

# Detonation or Dud?

The Initial Impact and Questionable Legacy  
of Paul Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb*  
at Middlebury College and Beyond

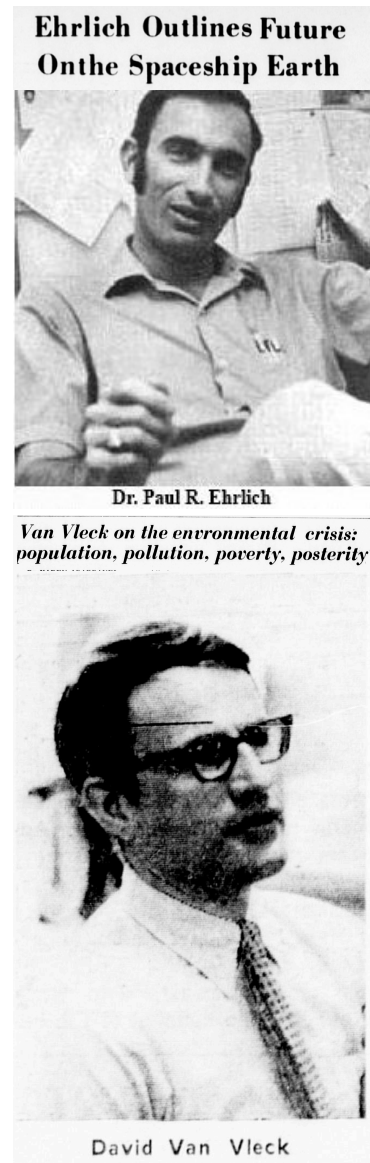
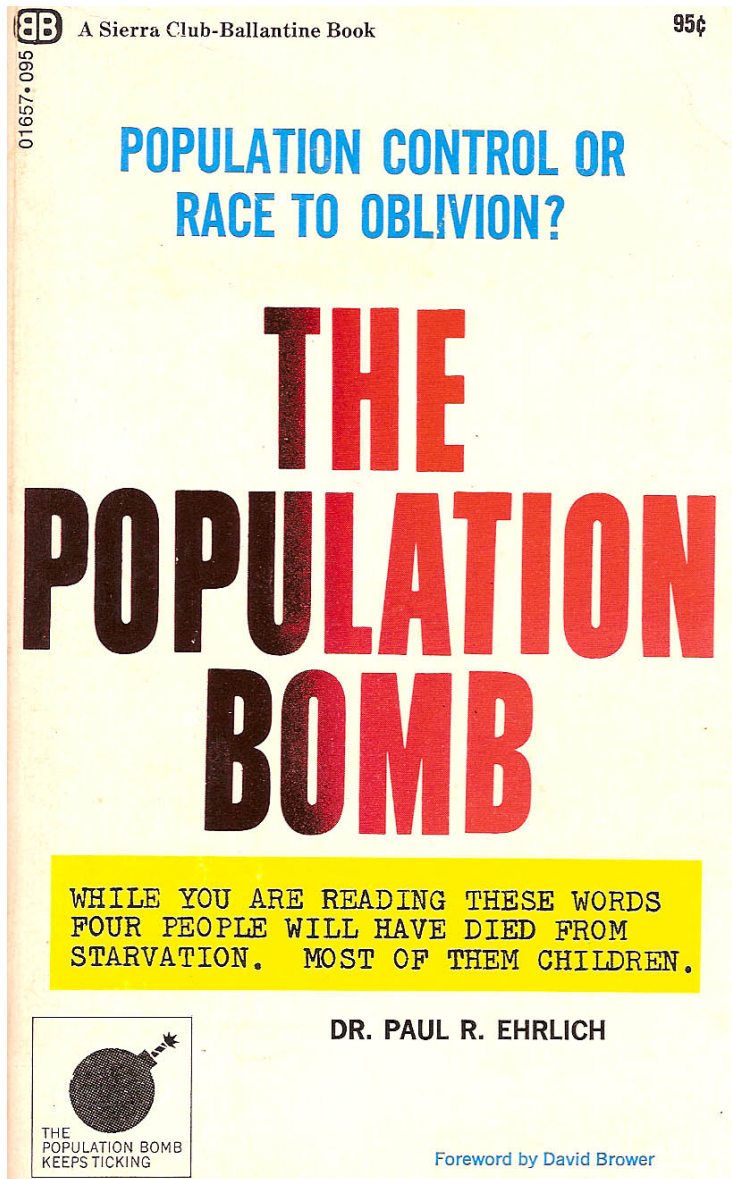


Fig. 1. The cover of Paul Ehrlich's 1968 book *The Population Bomb*

Fig. 2. Stanford University population biologist Paul Ehrlich.

