

NPG Footnote

Uncoupling Growth From Prosperity:

The U.S. versus Japan

by B. Meredith Burke

Who faces the brightest quality-of-life prospects for the year 2100: Japan with a population projected to decline by nearly 60 percent, or the United States, whose 1997 population of 267 million will nearly triple to 750 million (en route to a billion) if present levels of migration and fertility continue? ¹

Demographically-unschooled politicians in both countries' recent elections tipped their hats towards America. Since 1990 Japanese politicians have alternately wooed and criticized their childbearing-age women who at current rates will have fewer than 1.5 births each. Immigration is minuscule, so death rates and personal childbearing choices solely determine population size. Assuming constant fertility and mortality, the population will peak around the year 2005 at 130 million, then slowly diminish by the year 2100 to 55 million (its 1920 population level). At this level will Japan still be a world power?

The U.S. Has Exceeded Its Optimum Population

Most politicians have uncritically accepted the business leadership message that we need ever more workers to support the bloated Baby Boom generation in its retirement years. They tune out the ecological community's message that the U.S. has exceeded its optimum population (one maximizing environmental protection and the lifestyle values held by Americans) of 150 million (or fewer) ever since 1950. Both politicians and business leaders espouse that "a growing America is a healthy America."

For a population with a bulge in the childbearing age group to stabilize, let alone decline, requires that there be fewer births than deaths. If there is net immigration, births have to be very much fewer. Since 1920 the U.S. and Japan have both experienced sharp fluctuations in births. Bloated past cohorts must be balanced by subsequent smaller ones. This inevitably results in a short-term drop in the ratio of prime-age group workers to retirees— and nervousness among pro-growth interest groups.

Traditionalists, seeing a smaller work force supporting an enlarged retirement population, identify the problem as how to augment the former. They tend to have inflexible attitudes towards work and family organization, wage determination, and pension plan

financing. Hence traditionalists endorse importing workers from elsewhere. But this proposal implicitly endorses a demographic perpetual motion machine: more childbearing-age adults result in more births (barring a very sharp fertility reduction) and an ever-growing population.

Confronting the same rise in elders, sustainability advocates look to lighten the dependency burden two ways. The first is to encourage increased worker productivity and lengthened work life. They endorse more flexible work and pension arrangements permitting a gradual and later tapering-off by older workers. The second is to reduce the other part of the dependency burden: the proportion of children. If an industrial-country baby boom mimics a stomach swollen by a Thanksgiving feast, the appropriate response is to cut back on food intake until the stomach shrinks back to a size consonant with healthy body weight.

Japan has had two postwar birth peaks— 2.7 million in 1947 and 2.1 million in 1975— and two birth valleys— 1.5 million in 1995 and 1.2-1.3 million in the 1990s. The 20-24 age group— the main labor force entrant category— accordingly peaked in both the early 1970s and the early 1990s at just over and just under 10 million persons respectively. With the 1990s' sluggish economy Japan has confronted rising unemployment. Fortunately, the demand for new entrant slots has crested and will soon plummet. In 1993 the age group 20-24 numbered 9.8 million; that 15-19, 9.3 million; that 10-14, 7.8 million; and that 5-9, 7 million.

Japan's educational burden is simultaneously growing lighter. Primary school enrollment has declined steadily since 1980, from 11.8 million to 9.4 million in 1990 and 8.8 million in 1993. The country is well-placed to devote more individual parental attention to as well as greater societal investment in each child.

The Concept of an Ecological Footprint

Responsible politicians should welcome a return to a 1920's population level— or even below. They might educate themselves about the concept "ecological footprint," a term invented by University of British Columbia regional planner William Rees. This represents the land area necessary to sustain current

levels of resource consumption and waste discharge by a given population. Rees and his students, notably Mathis Wackernagel, have calculated that Japan, with one-quarter hectare of productive land per capita, has an "ecological footprint" of at least two hectares. That is, it consumes at least eight times more than its own renewable resource production. This makes it (along with other industrialized countries) a "resource predator" in the international market. Third world nations have already served notice they will not forever appease this appetite.

In particular, despite the most intensive agriculture in the world Japan is the world's largest food importer. As its population has grown 20 percent since 1970 its dependency upon imported cereals has risen from 55 to 75 percent while its rice prices are five times the world level. With a population of 55 million Japan could return land to agriculture, aim for food self-sufficiency, and see a reduction in its food bill.

The U.S., whose per capita ecological footprint is twice that of the Japanese while its land endowment is eleven times, is currently just barely ecologically self-sufficient. Our wetlands have all but vanished, our fishing banks are plundered, and our native flora and fauna are threatened even as we are assured that our "wealth" has increased. Provisioning, educating, employing, and housing the Baby Boom of the 1950s was very expensive.

Much has been made of the fact that the Baby Boomers themselves have had below-replacement fertility. Yet the absolute number of births rose steadily from the mid-1970s' nadir of 3.1 million until hitting 4 million in 1989, the same level we experienced during the peak "Baby Boom" years of the late 1950s. Even though the "baby bust" generation is well into its 20s, births have not receded as expected. Instead, they have been buoyed by the increasing contribution of foreign-born women: over 700,000 births in 1994 or nearly 18 percent of total births.

The First Earth Day Message Abandoned

Our "leaders" readily abandoned the first Earth Day message that the United States was overdue for a demographic diet. Dieting is not fun: it generally requires renunciation of a short term pleasure in favor of long term benefits. Because of our age structure, total population would have grown through the 1990s even in the absence of immigration. Evading demographic accountability politicians generously courted the greatest influx of immigrants in the nation's history. This denied us the "demographic valley" Japan entered in the 1980s.

The result is here now in growing rather than decreasing primary school enrollments; after the year 2005, in increasing numbers of young adults

seeking jobs and bearing children. According to the Census Bureau's "high" estimates (its most realistic) there will be 519 million Americans in 2050. More liberal assumptions yield 600 million or more. The prospect of a sustainable population has receded from view while we will battle the rest of the world for the resources demanded by our growing ecological footprint.

In 2100, Japan will be approaching greater ecological balance while its citizens will be disbelieving of the two and three-hour commutes and tiny dwellings of their great-grandparents. Conversely, Americans will routinely live in cities of 25 million, prize their few passes a year to crowded beaches and parks, and accept housing, diets, and physical movements unimaginably constricted by mid-20th century American standards. This country will have been permanently removed from the tiny group of net food exporters.

Because Japanese politicians cannot avert a desirable shrinkage of the Japanese population, Japan has a bright future. In contrast, American politicians are solely responsible for demographically irresponsible immigration and reproductive health policies. These have already tarnished the well-being of today's average family. By the year 2100, Americans will apply the words "bright and shining" to their past, not their present – and certainly not their future.

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¹ Extrapolated from *Alternate Projections of the U.S. Population*, by Dennis A. Ahlburg and James W. Vaupel, *Demography*, Vol. 27, No. 4, November 1990, pp. 639-652.

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