

America

This Month in History



50 YEARS AGO

The federal penitentiary at Alcatraz closes.

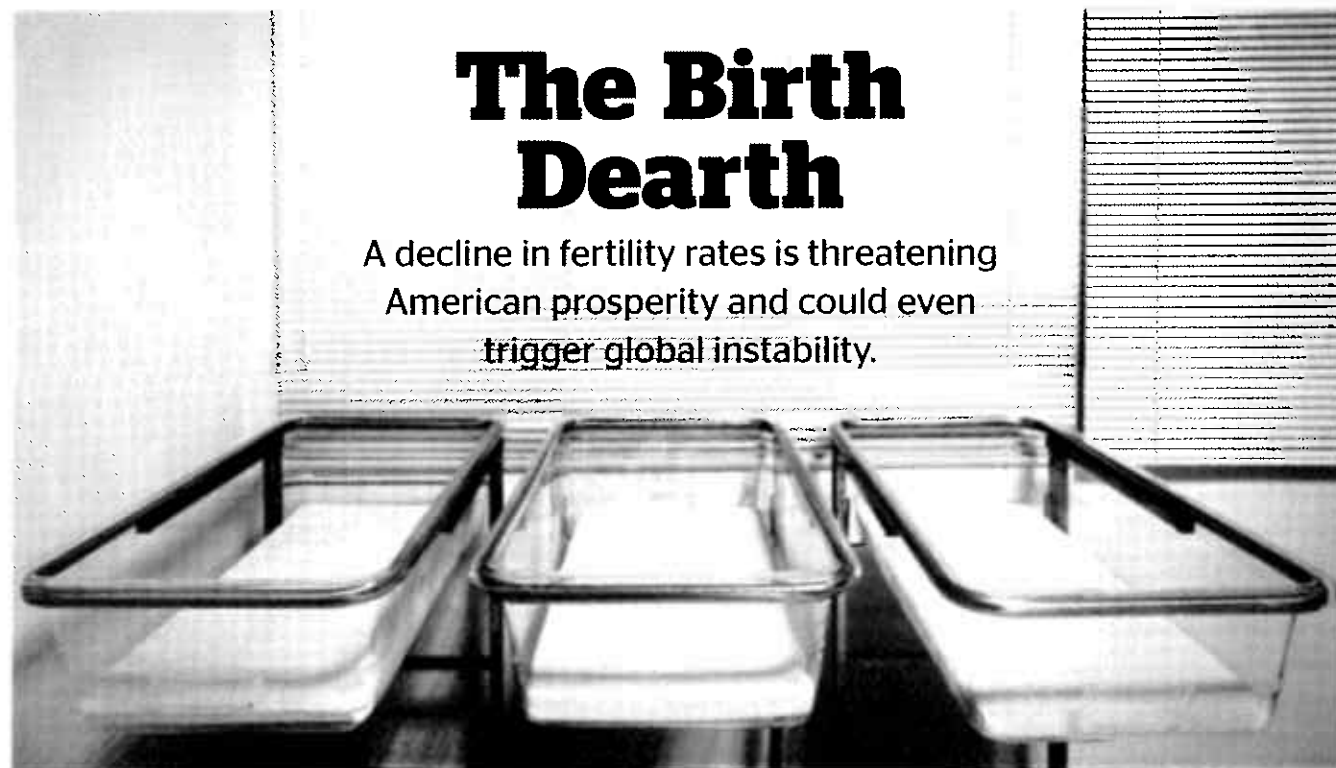


25 YEARS AGO

Mike Tyson knocks out Tony Tubbs for heavyweight boxing title.

The Birth Dearth

A decline in fertility rates is threatening American prosperity and could even trigger global instability.



BY TROY ANDERSON

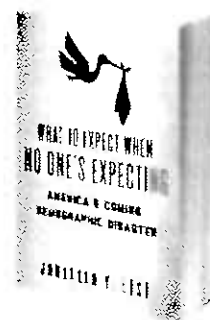
DECLINING U.S. AND GLOBAL fertility rates could have dire consequences, including threatening economic stability — even pushing nations to the brink of war, a groundbreaking new book warns. At home, the decline could wreak havoc on Social Security, already on course to run dry within 10 years, some analysts predict.

Jonathan Last, a senior writer at the *Weekly Standard*, writes that “throughout recorded human history, declining populations have always followed or been followed by very bad things. Disease. War. Economic stagnation or collapse.”

Last says he started thinking about a global

population implosion when a children’s boutique in his upscale Alexandria, Va., neighborhood was replaced by a doggy spa. He was stunned to learn that today, pets outnumber children by more than 4 to 1 in America.

