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Environmental Change and Security Program

The Graying of the Great Powers: Demography and Geopolitics in the 21st Century (Book Discussion)

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Edited Transcript—Jennifer Dabbs Sciubba

It's a privilege to talk today about the work being done at CSIS because you guys, as you know, have really led the way in keeping aging on the agenda of policy makers, kind of putting aging at the forefront. And that's something that I very much appreciate. And I think this book is likely to see similar success with policy makers. There are a lot of information here that they will find of use as they continue to think about the world and the future and what things they'll have to pay attention to as they make decisions.

I would like to speak today from both an academic and a policy standpoint because I think this book is relevant to both. It's a welcome addition to the literature, first of all. As far as I could figure out, I don't really think there's been a comprehensive book on demography and national security for about a decade, I don't think. At least not one of this quality. I think maybe [unintelligible] may have been the last one. So, in that sense, it's really good to bring the literature up to date, and just take stock of what's been going on in the last 10 years or so. Especially, a book 10 years ago might not have looked at something t 10Emw45(C1(a, and JTJ0.0002 Tc -0.0

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necessarily do. For example, you talk about the assumptions behind the statistics. That's something we don't usually see. We read books about demography or articles about demography where we take the statistics they give us for granted. And those of us who know the assumptions behind them usually get all ruffled up. And I completely agree the ones that you chose. I think you made wise choices with the constant fertility and the high fertility for developing countries. And you explain why you chose those. That's a major strength.

As I mentioned, the book really brings us up to date with what's been happening. And I think it lays out a research agenda for ways we can look at the interaction between demography and security. But there are a few things I think that I come to different conclusions about. One of the major things is I think you're a bit over-competent in what you term your findings. So, the headline in bold at the end of the book is, "These are our findings about demography."

The beginning and middle of the book use that really strong language and that doesn't really match the middle of the book. The middle of the book shows all of the nuances behind the research, that there are maybe differing viewpoints on something and how you really came to your, I guess, not conclusions but your guesses about what's likely to happen in the future. But when we turn to the end of the book, it's captioned in much stronger language. Instead of such and such is likely to happen, it's that such and such will happen. And I think that disconnects and takes away from the really strong research that you did in the middle of the book.

And this is where it connects to policy for me as well. Policy makers like to know what we don't know and what we do know. And with population aging and national security, often there's a lot more of what we don't know than what we do know. That's because the literature is somewhat underdev

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So the one area I'll pick on is the one area, I'm kind of cheating, that I've done most of my research in, and that's social mood. So in the end of the book you talk about these big fears that we have and we hear this often, that population aging will lead older electorates to kind of hijack the political agenda, that as they become a larger part of the population, those few policies more in their favor. Well, when you really start to look at what's happened so far, we have Germany, Italy and Japan, for example, the three most aged states in the world. And we can track, as their populations have aged, what's been happening politically there? Have the older parts of the electorate been joining together and voting in huge blocks in their interests only? Have policies been skewing more to give them more money, exclude youth? That's actually not the case. As Germany, Italy and Japan have aged, policy makers in those states have realized, kind of, the consequences of previous political decisions that would be extremely generous in terms of health care and pensions, and have been scaling back.

Another thing is that it's not always just about reducing or raising the retirement age or reducing pension benefits, if you really begin to dig down into these countries, you see that, in Germany for example, I think it's something like 40 percent of men exit the work force through disability schemes, not retirement. So, there are a lot of different policy options, more so than just raising the retirement age. And changing the level of analysis a bit from this very high level of analysis where we talk about just developed countries, to individual developed countries and recognizing that the particular context matters, is important. As far as older electorates voting together, I found that in Germany and Italy, region is a much better indicator of a person's vote than their age. So, like a 65 year old in Bavaria, very different interests from a 65 year old in the north of Germany. So we don't really see this happening yet. It's not to say that we might not in the future, but I think it's important to actually see what's been happening so far in order to be a bit more competent in what we suggest for the future.

And I think this tells us, then, that institutions really matter. We sit here in the U.S. where AARP is one of the biggest influences on our government, some would argue. We certainly see them out there a lot. So we tend to, kind of, project that model on to the rest of the world. If aging matters here, it must matter in places where they're ev

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And what factors would change your conclusions about aging? So I've talked a little bit about the need for maybe a sub national context, but what about a super national context? What about this global recession? Does that change any of your conclusions about aging? Or maybe a large scale international war. Or a trend in terrorism. Do any of those factors matter?

And lastly, I think, going into the future we need more of an emphasis on places where policymakers can make a difference, that opportunities matter just as much as challenges. And so, pointing out for them places for them that they can have a positive impact to mitigating the effects of trends are really important. But, I think it's an excellent book and thank you very much for the opportunity to sit here with you.

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