Income Countries: A Case Study of India's Prospects* (Princeton, 1958). For a critical examination of this paradigm, see Connelly, *Fatal Misconception*, 207–13.

70. One leading work along these lines was Albert O. Hirschman, *The Strategy of Economic Development* (New Haven, 1958). Also important was Ester Boserup, *The Conditions of Agricultural Growth: The Economics of Agrarian Change Under Population Pressure* (New York, 1965). The development debate led several experts to newly posit the strong possibility of a historical link between population growth and economic growth—and the idea that economic growth in the Western world has been fastest during the periods of the most rapid population growth. Douglass North and Robert Thomas concluded in a famous essay: “In capsule form our explanation is that changes in relative product and factor prices, initially induced by Malthusian population pressure, and changes in the size of markets induced a set of fundamental institutional changes which channeled incentives towards productivity-raising types of economic activity” (Douglass C. North and Robert Paul Thomas, “An Economic Theory of the Growth of the Western World,” *Economic History Review*, n.s., 23 [April 1970]: 1).

71. Friedrich Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty* (Chicago, 1960), chaps. 2 and 23. Population social scientists sustained Hayek's position. A 1960 conference, “Natural Resources and Economic Growth,” convened by Resources for the Future and the Committee on Economic Growth of the Social Science Research Council, signaled the new consensus downplaying the economic importance of natural resources. Stanford's Moses Abramovitz, a pioneer of modern growth theory, summarized the proceedings when he noted, “An important theme that recurs in the papers before the Conference is that, in the course of economic development, natural resources have become of smaller importance than they used to be” (Moses Abramovitz, “Comment,” in *Natural Resources and Economic Growth: Papers Presented at a Conference Held at Ann Arbor, Michigan, April 7–9, 1960*, ed. Joseph J. Spengler [Washington, D.C., 1961], 9). As economists argued that raw materials were tangential to economic growth, they also insisted that market forces would assure the future availability of nearly all resources.

72. Harold J. Barnett and Chandler Morse, *Scarcity and Growth: The Economics of Natural Resource Availability* (Baltimore, 1963), 11.

73. A good entry into the early human-capital debate is the series of essays in the supplement “Investment in Human Beings,” *Journal of Political Economy* 70 (October 1962).

74. Schultz's links to the population community are detailed in the Records of the Population Council, Rockefeller Archive Center, Tarrytown, N.Y., Box 39, Folder 560, “Schultz, Theodore W, 1956–1966.”

75. For example, the leading economist Simon Kuznets argued that the ability of societies to invest in human capital upset traditional assumptions about the effects of population growth

on capital formation. See Simon Kuznets, “Population and Economic Growth,” *Proceedings of American Philosophical Society* 111 (June 1967): 178–84.

76. The original human-capital theorists were conservative labor economists associated with the Second Chicago School, but their findings ironically offered theoretical support for the Great Society’s social investment programs. See Alice O’Connor, *Poverty Knowledge: Social Science, Social Policy, and the Poor in Twentieth-Century U.S. History* (Princeton, 2001), 140–43. Less well known is that the rise of human-capital theory was closely connected to the population debate. The link stretched back to prewar demography, when the eugenic emphasis on population “quality” spurred interest in measuring the economic value of investment in population “improvement.” See Louis I. Dublin and Alfred J. Lotka, *The Money Value of Man*, rev. ed. (New York, 1946). Essays on the history of human-capital theory, for example, B. F. Kiker, “The Historical Roots of the Concept of Human Capital,” *Journal of Political Economy* 74 (October 1966): 481–99, often mention the theoretical work of Dublin and Lotka but ignore the broader interest in population “quality” that informed it.

