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Letters

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The Right Number of Americans

The very idea of a drop in national numbers always sets off alarms. In their book "The Fear of Population Decline," Michael S. Teitelbaum and Jay M. Winter recall a 1979 essay, "How a Nation Dies," written by a French Foreign Minister, no less, for a collection luridly titled "Withered France." In 1982 Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn mourned that the Russian people "has moved into a phase of biological degeneracy" and before long would "almost vanish from the face of the earth."

Now listen to the alarm voiced over the newest projections from the Census Bureau. These suggest that the U.S. population will grow from the present 246 million to 362 million in 50 years and then trail off to 292 million by the year 2080. That's a very slight decline. Still, it's the first decline ever projected and prompts fears of economic decline, diminished vitality and "great turbulence."

The alarms are dramatic but implausible. To the extent that 50-year projections have meaning, the news from Census is good; it augurs a calm and stable era for America.

What's the right number of Americans? There's no sensible numerical answer. When George Washington became President there were 3.9 million. When Franklin Roosevelt became President there were about 125 million — a figure that has since doubled. And the land could support many more. There are 64 Americans per square mile; compare that with 100 in the typical suburb — and with the 65,000 people per square mile in Manhattan. The useful population question is not how big, up or down. It's how fast, up or down.

Society can adapt smoothly to gradual changes. It's rapid changes that wrench one institution after another. Americans know that from the baby boom pushing through the Stages of Man like a pig in a python. The new projections, however, describe a very gradual drop — only 3 percent, and over 42 years. Depending on all manner of world events, that implies a period of exceptional calm.

This speculative news about the future looks more encouraging in the light of non-speculative non-news about the present. There's a population bomb latent in the present U.S. population: the extraordinary number of women in their childbearing years, the women of the Baby Boom. If they were having children at the same rate as their mothers, there would be some eight million births this year. In fact, the figure will be about 3.8 million.

It is true, Martin O'Connell of the Census Bureau notes, that the fertility rate is going up among women in their early 30's. But that increase does not nearly offset the continuing decline in fertility among women in their 20's.

The total fertility rate now translates into about 1.8 births per mother. Is this figure, about the same as in England and France, the right one for a modern industrial society? Maybe, yet the figure in West Germany and Italy is much lower, 1.4 children. A rapid drop to, say, 1.0 child per family would be sure cause for alarm. Small, smooth movements over decades are not.

The right number of Americans is the number we can live with.

Cold War Brinks, Revisited

No final answers emerged from the recent Moscow conference of American and Soviet participants in the 1962 Cuban missile crisis. Yet ten, five or even three years ago, who would have thought such an encounter possible? The meeting bodes well for Mikhail Gorbachev's call to remove embarrassing blanks from Soviet history.

In the same closed room were gathered several of President Kennedy's senior advisers; the former Soviet Foreign Minister, Andrei Gromyko; Cuban officials, and Sergei Khrushchev, son of the deposed leader whose very name had vanished from Soviet political discourse.

Everyone agreed, then as before, that the world came perilously close to a nuclear war when Mr. Kennedy imposed a blockade to force Moscow to remove missiles secretly deployed in Cuba. But the meeting did not clear up what really impelled Nikita Khrushchev to deploy those missiles, or whether Fidel Castro in fact urged Moscow to start a nuclear war by attacking U.S. cities.

More interesting than the details of the rehearsal of a climactic moment was the rehearsal itself — an event that prompts a larger question:

Why shouldn't there be more such meetings of people from all sides who played a role at turning points in the cold war?

Consider Yalta: Did Soviet diplomats like Mr. Gromyko truly believe the West had abandoned Eastern Europe to Soviet dominion? And did Western diplomats truly nourish imperialist visions of encircling and subverting the Soviet Union? Why not a firsthand response, in an open session, from George Kennan, whose cables from the American Embassy in Moscow in the 1940's articulated the very axioms of the cold war?

Other crises ring with retrospective possibilities: the 1956 Hungarian revolt, the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia, the Vietnam War. Selective memory and state secrecy may limit how far participants can discuss, even in tranquillity, the motives that drove leaders to resort to force. But the encounters themselves have human value, and could provide insight into abiding puzzles.

Is the cold war rooted in a collision of ideology or interests? How accurate were assessments of the other side's intentions in conflicts past? There are questions enough to fill a thousand Moscow nights.

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