

**THE
ROCKEFELLER
CENTURY**



**JOHN ENSOR HARR
AND
PETER J. JOHNSON**

CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS

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was reminiscent of the comprehensive program of the General Education Board to help improve impoverished rural areas. Having taken over elements of the GEB's program in 1928, the Foundation's planning for China represented an effort to carry that obligation forward and apply it for the first time overseas. But before concrete steps could be taken, it was already too late. China had become unstable as Chiang Kai-shek battled errant warlords and engaged in his "bandit suppression" campaign against Mao Tse-tung and the Chinese Communists. The Japanese were threatening from newly occupied Manchuria; by 1937 the Sino-Japanese War was under way.

Nevertheless, it seemed certain that the Foundation policy adopted in 1934 would be implemented when its chief author, Raymond Fosdick, became president in 1936, and even more so when his colleague on the Review Committee, Walter Stewart, became chairman in 1939 upon Junior's retirement. As a trustee, JDR had ardently supported the leadership of Fosdick and Stewart. Yet as the years passed, he perceived that nothing in line with the 1934 changes was happening in the Foundation's program. At the end of World War II, JDR himself would begin pressing for a policy of "applied knowledge" and related program innovations. Ironically, his chief opponents would include Fosdick and Stewart.

However, it was not the Rockefeller Foundation, but his personal choices in philanthropy that occupied John 3rd's mind on a clear, crisp Saturday morning in March 1934. He was in his office on the fifty-sixth floor of the RCA Building concentrating on a letter he was writing to his father, spurred by decisions Junior had made. As he gazed out the window, John saw the buildings of lower Manhattan etched cleanly against the sky; below him, the half-finished buildings of Rockefeller Center stood quiet and empty. An occasional gust brought the sounds of keening bagpipes, thudding drums, and the raucous cries of celebrants as New Yorkers enjoyed their first St. Patrick's Day since the repeal of Prohibition.¹⁹

Composing a letter to Junior was never a simple matter; the subject had to be precisely indicated, facts and opinions placed in logical order, and conclusions and recommended courses of action clearly stated. Moreover, the subject was an unusually important one for John. He thought through what he wanted to say and began to dictate. "Dear Father," he began:

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As you of course know, the Bureau of Social Hygiene is terminating its activities on June 30. The two fields to which the Bureau has devoted the major parts of its time and resources are criminology and sex hygiene. It would seem from what Mr. Fosdick says, as if the Rockefeller Foundation might find it possible to assume an interest in the former. As to the latter, which is really the field of birth control and related questions, it would not appear as if it, as a whole, could be taken over by any of the boards in which you are interested, both because of the programs of these boards and the element of propaganda and controversy which so often is attached to endeavors in birth control.

The purpose of this letter is to ask you if you would be interested, through the Advisory Committee, to assume the responsibility for the continuance of the Bureau's support in this important field. I take the liberty of making this suggestion to you because of my great personal interest in birth control and related questions, and because of the fact that from time to time appeals do come to this office which we have previously referred to the Bureau—which procedure, of course, will no longer be possible.

John proceeded to analyze the pattern of assistance that had been given to organizations in the field, and he suggested, for Junior's approval, a level of support for the balance of 1935 and for 1936. He concluded with a solemn statement of personal interest:

. . . may I add one further statement in regard to my interest in birth control. I have come pretty definitely to the conclusion that it is the field in which I will be interested, for the present at least, to concentrate my own giving, as I feel that it is so fundamental and underlying. While I would not, of course, expect to contribute in the amounts that I have suggested for your consideration, if you should feel that it was not wise for you personally to continue the same liberal basis of giving as the Bureau of Social Hygiene has maintained, I would be more than glad to supplement your gifts or make independent ones of my own; or I could confine my financial efforts to individuals, organizations and projects to which you were not giving. In any event I should want very much indeed to coordinate whatever I might be able to do with whatever support you might feel it desirable to lend to this field.²⁰

The letter went through several drafts before John allowed his somewhat exasperated secretary to cover her typewriter and hurry downstairs to see the parade as it passed before St. Patrick's Cathedral. Satisfied as he read over the final version, John signed and sent it to his father.

It was a declaration of intent that John followed religiously the rest of his life, to lengths that no one could have imagined in 1934. As a result of the letter, Junior did allow the Advisory Committee to

concentrate its reduced budget, about \$40,000 a year, in the population field, and John 3rd did follow through as indicated with his gradually increasing capacity to give.²¹

No one can know with any certainty exactly why he made this choice. The question of population was not among the most pressing at the time. Because of the Depression, birth rates were falling in the industrialized world. The science of demography had scarcely come of age. Studies of human sexuality, contraception, and related matters were on a small scale. Birth control was a highly controversial subject, action in regard to it being largely the province of the militant feminists so well typified by the redoubtable Margaret Sanger. For decades the motivation of most people who gave any thought at all to population growth was tinged with racism, prominently so in the field of eugenics and among those viscerally opposed to immigration from southern Europe and the Orient.

Perhaps it was the masses of China that first aroused John's interest. His remark about the field being "so fundamental and underlying" suggests some such insight at least twenty years before it became a generally accepted view. Certainly, he had been exposed to sound thinking about population from the time that he took a reading course in the subject at Princeton, as well as in his experience with the Bureau of Social Hygiene and the Advisory Committee. He was well aware of his father's pioneering support of related projects since the days of the White Slave Grand Jury. Moreover, John was reinforced in his interest in population by the strong views of two men he respected highly, Raymond Fosdick and Arthur Packard.

Whatever the precise reasons for his choice, JDR had found a possible outlet for his philanthropic energies. He was broadly interested in the world of international affairs, and family tradition dictated an involvement in the solution of intractable social problems. Junior had once predicted that it would take his son ten years to learn anything about philanthropy; after less than five years of on-the-job training, JDR felt that he had absorbed enough to make a tentative choice. However, it would be more than fifteen years before major changes in his personal situation and in global perceptions of the dangers of unrestrained population growth would combine to turn an interest into a commitment of major proportions.

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