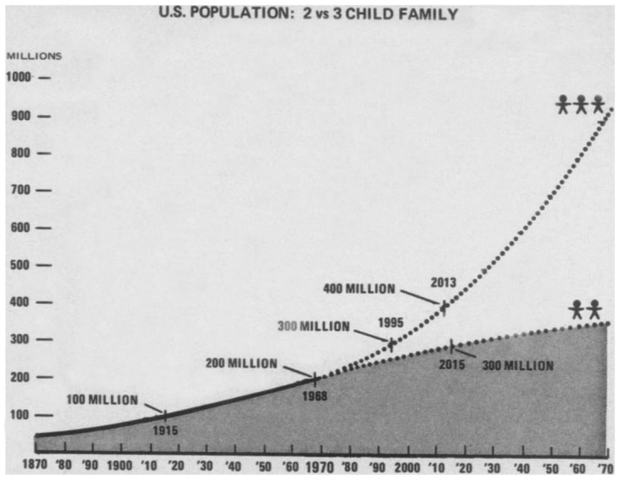
Quality or quantity

A Presidential commission finds reasons for stabilizing the population and prepares to make recommendations on how to do so



The more the merrier and the bigger the better are cliches no longer meaningful in terms of population. The Commission on Population Growth and the American Future, established by President Nixon and Congress in July 1969, has concluded that quality is more desirable than quantity.

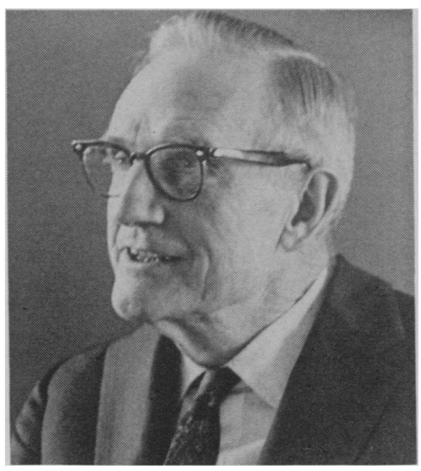
Commission chairman John D. Rockefeller III released part one of the commission's findings last week in Washington. "In the long run," he said, "no substantial benefits will result from further growth of the nation's population. Rather, it is our view that population growth of the current magnitude has aggravated many of the nation's problems and made their solution more difficult." He concluded: "The time has come for the United States to adopt a deliberate population policy."

Just what this population policy will be and recommendations on how to achieve it will be contained in parts two and three of the commission's report. They will be released next week and the week after. The recommendations will be based on findings of more than 100 scientists and experts on economy, environment, government and social problems. Their population studies point out that the present growth rate (1.1 percent per year) will double the population every 70 years and eventually lead to a standing room only situation. This can be avoided if the average number of children per family is kept at two. Eventually a state of zero population growth will be reached and this situation will benefit society at every level.

Economically, for instance, the report states, "the nation has nothing to fear from a gradual approach to population stabilization." In other words, a leveling off of the population would not mean a leveling off of economic growth, and eventual decline. John R. Meyer, president of the National Bureau of Economic Research and a commission member, said less people would mean a higher per capita income and therefore a higher consumption of goods. By the year 2000, the commission predicts, the average person will consume more than twice what he or she does today. (The value of this trend is debated by commission member James S. Rummonds in a separate statement published with the report.)

On the subjects of resources and the environment, the commission is less optimistic. The members acknowledge that population growth is not the sole factor involved in energy depletion and ecological damage. But with slower population growth, the report states, "we gain time to devise solutions, resources to implement them and greater freedom of choice in deciding how we want to live in the future." Water requirements, for example, already exceed available flow in the southwestern United States. The area of water shortage could double by the year 2020 with the two-child family. It would probably triple with the three-child family.

The scarcity of resources will be matched by the scarcity of public services if population growth continues at its present rate. Education accounted for about 7.5 percent of the gross national product, or $74 billion, in 1970. By the year 2000 it would account for 13 percent of the GNP with a three-child policy, but only 9.7 percent with a two-child average. Likewise, the efficiency of democratic governmental systems will continue to decline as the population climbs. And pressing social problems—racism and poverty—will only be aggravated as the population grows.



Rockefeller: Time to adopt a policy.

In all, the commission makes a good case for using the two-child family as a model of stabilization to avoid future problems. Achieving the goal, however, might present some more immediate problems. Who, for instance, is to limit family size and how?

Blacks and Third World peoples have expressed the fear that population control is a subtle means of genocide. Grace Olivarez, vice chairwoman of the commission, answered this charge by stating that "voluntary methods of birth control have eliminated the fear of genocide." Rockefeller reemphasized that the commission would recommend purely voluntary methods of birth control and said, "this is a major factor."

One likely recommendation, as a means of voluntary birth control, would be liberalized abortion laws. This, however, could meet with serious resistance. The Catholic Church has traditionally been against any form of artificial birth control—especially abortion. President Nixon, who appointed the commisssion, has stated, "I consider abortion an unacceptable form of population control. Furthermore, unrestricted abortion policies, or abortion on demand, I cannot square with my personal belief in the sanctity of human life—including the life of the unborn." And abortion is obviously an archaic and dangerous means

Debate over psychosurgery continues

Peter R. Breggin, the Washington psychiatrist who would like to see psychosurgery outlawed (SN: 3/11/72, p. 174), presented his case late last week at the Houston Neurological Symposium sponsored by the University of Texas. Reaction was two-sided.

