

## RESEARCH REPORTS

*Reviews of new research at public agencies and private institutions.*

### *"The True State of the Planet."*

The Free Press, 1230 Ave. of the Americas, New York, N.Y. 10020. 472 pp. \$15

Editor: Ronald Bailey

For a quarter-century, the environmental movement has marched to the loud, clanging sounds of alarm bells. The human population is growing too large, too fast. Scarce natural resources are being recklessly depleted. Biodiversity is endangered. Forests are being destroyed. The oceans are being overfished. Global warming threatens the planet. Apocalypse, in short, is just around the corner, unless humanity acts—and acts now—to thwart it.

In what is packaged as an "alternative" from the Competitive Enterprise Institute to the highly publicized "State of the World" reports issued annually by the Worldwatch Institute, Bailey, the author of *Eco-Scam: The False Prophets of Ecological Apocalypse* (1993), and 11 environmental researchers offer some strong arguments and a great deal of data to counter the conventional doomsday wisdom.

Bailey acknowledges that since Earth Day 1970, when the environmental movement was launched, it has achieved much good. In the developed world of the West, thanks to environmentalists, "air and water are much cleaner; automobiles are far cleaner to operate; belching smokestacks are far fewer and generally more efficient than ever before." But—fortunately—environmentalists have also been "spectacularly wrong" in many of their dire prophecies. "For example," he writes, "the global famines expected to occur in the 1970s never happened. Fears that the United States and Europe would cut down all of their forests have been belied by increases in forest area. Global warming, despite so many continuing reports, does not appear to be a major problem. And it turns out that the damage to human health and the natural world caused by pesticides is far less than Rachel Carson feared it would be when she wrote *Silent Spring* in 1962."

The gloomy Malthusian concerns about "overpopulation" that seem to be recycled from generation to generation (formulated lately in terms of "carrying capacity" and "sustainable development") ignore much of the available evidence, contends Nicholas

Eberstadt, a Visiting Fellow at Harvard's Center for Population Studies. The tremendous explosion of world population (5.3 billion, currently) in this century "has not plunged humanity into penury and deprivation," he notes. "Quite the contrary, the global population boom has coincided with an explosion of health, and of productivity, around the world. On average, the human population today lives longer, eats better, produces more, and consumes more than at any other time in the past."

To be sure, Eberstadt notes, within living memory, parts of Asia, Africa, and Latin America have suffered economic reversals or declines, harvest failures, and other disasters. But demographic forces are not the main culprit. For the most part, he says, the misfortunes "can be traced directly to the policies or practices" of the presiding regimes. For example, during the 1980s, "mass starvation erupted in Ethiopia . . . after its communist government inflicted a series of harsh and injurious policies on a population whose living standard was typically only slightly above the subsistence level."

For most of the world's people today, fortunately, the threat of famine is a thing of the past, writes Dennis Avery, director for global food issues at the Hudson Institute. "Never before in history has food been as abundant and as cheap as it is today. Although millions remain inadequately nourished, the good news is that advances in agriculture will eliminate the remaining pockets of hunger early in the next century." Many environmentalists, such as Lester R. Brown, head of the Worldwatch Institute, worry that with the global population projected to double to more than 10 billion by 2050, the world's farmers will not be able to keep up. Most agricultural researchers, Avery says, disagree. Paul Waggoner, former director of the Connecticut Agricultural Experiment Station, recently calculated that 10 billion people could be fed a sufficient, if minimal, diet *today*, if land and water already in farm pro-

duction were used at full efficiency.

Meeting the growing global demand for better diets, Avery says, will require continued research in plant breeding, fertilization, pest control, and other "high-yield" agricultural techniques, as well as "free trade in farm products so we can use the world's best and safest land to meet food needs with fewer acres and less soil erosion." High-yield farming, he points out, will also preserve biodiversity. "The main threat to the world's wildlife is the destruction of habitat. Continued dependence on low-yield farming in the developing nations would mean the plowing of additional acres of wildlife habitat to grow food for their increasing populations. A more populous world that also wants room for wildlife has no room for low-yield farming."

Turning to the much publicized threat of global warming, thought to be caused in part by the continued buildup of greenhouse gases, Robert C. Balling, Jr., director of the Office of Climatology at Arizona State University, says that the catastrophic projections come from sophisticated computer simulations of climate that are still far from perfect. As the models improve, he expects the "threat" to diminish. Meanwhile, highly accurate satellite-based measurements show that the earth's atmosphere has actually cooled by 0.13° C since 1979. (Even allowing for the cooling effect of volcanic eruptions, researchers found only a slight, statistically insignificant warming). Perhaps it's time now for some environmentalists to cool off a bit, too.

