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Dear Fellow Citizen:

I was born 82 years ago into a world of 2 billion people. The planet holds 7.3 billion of us today, and despite lower birth rates we are headed for 9 billion by mid-century. For decades the emphasis by environmentalists has been on “sustainability” – the long-term matching of population with resources. But the overpopulation deniers are back in force. Despite overall increases in population, they say, birthrates are falling in many countries. Soon there will be too few people of working age to fund entitlement programs critical to the growing ranks of the retired. Economic growth will stall. So, more babies, and immigrants, please.

America’s declining birthrate, inaccurately portrayed as a “baby bust” by these alarmists, has inspired fears of falling off a demographic cliff. But the U.S. Census Bureau projects that today’s population of 315 million will top 400 million by mid-century. Young or old, the real problem down the road is likely to be how to create enough middle-class jobs in a fractured society with too many people.

This is not how Jonathan Last of the neoconservative *Weekly Standard* sees it. He has received wide media attention for his focus on the perils of a declining birthrate both in the United States and elsewhere in the world. On a practical level, he argues that soon there won’t be enough young workers to keep the U.S. economy competitive in the world. But Last also spreads the notion that the waning of religion in American life has led to a focus on personal fulfillment rather than on raising a generation to replace us.

Unfortunately, President Obama has seized on the demographic cliff scenario to press his case for liberalization of immigration policy. In a March 22 “Fact Sheet on Economics of Immigration Reform,” the White House concluded: “With slowing of population growth, and the aging of the American workforce, America needs more workers.” This will come as news to the many young graduates living in their parents’ basements and unable to find permanent jobs.

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The supposed crisis posed by a rapidly aging population needs a poster child. Japan fits the role because its total population decreased by 259,000 in 2011 and it has the world’s oldest demographics with a media age of 44. But 2011 was the year that Fukushima prefecture was devastated by a record earthquake, with heavy loss of life. And the 0.2 percent decline left Japan with 128 million people crowded onto a land area the size of Montana. For decades, overpopulation deniers have been anticipating economic disaster for a stable and prosperous Japan. Technological innovation and a strong work ethic keep the country on course.

What is one to make of the dour prediction that China, the world’s most populous country at 1.35 billion, faces a stark demographic future unless it abandons its one-child policy and starts producing more babies? Westerners are horrified by the fact that China’s 1971 one-child policy has contributed to 336 million abortions and 196 million sterilizations, many of them forced. But would China’s economic resurgence have been possible with an estimated additional 400 million citizens to feed and house?

Although the one-child policy enabled China to enjoy a higher income per head, much of which went into savings and investing, a policy change may be under way. China's new leadership worries that the country's 15- to 24-year-olds will shrink by 38 million, or 21 percent, over the next ten years. In March, the National People's Congress was presented with a proposal that could lead to the eventual phasing out of the one-child and some other population control measures.

Declining populations are anathema not only to rulers who see strength in raw numbers but to business leaders who seek ever bigger global sales. Places like India, where 1.2 billion people jostle for survival, become the promised lands for mass consumption. "India has incredible demographics," Jim O'Neill, outgoing chairman of Goldman Sachs Asset Management, told *WSJ Money* (spring 2013). "It has a very strong birthrate, which means the demographic profile is improving all the time and it is very young. During the next 20 years, the increase...in the working population in India could be as large as the total number of people working in the U.S. today." But author Pankaj Mishbab describes a quite different India, one that produces perilously few nongovernment jobs for millions entering the workforce. "Desperation has grown among educated youth," he wrote (*Wall Street Journal*, March 13, 2013). "Recruitment drives for even menial jobs have been known to cause terrible stampedes and riots."

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Leaders in many poor nations stubbornly embrace the chimera of ever-more babies as the key to national power and influence. In the Middle East, clerics fulminate against "Western plots" to limit the Muslim population through family planning. Pakistan's population of nearly 200 million has risen more than 60 million in the last 15 years, and the average household contains seven people. "The whole country seems absolutely overrun with an increasingly younger population," wrote Irfan Husain in the publication *Dawn*. "Half of us are illiterate. We have water shortages and electricity shortages, and two years ago, after catastrophic floods, we even had a famine. Yet there is no effort to stop our relentless increase."

So great is the fear of economic stasis that even the most prosperous nations feel impelled to add more people. Singapore, a city-state of only 267 square miles, earlier this year announced a \$2 billion plan to boost fertility. It later issued a population white paper, "A Sustainable Population for a Dynamic Singapore," that proposes boosting Singapore's population by 30 percent in the next 17 years (after a 32 percent rise since 2000). Population fueled by immigration would grow to as much as 6.9 million, up from 5.3 million today, to ensure a workforce structure of younger people that "can create good jobs and opportunities." Protests, to no avail, came from citizens who cited soaring home prices, infrastructure failings, and the widening gap between the rich and poor in the last decade.

The real demographic cliff in the world, and in the United States, is not posed by too many oldsters and too few young. Rather, the problem is too many *people* to maintain quality of life for all, on a finite Earth where we have failed to live within limits.

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