



## JOSEPH J. SPENGLER

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### INTERVIEW WITH JOSEPH J. SPENGLER\*

Joseph Spengler, on the Duke faculty since 1932, is a former president of the American Economic Association, the Southern Economic Association, and the Population Association of America, and a former vice-president of the Economic History Association and of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, of which he is also a Fellow.

- Q. You have been an active contributor to the development of economics and more especially population economics for over four decades. What first led you into these areas?
- A. I studied journalism at college and left school to become a crime reporter after my freshman year. But the pay was poor in journalism at that time so after a year I decided to return to school. Then I studied sociology and political science, but these seemed rather vague fields and I turned to economics because I found economists to be, for the most part, sharper than other social scientists. Actually, I always intended to be a novelist; maybe my turning to economics had something to do with the fact that economists are even looser with reality than journalists.
- Q. What about population?
- A. Malthus intrigued me in eighth grade. My father didn't believe Malthus, so that was a good reason for investigating him further. Later I worked with A. B. Wolfe who greatly influenced the development of my interest in and approach to population studies.

Q. You came to Duke in 1932 from...?

A. The University of Arizona in Tucson. I wanted to go west, and it was the best thing I could have done -- got to see a very different part of the country. The economy in that part was based on agriculture and mining, and suffered badly in the depression. The faculty at Arizona were not paid in cash at that time. I taught Economic Theory. I came to Duke to fill an opening in Labor Economics. As it happened, by the time I got here, another person had come to teach that subject -- I was just as happy since that didn't interest me very much anyway. It gave me an opportunity to turn to other interests.

Q. You are known as a critic of government and, indeed, administrations in general...

A. Never trust anyone connected with government; politicians are preoccupied with re-election.

Q. But you are not an anarchist?

A. No, not completely. What I would cut out is a lot of the federal bureaucracy and waste. My general position is that the free enterprise economy is the only kind that will work well...But some controls are necessary. When decisions are entered into which involve short term horizons -- labor union contracts -- then laissez faire policies are in order. When long run impacts can be determined or predicted, we need controls -- on land development, for example, or natural resources. We have to ask what is the time dimension involved. Now this doesn't mean that I would like the government to handle the controls, because governments take a short-term view of things. Even the price system yields only the short run view and we can't count on it for decisions with long run implications. I generally favor a competitive system with built-in feedback -- but external rules are needed in areas like resources.

Q. What do you think economists can contribute to policy-making?

A. They have as good a contribution to make as anyone so long as they are suitably trained and keep things in proper perspective -- that is, don't get too vain about how much they know. They have to take hard stands when working with politicians -- high moral standards are needed.

Economists have a few techniques and a few solutions, mostly for non-existing problems, which they look for blind to the fact that economics is not a theoretical science, but one whose content is institutionally determined. One is reminded of the carpenter who, having only a hammer in his toolkit, pretends that everything is a nail.

Economists, for example, have acted as if we have plenty of resources simply because they did not study the issue long range. The energy crisis is a complex problem resulting from population increase, increased consumption, higher income levels, plus a limited resource

base. In part the government is to blame. Energy has always been a long run problem -- we should have directed money to research into the development of our own energy resources instead of depending on outside sources. We should have limited consumption years ago when it looked like lean years were coming.

But the economists are not innocent in this; we need to reevaluate the 'growth is good' philosophy that has been propagated by economists.

The great danger of economists in government is that they are never called into account. This allows them to get too far removed from reality -- most of them could never paint a barn.

Q. How do you view the prospects of the world at large?

A. I am concerned about poverty, a diminishing supply of national resources, higher population growth.

But economics aside, the most fundamental problem seems to me to be how to strike a balance between a high degree of liberty and responsibility to the community. I see a decreasing sense of responsibility. We have a high degree of freedom in this country, but the sense of public responsibility is very low. I would like to see a balance so that no one can take advantage of his 'neighbor'.

I'm inclined to think the U.S. is living on borrowed time because we're too soft. Democracies eventually die unless the people are tough -- otherwise the worst elements rise to the top. If I had my opportunities over again, I would study the Chinese. I admire them for their toughness; we have gotten altogether too soft.

Q. One sentence by way of advice to a budding economist?

A. It is dangerous to overspecialize. Take up work in several areas. Do what you enjoy doing but move around to vary your experience. You will do best with three or four interests: one area leads to another. Let your subconscious do some of the work for you.

Q. Dr. Spengler, thank you.

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