Fig. 3 David Van Vleck, Associate Professor in the Middlebury Biology department, 1968-1971.

In the summer of 1971, the *Middlebury College News Letter* ran a column highlighting the most popular books sold in the college's store in the previous school year. What the editors found was a telling snapshot of American culture at the time; "a mixture of ecology, sex, child psychology, drugs, Vietnam, and Negro writings." Indeed, the previous decade of radical upheaval and cultural transformation resulted in an influx of new thought in the realm of academia on topics of war, sex, gender, race, class, and the environment. Topping the list at the Middlebury College bookstore in 1970 was Paul Ehrlich's 1968 book *The Population Bomb*.<sup>1</sup> The neo-Malthusian theory behind the Stanford University population biologist's foreboding message was thus; without population control, the world would descend into a state of famine and irreversible pollution over the next three decades. On the book's original cover, the text beneath its title made a desperate appeal to the emotions of American people; "While you are reading these words four people will have died from starvation. Most of them children." (Fig. 1)

In the 1960s, the rising tide of environmental awareness and activism was overwhelmingly defined and driven by the sense of urgency and "crisis." Concerns over dwindling resources, urban decay, and environmental deterioration stood in stark contrast with the "quality of life" that so much of American society stressed and strived to attain in a post-World War II era of affluence. Compounding all of these issues of decline was the well-circulated fact that the world's population growth was increasing at an unprecedented rate. By the end of the decade, news outlets, politicians, professors, students, and protesters rarely discussed pollution without mention of population.

While doomsday shock value of *The Population Bomb* was initially popular and influential in permeating American culture during the late 1960s and early 70s, the work is

---

<sup>1</sup>"Around the Hill," *Middlebury College News Letter*, Summer 1971, 1.

often retrospectively criticized for its alarmist tone, anthropocentric focus, and tendencies toward American exceptionalism. Interestingly, despite the book's popularity with Middlebury students, the News Letter reported that sales of all ecology titles, inclusive of *The Population Bomb*, "faded" in 1971. Given the intense culmination of activism and attention focused on the environmental movement and the first Earth Day in 1970, the peak in popularity of environmental and ecological readings at Middlebury College is not surprising. But what made *The Population Bomb* so particularly captivating on a college campus in the sparsely populated, mostly rural state of Vermont? The book's fear-inducing title, staggering statistics, and dramatic predictions surely contributed to its general popularity, but the public dissemination and discussion of Ehrlich's ideology on the Middlebury campus between 1968 and 1971 can be largely attributed to one of the college's newly hired professors, Dr. David Van Vleck.

A Princeton graduate with a Ph.D. in biology from Cornell, Van Vleck arrived on the Middlebury Campus the same year *The Population Bomb* was published in 1968. As an Associate Professor in the Middlebury Biology department, Van Vleck taught courses in anatomy and physiology, but his main passion was writing and to speaking his students and peers about what he believed to be the biggest problem facing mankind at the time: "the imbalance between human population and the ability of the environment, including water, to support this population."<sup>2</sup> Of the many articles about pollution and population published in *The Middlebury Campus* from 1968-1971 almost all were either written by or written about Van Vleck. The high concentration of articles regarding population and pollution published in *The Middlebury Campus* during Van Vleck's four years as a professor is not only reflective of his campus presence and influence, but also mirrors media and public attention to

---

<sup>2</sup> David B. Van Vleck, "Letter to the Editor: Power Plant...", *The Middlebury Campus*, March 20, 1969.

