A population policy for the enrichment of life

Realizing that the findings and recommendations of Presidential commissions often go unheeded (especially if they seem to bite the hand that feeds them), the Rockefeller Commission on Population and the American Future is taking its case to the public. Rather than making one big spash, the commission is pursuing a program of increased visibility by making a series of small splashes. First an impressive situation report (SN: 3/18/72, p. 181) detailed the reasons for instituting a national population policy. Now, part two makes recommendations on how to implement such a policy. Later this week more recommendations will follow. The commission hopes eventually to follow up with a nationally televised program and further dialogue.

The commission's recommendations are keyed to the enrichment of life and, like the situation report, emphasize the value of quality over quantity. The first recommendation is to enact a Population Education Act to assist school systems in establishing population education programs "so that present and future generations will be better prepared to meet the challenges arising from population change." The education programs are to emphasize environment, heredity, parenthood, family life, the cost of children and responsible sex education for all. Community organizations, the media and especially schools are urged to participate with help from Federal funding.

To encourage lower birth rates and to make life better for those who are born, the commission encourages the easing of adoption laws and practices (including public subsidies) and a revision of the laws and practices that result in discrimination of out-of-wedlock children.

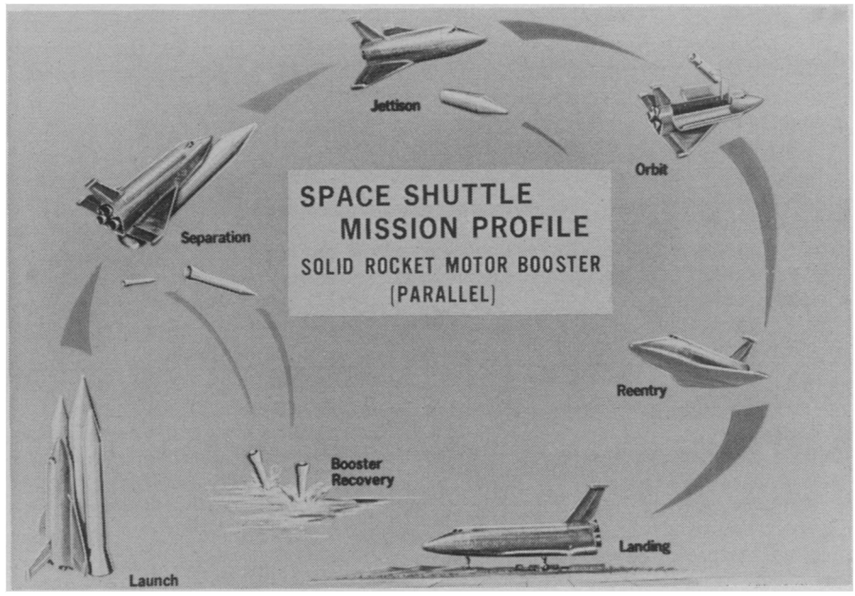
To give women worthwhile alternatives to motherhood, the commission calls on Congress and the states to approve the proposed Equal Rights Amendment. It asks Federal, state and local governments to undertake programs to ensure freedom from discrimination based on sex. This, plus the redefinition of the family roles of men and women, the commission hopes will help reduce births.

Getting down to the specifics of reproduction, the commission's argument rests on the individual's right to decide whether or not to have a child. It recommends "the elimination of legal restrictions on access to contraceptive information and services, and the development by the states of affirmative legislation to permit minors to receive such information and services." Administrative restrictions on access to voluntary contraceptive sterilization should be removed, the commission says. It recommends that state abortion laws be liberalized along the lines of the New York State statute, which allows abortion on request. (Federal, state and local funds to support abortion services should be provided, and public and private health insurance should pay costs of abortions, it adds.)

The commission acknowledges that moral objections will be raised against the recommendation for abortion reform, but it emphasizes that abortion is not to be considered the prime or preferred method of birth control. It is only a remedial method of avoiding unwanted pregnancies. However, the United Nations reports that abortion is probably the most widely practiced form of birth control in the world. To change this situation, the commission says the highest priority should be given to research on reproductive biology and "the search for improved methods by which individuals can control their own fertility."

If the commission had presented its findings and recommendations in one long statement, the abortion issue would undoubtedly have stolen all the headlines and obscured much of what the commission has to report and recommend. That would have been unfortunate, says Joseph D. Beasley, a commission member from Tulane University. The commission will attempt to steal some of the thunder from the abortion issue and follow up later this week with recommendations in the areas of immigration, population distribution and research. □

Choice for the space shuttle: Solid-fuel rockets



NASA made its last major decision last week on the configuration of the space shuttle: the type of booster to be used to get the orbiter-plane into space.

Two propulsion systems were under intensive study—pressure-fed liquid propellants and solid-fuel. The choice went to the solids, "because of lower [development] cost and lower technical risk," according to James C. Fletcher, NASA administrator. The cost estimate now for research, development, testing and evaluation (RDT and E) of the entire shuttle (boosters and orbiter) is $5.15 billion, compared with the previous estimate of $5.5 billion (SN: 1/15/72, p. 36). This does not include the cost for facilities and purchase of additional orbiters and boosters. The shuttle with pressure-feds would have cost $6.2 billion for RDT and E.

The two solid-fuel boosters will be parachuted into the ocean and recovered for refurbishment and reuse. This will save about 30 percent of the cost per launch, Fletcher estimates. Cost per launch is now estimated at $10.5 million, of which $4.2 million is for the solid-fuel boosters. The solids will be assisted at launch by the three orbiter engines which will be fueled by liquid hydrogen and oxygen from a large expendable tank. The tank will be jettisoned in orbit.

The choice for the solids came as a surprise to some space observers. "NASA used to shrink in horror at the mere mention of solid rockets on manned spacecraft," says one aerospace engineer. (The fuel and the oxydizer are already mixed so that an electrical discharge can set the rocket off.) NASA says it feels more comfortable with solids now that the Air Force has had some experience with them. But the shuttle will be the first manned space vehicle to use solid rockets as the main propulsion unit. □