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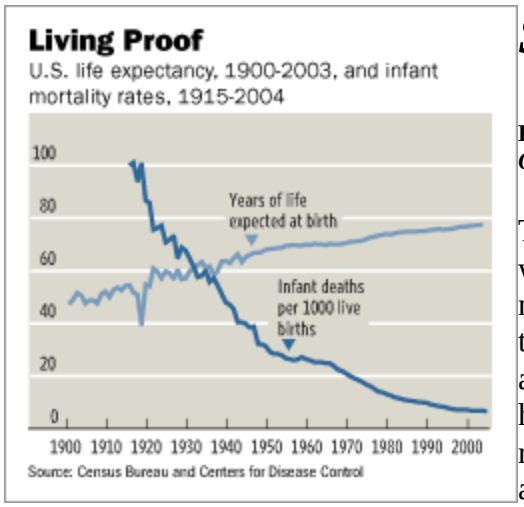
COMMENTARY



Supply Side 300,000,000

By STEPHEN MOORE
October 3, 2006

The Census Bureau tells us that some time in the weeks ahead the U.S. population will reach 300 million. This means that there will be roughly three times as many people as there were a century ago, and twice as many as in 1950. Americans have been bringing a new baby into the world roughly every eight seconds and a new immigrant arrives every 30 seconds -- the equivalent of a new Chicago every year.

This demographic milestone is not cause for alarm -- as some prophets of doom would have it. Rather, it is cause for celebration. We 300 million Americans are on balance healthier and wealthier and freer than any population ever: We breathe cleaner air, drink cleaner water, earn higher incomes, have more leisure time, and live in less crowded housing. Every natural resource we depend on -- water, food, copper and, yes, even oil -- is far more abundant today measured by affordability than when our population was 100 million or even 30 million.

Thanks to the rapid pace of technological progress, there's every reason to believe these resources will be still more abundant when our population reaches 400 million -- which should happen about 40 years from now. As the late economist Julian Simon reminded us, thanks to our free market capitalist system, the history of America is one of leaving the storehouse for every successive generation more endowed with wealth, knowledge and natural resources.

Yes, skeptics will ask: What about the inevitable headaches of crowded classrooms, highways and all the other problems associated with more people sharing a finite land area? In the short term, more people can mean more congestion. But anyone who has bothered to look out the window of a plane on a trip from the West to the East Coast knows that America remains a vast, unpeopled land. Texas alone is so large that we could put every U.S. family of four in the state and give them two acres to call their own -- and the rest of the country would be deserted. Our farmers grow about three times as much food on one-third as many acres and a third fewer man-hours as 75 years ago -- and we

have the technological capacity to feed a population many multiples of what we have today.

Our population is rising mainly because early childhood death rates in the U.S. have fallen by 90% in the last century, and continue to fall: A child born today in the U.S. is four times more likely to live to adulthood than one born in 1950, and 12 times more likely than one born in 1900. And these children will live longer, as the nearby chart shows. Life expectancy has increased by more than 30 years in the last century.

This good news is an eloquent rejoinder to 40 years of seemingly endless jeremiads issued by neo-Malthusians from Paul Ehrlich to Al Gore. In the early 1970s, when the U.S. head count was one-third less than today, the then-president of the World Bank, Robert McNamara, famously proclaimed that overpopulation was a danger on par with nuclear war. Many highly credentialed demographers actually compared uncontrolled human copulation with the reproduction behavior of Norwegian field mice. School children in the 1960s and '70s were warned that an impending nightmare of geometric population growth would mean standing room only on the globe and the need to wear gas masks to breathe.

Instead, as nations have grown richer over the past 50 years, birth rates around the globe have fallen by half. Human beings don't breed like field mice -- they can and do control their fertility. Ironically, even Thomas Malthus came to realize that humans control their breeding as a result of the "superiority in their reasoning faculties" and a capacity to "calculate distant consequences."

Apocalyptics in the Club of Rome -- who complained that America has the "grossest national product" and whose famous screed, "The Limits to Growth," asserted that economic growth could not continue because of limited natural resources -- were wrong. Growth brought about through the free market isn't a planetary curse at all, but rather the ultimate contraceptive and ecological protector.

Sadly, many policy makers still believe in the science fiction of overpopulation. The alleged threat of "too many Americans" crowding the country is one of the reasons that many in Congress want to build a wall around the U.S. to keep out immigrants. But even with continued immigration, the U.S. population is expected to grow for the next 50 years and then stabilize. By contrast, Japan and many European nations are expected to experience a debilitating absolute decline in their populations by between 10% and 25% over the next 50 years. Fortunately, the combination of immigration and slightly higher birth rates in the U.S. will help us avert that kind of population implosion here.

"Americans are the first best hope for the human race," as the historian Paul Johnson put it. That there are now 300 million of us -- and growing -- suggests that the future of freedom is in good hands.

Mr. Moore is a member of The Wall Street Journal's editorial board.

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