77. Paul Demeny, “Population and the Invisible Hand.”

78. Gary Becker, who remains today a leading family economist, offered a crucial early statement of these ideas in “An Economic Analysis of Fertility,” in National Bureau of Economic Research, *Demographic and Economic Change in Developed Countries* (Princeton, 1960), 209–31. See also Theodore Schultz, “The Value of Children: An Economic Perspective,” *Journal of Political Economy* 81 (March–April 1973): S2–S13. For a critique of the new microeconomics of fertility, which holds that it “must engage in considerable conceptual contortion to convert children into commodities,” see Linder, *The Dilemmas of Laissez-Faire Population Policy*, 15–26 (the quotation is on p. 19). See also Judith Blake, “Are Babies Consumer Durables? A Critique of the Economic Theory of Reproductive Motivation,” *Population Studies* 22 (March 1968): 5–25, which stressed women’s psychological and situational motives for childbirth.

79. In Easterlin’s view, the 1950s Baby Boom was traceable to the fact that the children of the Depression years grew up poor but then, after World War II, did better in young adulthood than their parents had. This “relative affluence” compared to their parents translated into optimism about their economic futures and lots of babies. Writing during the 1960s, when fertility rates fell from their Baby Boom highs, Easterlin’s economic-demographic feedback model predicted further declines: the large crop of children born in the 1950s would face hard economic times, in part because there were so many of them. As a result, Baby Boomers would not expect as high a standard of living as their parents and would respond by having fewer children. A short statement of this thesis was Richard Easterlin, *The American Baby Boom in Historical Perspective*, National Bureau of Economic Research, Occasional Paper No. 79 (New York, 1962), reprinted from the December 1961 issue of the *American Economic Review*.

80. Easterlin also insisted on a historical link between population and economic growth in both the developing and developed worlds. See Richard A. Easterlin, Michael L. Wachter, and Susan M. Wachter, “Demographic Influences on Economic Stability: The United States Experience,” *Population and Development Review* 4 (March 1978): 1–22, which concluded that “upsurges in population growth had an important role—through their feedback effects on aggregate demand—in prolonging economic expansion” (5). For Easterlin’s doubts on the “population explosion” paradigm, see his *Growth Triumphant*:

The Twenty-first Century in Historical Perspective (Ann Arbor, 1996), 9–10. It should be noted, however, that Easterlin also argued here that conservatives' anxiety about slowing population growth or even stability is as overblown as the fear of overpopulation was a generation ago (*Growth Triumphant*, chap. 9).

81. The stress on the individual also critiqued the state-centered thrust of the family planning movement. Market-knows-best demographers not only assumed that government family planning programs at home and abroad were inefficient and ineffective. They also noted that nations pursuing vigorous population-control programs tended to be those with high levels of state economic planning. Hence they suggested that instead of concentrating on family planning programs, nations worried about population growth should concentrate on freeing the market.

82. For a typical statement of the prevailing wisdom, see Goran Ohlin, *Population Control and Economic Development* (Paris, 1967). Thereafter, Ohlin actually moved into the anti-Malthusian camp.

83. Commenting on a series of papers in the May 1971 *American Economic Review*, Paul Demeny wrote, "It is wholly unsatisfactory to argue that 'people' behave rationally in the interest of their children" (T. Paul Schultz and Paul Demeny, "Discussion," *American Economic Review* 61 [May 1971]: 421). Then again, it is notable that all three of the papers downplayed population problems.

84. Beck and Kolankiewicz, "The Environmental Movement's Retreat," offered a typical comment: "Business groups always have defined one end of the growth issue spectrum as they pushed for ever more population growth" (126). Yet the business community never organized in any meaningful way to reverse the Malthusian craze, perhaps because for a time American business did not wish to be seen as anti-environmental. Neo-Marxists argue that business is sometimes in favor of population policies because they seek to regulate the future labor supply, hold back the mob, and cut welfare spending. This argument has a certain logic to it, but there is little evidence that American capital ever organized around a coherent population policy. While American business was divided on the population question, there is little doubt that, as Critchlow concluded, "big business's assumption that expanding population was equated with economic growth was seen [by population activists] as a serious obstacle to population control" (*Intended Consequences*, 18).

