6. Defining the New American Community

A Slide to Tribalism?

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Doubters that rapid population growth drives poverty, inequality, resource overconsumption, and polluting emissions that overwhelm nature's restorative capacity do, of course, exist. Denial lives. The blithe ones, unaware and unafraid, enjoy the free-fall from the penthouse roof—until everything changes.

All may indeed (seems likely to) change. But if a soft landing remains possible, clear sight and a long view of population pressure on resources should pay off. Former Secretary of State Warren Christopher addressed the fundamentals at a December 1994 State Department conference on population and development. "When population grows too quickly," he said, "it strains resources, it stunts economic growth, it generates disease, it spawns huge refugee flows, and ultimately it threatens [U.S.] stability" (Dickinson 1995, 1). The process that threatens is insidious: drizzles and drops. Crises may be staggered and localized; oases may remain.

Constructive strategies are within reach, but first one must recognize elements that darken the horizon. Namely, the rapid increase in the population and labor force and the associated depletion of resources are propelling the United States toward shrinking shares per capita and toward widening inequality between rich and poor. The economic effects of population growth are adding to fiscal imbalances,
which already have burdened the American people with $5 trillion of federal debt. The feedback loops that link population growth to the nation's carrying capacity and the economy are accelerating a downward spiral.

Recognition of limits is neither new nor unique. Great Britain's 1949 Report of the Royal Commission on Population stated, "We have no hesitation in recommending... a replacement size of family... in Great Britain at the present time" (cited in Willey 1994, 3). Similarly, the 1972 report of the Presidential Commission on Population Growth and the American Future concluded that no national interest is served by continuing population growth. Addressing common economic and quality-of-life values, commission members said that ordinary Americans would be better off if population growth stopped immediately; conversely, almost every social, economic, and environmental problem would be made worse by continuing growth (President's Commission 1972).

Disillusionment with the American dream and fragmentation along ethnic or religious lines could precipitate a breakdown in civil society. Crime, riots, and incipient vigilantism today may escalate to worse riots, kangaroo courts, scapegoating, and separatism tomorrow. If such conditions were to occur, a government seeking to keep control might be expected to resort to unpleasantness, in violation of civil rights. Here we examine the relationship between (1) scarcity, diversity, and conflict, (2) population growth and carrying capacity, and (3) population growth and disquiet in America.

**Scarcity, Diversity, and Conflict**

The underlying issue in much domestic and international conflict is the incapacity of natural systems to support the resident population. Nevertheless, violent upheavals are often reported as class, ethnic, and religious conflicts because regions and societies fracture along these fault lines. Reports of political and social stresses and associated individual pathology (for example, Kleinman 1995) often inappropriately omit mention of the causal role of rapid population growth (Bouvier 1995).

Homer-Dixon, Boutwell, and Rathjens (1993) explicitly reject attempts to gloss over population/resource imbalances in the genesis of conflict. Their analysis of civil and international wars on several continents shows how resource scarcity makes direct contributions to conflict and feeds back into political and social alignments in ways
that exaggerate unequal distribution of wealth. The synergistic effects of overpopulation and scarcity occur as impoverishment breeds competition; and competition turns into resource grabs where sociopolitical alignments (tribes, gangs, economic cartels, political factions) provide both the cover of legitimacy and the sheer power of numbers and organization.

Journalist R. D. Kaplan (1994) also observes that environments collapsed by the "impact of surging populations" are the frequent root cause of political chaos. As overtaxed environments fail, Kaplan expects to see "re-primitivized man: warrior societies operating at a time of unprecedented resource scarcity and planetary crowding. . . . Crime and war become indistinguishable" (73–74) and security of sorts is found only in private guards and armies. West Africa may be "the symbol of worldwide demographic, environmental, and societal stress, in which criminal anarchy emerges as the real 'strategic' danger" (46). However, collapsing or invaded nations on every continent are potentially threatened by sociopolitical disintegration, refugee migrations across international borders, ethnic mixing, and loss of a cultural center.

Milton Esman (1994) focuses on the risks, sources of conflict or accommodation, and likely channels of protest that accompany the presence of several minorities together or, alternately, a minority residing alongside a majority group within one territory. Permutations include whether one minority regards the shared territory as its homeland. Noel Malcolm (1995, 66) suggests that "aggressive nationalism is typically a syndrome of the dispossessed, of those who feel power has been taken from them." Kaplan finds that ethnic diversity where wealthier minority populations can be demonized spawns the most vicious conflicts.

