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More or Less?: Two Accounts of Population and Family Planning

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Edited Transcript – Matthew Connelly

All right. Well what do I mean by putting up this title here, “Less is More.” When Geoff told me that he was going to title this panel where Bob and I are both of us going to be talking about our books “More or Less,” I thought, do I really want to be the one who’s going to argue for less? Is that really what my position should be today?

And that’s why I decided that I was going to title my talk “Less is More,” because what I mean by that is that the less we think about targeting populations, the less we think about controlling populations, the less we have a crisis mentality, the less we assume that all of our problems come from too many people, the more I think we can work on the things that really matter like reproductive rights, reproductive health care. And so, less population control, more reproductive freedom.

But what do I mean when I titled this book *Fatal Misconception*? What I mean is the erroneous belief that political problems, whether poverty or violence or environmental degradation, have biological causes and technological solutions. This book tries to show that you can’t make people better by breeding them, whether by forcing sterilization or paying poor people to stop having children, population control has not worked because people will not be controlled. And manipulative or coercive population programs have had the most pernicious consequences, not the least of which is to undermine the cause of reproductive rights.

Many thousands died from risky contraceptives and sub-standard reproductive health care, and millions were sterilized under the most appalling circumstances, much of it paid for by the World Bank, the United Population Fund, the Ford Foundation, International Planned Parenthood and many other organizations in the field. And all of this enabled the Roman Catholic Church to rally conservative Muslims and evangelical Christians and mobilize a backlash against abortion and contraception worldwide.



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It was only in the last quarter century that people working from within and without managed to reform organizations like Planned Parenthood and the UNFPA and redeem the cause of reproductive freedom.

Now I used to be one of those who assumed that population growth made poor countries even poorer and contributed to political unrest. Now I co-authored an article about it back when I was still in graduate school. This is an article that I wrote together with my graduate school mentor, Paul Kennedy titled, “Must It Be the West Against the Rest?” As you can see in this article, right on the cover, it says, “Whether it’s a racist fantasy or realistic concern, it’s a question that won’t go away.” As population and misery increase, will the wretched of the earth overwhelm the western paradise?

We call for more and better international aid, but especially more money for contraception. And like many people who grew up in the wake of *Roe vs. Wade*, I did not feel any particular passion about reproductive rights. The right to decide whether and when to have children seemed like a settled law. Instead I looked at population growth and migration in terms of national and international security.

I was therefore unsettled by what I discovered when I started researching a book on the subject. Much to my chagrin, I found that many other authors, to the left, the right, and the middle had issued similar warnings decades ago, and many of them went on to advocate coercive measures to control population growth. And I think we were right about one thing, it’s a question that won’t go away. Worries about population growth and movement have proliferated.

I’m going to give you just a few examples from some recent best sellers, starting with Mark Steyn book, the radio personality, *America Alone*. Now from Mark Steyn, the decline of fertility in Western countries portends the decline of the West. “Someday soon,” he writes, “you might wake up to the call to prayer from a muezzin.” Europeans already are. The future belongs to the fecund and the confident and the Islamists are both, while the West is wedded to a childlessness that consigns it to oblivion is looking evermore like the ruins of a civilization.”

Now for others population growth is making the planet uninhabitable. Even if poor people don’t actually invade, overpopulation turns them into terrorists. Now, Jared Diamond, for instance, whose politics couldn’t be more different than Mark Steyn’s, has a picture of the





ruins of civilization on the very cover of his more recent book, *Collapse*. Now here's what he writes, "In countries that are environmentally stressed, overpopulated or both become at risk of getting politically stressed and of their governments collapsing. When people are desperate, undernourished and without hope, they try to emigrate at any cost, they fight each other over land. They kill each other. They start civil wars. They figure that they have nothing to lose so they become terrorists."

Now it's true that poor countries have long had high rates of fertility and it has seemed obvious that this must be part of their problem and that having fewer children is part of the solution. In fact it's not supported by the data. I use a lot of graphs in this book, more than my editor would have liked, but this was one that I was persuaded not to include. Now if you find this confusing, you should, because it's a graph that represents along the Y axis GDP growth and all the countries of the world arranged in terms of how quickly their economies are growing at an annual rate all the way down from minus three percent all the way up to 7 percent a year. On the X-axis, you have population growth, that is, how rapidly these countries are growing in terms of population. If you don't see any pattern, it's because there is no pattern; countries are all over the chart. Some countries with relatively high rates of population growth also grow quickly economically, and vice versa.