*"The Growing Importance of Cognitive Skills in Wage Determination."*

National Bureau of Economic Research, 1050 Massachusetts Ave., Cambridge, Mass. 02138. 46 pp. \$5

Authors: Richard J. Murnane, John B. Willett, and Frank Levy

It is well known that the wage gap between high school and college graduates has widened in recent decades. The average 24-year-old male high school graduate, for example, took home 16.5 percent less real pay in 1986 than in 1978. A male college graduate of the same age saw his earnings fall only one percent. (Female college graduates, however, saw a slight increase.) That is not the whole story, however.

For high school graduates, say Murnane and Willett, of Harvard's Graduate School of Education, and Levy, of MIT's Urban Studies and Planning Department, how much they earn later is increasingly affected by whether they possess basic cognitive skills.

Murnane and his colleagues found that six years after getting their diplomas in 1980, men who had strong basic math skills, as measured by tests given in their senior year, earned 53 cents an hour more (in constant 1988 dollars) than those with average skills. Moreover, the relative value of solid cognitive skills seems to have jumped during the 1980s. Among 1972 graduates, the differential was only 24 cents. The pattern was much the same for women: a 74-cent differential among 1980 high school graduates after six years, and a 39-cent differential among 1972 graduates.

The rising demand for cognitive skills

reflects changes taking place within occupations, the authors say. Employers need people who can "work smarter." People at all educational levels are feeling the effects. The premium on mental ability partly explains a 30 percent increase since 1970 in wage variation among individuals with the same amount of formal education.

The bad news is that while smarter 1980 high school graduates earn more than their peers, they earn much less than 1972 graduates—even those with weak math skills—did at a similar point in their careers.

For recent high school graduates, the picture six years after graduation is grim. For 1980 graduates with weak math skills, the average hourly wage was \$7.40. That is equivalent to \$12,950 (in 1988 dollars) annually—just above the 1988 poverty line for a family of three. Their higher-scoring classmates, by contrast, earned \$8.49 per hour.

The economic payoff for cognitive skills does not show up right away, the authors note. Two years after graduation, there is no wage differential among males and only a modest one among females. It takes longer, perhaps six years, to get a bigger paycheck. The delay means that the higher pay will serve as an incentive to work hard in school only for those high school students who are looking to their future.

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audiences come from over the next couple of generations? Perhaps this is a lesser concern in New York City, but it is a huge problem in nearly every other city or town in America.

Like Robinson's, my high school band was led by a superb, dedicated musician, A. E. Raspillaire. We had our share of successes, too, including the principal clarinetist in the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Larry Combs, and 32 years of consecutive "superior" ratings at the concert festival. (Not bad for the small town of South Charleston, West Virginia.) I share Robinson's appreciation for the music education I received as a youngster, as well as his concern that far too few students will have anything close to the opportunities we had.

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#### Pursuing Happiness

I was surprised that Robert Darnton ["The Pursuit of Happiness," *WQ*, Autumn '95] dated the death of Augustine of Hippo to "604 A.D." That date surely refers to the death of the other Saint Augustine—"the Apostle of the English." Augustine of Hippo's death is usually given as 430 A.D.

Moreover, the suggestion that "the classical revival was snuffed out in Florence by

Savonarola's bonfire of vanities in 1497" is of dubious historicity. Certainly Michelangelo's *David* (1501–04) more than amply suggests the vitality of the classical impulse after Savonarola. Whether or not Hobbes's pithy characterization of the "state of nature" is really applicable to the Middle Ages might also be pondered.

Robert Cahn  
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Robert Darnton finds no happiness worth pursuing in the medieval millennium. The hoary stereotypes of the "vale of tears" and of peasants working "the fields in a state of semi-slavery" are dredged up despite a century of scholarship by historians such as Marc Bloch and Joseph Strayer. The former credited the Middle Ages with *abolishing* slavery if only by the invention of that labor-saving device, the windmill. Yes, the medieval fathers did have a philosophy of suffering: only by accepting that inevitable aspect of human existence could one be happy. They wrote a good deal on happiness, not least of which is Aquinas's *Summa Theologica*. But Augustine's words on the subject are probably the best loved: "Our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee."

The American version of the Enlightenment dream, as Darnton points out, seems to have turned away from homestead, which is unfortunately no longer universally available, to "hot tubs, 'perfect' waves, 'deep' massage,

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fat farms, love clinics, and therapy of every conceivable kind." It is hard to cultivate one's garden when there is no garden to cultivate.