population on at a national level. In a study analyzing the number of population related articles in popular magazines between 1946 and 1990, John R. Wilmoth and Patrick Ball found that media interest in and attention to population peaked in the 60s and early 70s, after which it more or less trailed off.<sup>3</sup> In his campaign for population control on and off campus, Van Vleck repeatedly echoed Ehrlich's call for zero population growth, otherwise known as population stasis in which there is one birth for every death within a demographic, and only two children per family. Van Vleck was also a staunch supporter of abortion legalization, which he actively promoted as one of the primary and absolutely necessary tools of population control. He was crucial in implementing Addison County's Planned Parenthood clinic in Middlebury's Porter Hospital, and served as Chairman of the Policy Formation Committee of Vermont Planned Parenthood as well, all in the name of population control and stabilization.<sup>4</sup>

In 1968, a collection of Middlebury students and faculty formed the Population Forum, which was described by the *The Middlebury Campus* as a group "greatly concerned with the problems that will soon affect the world standard of living because of continuing uncontrolled population growth." Not surprisingly, Van Vleck was an active member in the forum, frequently speaking about the negative effects of an unchecked population on the environment in meetings and lectures. In one meeting, Van Vleck is quoted as saying "In 1990 there will be six billion people in the world: will you be satisfied with a diet of yeast and seaweed?" Though his population projection was a little less than a billion off, Van Vleck's dramatic predictions about an impending food shortage did not come to fruition in the 1990s, nor did Ehrlich's similar claim that hundreds of millions of people would starve.

---

<sup>3</sup> John R. Wilmoth and Patrick Ball, "The Population Debate in American Popular Magazines," *Population and Development Review*, Vol. 18, No. 4, December 1992, 635.

<sup>4</sup> "Planned Parenthood Clinic Gives Birth Control Aid," *The Middlebury Campus*, September 24, 1970.

When the “environmental crisis” subsided, or rather, was pushed aside after 1972 and worldwide famines did not ensue, the inaccuracy biologists’ doomsday predictions devaluated important underlying discussions of human interaction with the environment.

To increase community awareness of the supposedly impending disasters facing mankind, the Population Forum sponsored a lecture series in January, 1969 featuring presentations on topics such as “How Population Growth Will Affect YOU” and “The Geopolitics of World Population Growth,” as well as the troublesomely titled “Mechanisms of Population Control: Contraception, Abortion, Sterilization, Starvation.”<sup>5</sup> While these ideas were important in fostering a campus awareness regarding the various interconnections and interdependencies between humans and the environment the emphasis on overpopulation as the root cause of environmental degradation was problematic. By attributing the trend of continually increasing pollution of air and water as a direct result of overpopulation, both Van Vleck and Ehrlich were promulgating the ideas of universal blame and individual guilt. In his 2015 book, *Seeing Green: The Use and Abuse of Environmental Images*, Environmental Historian Finis Dunaway discusses a similar parallel between images construing universal vulnerability with notions of universal responsibility with regard to environmental stewardship, and how those images convey the idea that all Americans are equally to blame for causing the environmental crisis.<sup>6</sup> Just as certain apocalyptic images and accompanying rhetoric incited fear in the hearts of Americans, so did Ehrlich’s declensionist projections of famine and irreversible pollution at the hands of an unchecked population.

Though Van Vleck dominated campus discussions when it came to population and pollution, his and Ehrlich’s urgent call for population control and the potential social

---

<sup>5</sup> Alice Korach, “Seaweed Lunch Foreseen,” *The Middlebury Campus*, December 12, 1968.

<sup>6</sup> Finis Dunaway, *Seeing Green: The Use and Abuse of American Environmental Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 3.

ramifications their call did not go unquestioned on the Middlebury campus during the 1970s, nor did it on a national scale. In an October 1970 two page spread in *The Middlebury Campus* one of Van Vleck's colleagues in the Middlebury Biology department, Wayne Bell, offered a critique of Paul and Anne Ehrlich's *Population, Resources, Environment*, published that year. Bell laments the potential for racial discrimination and limitations of political freedom associated with many forms of population control put forth by the Ehrlich's argument; "compulsory population control is easily turned into arguments for differently limiting reproduction of certain minority groups" and "political freedoms, once lost are not easily regained."<sup>7</sup> Towards the end of the review, Bell makes an important point in asking of the rhetoric and substance of Ehrlich's publications; "why is such literature so popular?" About a decade ahead of his time with regard to environmental justice, Bell saw through the Ehrlich's agenda of environmental protection by way of draconian population control; "I believe that this popularity is somewhat of an illusion; there are groups of people with whom environmentalist literature is not popular – the minority groups of this country and governments of many underdeveloped countries of the world, for example. Such a reaction is understandable, for these are the groups who will bear the burden of the proposed remedial measures in the long run. Those most vociferous about environmental reform and population control are all too often those who stand to lose the least by such measures."