85. See "Birth Control: Businessmen Back It," *Business Week*, 15 May 1965, 34.

86. Quoted in Stephen Viederman and Sharmon Sollitto, "Economic Groups: Business, Labor, Welfare," in *Population Policy and Ethics: The American Experience*, ed. Robert M. Veatch (New York, 1977), 330.

87. This statement appeared on page 2 of the June 1970 issue of *Fortune*, previewing Lawrence A. Mayer, "U.S. Population Growth: Will Slower Be Better?"

88. "A Population Policy?" *Wall Street Journal*, 23 March 1971. See also John G. Welles, "The Economy Doesn't Need More People," *Wall Street Journal*, 22 April 1970.

89. The shift also filtered into the mass media. In *Newsweek*, for example, Henry Wallich, a Yale economist who had served on Eisenhower's Council of Economic Advisers (and whom Nixon would later appoint to be a Federal Reserve Governor), wrote: "Everybody has his pet prescription for curing society's ills. A peculiarly misguided one has surfaced recently—zero population growth. If this wholesale misanthropy prevails, we are in trouble. . . . If large parts of our country are polluted, it is not because we are too numerous, but because we pollute. The way to stop that disgrace is not to stop having

children, but to start cleaning up" ("Henry C. Wallich on Population Growth," *Newsweek*, 29 June 1970, 70).

90. William F. Buckley, "The Birth Rate," *National Review*, 23 March 1965, 231.

91. Editorial blurb accompanying Theodore Sturgeon, "The Avalanche," *National Review*, 27 July 1965, 634. The supplement also included Alan F. Guttmacher's "How Births Can Be Controlled."

92. Sturgeon, "The Avalanche," 636.

93. *Ibid.*

94. Pyrrho, "What Exit for Asia?" *National Review*, 27 July 1965, 640.

95. For Clark's pro-populationism, see his *Population Growth and Land Use* (London, 1967). Clark served on the Vatican's Commission on Population (1964–66), which resulted in *Humanae Vitae*, the reaffirmation of the church's traditional anti-birth control position.

96. Colin Clark, "World Power and Population," *National Review*, 20 May 1969, 481–84.

97. Clark, *Population Growth and Land Use*, 274.

98. Milton Friedman, "The Market v. the Bureaucrat," *National Review*, 19 May 1970, 507.

99. Robert Moses, "Bomb Shelters, Arks, and Ecology," *National Review*, 8 September 1970, 939.

100. For example, the *Population Bulletin* argued in February 1970: "The larger, the more complex and the more crowded a society is—and the more its resource base is subjected to intensely competing demands—the more numerous and restrictive are the laws and regulations required for its governance" (quoted in National Goals Research Staff, *Toward Balanced Growth*, 42).

101. Moynihan's comments on television quoted in "The Drive to Stop Population Growth," *U.S. News and World Report*, 2 March 1970, 38.

102. For example, see Jack Parsons, *Population versus Liberty* (London, 1971).

103. S.J. Res. 108, with twenty-six co-sponsors, was introduced on 2 June 1971 by Senators Alan Cranston (D-Calif.) and Robert Taft (R-Ohio); H.J. Res. 789 was introduced in the House on 19 July 1971. I found discussion of these resolutions in Coalition for a National Population Policy, untitled October 1971 report, Wilderness Society Records, Box 43, Folder 19.

104. Due to fear of upsetting Catholics, "Government efforts to set an official goal of stabilizing the United States population ground to a halt Nov. 23 when the Senate Labor and Public Welfare decided not to consider the issue this year" (*National Journal*, 4 December 1971, 2401). See also Senate Committee on Labor and Public Welfare, Subcommittee on Human Resources, *Declaration of U.S. Policy of Population Stabilization by Voluntary Means*, 92nd Cong., 1st sess., 5 August, 5, 8, and 14 October, and 3 November 1971.

105. Commission on Population Growth and the American Future, *Population and the American Future*, chap. 4 ("The Economy") and chap. 5 ("Resources and the Environment").

106. Importantly, the commission argued that a reduction in "unwanted" children would be nearly sufficient to bring about population stabilization. This of course disappointed the radicals who held that Americans' desire for so many "wanted" children was the core of the problem.