Esman's thesis is that the presence of minorities invariably creates strain, so the implicit or explicit goal of a vigorous society is the minimization of diversity. He writes, "The classic approach to depluralization is the encouragement of individual assimilation" (255). Schwarz (1995) also argues that accommodation to diversity is a false political myth and that until recently, and although more slowly with African-Americans, diversity in America has been systematically erased through assimilation. An example (see Kaplan 1994, 75–76) is Saul Bellow's description of his immigrant family in turn-of-the-century Chicago: "The country took us over. It was a country then, not a collection of cultures." An expanding economic pie makes assimilation easier because competition is muted.
Failing assimilation, conflict-management strategies depend on the strength of the state that mediates between parties. But, as Kaplan and Esman both point out, a state is fatally weakened by environmental collapse. The legitimacy of a state is further affected by whether minority or majority interests are in control. Schwarz (1995) suggests that unicultural dominance is a precondition of national stability; that is, claims made by diverse elements in a society cannot be resolved by "reasonable" divisions of resources and power, because minorities are seldom satisfied by distributions that do not entail significant (therefore unacceptable) losses to the dominant group.

Diversity becomes problematic if a nation's institutions allow, even encourage, the mobilization of minorities by "ethnic entrepreneurs" (Esman 1994, 245). Illustratively, the judicial construction of "affirmative action" in the United States has created resentment on all sides. Affirmative action programs—now widely viewed as a perversion of an ostensibly race-neutral civil rights policy—are being rejected in proposals and ballot initiatives to affirm the language of the 1964 Civil Rights Law, which forbids discrimination on the basis of race, creed, or ethnicity. Dismantling affirmative action exacerbates grievances in sectors that acquired a sense of entitlement and now stand to lose (Roberts and Stratton 1995).

Esman warns that diversity is intrinsically antagonistic to democracy, because "where the state loses control of ethnic relations, the result is likely to be protracted violence and civil war, as in Bosnia, Sri Lanka, and Sudan" (255). Containing violence among ethnic groups tends to entail increasingly authoritarian state measures. An embattled state will prefer an unarmed citizenry; but individuals and groups rightly fear losing the capability of self-defense, needed if the state were (1) unable to keep order or (2) captured by a hostile faction.

The United States, which sometimes defines itself as a "nation of immigrants," at first appears as a contrary example to Esman's principal themes. Yet diminished shares and a diversifying national profile complicate unity and democracy. Alexis de Toqueville observed that the roots of American liberty are planted in the natural wealth of our continent: "The chief circumstance which has favored the establishment and maintenance of a democratic system in the United States is the nature of the territory that the Americans inhabit. Their ancestors gave them a love of equality and freedom; but God Himself gave them the means of remaining equal and free by placing them upon a boundless continent" (cited in Potter 1954, 92).
Indeed, American history is congruent with the Esman-Kaplan-Schwarz analysis. Recent multiethnic riots in Los Angeles—where, significantly, some businesses escaped being burned out because owners (mostly Korean) engaged in self-defense—involved newly arrived immigrant groups who compete with citizens for jobs, housing, and education (Miles 1992). Esman’s observation that authoritarianism becomes indispensable to control of ethnic relations foreshadows the use of police and national guard to quell the Los Angeles disturbances, gun control legislation, and questionable, it is claimed, violent activities against citizens by law enforcement agencies (the FBI and Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms [BATF]). Law-abiding citizens have reason to fear both injury from extremists and loss of constitutionally guaranteed liberties as, once empowered, authoritarian institutions expand their mission.

In the slide to social disintegration, states Kaplan, democracy becomes “less and less relevant to the larger issue of governability. . . . It is not clear that the United States will survive the next century in exactly its present form. Because America is a multiethnic society, the nation-state has always been more fragile here than it is in more homogeneous societies. . . .” (Kaplan 1994, 75–76).

Liberty, tolerance, and democracy are fragile. Civil virtues may not survive population growth and shrinkage of the ordinary person’s portion. But unwanted trade-offs between liberty and order can be resisted. Much of the population growth results from immigration, a de facto population policy that, to many Americans, appears arbitrary and unnecessary.

