

BIRTHWRONGS

EARTH NEEDS LITTLE MORE OF THE FRUIT WE BEAR

BY TOM BURGESS

The presentation of Chairperson Nancy Pelosi to the House of Representatives was as proper as Capitol events get — excepting components that reeked of this world's double standards; the inclusion of her six grandchildren as part of the show.

Given our die-cast responses, the six little faces did, indeed, put a seal on Ms. Pelosi's status as a maternal unit of energy. Add to that, her own five "start-up" progeny and you get a bountiful, marketable image: a builder of multi-generational families and a fertile community operative with — additional to "Congresswoman" — the unchallenged titles of Mama, Grandma, and Great God knows what multipliers the procreative future could give her.

It's an affirmation of life in domestic terms. It's hypocritical abandon in world terms.

The event in Washington is reminiscent of one that occurred in the late '80s in Berkeley, California. Helen Caldecott was departing an organization she had founded some twenty years before, Physicians for Social Responsibility. I heard her address. As she lauded herself and her colleagues, she reminded all present of the dilemma faced by the medical community and by humanity; that we had taken the atom, a simple, basic-to-life element and transformed it into an elemental monster that could and would destroy us if we did not change our ways.

During the course of Caldecott's farewell, however, something most contrary happened. In the midst of her concern for life, she started celebrating life, and in the midst of doing that, she began to wax emotional about her "many (beautiful) children" and her "many, many (beautiful) grandchildren" and the many, many, many familial lives for which she was both responsible and visionary.

Did she not see the contradiction on another level? Amidst all the nurturing and humanitarian fervor, had she not read Paul Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb*? Caldecott was, supposedly, a medical analyst with a world view — a messenger from the calculated sciences to the randomly conceived masses. Where had her "Social Responsibility" gone when she was burning-up the bed sheets to create life beyond the simple replication of herself, her husband, and at most, a third child?

Well, more often, the doctor kept her atom focus. But the nuclear age we face is no more ominous than our urban sprawl, our depleted oceans, deforested land, or polluted rivers. And all of these factors — and hundreds of earth maladies — have, as their point-of-origin, a single, germinal malady; a single, correctable excess over which we have lost control: the overpopulation of our planet. And it's a difficult admission. Given humanity's gravitation toward materialism, food sources, and territorial imperative, all are easily definable as malignancies for us to target. But, in reality, they all have as their point-of-origin, the seemingly benign and moral act of love-making and child-bearing — the excesses of the latter being the key to all other excesses of humankind and all the dire consequences we have inherited.

Yet we turn a blind eye; a blithe and pious ear. Regardless of the dangers apparent, if our average countrymen were told of the possibility of family numbers being regulated by some entity outside his or her own family unit, the ACLU, the appellate courts, and every civil rights lawyer in the country would shift into a gear higher than the Republic has yet to spin in. Instead, we would rather blame our impulsive youth, our poorer citizens, or our mismanaged immigration policies when, in fact, it is white middle-income Americans who tip the scales in national birth-rates. I personally know a retired university professor who has nine brothers and sisters resulting in 53 nieces and nephews; all these lives originating with one middle-American man and woman who were neither poverty-stricken, immigrant nor ill-educated.