107. *Ibid.*, 141–47 (“Compilation of Recommendations”). Internal debate on immigration produced a stalemate on that issue, resulting in support for the status quo. See Critchlow, *Intended Consequences*, 164. Westoff, “The Commission on Population Growth and the American Future,” reported that the commission discovered that if the birthrate averaged 2.0, zero population growth could be reached with no changes to immigration at almost the same speed as with a birthrate of 2.1 and a reduction in immigration (55).

108. Commission on Population Growth and the American Future, *Population and the American Future*, chap. 3.

109. John D. Rockefeller III wanted to release the final report to the press in three separate sections, so that no one issue or finding dominated the discussion. Antiabortion members of the commission, led by Representative John Erlenborn, were apparently amenable to the three-section strategy but, because the full commission was to advocate the full legalization of abortion, insisted on issuing a dissenting statement on abortion. In February 1972, however, White House staff met with commission members to “emphasize the President’s desire for a single report” but “met with resistance.” Ray Waldmann, Staff Assistant to President Nixon, to Ken Cole, 22 February 1972, and Waldmann to Cole, 23 February 1972, Nixon Commission Papers, Box 2, Folder “FG 275 Commission on Population Growth and the American Future 1/1/71 (1 of 2).”

110. The White House put off meeting with commission members. See John D. Rockefeller III to Ehrlichman, 2 and 17 March 1972, in Nixon Commission Papers, Box 2, Folder “FG 275 Commission on Population Growth and the American Future 1/1/71(2 of 2)”; and John D. Rockefeller III to Nixon, 7 April and 19 March 1972, JDR III Papers, Box 30, Series 3, Subseries 2, Folder 138, “Famous People, 1972–1977.”

111. Abortion had already been a contentious issue within the commission, which at one point tabled its discussion of abortion for fear of splintering. White House files reveal plenty of letters from Americans excoriating the commission’s pro-abortion stance and newspaper clippings about Catholic leaders with similar concerns. For example, see the exchange between Waldmann and the County Attorney from Nobles County, Minnesota, Nixon Commission Papers, Box 2, Folder “FG 275 Commission on Population Growth and the American Future 1/1/71(1 of 2)”; and the newspaper clippings about James McHugh, director of the Family Life Bureau of the U.S. Catholic Conference, *ibid.*, Folder 2 of 2. Critchlow, *Intended Consequences*, 164–73, provides an excellent summary of the commission’s entanglement with the ascendant abortion politics of the early 1970s.

112. See the unsigned memo reviewing five options and several drafts of the president’s comments on the commission’s final report in Nixon Commission Papers, Box 2, Folder “FG 275 Commission on Population Growth and the American Future 1/1/71 (1 of 2).”

113. Waldmann and Gergen, “Statement on Report of Commission on Population Growth and the American Future,” 24 March 1972, Nixon Commission Papers, Box 2, Folder “FG 275 Commission on Population Growth and the American Future 1/1/71 (2 of 2).”

114. “Draft Statement on Population Commission: Draft: Buchanan, 3/29/72,” Nixon Commission Papers, Box 2, Folder “FG 275 Commission on Population Growth and the American Future 1/1/71 (2 of 2).”

115. All quotations are in *ibid.*

116. Nixon Tapes, Conversation 697-29, 30 March 1972.

117. Critchlow, *Intended Consequences*, 167–70.

118. Nixon Tapes, Conversation 699-1, 31 March 1972. The MIT study was Donella H. Meadows et al., *The Limits to Growth: A Report for the Club of Rome's Project on the Predicament of Mankind* (New York, 1972). Kissinger's response was hilarious and emblematic of conservatives' antipathy to the academic establishment. Kissinger answered the president by explaining that academic life was fraught with insecurity and that college professors became like the teenagers they taught. He suggested that intellectuals were easily manipulated and that in the second Nixon administration, the president should mollify them by giving "them the illusion they're participating in something . . . not because they can contribute a goddamn thing," but because it would be dangerous to have all the writers criticizing the nation.