**Population Growth and Carrying Capacity**

Carrying capacity refers to the number of individuals who can be supported without degrading the environment, that is, without reducing the ability of the environment to sustain the population at the desired quality of life over the long term. A degraded environment produces less. Exceeding the carrying capacity today reduces tomorrow’s productivity, so that smaller and smaller numbers can be supported without further damage (Arrow et al. 1995). Population growth combined with the high consumption levels to which all Americans and immigrants aspire is the ultimate threat to carrying capacity—the topsoil, forests, energy, clean air and water, and other resources—of our national home.
One cannot predict which of several factors will ultimately become limiting, because technological and market adjustments alter pressure points in the system. David Pimentel and others (1995) show, for example, that topsoil is being eroded fifteen to thirty times faster than its natural formation rate and that 3 million acres annually are being paved over or made useless for agriculture. No known technology creates or substitutes for topsoil, although its loss is temporarily masked by petroleum-intensive technology. If present trends continue, arable land will shrink from the 1.8 acres per person now available in the United States to only 0.6 acres per person by 2050 (but 1.2 acres per person is needed to provide a diverse diet).

Similarly, major aquifers are being depleted 25 percent faster than their replenishment rate. Transport of water from ever-more distant sources and desalination are energy-intensive and expensive. Competition between urban and agricultural users of water is intensifying and, foreseeably, water-short areas (much of the U.S. West) will cease to be agricultural.

Agriculture accounts for 17 percent of U.S. petrochemical use. Domestic oil is expected to be effectively gone in twenty-five years (meaning that the energy recovered will be less than the energy used to get, refine, and distribute the oil). Some uses for oil have no substitute (Gever, Kaufmann, Skole, and Vorosmarty 1986).

Already 60 percent of oil is imported. Reliance on foreign sources could greatly impact food production, domestic food prices, the $40 billion per year income from agricultural exports, and policy options vis-à-vis oil-producing nations, including Russia, Iran, Iraq, Egypt, Libya, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia.

Demography explains America’s insatiable thirst for oil and energy. Nearly all (93 percent) of a 25 percent increase in energy use between 1970 and 1990 was driven by population growth. That is, consumption per capita leveled off, but increased efficiency and conservation efforts were, and continue to be, overwhelmed by growing numbers (Holdren 1990).

Population growth is also endangering whole U.S. ecosystems. Thirty systems have declined over 98 percent of their natural area, imperiling habitat for countless animal and plant species (Stevens 1995). Five hundred species have vanished already as humans encroach on habitat (Ling-Ling 1995). The 40 percent loss of Staten Island’s original species is attributed to population growth. Man and Biosphere (MAB) reserves in New Jersey, the outer islands of the Chesapeake Bay, and
southern Florida are similarly at risk. The critical shift is from agricultural to more intensive uses of land as population density increases (Long 1995).

Losses in biodiversity have economic as well as moral and esthetic implications. Biodiversity contributes in uncounted ways to productivity and income, for example, honeybees pollinate billions of dollars worth of crops and we have no substitute! Unseen microorganisms restore (albeit over decades or even centuries) eroded topsoil; theirs is an essential contribution because “about 10% of all the energy [all types] used in U.S. agriculture today is spent just to offset the losses of nutrients, water, and crop productivity caused by erosion” (Pimentel et al. 1995, 1120).

Other factors (deforestation, pollutants, infrastructure, traffic congestion) could be chosen to illustrate carrying-capacity limits. Resources are being depleted even at the present rate of use; more people demand more resources; in using them, people create more pollution. Some systems have no substitute and, once used up or degraded, the loss is irreplaceable. Other systems are remediable but at a cost, for example, $25 billion is the estimated annual cost of implementing the Clean Air Act. Such programs compete with other economic and fiscal uses for money.

Population Growth and Disquiet in America

As a country grows poorer in natural capital, the hardship that citizens endure depends on the population growth rate, the distribution of wealth, and economic competitiveness.

The United States has the fastest population growth rate in the industrialized world. At more than 1.1 percent per year, the U.S. rate approaches that of some Third World countries and puts the population on track to double in less than sixty years. Every increase yields a less favorable natural resource/per capita ratio than enjoyed today. Yet, few alarms have been sounded over the no-end-to-growth-in-sight scenario (Stycos 1995).