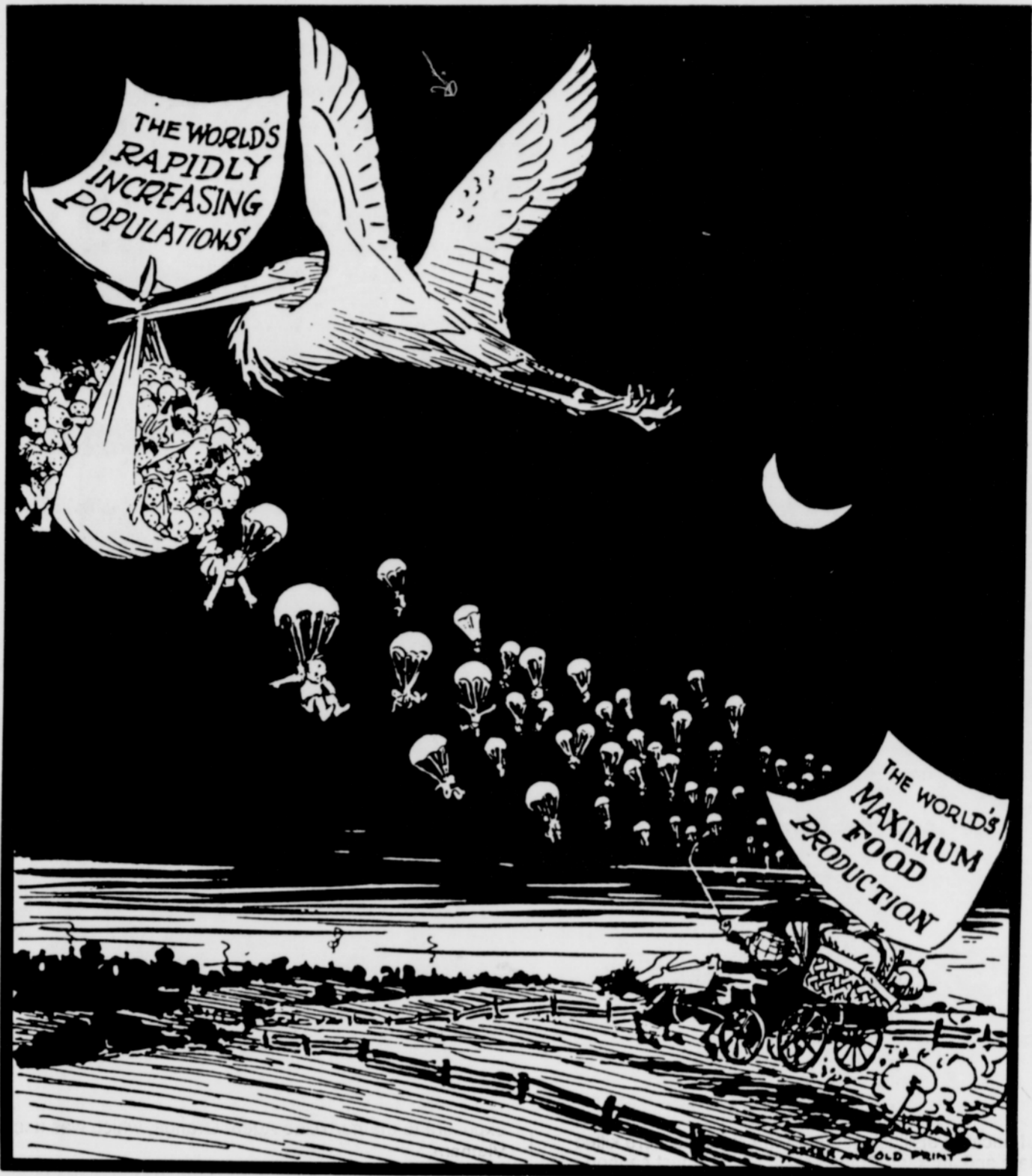
In contrast to such freedoms — and an irony of our national birthrate policy — is that another nation, far less developed and near-primitive in information-dispersal, is solving their own version of this problem. Sadly yet predictably, they happen to be the one currently employing the most strong-armed means of mixing democracy, capitalism and industrial expansion. China was a sleeping giant and now, as an emerging giant, its offspring planning methods are geography-discriminatory and gender-inequitable. They are as ham-fisted in their family regulation as they are in their commerce methods.

But China is desperate. Their nose is to the wall, their very existence at stake. They are digging 900-mile canals to channel water from healthy rivers in the south to dying rivers in the north — all to serve their current populace. They are putting on line a coal-fired power plant a week — all to serve the same populace; buying up rainforests to cut-down and cultivate crops for ethanol — their version of ecology consciousness. A male first child encourages rural couples to cease their childbearing. A girl child allows them one additional child. Two children of any sex is the end of the child-bearing process. China is in a place the United States will someday find itself if we do not do something and soon.

So how do we address this dilemma before we are forced to become as desperate and brutal in our methods as China? What has happened to our own informational efforts and our political priorities in the years since Rachel Carson and Paul Ehrlich wrote so passionately?

Doubtless, before those two authorships, America had the weight of a pious 19th century to shake loose. In those times, even though married couples were allowed to use contraceptives that right continued — at least on the books — to be denied the unmarried. Outside a pharmacy exchange, the "anti-obscenity" Comstock Laws still prohibited the dissemination or the mailing of contraceptives. As far as abortion, most states held it illegal and elective sterilization was near impossible to obtain.

But 1968 was the year that apocalyptic urgency was fixed to the emerging environmental movement. In the wake of *Silent Spring*, the Sierra Club published Ehrlich's *Population Bomb*, and that, in turn, was the genesis of an organization called 'Zero Population Growth'. The membership exploded to 35,000 in a three-year period. Given the extent of that response, Congress took the obscenity nonsense off rubbers, the Supreme Court gave contraceptive rights to the unmarried, and *Roe vs. Wade* went to press, signed and sealed — at least for the time being. By the way of these texts and these judgments, the fertility



J. N. 'DING' DARLING, "THE RACE WITH THE STORK" (1948)

rate in the U.S. dropped from an average 3.4 children in the early '60s to 1.8 in 1975. The "doubling time" of the U.S. population rose by 14 years between 1968 and 1975, which was, though difficult to believe, a major human statistics triumph.