119. Edwin L. Dale Jr., "A Nixon Economic Adviser Doubts Overpopulation," *New York Times*, 29 March 1970.

120. Nixon Tapes, Conversation 700-10, 3 April 1972.

121. See JDR III to Nixon, 7 April 1972, Nixon Commission Papers, Box 2, Folder "FG 275 Commission on Population Growth and the American Future 1/1/71 (2 of 2)."

122. "Statement about the Report of the Commission on Population Growth and the American Future," 5 May 1972, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, Richard Nixon, 1972* (Washington, D.C., 1974), 576-77.

123. Peter Collier and David Horowitz, *The Rockefellers: An American Dynasty* (New York, 1976), 376.

124. Nixon Tapes, Conversation 720-12, 5 May 1972.

125. This task force included representatives from Nixon's Domestic Council, the Council of Environmental Quality, the Council of Economic Advisers, and the Office of Science and Technology. It is not clear from the archival record how often this group met.

126. Various documents surrounding these films are in Nixon Commission Papers, Box 3, Folder "Gen FG 275 Commission on Population Growth and the American Future 1/1/73."

127. Leonard Laster, Office of Science and Technology, to Edward E. David Jr., Nixon Commission Papers, Box 3, Folder "Commission on Population Growth Oversize Attachment 14264."

128. See Commission on Population Growth and the American Future, *Economic Aspects of Population Change*, vol. 2 of *Commission Research Reports*, ed. Elliott R. Morss and Ritchie H. Reed (Washington, D.C., 1972). One of these essays, by the Duke economist Joseph Spengler (then entering his sixth decade as a published participant in the population debate), espoused the traditional position that a smaller population would, in sum, yield significant economic benefits, and he dipped into the new ecological economics by identifying limits of the "biosphere." The other three papers, however, ranged from neutral to supportive of population growth and certainly cut against the "overpopulation" paradigm that had launched the commission. Harvey Leibenstein wrote: "The economies of scale and employment stimulation advantages of population growth more or less counterbalance the loss due to the dilution of difficult to substitute natural resources. Another advantageous factor is that a younger population contains more 'human capital' per person" ("The Impact of Population Growth on the American Economy," 51). See also Edmund S. Phelps's essay "Some Macroeconomics of Population Leveling."

129. As Richard Easterlin maintained in "Comment," in *Economic Aspects of Population Change*, ed. Morss and Reed, "In the case of pollution, the causal role of population seems vastly exaggerated" (46). In "Demographic Changes and American Economic

Development: Past, Present and Future,” in the same volume, Allen C. Kelley argued: “A population policy justified noticeably by its favorable impact on pollution reduction may not only be unjustified, but also undesirable. The most appropriate ‘economic’ policy in the area of population is a neutral position regarding an economically desirable family size” (11). Phelps maintained, in the spirit of Barry Commoner, that technology, not population, was primarily responsible for pollution.

130. Kelley, “Demographic Changes and American Economic Development,” 31. Kelley also stated: “Neither economic theory, nor the empirical studies in the area of economic demography, as yet provide a sufficiently firm basis for concluding that a reduction in the average American family size will have a quantitatively significant effect on the pace of material advancement” (15).

131. Richard Easterlin, “Comment,” in *Economic Aspects of Population Change*, ed. Morss and Reed, 45.

132. C. F. Westoff, “Further Reflections on Population Policy,” 17 September 1971, JDR III Papers, Series 3, Subseries 4, Box 67, Folder 443, “Population Interests, Background Materials, 1969, 1970–1971.”

133. John D. Rockefeller III to the President and Congress of the United States, 27 March 1972, reprinted in Commission on Population Growth and the American Future, *Population and the American Future*, 4.

134. “Extended Outline for Chapter 1,” JDR III Papers, Series 3, Subseries 4, Box 71, Folder 471, “National Commission on Population Growth and the American Future, Population Distribution, 1971.”