Crime, the breakdown of the family, drugs, and suicide aren't mentioned, although they may be equally strong indicators of the failure of this dream among American youth. Might not Emile Durkheim have been right when he called one of the results of modernization "anomie"—rootlessness, a lack of sense of belonging to the old centers of community: church, commune, village, or family? It seems that we have a suffering here which must be accepted at least for the time being. The failure of the American Dream may spring from the fact that it promises something it cannot deliver, and, even if it could, would not fully satisfy our longings.

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#### *Taking McNamara to Task*

Your "At Issue" column ["Listening—and Deciding," WQ, Autumn '95] properly takes Robert S. McNamara to task for alleging there were no Southeast Asia specialists in the U.S. government to whom the top policy makers could turn for intelligence on Vietnamese history, culture, and politics. There were several in government service during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, and quite a few outside the government. At least one was within walking distance of the White House. He was Professor Bernard B. Fall, who was on the faculty of Howard University in the nation's capital. Dr. Fall, a Frenchman whose penetrating scholarship on Vietnam drew extensively from his several research missions to that country, ultimately met death there in February 1967, when he tripped a Viet Cong mine while on one of those missions.

In the early weeks of 1961, I remember calling McGeorge Bundy at the White House from my consulting post at the Senate Committee on Commerce to urge consultation with Dr. Fall regarding some crisis in Saigon. I was told they knew of Dr. Fall, but I have reason to believe they never contacted him. Maybe, in their eyes, his French citizenship made him less reliable for objective judgment on that former French colony where France had suffered a massive military defeat before withdrawing in 1954. I am sure lower echelons in the U.S. government consulted

Dr. Fall and other outsiders. It is doubtful if the top policymakers ever did. Quoted in the WQ article, Roger Hilsman (an assistant secretary of state in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations) has referred to the fruitless flow of expert memoranda from the government's Asia specialists to its top policy echelons.

Failure to make the most of scholarly expertise on Vietnam occurred even under earlier administrations. In 1955, I chaired a Washington-based research team preparing a comprehensive study of Vietnam for the army under a private contract. When the year-long study was completed, I proposed to my superiors that the six-man team, including Dr. Fall, be sent to Vietnam to test the validity of our conclusions. Nothing ever came of this proposal.

Disappointment over the government's failure to make the most of a high-quality research effort in which government funds had been invested still lingers in my recollection of that worthy project. I wonder about the extent of other government failures to make the most of government-financed research—possibly with life-and-death implications for American military personnel.

*David J. Steinberg  
Alexandria, Va.*

#### *Setting Historical Standards*

It is probably dangerous for a nonhistorian to comment on the recent survey on history standards ["The Periodical Observer," WQ, Autumn '95], particularly since I did not know such standards existed. However, as you see, that hasn't deterred me.

My comment concerns Walter McDougall's quote on "spin." Perhaps Europeans didn't go to the New World to kill and displace Native Americans; perhaps they did not intend to deny human rights or rape the environment and keep workers in misery. *But that is what they did.*

An earlier paragraph referred to the ideological thread of feminism as a negative. Let us remember that women are *still* struggling for equality.

Since the philosopher is the product of his milieu, I must note that the undersigned is a patriotic WASP male from the deep South whose ancestors owned slaves and were Confederate soldiers. Also the undersigned believes in democratic capitalism with compassionate government regulation.

*Thomas L. Harmon, Jr.  
Greensboro, N.C.*

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some seriousness important ideas expressed on the printed page. I am haunted by the memory of a television commercial I recently saw in which viewers were told that a rich vocabulary is essential to success, and that thanks to some marvelous new device they could now increase their vocabulary markedly without having to read!

The second uncertainty is technological: whether fiber optics, satellite communications, CD-ROMs, computers, and other devices yet to be invented will leave a niche for those who prefer to sit in a comfortable chair turning the pages of a book or journal. Indeed, even the Wilson Center, thanks to the voluntary and devoted efforts of a few of its more sophisticated staff members, made

its appearance on the World Wide Web last November. Recently Michael Kinsley, one of the country's most gifted political columnists, announced that he will launch a new magazine that will exist only in cyberspace. This is almost beyond the comprehension of those of us who are wedded to print on page. I can only wish him well and say that I shall miss reading him.

A wise man once said that he could predict anything except the future. But one can say that so long as intelligent readers remain, and so long as they continue to appreciate the very special value and delight unique to words printed on pages, the *WQ* will seek to serve them with the same high distinction in the future that it has in the past.

Charles Blitzer  
Director

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