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The pill is mightier than the sword

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The Bush administration intends to cut the modest funding the United States gives to international family planning by almost one-fifth. For those of us who are interested in looking 15 to 20 years ahead, this is the dumbest action possible.

The Sept. 11 commission report is explicit: "a large, steadily increasing population of young men without any reasonable expectation of suitable or steady employment [is] a sure prescription for social turbulence." Every day on TV, we can see that it is predominantly young men who join extremist groups, burn embassies and plant roadside bombs. In Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan or Syria, the mean age of the population is between 18 and 19; in the United States, it is over 35. Both liberal sociologists and hard-nosed CIA analysts recognize a link between a high birthrate, a high proportion of young men in the population and the possibility of violence and terrorism.

Just as smoking is a risk factor for lung cancer, so a high proportion of young men in the population compared with older men is a national risk factor for violence. Not everyone who smokes dies of cancer, but many do; not all nations with a high ratio of younger to older men spawn terrorists, but many do. Young men in a sexually conservative society who have no jobs and cannot marry are easy recruits for any extreme political or fanatical religious teaching.

Consider the case of the Black September terrorists who murdered Israeli athletes at the 1972 Munich Olympics. Even Yasser Arafat felt compelled to try to rein in this group of young fanatics, and he did so in an unusual but highly effective way. The PLO offered Black September members who married Palestinian women a flat in Beirut with a television and a refrigerator, together with \$5,000 when they had their first child. Black September was never violent again.

For more than 30 years, there has been bipartisan congressional support for international family planning, and voluntary family planning has achieved a great deal. In 1960, South Korean women had six children, the population was growing more rapidly than the economy, and the country was as poor as contemporary sub-Saharan Africa. Without the support the United States gave to Korean family planning in the 1960s and 1970s, Korea might not have the two-child family and 15 times the average per-capita income of African countries it enjoys today.

It is commonly thought that poor and illiterate people want many children. Those of us who have worked in family planning for decades know this isn't true. As Korea, Thailand, Brazil and many other countries demonstrate, wherever modern methods of contraception have been made realistically available, the birth rate has fallen -- often

rapidly. Where fertility remains high, careful surveys always show a significant unmet need for family planning. We have spent our professional lives in international family planning because we know family planning saves mothers' lives, and we know that in the developing world, babies born less than two years apart are more likely to die. We see abortions increasing in the Philippines where contraception is difficult to get, but decreasing in some parts of the former Soviet Union, where access to family planning is improving. Most fundamentally, no woman can be free until she can decide when to have a child.

But having said all of this, it might seem naive to suggest that family planning could help forestall the next generation of terrorists, were it not for a silent revolution occurring in the Islamic Republic of Iran. In the 1980s, Iranian economists, like their Korean counterparts 20 years earlier, saw that the population was growing faster than the economy. The Quran supports family planning, and the theocracy agreed to make all methods of contraception easily available. In 15 years, average family size plummeted from more than five children to two. A more sober, cautious population of smaller families is replacing the body of radical students. The West may not want Iran to develop nuclear weapons, but in a generation's time Iran is likely to be more stable than Pakistan, which already has the atomic bomb.

Iran had the resources to build contraceptive factories and to carry family planning into the most remote villages. The poorer countries around the world need exactly the external support that President Bush is axing. It is difficult and costly to make modern urban society invulnerable to terrorist attacks, but relatively easy and extremely low cost to help those who wish to have smaller families. For international family planning (before Bush cut it), each American gave the cost of one hamburger per year -- about \$436 million total.

Prescott Bush, the president's grandfather in Connecticut, lost his first election for the Senate in 1950 because he had the courage to support Planned Parenthood. As U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, George H. W. Bush believed family planning was the key to solving the "great questions of peace, prosperity and individual rights that face the world." Laura Bush has supported family planning in Texas and Mexico. Sadly, the first president Bush sacrificed common sense to ideology in order to become Reagan's running mate. The second president Bush should take this opportunity to re-establish U.S. leadership in international family planning.

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