

Food & Energy

INTER-OFFICE CORRESPONDENCE

900  
JFK  
Population

FROM: WFL

DATE: November 15, 1949

TO:

WW	NOV 15 1949	WW
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GRP		GRP
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COMMENTS:

{ WFL makes some excellent points. I would like to discuss with him sometime the limitations of agricultural improvement,

SUBJECT: WFL Notes on Our Plundered Planet and Report to Industry by the Conservation people.

I have read both of these works with great interest and some misgivings. It seems to me that Osborn's book states the problem extremely vividly but loses some of its punch by overstating the facts at times. Essentially, of course, he has merely restated the Malthus theory in modern terms and it undoubtedly still contains many elements of the truth. But he has failed, it would seem, to bring in the other compensating facts, just as Malthus failed to do so originally. Some of these omitted facts, for example, are:

1. The increased efficiency in producing food per acre that has resulted from advances in modern agricultural science, such as now being demonstrated in the Mexican program. Thus, whereas the American Indian required many square miles of hunting country to support a small tribe, it takes only a few acres today to support a like number of people. Yet he draws the picture that we are nearer starvation than the Indians, a conclusion that I believe is contrary to the facts.

2. He has omitted any mention of the many factors that limit birth, such as ~~our~~ <sup>an</sup> obviously increasing effectiveness in industry in America.

There are several amusing instances wherein he takes the tone of a preacher in the pulpit rather than that of a scientist, as on page 70 - "Ingenious as man is he cannot create life." This may be true concerning the synthesis of life in a test tube but it is far from true when one thinks of both agriculture and the raising of chickens, cattle, hogs, etc., as a vast business directly concerned with the creation of life.

Page 76 - "The old saying that 'a man is what he eats' is acquiring a considerably greater meaning than it had at the time the phrase was coined. Our energy and well-being, physical and even mental, are dependent in the main on the composition and quality of our diet." I think most medical authorities would relegate dietary problems among their patients to a relatively minor category in the causation of both physical and mental disease.

Page 10 in Report to Industry - "Non-renewable resources are a fixed, measurable quantity. Known reserves of some, notably petroleum, lead, zinc, and copper, are seriously depleted. When these are gone they cannot be replaced."

This frightening last statement is of course technically incorrect, since lead, zinc, copper, etc., cannot be destroyed in toto and can only be distributed around the face of the world, resulting of course in an increasing cost of refining, etc.

Page 27 - Report to Industry - Talking about trace elements in agriculture he makes the statement "If any of them are absent it is possible for man to eat apparently well, even luxuriously, and still suffer from malnutrition." In all the time I have spent in medical school and in practice I have never seen or heard of a patient diagnosed as being deficient in "magnesium, sulfur, manganese, aluminum, zinc, copper, boron, cobalt, sodium, chlorine." Certainly this statement as it applies to man is more than an exaggeration and conveys a false picture of the facts.

SUMMARY: Both works lack, it would appear to me, a synthesizing summary of what first steps should be taken in view of the over-all problem. The reader is left with a sense of impending disaster but with no clear-cut picture of what to do about it. One of the most refreshing facts he gives is when he says, "All 48 States have passed laws to facilitate the organization of soil conservation districts. More than 2,000 districts have been organized. These districts are managed by the farmers themselves. An individual farmer can obtain, through the district, a survey and conservation plan for his farm, plus technical assistance, by agreeing to follow the farm conservation plan which will protect his own and his neighbors' land. The Federal Government contributes the services of technicians. So far 102 million acres (one-third of these being cropland) have been treated. Plans and work are in progress on an additional 83 million acres."

This present program of the Government, he says amounting to as much as 1 per cent of the national income, has of course been supplemented by the great regional programs of the T.V.A., and M.V.A., etc. Just what should be done other than to back this Government program to the hilt?

They make the statement that the conservation of all of these factors (water, top soil, timber, minerals, etc.) is vitally important to our civilization. It seems to me that the measure of importance is directly related to the time factor within which such shortages will make themselves felt. Thus a resource shortage that will become acute in 200 years is obviously of much less importance than one that will be felt in ten to twenty years. An objectively determined priority list of failing resources along a time scale would seem to be of first importance in even beginning to assess the problem.