In his book *What to Expect When No One’s Expecting: America’s Coming Demographic Disaster*, Last argues that falling fertility rates in the United States, Europe, Asia, and elsewhere pose potentially cataclysmic problems. Consider that in 1979, the world’s fertility rate was 6.0. That meant there were six live births that year, on average, for every 1,000 women of child-bearing



BABY BANE Author Last lays out how a declining birth rate could have devastating consequences.

age. Just to keep the population from gradually declining, it is necessary to maintain a fertility rate of 2.1.

Since 1979, the global fertility rate has dropped dramatically — to just 2.5. And in developed Western nations, it is even lower.

The rate is 1.3 in Japan, and between 1.3 and 1.5 in most European nations. In China, which has enforced a highly controversial one-child policy for decades, the rate is 1.6.

The developed nation with the highest fertility rate in the Western world? That would be the United States, where fertility stands at 1.95 — still significantly less than what would be required to keep the nation’s population from entering a gradual decline.

Why the decline? Social scientists cite a complex constellation of factors. Certainly the 55 million abortions in

the last four decades have played a major role. But so have delayed marriage, the increase of women in the workplace, the rise in cohabitation, and the high cost of housing.

The economic implications are vast. The U.S. Department of Agriculture recently calculated that the average family will spend nearly one-quarter of a million dollars to raise a child born in 2011 to age 17. That doesn’t include a college degree, which costs a small fortune.

Those costs represent a serious burden to parents. But they are a boon for the economy at large. From formula to diapers to car seats to toys to medicines — children are a font of economic activity. As they grow up and enter their adult years, they have families of their own and begin to contribute to a new cycle of economic productivity.

Changes in fertility rates send ripples through the body politic. Social welfare systems begin to bleed red ink when retirees outnumber workers. Innovation slows, because most entrepreneurs are under age 40. Investment capital dries up because investors grow more conservative with their money as they age. There are even fewer people to serve in the military.

So perhaps the American bugaboo shouldn’t be so much winding up like Greece, but rather coming to resemble Japan. After all, that aging island nation has averaged only about 1 percent growth over the past 20 years.

“Our fertility rate is not quite as low as Japan’s is now,” Last says, “but there are signs to suggest that we could be heading in that direction.”

That America is faring better than most developed nations is due in large part to its ongoing immigration, including illegal immigration. Recent immigrants tend to have a higher fertility rate, which helps explain why the U.S. population isn’t nose-diving as much as other countries.

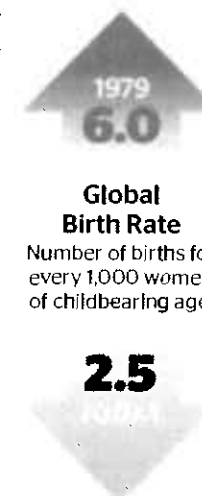
Today, American middle-class women have, on average, about the same number of children as Chinese women: 1.6. However, Chinese women have been subjected to the one-child policy for decades.

Of course, with lifespans averaging more than 70 years in developed countries, it takes a while for the decline in fertility to actually result in an overall drop in population.

The global population currently stands at over 7 billion. But the rate of growth has been slowing for two generations. According to Last, the planet’s population will peak in the next 85 years at somewhere between 10 billion and 12 billion. After that, the population will begin shrinking.

“Since Paul Ehrlich wrote *The Population Bomb* [in 1968], we’ve heard almost nothing but the hysterics of overpopulation; you know, ‘The world is going to be too full of people and hundreds of millions of people would die from starvation’ in the 1970s,” Last says. But the real danger, he says, is economic and social disruptions stemming from declining populations.

“Fertility rates, first in the West and then everywhere else, went into a nose dive beginning in about 1970,” he says. “And this is likely to lead to some very tough times, certainly around the globe — but also in America.”



Religion Plays a Role in U.S. Fertility Rates

So what should America do to prevent a future baby shortage? Author Jonathan V. Last says more Americans should attend churches or synagogues. Secular Americans, it turns out, have a fertility rate of just 1.66, compared to 2.3 for observant Catholics and 2.2 for Protestants.

In fact, fertility rates for religious folks are so much greater than for secular people that Last predicts America will inevitably become “a more religious country” over the next five decades. If it does, that would help boost the nation’s fertility rate.

Last contends Social Security distorts the “market value” of children. Not so long ago, people used to have lots of children because their kids could help support them in autumn years. But with Social Security, retirement is guaranteed.

“We have everybody getting Social Security benefits whether or not they went to the incredible expense of raising a child — and it’s about \$1 million to raise a kid once you include college and forgone wages,” Last says.

One way to strengthen the marriage culture, Last says, is tax reform. Currently, the tax code discriminates against married people.

Finally, Last says having fun “has become a legitimate pillar around which one could arrange one’s life.”

Children, conversely, are sometimes viewed in today’s society as a marker of social failure. After all, parents with a lot of kids will have less money to spend on themselves.

The bottom line, Last says, is that Americans need to re-evaluate their values. □