Historically, the U.S. Census Bureau’s projections have been too low. Their series were revised upward in 1989, 1990, and 1992, because assumptions about immigrant numbers and subsequent fertility had to be raised. A 1995 series escaped upward revision by altering assumptions about departures from the United States each year. Moreover, asylum claimants (those in the United States but not yet processed
by the Immigrant and Naturalization Service [INS]), estimated at 150,000 per year, are overlooked; this omission resulted in a greater than 10 percent underestimate of immigration in the 1995 Report of the U.S. Commission on Immigration Reform.

A population of one-half billion was “the most likely” variant projected for the United States in the year 2050 by demographers Ahlburg and Vaupel (1990). Their number might now be raised in contemplation of high immigrant fertility, an increased annual flow of legal immigrants (to 1 million including refugees and asylees), and the conservatively estimated net 300,000 illegal immigrants including the many who overstay visas (aircraft passenger manifests show several hundred thousand more persons arriving than leaving each year) (Grant 1992).

The distribution of wealth is second in importance for determining national well-being. How is the manmade and (inherently limited) natural wealth divided up?

The question is fraught with political ideology, but what is desirable ought not be confounded with what seems likely. Historical and contemporary societies, and principles of market economics, suggest that distributional equity is incompatible with shrinking resources per capita. Government can alter for a time the identity of “winners,” but equality of results is probably not—nor ever has been—achievable. As an anthropologist, I conclude that every society that experiences population growth without commensurate growth in resources arrives at an advanced state of social stratification. The late Mayans and Aztecs preyed upon their neighbors and developed elaborate class systems of nobles, religious functionaries, military leaders, and commoners. The Incas had the same, with the probable added features of vassalage and slavery. Neolithic peoples in Great Britain evolved from egalitarian to stratified social structures as their communities became more densely populated. Stratification became prominent in both India (Davis 1951) and Algeria (Baer 1964) about the time that these societies became more crowded (Abernethy 1979). Women became chattel property in Europe’s overpopulated late Middle Ages. The overpopulated New Guinea Enga victimized women, unlike neighbors with a generous land-to-people ratio. So it goes through the ancient and modern world. The gap between privileged and powerless appears to enlarge as overpopulation and poverty become more profound.

Growth in the labor force is one mechanism by which population growth widens the gulf between rich and poor. Labor is a commodity
with respect to production. Thus, a large supply of labor relative to demand (availability of jobs) drives down the price (wage) that employers are willing to pay. The larger the supply of labor, the more that the compensation for labor falls.

Ronald Lee documents the inverse relationship between population size and wages. Time series for western Europe beginning in A.D. 1260, show how “a 10 percent increase in population relative to its long-run trend . . . depressed wages by 16 percent” (Lee 1987, 448). Individual countries were characterized by 25 percent (Austria), 24 percent (Germany and Spain), and 22 percent (France) declines in wages in response to 10 percent surges in the labor force. The population effect on working persons in preindustrial England was equally dramatic: “[R]ecounting in terms of agricultural goods, a 10% increase in population depressed wages by 22% and lowered labor’s share of national income by 14%” (Lee 1980, 547). Emphasizing that “population-induced changes in the preindustrial [English] economy were not trivial,” Lee adds that “the segment of society dependent primarily on wage income was comfortably off at the end of the fifteenth century; [but] after a century of population growth their wages had fallen by 60% and their situation was desperate” (Lee 1980, 519).

The population effect on wages is predictable regardless of the source of growth. Claudia Goldin examines the 1897–1917 period during which 17 million Europeans immigrated to the United States. Men’s clothing and foundries preferentially employed foreign labor, and displacement of less-skilled workers of the native-born population caused ripple effects so that across industries, states Goldin, “a 1 percentage point increase in the fraction of a city’s population that was foreign born decreased wages by about 1.5 to 3 percent” (1993, 21–22).

Effects were probably more far-reaching than Goldin imagines, because the large labor supply stifled internal migration toward new industrial jobs. In his well-remembered “Put Down Your Buckets Where You Are” speech at the 1895 Atlanta Exposition, Booker T. Washington pleaded for an end to immigration because it contributed to continuing underemployment in rural and small-town America. Indeed, African-Americans began to take advantage of industrial job opportunities in the north only after immigration was effectively ended in the early 1920s (Morris 1990; Briggs 1992).

