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An Era of Global Scarcity

Not so many years ago, the United States was embarrassed by surplus food, exported petroleum, enjoyed leadership in mass production, and took pride in the expression, "sound as a dollar." A comfortable era has passed. Indeed, it would be all too easy to lose perspective and to panic. That would be foolish. Many of the current troubles will seem less worrisome before the year is out. Moreover, in having problems we are not alone.

If we extrapolate present trends, we can see that most lands are more likely candidates for turmoil and extreme misery than are we. The peoples of the world are demanding more food, more energy, more raw materials, and more goods. We have entered an era of scarcity.

The United States is remarkably blessed in a number of fundamental ways. It has great human and material resources. Our people are well educated, energetic, and disciplined. They respond to movements that are in the long-term interest of society—population control, environmental protection, and conservation. Few nations, if any, enjoy as good a long-term potential for production of food, energy, and raw materials. In the light of our present population and current rates of reproduction, the situation compared to that of most countries is excellent.

The advanced countries are vulnerable in one or more respects. For example, Japan has been enjoying a great boom. However, Japan must import food, fossil fuels, and raw materials. The sudden ban on shipments of soybeans from the United States is a tiny foretaste of what Japan is likely to face in the future.

But the coming problems of scarcities in the advanced countries are small in comparison to those in store for some of the lesser-developed countries. Most are without adequate potential for production of food, energy, or a variety of raw materials; they lack sufficient scientists and engineers and have not acted decisively to control population growth.

A country of particular interest is Mexico. There was born the Green Revolution. Over the course of 25 years, grain production doubled. But at the same time, the population also doubled. Last year, Mexico imported substantial amounts of feed grain. The country has considerable mineral resources, but its energy reserves are small. Currently it is importing oil, and its coal seams are few, thin, and deep. What about the human resources? The visitor to Mexico seeking answers to that question is likely to depart puzzled. The Mexicans clearly have the capacity for excellence. We have nothing that approaches their anthropological museum. Other aspects of Mexico City—for example, the metro—compare favorably with those of cities in advanced countries. The streets are clean and safe; the populace is alert and energetic. An observer, however, cannot escape the impact of two aspects of unchecked growth—babies and automobiles. During the past year the Mexican government has quietly begun to open birth control clinics. The effects, if any, are not evident. If something is not done quickly about automobile parking and traffic, Mexico City will come honking to a standstill.

The city is only a minor part of the country. Within a few kilometers of the city, the population lives under conditions much like those of 100 years ago, with a disregard for sanitation, but with Coca Cola signs and transistor radios everywhere.

Much of the world is aware of our standard of living and of our gadgets. They yearn for both, while the population explosion continues. We are soon going to witness dramatic and miserable confrontations of aspirations, expectations, and limitations.—PHILIP H. ABELSON

Science

An Era of Global Scarcity

Philip H. Abelson

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