Then the issue took a breath. Bad luck. *Roe vs. Wade* churned-up the Religious Right and, from 1989 to 1992, state legislators had introduced more than 700 anti-abortion rights bills. As a result, by 1992, 84% of American counties had not one doctor willing to perform abortions. As far as the more general issue of population growth, it had at that time, become so associated with abortion that suddenly, any means — any aspect — of population control became risky politics and by the late '90s, the National Field Director of ZPG stated that "Many politicians wouldn't come near a population policy if it was wrapped in gold."

In view of this atmosphere, the first thing ZPG did was to distance itself from abortion. From a promotional aspect, it was probably sound thinking. Additional to the "taking of life" issue, abortion implied emergency measures for those who were emergency-prone or crisis-perpetuating. "Population consciousness," on the other hand, implied that the public could develop and nurture an attitude and a sustaining practice; the long-range planning for small-family benefits.

The next thing ZPG did was to redirect their message away from the white middle class though it had long been established that these folks not only did more "populating" but obviously used more than their share of resources and did more than their share of polluting. Today, there is greater effort toward an increasingly diverse audience and ZPG lobbies Congress for funding on both international as well as domestic family planning. The long-promoted link between population growth and environmental degradation was, for a time, de-emphasized because it made too many dots for their new audience to connect. Also, affluent Caucasians advising other communities to clean-up the world doesn't always fly.

Whether ZPG is on or off the promotional mark with their small family proposition, they at least realized that, for any of it to have relevance, they had to help ensure the means to choose such families. Thus, a few vasectomy clinics were opened as were some retail outlets to vend condoms at reduced prices. Their education programs have produced videos and school curricula incorporating population issues into classroom fare.

World Population was produced in '97 and *The Children's Environmental Index* opened as a display in the American Museum of Natural History. Texts include *Earth Matters*, *Counting on People*, and *People on the Planet*. At one point there were 250 teacher-training workshops a year.

But where are they today in the public mind? On the public airways? In our voluminous texts about earth concerns? Of the five books listed on ZPG's web site, one is a government census, one a biography of Margaret Sanger, one a history of abortion wars, and one a history of the green revolution. Ehrlich's *Population Bomb* stands alone in its exclusivity to the subject of population. The matter of our exploding numbers appears in the broadcast media as often as a singing dog in the old Movietone News. To keep a profile and some organizational fluidity, Zero Population Growth has had to combine their efforts with the National Organization of Women, Planned Parenthood of America, and even the ACLU of my "sometimes ominous" list. By the late '90s, their membership grew by an average 700 a year. Butterfly and model railroad clubs have better enrollment spikes.

With the press these days, though there's an effort to keep our bio-challenge up front — there is a disinclination to cite causal agents when they're too close to our hearts. *The Oregonian* recently ran a front-page, three-article feature that boomed "Life As We Know It Gets Blame For Global Warming." Well, that header wasn't a thunderball of perception but moreover, the text predictably avoided our sweetest points of excess. Word counts can trivialize journalism but it was intriguing that, in all of the copy, the references to fuels, emissions, power, and industry totaled some 22. Land-use, development, vehicles and urbanity each received a mention. Somewhat closer to candor — modern society, and everyday life were each named once. Finally, humans, humankind, and people made it in but not in regard to their exploding numbers — only to their present and future habits and their needs. Population growth wasn't discussed. It was like attending a Victorian sex education class where the phrase "sperm fertilizes egg" would get the teacher fired.

As for Chairwoman Pelosi, she is now a Westerner with a western mandate. She has roared out of the tunnel streaming earth banners and belching green steam and good for us. In her first days, she pushed through a clean energy act and has appointed a committee on climate change. But if what Pelosi achieves is to have lasting value, she and her fellow leaders must develop a tenet that is often contrary to the human spirit. They must identify with generations they may not hold in their laps; generations who may not stand by their gravesides. Instead they must think in an oftentimes subtractive way — in a procreative world that thinks in multiples.

To rephrase a point, it is doubtful our depleted fuels would have the attention — or would, in fact, be depleted — if we had manageable and predictable population guidelines. Obviously, the same would prevail with our food sources, our breathing medium, our economies, and our prospects for peace. No manner of scientific advancement, religious understanding, racial tolerance, or the equitable distribution of baby clothes will save us if there is no longer room or resources to live a life.

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