On the same page as Bell's review, Van Vleck offered his take on the same book, in which he gave the Ehrlich's moderate praise for their contributions to the casual study of population biology and highlighted the interconnectedness of three forces acting on and determining the standard of living "on spaceship Earth;" food production, power production, and baby production. For the most part, Van Vleck stuck to his guns but

---

<sup>7</sup> Wayne Bell, "Freedom to Breed: Social Consequences of Population Control" *The Middlebury Campus*, October 9, 1970.

concedes that at times “the authors [of *Population, Resources, Environment*] overdramatized some points”<sup>8</sup> Van Vleck also makes the point that the act of making bold predictions such as those in the made by Ehrlich in his books, is an uncertain game; “The Ehrlich’s are either right or wrong...time will tell.” Time did tell, and for the most part the Ehrlich’s were wrong. However, this should not reflect poorly on the individual biologist’s character or scientific merit, but rather reveal an influential theory run amok within popular environmentalism.

In the 1960s and 70s participants in mainstream environmentalism frequently blamed overpopulation as the root cause of pollution and resource depletion, and subsequently touted population control as the end all be all solution to these problems, rather than holding the government, industries and other capitalist structures of concentrated power and wealth accountable for their exploitation of the environment.<sup>9</sup> Unlike Ehrlich’s predictions, Rachel Carson’s highly influential 1962 environmental text *Silent Spring* was based in facts that were fictionalized only in their collective presentation. Carson merely placed present environmental issues of the era in the context of one town for dramatic effect, rather than presenting facts in the sensational, oversimplified, alarmist manner of Ehrlich and Van Vleck. Carson’s powerful and foreboding rhetoric awakened the American public to the harmful aspects of the chemical industry, and proved crucial in both raising awareness and inciting change with the ban of DDT in 1970. Meanwhile population obsessed biologists and environmentalists like Ehrlich and Van Vleck were crucial in scaring the American public, and Middlebury College, respectively to care and pay attention to the environmental movement, but their narratives of declension and doom inspired little environmental action and much backlash. Today Ehrlich’s rhetoric reads a bit like the biologist who cried wolf.

---

<sup>8</sup> Paul Ehrlich, “Ehrlich Outlines Our Future on Spaceship Earth” *The Middlebury Campus*, October 9, 1970.

<sup>9</sup> Dunaway, *Seeing Green: The Use and Abuse of American Environmental Images*, 3.

Nevertheless, Ehrlich and Van Vleck's crusade for population control and stabilization was influential because it matched the environmental movement, or rather the environmental crisis' spirit of urgency and efficiency in the late 1960s and 70s, and in doing so it succeeded in bringing about greater awareness of what and how much Americans consumed, but ultimately, failed in its goal of inciting creative and socially sound methods of population control. Whether it was for better or for worse, only time will tell.

I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment. *Kate Leib*

### Works Cited

“Around the Hill.” *Middlebury College News Letter*. Summer 1971, 1.

Bell, Wayne. “Freedom to Breed: Social Consequences of Population Control.” *The Middlebury Campus*, October 9, 1970

Dunaway, Finis. *Seeing Green: The Use and Abuse of American Environmental Images*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015.

Korach, Alice. “Seaweed Lunch Forseen.” *The Middlebury Campus*. December 12, 1968.

“Planned Parenthood Clinic Gives Birth Control Aid,” *The Middlebury Campus*, September 24, 1970.

Van Vleck, David B. “Ehrlich Outlines Our Future on Spaceship Earth” *The Middlebury Campus*, October 9, 1970

Van Vleck, David B. “Letter to the Editor: Power Plant...” March 20, 1969

Wilmoth, John R. and Patrick Ball. “The Population Debate in American Popular Magazines.” *Population and Development Review*. Vol. 18, No. 4. December 1992.