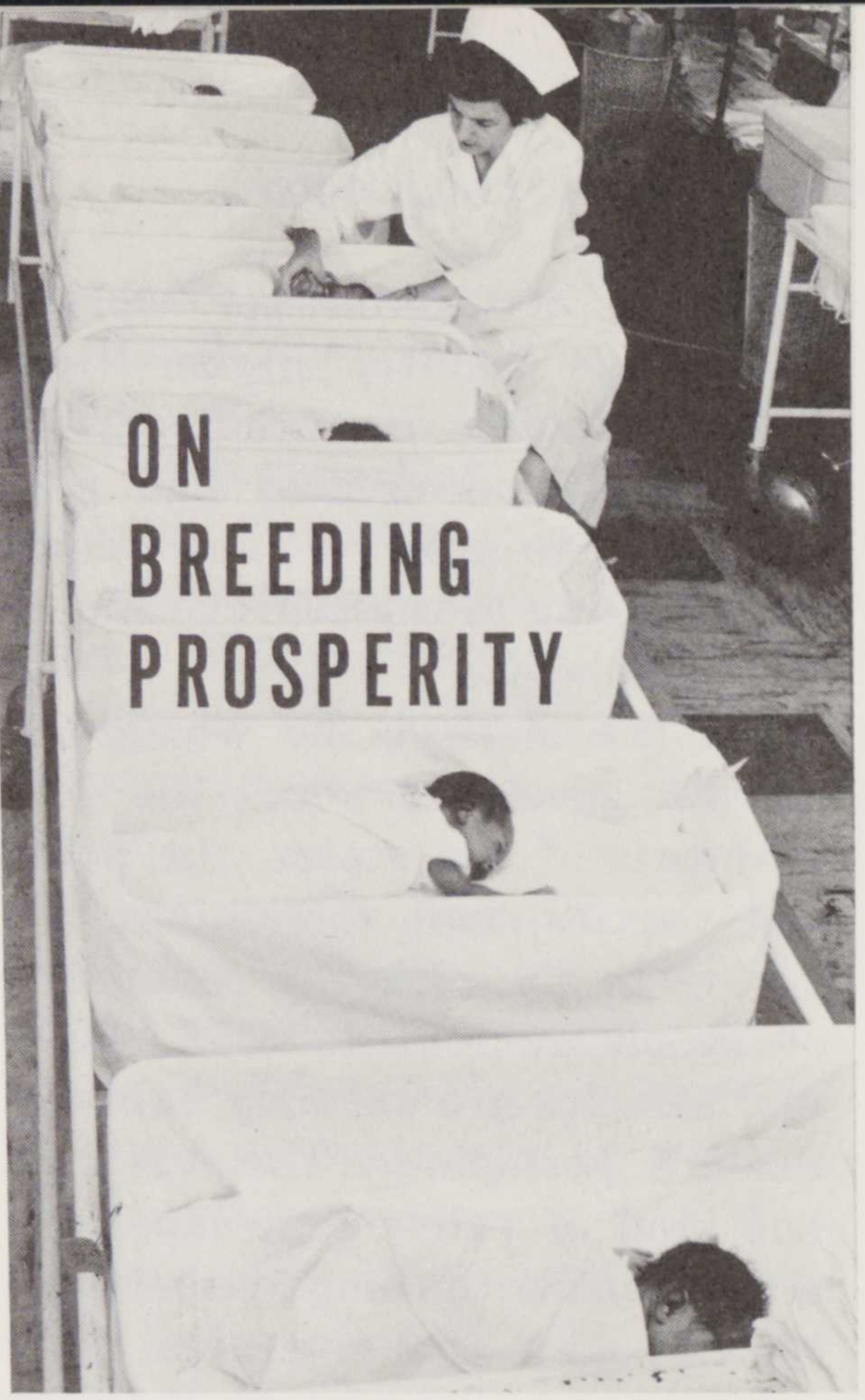

ON BREEDING PROSPERITY

F. A. Harper

THE POPULATION explosion in our country and around the world is commonly met with mixed emotions. On the one hand, there is the discomfort of being so pressed together that we stand on each other's feet, elbow our way through crowded subways, become submerged in traffic jams, or find distant recreation forests about as peaceful as Times Square at 5:15 p.m. On the other hand, there is the appeal of more customers for all who believe that a rising population assures prosperity.

The fact that the population has been rising rapidly during recent decades, and that more is in prospect for some time, seems beyond question. A common prediction is that the present world population of nearly three billion will reach nearly five billion by 1984.

Some authors in a *Science* article a few years ago reported that by extrapolating from past trends of recorded data, the world population will approach infinity on November 13, AD 2026. But the outlook cannot be as gloomy as that. Before that time the trend would flatten out from a new Malthusian corrective because persons would become crushed to death. And even before that, as a university president once reminded us, the population increase will probably terminate before reaching the point of standing room only, due to other obvious reasons.

Leaving these predictions for others to ponder, our present concern is with an economic notion which seems even more prolific than the human organism itself, namely that increasing population assures prosperity. To review the notion briefly, as any restaurant owner or storekeeper knows, his sales and profits are raised by more persons entering his store to buy. And they cannot enter his store without having first been

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born. Each birth today, then, means more persons in stores later; diapers will be bought at once, childrens' clothes later, and adult needs on through life. The more the births, the more will have to be sold to meet the growing needs, *ipso facto*, according to this simple reasoning. But on further thought and analysis, is this reasoning sound?

Wants Are Insatiable

Let us begin to analyze it this way: Human wants, over-all, are insatiable. If a President of the United States with "rigorous economy" spends $111,000,000,000 in a year, it seems probable that he might easily spend the entire national income if he were to let himself go on a spending binge.

Any one person's capacity to eat popcorn at one sitting may have its limits, but there is no known limit to his capacity to own more suits, cars, servants, servants for the servants. . . . So if there is any limit to human wants, it surely lies beyond the horizon of our imagination. This means that the limit on sales in stores, and the like, is set by something other than too few persons. By the same reasoning, more persons do not assure more sales and more welfare. What is it that sets the limit?

The limit to the satisfaction of wants is set by the quantity of things produced. Should some of production be wasted, fewer wants will be satisfied, but no miracle is available by which to satisfy wants with things not produced. Some persons may get more of the supply and others less, but that is a question separate from the one we are discussing; and in any event it does not make consumption any greater than production.

What Limits Production

The total quantity of goods and other services produced in the nation in a year depends on three things:

1. The number of persons working
2. The number of hours worked per person
3. The output of product per hour

We are considering prosperity, and the effect of an increase in population on prosperity. Our concern is with the welfare of the individual, not the nation. China or India produce more than Switzerland or Canada as a national total, but who yearns for that sort of prosperity? Thus, we can largely ignore from our concern in this connection the first factor of the number of persons, because as increasing population brings more producers it also brings more stores for more consumers to enter. Over-all, persons