Another idea is to reduce population growth in order to solve environmental problems. The problem with this, if you actually look at the history of efforts to reduce fertility rates, if you want to see how it is that organizations like Planned Parenthood and the UNFPA and so on try to persuade people to have smaller families, it was by trying to convince them by showing them the miserable, poor, unplanned, unhappy, often violent and ugly family on the left, was one that if only they had fewer children, would become the happy, rich, prosperous, good looking, athletic, planned family on the right. It was really a miraculous transformation that was promised and all if people would only have two children or three perhaps. So in the case of Nigeria, for instance, you can see that even in Nigeria, people are promised a suburban home and a car in the garage.

There's a curious thing about promoting smaller families. By promoting smaller families and also by promoting different ways of thinking about family -- even if it wasn't these organizations who did it -- over time changes and attitudes about family size did reduce the rate of population growth for reasons I'm going to describe in a moment. But it also increased the numbers of households in which people live. The numbers of households, that





is the numbers of homes in which people live, is now increasing at twice the rate of world population.

This is a study that was published in *Science* a couple of years ago about increase in household, numbers of households worldwide. They tried to show how even in the case of New Zealand, even in the nine districts where population was actually declining, the numbers of households was increasing. And in fact, and this is what you can see spread across the top part of this chart; the declines in population size actually coincided with increases in the numbers of households. And when you increase the numbers of households, if people live by ones, and twos, and threes, instead of multi-generational larger households, people consume more of everything per capita -- whether it's fuel, or water, or wide open spaces. So reducing the rate of population growth is not going to solve all of our environmental problems.

What about the notion that population growth fuels violence? Jared Diamond blames the Rwanda genocide on Rwanda's high population density, so too does Jeffrey Sachs in his new book *Commonwealth*, a book by the way in which Jeffrey Sachs explicitly backs population control and uses the term population control. It's true Rwanda has had a high population density, but I want you to compare Rwanda with this other country. This is another country that also has relatively high population density. Now, if you look at Rwanda on the left, you can see how it is that in those red parts of the country, you have from 500 to 1,000 or even more people living per kilometer. But if you look at the country on the right, you also see that there are many parts of the country where you have 500 to 1,000 or more people living per kilometer. So this is also one of the most densely populated countries in the world.

There are other ways in which these two countries are comparable. Like Rwanda, this country is ethnically divided. And this is a part of the world that has had many wars over religion and what many people that think of as religious fanaticism. And this included horrendous massacres and persecution, and it eventually required the partition of this country from the territory to the north in a long war, a war that lasted some nine years and drew in other neighboring states in the region.

The country to the north is a country that we now call the Netherlands. And the country I'm talking about is Belgium. It's true the worst violence occurred in earlier centuries, in the 16th Century and especially in the 19th Century, but Belgium's population was much smaller then. Now is Belgium overpopulated? If someone suggested to you that Flemings and Walloons were going to start cutting each other's throats because they couldn't possibly





inhabit such a tiny territory together, you would think they were crazy and you would be right because political violence has complex causes, and it is not driven by demography.

If some countries are rich and others are poor, it usually has something to do with relations of power. If Belgium had been a colony of Rwanda, for instance, rather than the other way around, then I would suggest that things might have been rather different even if the population density wasn't very different. What I'm trying to suggest is that even sophisticated quantitative research – and there's a lot of very unsophisticated quantitative research in this field – even the most sophisticated quantitative research can't answer the questions that really come down to values; how we value human life, how we understand the good life, and how we choose to live with one another or prefer not to live with one another. If you worry about poverty or environmental degradation or genocide, then you have to address these problems head on. And you can't make them go away just by making other people go away.

For an extreme example of this way of thinking you might consider another bestseller; this is Alan Weisman's *The World Without Us*. This was a book that inspired *Slate* about "global swarming" suggesting that maybe it was time for Americans to start cutting baby emissions. I like to show it alongside this illustration on the left. This is a very different perspective from the American conservative about the baby gap, how after the 2004 election, it was assumed that because Republicans and evangelicals had higher rates of fertility, that they were destined to rule and that miserable, unhappy, decadent family, even if they might be rich living in those blue states in the northeast like me, that they were doomed to irrelevance. So I'm trying to show you how it is that people have a different reaction that sometimes comes down to again how they evaluate the good life.