Current U.S. data again show deterioration in both wages and the conditions of work (Bernstein 1994; Mishel and Bernstein 1995). Real wages stagnated for up to 80 percent of the population beginning in
the early 1970s, a period coincident with a one-time surge from women and the baby-boom generation bursting simultaneously onto the labor market. Continuing growth in the supply of workers is driven by immigration. About three-quarters of immigrants enter the labor force, nearly doubling the annual demand for net new jobs. Underemployment (the unemployed plus involuntarily part-time workers) rose from 9.8 percent of the labor force in 1989 to 12.6 percent in 1993 (Morris 1995), and is an obstacle to the absorption of a probable 10 million discouraged workers, the many welfare recipients whose benefits may end, and the 900,000 a year more young Americans entering than older workers leaving the labor force.

By 1990 immigrants were 10 percent of the total U.S. labor force and a quarter of all workers without a high school diploma. Vernon Briggs, Jr. (1990) testified before the Congressional Judiciary Subcommittee on Immigration, Refugees, and International Law that immigration victimizes the lower end of the U.S. labor pool, including both citizens and established, earlier immigrants whose labor force characteristics resemble those of newcomers. Frank Morris (1990), dean of graduate studies at Morgan State University (Baltimore), testified in the same hearings that “the black community ... may find that any encouraging assumptions we had about opportunities for young black workers and prospective workers have been sidetracked by hasty immigration policies.... It is clear that America’s black population is bearing a disproportionate share of immigrants’ competition for jobs, housing and social services.” Richard Estrada, of the Dallas Morning News, concurs. “Apologists for massive immigration appear to blame the large-scale replacement of black workers by Hispanic immigrants in the hotel-cleaning industry of Los Angeles on the blacks themselves, instead of acknowledging the obvious explanation that the immigrants depressed prevailing wages and systematically squeezed thousands of citizens out of the industry” (1991, 25). Earlier immigrants also lose, even when an influx is their own ethnic group. Estrada (1990) attributes unemployment among established Hispanics to new arrivals from Mexico and elsewhere who undercut wages, that is, will work for less and with fewer benefits. He adds,

In sum, the evidence shows that Hispanic-Americans have emerged as the greatest victims of U.S. immigration policy since 1965, instead of its greatest beneficiaries. The notion that Hispanics in this country favor more immigration, while the rest of America favors less, is a
false one that has poisoned the debate for too long. This distortion must be corrected, especially by those who explicitly claim to represent Hispanic-Americans. (1991, 28)

George Borjas and Richard Freeman (1992) attribute the deterioration in economic position of high school-educated U.S. workers to competition from immigrants and net imports of goods manufactured by unskilled labor outside of the United States. High school dropouts are still more affected: immigration and the trade imbalance together raised the 1988 effective labor supply by 28 percent for men and 31 percent for women, accounting for up to half of a ten-percentage-point decline in the wages of unskilled labor between 1970 and the late 1980s.

Recent labor market studies show further net negative impacts. Estimating that immigration accounts for as much as one-third of the 1980s relative income decline among lower-paid workers, Borjas (1995) sees it costing working Americans more than $133 billion annually in job opportunities, depressed wages, and deteriorating conditions of work. Symmetrically, immigration puts $140 billion into the pockets of employers. The net $7 billion added to the aggregate economy comes at the cost of increasing polarization between rich and poor.

Steve H. Murdock's testimony on March 22, 1995, before the U.S. Commission on Immigration Reform also suggests that immigration adds to aggregate income but without corresponding benefit to individual American families. By 2050, states Murdock, "average per-household annual income (in 1990 dollars) would be approximately $600 lower because of immigration."

