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Long-Range Study Mustn't Sidetrack Birth Control

A BILL to establish a Commission on Population Growth and the American future was enacted by Congress earlier this month. As originally proposed in President Nixon's message on population last July, the commission would have made a technical survey of American demography and of governmental activities that are sensitive to population numbers. The President also asked for a creative examination of the growth and distribution of urban centers, so that rational planning might replace haphazard sprawl.

House amendments enlarged the commission's mandate to include an inquiry on "the impact of population growth on environmental pollution and on the depletion of natural resources." Most important, it will also discuss "the various means appropriate to the ethical values and principles of this society by which our nation can achieve a population level properly suited for its environmental, natural resources and other needs."

WE HAVE been bombarded with proposals that range from one extreme, of putting sterilizing chemicals in the water supply, to the other, of ignoring the problem of population overgrowth. Both are equally hazardous to our future as a democratic society.

Furthermore, it is preposterous to advocate less intrusive solutions without more public understanding about the realities of the problem. In a poll at Cornell University, a majority advocated restraint on population growth but most of the individuals thought that three to four children was an ideal family size.

The commission can do a vital service by steering between evasion and hysteria in delineating the consequences of different rates of growth within the realities of our economic and social policies. Just how much is this generation willing to invest in the education of the next one? Or in capital outlays for disposing of its wastes? Or in conserving unspoiled lands so that a future generation can experience a wilderness rather than study an album of historic photographs?

It can also help to sort out the more realistic proposals for influencing reproductive behavior consistent with our central ethical principle of individual liberty. Simple solutions are improbable, and we may have to consider some important social experiments without being absolutely certain of the results.

For example, welfare reforms, whether or not directly coupled with family allowances, can be expected to influence planning for family size. It is important that we reinforce our statistical data collection and analysis so as to make the most intelligent appraisal of "experiments" of this magnitude.

THE NEW commission must not become an excuse, as many will predict, for neglecting existing opportunities. Sen. Joseph D. Tyding's bill, introduced last May, calls for some real action on providing family planning services to all women who want and need them.

It has the unhappy defect of requiring about $100 million a year in new funds—as will any effective program. As Sen. Ralph Yarborough commented,"Between the policy on family planning and the fulfillment there is such a gap that it makes the Grand Canyon look like a Texas creek."

The proposed commission has a large task in discovering a new ideology for America in dealing with its long-range problems of population growth. It will be wasting its time if immediate programs to give the means for birth control to women who are already inclined to it are kept in limbo.

On March 16, President Nixon signed the bill (Public Law 91-213) and announced the appointment of Mr. John D. Rockefeller,III, as the chairman of the new Commission.

This communication relates to a column "Science & Man" distributed weekly by the Washington Post.

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