

VILLAGE VIEW

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While government officials, economists and voters, even as you and I, are all deeply concerned about inflation, there seem to be few who can give us any logical reasons we are experiencing it. Republicans blame labor unions; Democrats blame big business; the President blames Congress; a lot of people blame OPEC nations; newspaper columnists point fingers at all and sundry, including environmentalists.

Everyone's looking for a fall guy. After reading a report of an interview with Lester Brown, President of the World Watch Institute, I think maybe what we all need is a mirror.

Inflation is impoverishing the entire world; it's not a problem limited to the United States. And what has happened during the last quarter-century, world wide, that might possibly be at the root of inflation and give us the explanation for it?

For one thing, the world's population has increased from three billion people to four billion, and in those awesome figures, Brown believes, lie the basic reasons for international inflation and the continuing decrease in living standards in most places on this planet.

Author of numerous books on food, resources, and population, Brown holds degrees in agriculture, economics, and public administration. In the '60's he coordinated U.S. Department of Agriculture programs to increase food production in 40 countries. The Washington Post has described him as "one of the world's foremost thinkers."

In following Brown's thought processes, we may see more clearly inflation in relation to ourselves, as well as some possible steps to be taken to reverse trends that threaten to engulf us all.

What happens to the basic biological systems we depend on when too many people draw on them? What happens when fisheries, forests, grasslands and croplands are overused? These four systems provide food; it comes from nowhere else; they also provide all raw materials for industry except the minerals and petrochemicals.

Don't take my word for it. Don't take Lester Brown's word for it. Stop and think about it for a minute. Is that statement true?

If it is, it naturally follows that when unprecedented growth in population occurs, human demand for products begins to exceed the sustainable yield. As demand rises, prices go up. The old law of supply and demand works, as it always has.

To meet the higher demand for food, demand resulting from adding a billion more people in twenty-five years, we are overfishing the waters. To house more people and provide them with the accoutrements of living, we are deforesting the land. To raise enough grain and cereals to feed that additional billion people and the meat-producing animals people eat, we are overgrazing the grasslands.

When we overfish, we leave smaller fish populations, and guarantee next year's catch will be no larger than this year's. As we take wood faster than it can renew itself, we eliminate potential lumber for the future. As we overgraze, we destroy the carrying capacity of the land. Soils lose their capacity to produce; soil erosion further destroys future potential for production. Along comes a wind or a flood, and there's no grass to hold the soil, no tree roots, and the topsoil disappears. We have the beginnings of a desert.

That's happening, right now; almost all commodities of biological origin are becoming increasingly scarce and expensive. Why are we and everyone else in the world paying higher prices for wood, leather, beef, fish, wool, mutton and, most important of all, for cereals? The economics of supply and demand are at the root of inflation and may soon appear in the form of widespread malnutrition.

A few nations recognize the need to stabilize population growth; among them are China, Sweden, Norway, Denmark and The Netherlands. The Chinese are developing incentives to reduce family size; by providing economic bonuses to families with only one child, small families are encouraged. If continued population growth undermines and erodes the gains the Chinese have made recently in raising living standards, controlling growth is important to them.

In European countries mentioned, and in some others such as Nepal and the Philippines, limits on the number of children for which tax deductions can be claimed are imposed. In contrast, our United States policy is that deductions may be claimed for all the children the family produces, whether two or twenty-two?

In countries where population growth is not yet a recognized threat and where the growth rate is 3% a year (Brazil and Mexico are good examples), the relationship between people and their environment, the extent to which humanity depends on natural systems, is ignored. If Brazil's population, now at 110 million, continues to grow at three percent a year for the next century, there will be two billion people to feed, clothe and house, to provide with medical care and human services in Brazil. The same is true of Mexico. That is, more than all the people in India and China today, combined, will live in Brazil. Another equally large population will live in Mexico.

Some there are who hold environmentalists responsible for inflation; they feel it's a question of the environment or jobs. When we examine our relationship and dependence on the natural systems and resources, it's clear that if we don't protect those systems, there will be no jobs at all. Nor will there be many people left, if we can no longer grow grain to feed meat-producing animals and people, no longer catch fish, no longer find trees. Talk of tradeoff between environment and jobs is foolishness.

According to Lester Brown, the greatest danger to our national security, a far greater threat than military attack, is ecological deterioration and resource exhaustion. The development of new energy systems, he believes, is essential to our long-term survival as a nation, along with preservation of fish, forests, grasses and croplands.

Without new energy systems and without preservation of these basic biological systems, inflation will become the world's most destabilizing force by the dawn of the 21st century. Unless we brake world population growth, inflation will continue to erode all currencies, living standards will continue to decline, and the natural consequence will be sudden and disastrous reduction in population through wars, starvation and disease. Look to Cambodia today.

Neither huge budgetary deficits nor monetary policies to control wages, prices or interest rates will preserve food supplies, arrest deforestation, halt soil erosion. These are basic elements in the inflation problem.

Maintaining the basic biological balance between man and his environment would control inflation; to accomplish population control we must not only reverse our own social patterns, but we need to help educate the rest of the world to recognize, as China and a few other nations have already recognized, the important relationships between the environment and the number of people who attempt to wrest necessities of life from the planet's arable land.

Maybe the Washington Post's description of Lester Brown as "one of the world's foremost thinkers" is true enough that we should pay greater attention to his thoughts and conclusions. Before it's too late.