Jobs are systematically downgraded by labor competition so that the nostrum, "There are some jobs that Americans won't do," becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Bring in fresh Third World labor and the wage, benefit, and safety conditions to which jobs devolve attract neither native-born Americans nor established immigrants (Marshall 1995). Wages and conditions of work are competed down so that jobs in whole industries—construction, meat packing, and hotelery, for example—become less attractive. Meat packing, formerly unionized and characterized by adequate wages and working conditions, is now said to be the most dangerous job in the United States (Browne 1995). Supply and demand operating in the labor market means that "a surge in immigration guarantees that the less skilled service-sector jobs remain low paid" (Whitmore 1992, 1E).
In testimony on March 22, 1995, before the U.S. Commission on Immigration Reform, a representative of the Arizona restaurant owners association made a telling admission when asked how the industry had coped with the temporarily smaller flow of illegal alien labor after passage of the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA). He replied, "We made the jobs more attractive by increasing wages, improving working conditions, and establishing promotion tracks." Queried as to how the industry might cope with new legislation that restricted immigrant labor, this same spokesman could not think of one single way.

Some newcomers are entrepreneurial (but at no higher rate than the native-born) and upgrade communities. Nevertheless, Americans may not benefit because immigrants tend to hire others of their own ethnic group, and some businesses are not new but only displace American-owned operations. In 1960 blacks owned 25 percent of the gas stations in Florida's Dade County (encompassing Miami). By 1979 black ownership had dwindled to 9 percent and Cuban ownership accounted for 48 percent of the total (Abernethy 1993).

Low-skill black and white Americans flee states that are heavily affected by immigration (Frey 1994; 1995), so data from local labor markets understate the extent to which Americans are displaced. Rejecting early econometric models that purport to show that legal and illegal immigration have little, if any, negative effect on U.S. labor, Donald Huddle asks if models and field studies that do show "significant wage depression and job displacement [are] ignored and distorted...treated as taboos, because immigration as a win-win situation is such a powerful myth?" (1992, 3). Huddle (1993) estimates that more than 2 million Americans unemployed in 1992 were displaced by immigrants, for a public sector cost of $11.9 billion in social safety net programs.

American skilled labor is also under pressure, particularly in fields where fluent English is not required (Coping 1994; Nelson 1994). The national security implications are not trivial (Wiarda and Wiarda 1986). Displacement of specialized professionals by immigrants who often will work for much lower wages threatens the viability of U.S. engineering schools and science departments. Is it wise for the United States to cede preeminence in mathematics, physical sciences, and engineering education?

International competitiveness, meaning the ability to sell goods and services abroad, is the final factor affecting the resource/population balance. Exports pay for natural resource imports while leaving,
ideally, a balance-of-payments surplus. A positive trade balance enables countries to afford imported carrying capacity (Teo 1995). The Netherlands imports carrying capacity.

Japan, Singapore, and other so-called Asian tigers have increased competitiveness through large gains in labor productivity. Rising productivity depends, in turn, on investment in technology, equipment, and plant (McCracken 1991).

The United States, although competitive in many sectors, may be overtaken because of its slower productivity gains: 0.8 percent average annual increment compared with 2.8 percent in Japan. Neoconservatives explain the variation in productivity trends in the effect of capital gains tax rates on savings and investment (Rubenstein 1995). But the difference between the 28 percent U.S. maximum tax rate and the 20 percent Japanese rate seems insufficient to fully explain the disparate rates of capital investment.

A likely contributor to the differential is the cheapness of American labor. Continuing rapid growth in the U.S. labor force (against almost no growth in Japan) drives down the relative cost of American labor and probably encourages reliance on labor in place of investment in labor-saving technology. Preference for creating new jobs rather than investing to raise the productivity of existing workers tends to dilute the average amount of capital backing each job. This is a drag on productivity gains and, thus, on international competitiveness in the long run.

Never to be forgotten as one heads down this road is the widening gulf between rich and poor. In a democracy, the benefit of cheap labor to employers may be transient, because it fosters the rhetoric of class warfare and demagoguery. The electoral process can result in tax and regulatory policies designed to redistribute wealth; but these also stifle wealth-creating business activity (for example, Sweden) so the "remedy" is self-defeating. Amelioration of conditions by a debt-ridden government is unrealistic in the long run. No one wins as government debt grows and underemployment worsens.

Lower compensation and heavier taxation both eat at the middle class, which is the bulwark of the domestic consumer market, political stability, and democracy. Not only dissatisfaction among ordinary Americans but also pathological behavior can spread. Despair of ever joining (or remaining in) the mainstream fosters crime, riots, vigilantism, intolerance, scapegoating, and other signs of disappointment and anger. All erode civil society and generate instability.
Conclusion

Population growth underlies many of the serious environmental, economic, cultural, and political tendencies that threaten to engulf America. Many Americans are resentful, having believed for so long that their birthright is the opportunity for honest work that will produce a good living.