But in the case of this particular book, let's have a look at Alan Weisman's book. This is a kind of environmentalist utopia. Why is it a utopia? Because it imagines a perfect world, perfect because it has no people. There are no people in Alan Weisman's world, that's why it's so appropriate for Earth Day. Weisman wants to get us started and here's what he says: "worldwide, every four days the human population rises by a million. Since we can't really grasp such numbers, they'll wax out of control until they crash. The intelligent solution would henceforth limit every human female on earth capable of bearing children to one."

Notice he doesn't say anything about men. Presumably men can have as many children with as many women as they want, which I think is telling. But we could debate, you know





whether for instance the world would really be better without any aunts and uncles, or brothers and sisters, or better yet with nobody at all. But before embarking on a global one-child policy, shouldn't we look at places where they've already tried to limit people to only one child?

China, the largest country in the world, has had a national policy to limit women to one birth for 30 years. They've done this with birth permits and compulsory sterilization and coercive abortions, and this has led to extremely bitter resistance because without any social security system, Chinese depend on sons to provide for them in old age. This peaked in 1983 when China carried out some 20 million sterilizations in a single year. The next year, in recognition, the United Nations awarded the director of China's program, the hardest of the hard liners, mind you, a gold medal and a cash prize.

If you think that the United Nations was giving China a prize because it was promoting and protecting reproductive rights in 1984, then you're more Orwellian than I am. China did finally manage to get its fertility rate down to 1.7. Alas, relatively few of those babies are girls, to the point that boys in some parts of China outnumber girls by almost 40 percent.

There are some that would say that it might be worth the cost that 400 million fewer Chinese have left the world better off, but I want you to have a look at this graph. If you look on the left you can see those countries that were assessed by people working in the population field as having a high program effort, that is, these are countries that were really trying to control fertility rates. You can see the highest program effort score of all was given to China, and China did, it's true, reduce the fertility rate from some six children in 1950 and 1955 to 1.7 in 2000, 2005. You also see significant dropoffs in India, Indonesia, Pakistan, Bangladesh.

But have a look at the countries to the right. These are the countries with the lowest program effort scores, or at least in the category with the lowest program effort scores. The largest countries in that category included Brazil and Turkey and Argentina, Algeria and Saudi Arabia. Notice their fertility rates and how they changed over the same period.

What did the countries on the left do to get that high program effort score? They paid people to be sterilized and in some cases punished them if they refused. And the population control programs in all of these countries received international support. In some cases, like Pakistan and Bangladesh and Indonesia, at times international aid paid for two-thirds or more of the program budget. But again, these other countries in many cases had no program whatsoever





and still people found the means because it was important to them to control their family size.

Far more important than population control in controlling the population of the world is something very simple and very stubborn: it's whether women actually want to have smaller families. The most important predictor is whether women have access to education. All of the countries you see here that still have fertility rates of over three children per women are also countries with very high rates of female illiteracy. So India in 1990, in the middle of this period, had 60 percent illiteracy, Pakistan 79 percent, Bangladesh 77 percent and in Saudi Arabia half of women were illiterate.

If you have a look in the conclusion of my book, you can see how it is that the fall off in female illiteracy is almost exactly correlated with the global decline in fertility rates. Women who do not have access to education or career opportunities tend to have large families. This is not new information, it has been known for almost a century. The best way to bring down the birth rates was to allow more girls to go to school.

All along, the people that I write about did not see this as a solution; in fact, it was a problem. They worried that educated women were not contributing to the gene pool, so to bring down birth rates, they resorted to increasingly blunt instruments. If simple people did not plan their families in ways that experts found intelligible, then researchers had to come up with simpler methods. If people were too poor to afford them, they could be paid for using them with group pressure providing added inducement. And when many people would not accept IUDs or sterilization or implants or injectables, population controllers dreamed of something that could be added to the water or sprayed through the air, making everyone sterile without an antidote that only authorities could provide. I kid you not, this is actually research that was supported by the Ford Foundation and backed by the Population Council.

When no such technological fix was forthcoming, they denied maternity leave, housing and health care, or simply dragged people to abortion and sterilization clinics and camps like this one. In this case, for instance, from Kerala, this is a camp in which they had 50 beds in a vast operating theatre, one that had been set up temporarily. They were able to carry out some 60,000 sterilizations in a month, and this was promoted as a model for the rest of India. And by the emergency period in India in a single year, 1976, the bicentennial, Indira Gandhi's government sterilized people at the rate of a million a month. And when the World Bank and International Planned Parenthood Federation received word that these measures





had provoked resistance leading to clashes with the army and police, they redoubled their support. They increased their funding. Robert McNamara flew in to offer his support and said he wanted to commend India for finally getting serious in dealing with its population problems. McNamara was the president of the World Bank.