Breggin elicited emotional support from 19 local university students who disrupted the closing session of the meeting to present a resolution. It read: "We resolve that this body take a position against the use of psychosurgery. We hereby condemn the use of psychosurgical techniques in the United States, especially in institutions—prisons, schools, army, etc. Locating areas of the brain and surgically cutting, removing or substituting them to control 'violent and aggressive' behavior is unjustifiable. People are not violent because of a problem in their brain. They are violent because their conditions of life are intolerable. If a person is unemployed he may well resort to robbery. Prisoners who are constantly harassed by guards may resort to violence to protect themselves. Are all the black people who have rebelled in cities across the country crazy? How about the people who fought to win unions? Should the people of Vietnam be operated on because they fight against oppression? These techniques will be used on blacks, Latins and white working people who are forced by society to be violent and aggressive. They will be used to stop future Atticas. They will be used to rob the working class of some of its most militant leaders. . . . We call on this body to take a stand against racism and oppression by absolutely opposing the use of psychosurgery."

Scientists at the meeting were less emotional. No vote was taken on the resolution and the meeting closed. But Frank R. Ervin of Harvard University, one of the researchers mentioned by Breggin, told SCIENCE NEWS last week that "there is a germ of truth in what Breggin says." Added Ervin: "The whole science of behavior technology —of which surgery is only a tiny piece—is bustling along at full tilt and getting better all the time, i.e., more powerful all the time. And this is one of those technologies that we damn well better keep on top of socially and politically. People ought to know what is available and what is happening—such as who is using what tool to do which with. . . . Everybody ought to be thinking about these things. . . . Everybody ought to be involved, not just an elitist group." Breggin, Ervin says, may be getting more worked up than the situation calls for. But he is thinking about these things and he is getting more people involved.

of birth control when compared with oral contraceptives, sterilization and intrauterine devices.

Even so, the commission may have to recommend liberalized abortion because, at present, knowledge of and access to other forms of birth control are not universal. To lessen the impact of such a recommendation, the commission last week released results of a poll indicating that half of all Americans favor liberalized abortion laws (see page 186). When asked if the commission's aim to "promote the opportunity for the means of a free choice" included the freedom to have an abortion, Rockefeller said, "tune in next week." □

Forced busing and the Coleman Report

Busing has long been a practical means of getting children to school—especially in rural areas. But the Civil Rights movement and the U.S. Supreme Court have made busing more than a means of transportation. It has become a means of integration and the hottest issue of the 1972 campaign.

Moral, social, psychological and educational reasons have been cited by busing proponents. They believe racial strife can be overcome in the future by busing tactics in the present. Some of the educational arguments, however, may not be as strong as previously believed.

Support for the forced busing mandate came in 1966 from James S. Coleman of Johns Hopkins University. With data from the U.S. Office of Education on 570,000 students in 4,000 schools, he conducted an extensive survey on educational equality. He found that lower-class black children being educated with more economically advantaged students learned more than lower-class black students being educated with lower-class black students. Therefore, busing to achieve economic and racial integration seemed a possible means of ensuring equal education for disadvantaged blacks.

A reevaluation of the Coleman Report, undertaken by a group at Harvard University, was published this week by Random House as *On Equality of Educational Opportunity*. The book opens with an essay by Frederick Mosteller and Daniel P. Moynihan and contains 13 research papers. The studies, applying advanced mathematical and statistical methods, confirm Coleman's original findings but say he may have overstressed the effects of integration on education. Poor blacks did make gains when put in white classes, but the gains were too small to be of much value. The advantage of social class mixing is "very clear but very small," says Moynihan, "because schools don't much alter these things."

More important, says the Harvard report, is the effect of family background on education. Economic conditions, number of siblings and parental education and attitude (but not race) were found to be the most important factors in educational achievement—for anyone in any school. This fact was found by Coleman and is reinforced now. It implies that Governmental efforts to boost educational gains should be directed at improving economic conditions (and therefore the quality of home life) rather than at forced busing. It does not directly affect the moral, social and psychological reasons for busing. □

Congress measures metrication bills

Along with liberté, égalité and fraternité, the armies of Napoleon spread across Europe a system of measurements based on decimal notation and the rational bias of French philosophy of the time. Napoleon's system of measurement conquered where he did not, and in the end, although Russia could defeat his armies and Great Britain his navy, neither could defeat his meter sticks. The Bolsheviks standardized Russia on the metric system, and a few years ago, after a century and a half of blood, sweat, tears and compound fractions, the British capitulated. Since the remaining countries of the Commonwealth are following the British lead, the action leaves the United States the only holdout among industrialized nations.

But possibly not for long. Last week the Nixon Administration introduced a bill into Congress that would provide for changing U.S. measurements to metric units over a 10-year period. The Administration bill joined two already introduced: one in the Senate by Sen. Claiborne Pell (D–R.I.) and one in the House by Rep. Robert McClory (R–Ill.). The major difference among the bills is that the Pell bill would pro-