The people are far ahead of their leaders in trying to stop population growth. Native-born Americans limit family size to 1.8 children. (The average national rate of 2.1 reflects the significantly higher fertility of the immigrant sector.) A cross-section of Americans also affirms that “controlling immigration [is] a very important goal” [73 percent of public versus 28 percent of leaders]; and that “immigrants [are] a critical threat” [74 percent of public versus 31 percent of leaders] (Rielly 1995, 6). Similarly, the 1988–90 Latino National Political Survey—released by the Ford Foundation in December 1992, two months after passage of legislation that raised legal immigration by 40 percent—suggests that more than 75 percent of Mexicans and Puerto Ricans residing in the United States agree or strongly agree that “there are too many immigrants” (LNPS 1992).

The general public is not xenophobic in its rejection of immigration, but a growing number perceive a link between worsening conditions, population growth, and the large inflow of aliens. Two-thirds believe that “the American Dream of equal opportunity, personal freedom, and social mobility [have] become harder to achieve in the past 10 years” and 74 percent expect that the struggle will intensify in the coming decade (Rielly 1995, 8). If current trends continue, resentment could rise sharply, redefining who is unwanted and what is unAmerican.

Perception of being cheated out of what is commonly seen as an American citizen’s birthright will enrage many. Democracy and mutual tolerance may not survive the realization that government, the media elite, and multinational corporations have governed in their own interests, in disregard for the well-being of the average, loyal citizen. The less sophisticated will sense mainly their own alienation from society and a near-total absence of a stake in its peaceful continuance. Demagogic leaders could mobilize this mass in the usual way—scapegoating, myths, promises—and the America we honor would become history. A descent into genocide as gangs, tribes, and factions war over spoils seems farfetched except in the context of history.
The further tragedy would be that the sacrifice is based on self-delusion, a persistent belief that open-arms immigration policies help countries from which immigrants come. They do not help. On the contrary, holding out the promise of rescue promotes false perceptions. Believing that local limits will not apply, foreign governments and people conclude that reproductive self-discipline can be disregarded. This miscommunication is devastating because societies cannot, without limiting natural increase, bring population into balance with the carrying capacity of their environment (Abernethy 1979, 1993, 1994a, 1994b).

Stopping the momentum of population growth in the United States is daunting. Albert Bartlett and Edward Lytwak (1995) explain that attaining zero population growth immediately means that the total of deaths and emigration must equal (or be greater than) the total of births and immigration. Given the 1992 estimates for the United States of 2.2 million deaths and 0.2 million emigrants per year, the total of births and immigration should not exceed 2.4—a problem to say the least, because births alone were 4.1 million in 1992!

The array of zero-population-growth scenarios can be represented by the two most diverse possibilities. One gives the whole allowance (2.4 million) to births while placing immigration at zero (42.5 percent and 100 percent reductions respectively). At the other extreme, immigration remains at the estimated 1992 level of 1.3 million, leaving room for just 1.1 million births (a 73.2 percent reduction in U.S. fertility).

The preceding exercise reveals the strength of the force producing population growth and the corresponding risks of delay in formulating and implementing policy. Delay now could contribute to crisis later, a high-stakes gamble. Never (one hopes) will individual decisions about childbearing be overruled by government, but China, of necessity, provides precedent.

Immigration numbers, unlike childbearing, are historically and appropriately within the public-policy arena. An all-inclusive cap of 100,000 annually, say, might give continuing priority to America’s valued role as a refuge of last resort. One-quarter, or 25,000 places, could be reserved for refugees. Asylum claimants (who apply for resident status only after entering the United States) “jump the line,” and so need not be rewarded with any significant quota. Skilled immigrants and citizens’ nuclear families (but not collateral relatives) complete the list of those who should be admitted under a reformed immigration policy.
Americans could be proud of this policy. It is sensitive and restrained and, given the population growth to which we are unavoidably already committed, is congruent with “the interests, and limitations of our country” (Kennan 1995, 116). This policy would produce a gradual decline in population size (through attrition) beginning in about 2050. It would come none too soon to mitigate the very likely social and political sequelae of overpopulation that could be increasingly upon us.