Numbers

by

*Eyes Right*

**Springfield, VA –** A 2021 book by Vaclav Smil, “*Numbers Don’t Lie*,” seeks to teach us how numbers reveal “the true state” of the world. His stated goal is to “make facts matter.” Among the many fans of his interdisciplinary research is Bill Gates, of Microsoft fame. If you like easy-to-understand discussions of a multitude of varied and interesting topics, I recommend his book.

Here are some numbers which should be of concern to Americans, particularly those under 50. According to a recent report from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), the U.S. fertility rate is currently 1.787, which is considerably below a population replacement rate of 2.1 children per woman. More alarmingly, there has been a general decline in this statistic from at least 1990. And the birth rate for women ages 20-24 has reached a record low. [An interesting side statistic from the CDC is that cesarean delivery rates now account for nearly one-third of all U.S. births.]

So why the concern? Among other economic concerns stemming from the birthrate decline is a coming shortage of younger workers to pay into the Social Security system. Prior to 2000, there had been a 5 to 1 ratio between workers paying into the program and retirees taking money out. Now this ratio is closer to 2.5 to 1 – and declining. Obviously, something has to give; we must either dramatically increase Social Security contributions by workers or severely decrease benefits received by retirees – or both.

American schools are already beginning to see declining student population. Several smaller, less prestigious colleges are facing closure. There simply are not enough students to go around. Upper tier universities (Ivy League, military academies) will continue to have more than sufficient applicants, but there will be an inevitable loss of jobs in the education sector due to less students. This loss will in no way offset pending labor shortages in many employment sectors, including the Armed Forces. Without sufficient numbers of young men and women, our military will atrophy in spite of advances in robotics, drones, and other types of weapons requiring less manpower.

The impact of our declining birth numbers has been mitigated for the past two decades by the stream of immigrants entering the U.S. both legally and illegally. Although all administrations have professed a desire to slow, or end, illegal immigration, their words are nothing more that a wink and a nod to bring ’em in – we need bodies for all those entry level jobs that many Americans have no desire to fill. You have not heard a word from the U.S. Chamber of Commerce about immigration issues because big business understands that the success of their members is often totally dependent on this source of labor.

Another set of numbers do not add to optimism over the declining population trend. One out of every three millennials and Gen Z adults are childless or state that they do not want children. There are several reasons for this change of priorities. Obviously, contraception options are one. But surveys also indicate that there is a strong preference among these groups for a lifestyle unencumbered by children, both financially, professionally, and socially. Raising children is costly, time-consuming, often frustrating, and demanding. But, as one who has rode this horse, it can also be a source of joy and wonder. And, I might add, something of a safety net as one ages. Sadly, these long-term benefits are often overlooked until time has erased options to have children.

Unfortunately, I see no signs of any early reversal of current demographic trends. The most recent numbers are not encouraging….and, remember, they don’t lie.

I thought you might like to know.

E-R