

MEDIUM NOT THE MESSAGE

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Consider what reporters call "burying the lead." Here's a big story, expressed in headlines: "GIANT METEORITE SLATED TO HIT PEORIA AT 3 P.M." Or, with the lead buried, "METEOR WON'T STRIKE PEORIA UNTIL 3:10 P.M."

And here's the overwhelming demographic story of our time: Never have birth and fertility rates fallen so far, so fast, so low, for so long, all over the world, yielding populations in decline. That story was buried by the noise of "the population explosion," a powerful trend that peaked decades ago, but which is still promoted by environmental alarmists and their allies in the United Nations.

Recently, however, the U.N. Population Division had started unburying. Some projection techniques were modified to partially account for starkly falling fertility. The U.N.'s "Replacement Migration: Is It a Solution To Declining and Aging Populations?" caused a firestorm. All it said is that European nations will either take in huge numbers of immigrants or go out of business. Many European governments complained bitterly, demanding that the U.N. stop committing truth.

But now, alas, the recent release of the "Highlights" of the new U.N. biennial reference book "World Population Prospects -- The 2000 Revisions" shows the U.N. back in burying mode. That is too bad; only the U.N. has the standing to correct the central misconception of our time. And it can do so by changing a single word: "medium."

Consider the gist of the first four items of the executive summary of the document. World population is growing by 77 million per year, going from 6.1 billion today to 9.3 billion in 2050, according to the "medium variant" projection. The gain will come entirely in the "Less Developed Regions"(LDR), even though the LDR "projection assumes continuing declines in fertility." The population of the modern "more developed regions" (MDR) is "anticipated to change little." The 2050 global projection comes out at 413 million more people than previously reported.

So "more people" was the functional U.N. lead, and that is what was sent into orbit by the Associated Press, among other news organizations.

Bill Clinton was in New York when the U.N. report was published, but there is just enough truth in the U.N. document to rule out Clintonesquery. Still, the document is misleading.

Saying modern nations won't lose population in the next 50 years is like saying Michael scored 42 and Scotty scored 6 -- for an average of 24. Europe, Japan and most every other modern nation will suffer severe population losses, while the United States will grow.

Thus, the 2000 population of Europe is 727 million and the "medium" projection for 2050 is 603 million, a loss of 124 million people, or 17 percent, an unprecedented drop, hard to halt, let alone reverse. The "low" scenario for Europe, which unlike the "medium" version does not arbitrarily reflate low fertility rates, puts Europe at 556 million, a loss of 171 million, or 24 percent. Such a dizzying tailspin yields a senior theme park of castles and cuisine, disguised as a continent.

America, on the other hand, is slated to grow from 283 million today to 397 million in 2050, which pushes up the MDR average. But that American projection supposes increasing fertility and immigration, which is dubious. American fertility has been below the "replacement" rate of 2.1 children per woman for 30 consecutive years. Why would it go up? Will immigration go up? Mexican demographers say that Mexico has already breached the 2.1 rate, down from a 1965-70 rate of 6.8 children!

Like Mexico, there are already 21 nations from the LDR that have fertility rates below the replacement rate, including China, Thailand, Cuba, both North and South Korea and Kazakhstan. Yet a U.N. projection protocol mindlessly precludes an above-replacement LDR country from declining below replacement and, moreover, projects those that have back toward replacement.

Madness. Brazil's fertility fell from 6.25 children per woman to 2.25 in 40 years. Won't it likely go below 2.1? What about Turkey, down from 6.9 to 2.2, Tunisia from 7.2 to 2.3, or Indonesia from 5.6 to 2.7?

(The "additional" 413 million people reported come from recalculations of the speed, not the continuation, of fertility decline, and it follows other corrections from 1994-1998, which subtracted about 1 billion people.)

The U.N.'s sin is not that it uses screwy projections. Projections are tricky. The U.N.'s problem is labeling fairly high projections as "medium." That word is immediately misinterpreted as "most likely." It is then further transmuted into "fact."

And so the U.N. tells us that the world population will rise from about 6 billion to about 9 billion and keep growing instead of

a more likely course of going from 6 billion to about 8 billion, and declining.

There is a big difference between growing and declining. Reporting growth when the likelihood is decline buries the lead, and obscures the truth.

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