The family planning field is completely and utterly transformed, but I would argue that it was a long, hard slog. It took a long time to change these programs and to change these institutions. It was only in the late 1970s and in the 1980s that the major organizations in the field, the ones that I've been talking about, the UN Population Fund, the Ford Foundation, Population Council, began to promote family planning as not just a strategy and a slogan for population control.

One reason is that until then these organizations were almost completely dominated by men. The handful of professional women were almost completely shut out of the major policy decisions. In the 1980s, working both from within and without, they began to advance a broader agenda for reproductive rights and health. But the legacy of crash programs to reduce fertility was to make many people mistrust sexual and reproductive health care, and decades of warnings about a population bomb made it more difficult to sustain support for reproductive health care when it was not the fate of the Earth, but the lives of individual women and children, that hung in the balance.

This history still weighs like a millstone around the necks of the reproductive rights movement. But the main reason is simply that they have not unburdened themselves of it. Many prefer to think, especially people of this older generation who are more invested in this history, that these organizations have always and everywhere been dedicated to reproductive rights. It's only by acknowledging how difficult it was to reform these organizations that we can put to rest once and for all the accusation that they are still pursuing the same hidden agenda. And nowadays anyone writing on these issues is expected to identify themselves as pro-life or pro-choice. These two camps seem locked in confrontation, espousing principles that have come to seem irreconcilable. But this is a history of how some people systematically devalued both the sanctity of life and the autonomy of the individual.

Because I am late to this fight, this book reflects the passions of a convert, but not to one camp or the other, but rather to the belief that we must make common cause if we're to stop what may be the even more dangerous experiments of the future. If history is any guide, I think that projections of population decline, even a population implosion, may lead to





increasingly coercive policies, perhaps even crash programs, but in this case to try to get women to have more children, rather than fewer. And if you think that family planning has to be justified as just a means to that end of controlling fertility rates, then on what principle can you stand in the way of those who would use them, deny family planning, even deny women access to education and employment, as a way to boost fertility rates?

There's also the prospect that sex-selective abortion will make women a persecuted minority in parts of Asia. And with genetic enhancement the most privileged people may try to make themselves a breed apart. There's already an almost completely unregulated market in sperm, eggs, embryos, and even infants with the outsourcing of surrogacy and international adoption. The cumulative effect of these individual choices may be to make patriarchy permanent in the largest nations and endow the most privileged with genetic advantages they will lord over the world.

So I'd like to call for what I call a peace process for the abortion wars. It may seem naïve, but I think it's actually possible that people of good faith on both sides might recognize some common threats and work together in addressing them. And this is how I'm going to conclude.

I think that there are people on both sides, even among many otherwise pro-life congressmen, recognizing that universal access to birth control is the best way to reduce rates of abortion. They might also agree to try to campaign to end sex-selective abortion. If there's anywhere in the world that I'd actually like to see abortion clinic protesters, it would be standing in front of those places where people are using ultrasounds to avoid having daughters.

I would also like to see free and equal access to infertility treatment. If this is really a part of the Cairo consensus, if everyone agrees that this is part of comprehensive reproductive health care, then why is it so rarely provided in family planning clinics? And why is it almost never a priority for population organizations in this field. If people are to be permitted to use new technologies for genetic enhancement, then I think they have to be available to every one equally.

And finally I think the field of international adoption, now archaic and inequitable, is a field that's ripe for adequacy and reform. Certainly on issues like this one, and many of the others too, I don't see why pro-life and pro-choice people necessarily have to disagree, and I think there are many opportunities they might actually work together. Though the struggle





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against population control has shown that it is never enough merely to insist on choice, choices can be, have been, conditioned and constrained by default or design in ways that lead to new kinds of oppression. And the defense of life can also become a symbol, a symbol devoid of substance, if the effect is to drive people to breed.

Reproductive freedom is a cause that can and must stand on its own now more than ever, but it can only take flight if it is animated by a vision of social justice in which every one of us is conceived in liberty and created equal. So I thank you for your time and look forward to your questions. Thank you.



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