

The Dirty Air Act

While Washington concerns itself with drawing lines in the sands of Araby, and deciphering the opinions of an enigmatic nominee to the Supreme Court, an argument affecting millions of people, in fact, every new arrival on this globe, is raging. The battle, over the use of cloth or disposable diapers, has clearly resulted in washing a lot of dirty linen in public.

One enormous difficulty in this debate is the lack of a clear moral advantage identified with either side. That deficiency has forced an unpleasant need to examine the facts in the case, an activity for which Americans lack experience and find to be boring. Anyone regarding this problem as frivolous, however, should be apprised of the monumental fact that some 18 billion disposable diapers are discarded annually here, and they account for an estimated 2% of all municipal solid waste.

Although cloth diapers actually account for 1/100th the amount of solid waste of disposable paper diapers, they consume a great deal more detergents and hot water, which requires energy, thereby contributing to environmental stress. If a professional diaper service is involved, then there is gasoline consumed in delivery, to say nothing of exhausts contributing to the air pollution problem. In fact, use of a diaper service appears to consume three times as much fuel and cause nine times as much air pollution as use of disposable diapers. A scientist from the Natural Resources Defense Council has pointed out, in addition, that pesticides are used in cotton fields. To add further confusion, there is little doubt that disposable diapers, being quicker and more efficient, are an enormous help for parents who work. The ability to blame corporations is difficult in this case, because corporations make not only the disposable diapers but also the trucks that provide diaper service.

A related health problem also should be mentioned. To minimize environmental pollution and incidentally provide some respite to harried parents, there is a tendency to use double diapers to increase their absorption capacity and lengthen the time between required changes. Those who have experienced such techniques know that the conspiracy to make safety pins extremely dull and cloth extremely compacted after washing means that considerable force must be exerted to get the pin to pierce the diaper. Any conscientious parent will insert a finger between the baby's tender skin and the stubborn pin, with the obvious consequence that a large number of thumbs are impaled during the hazardous business of applying a cloth diaper. Most mothers and fathers bear their wounds heroically and with great modesty, never requesting medals of honor or other civic recognition for this unselfish act. This extraordinary danger of exposure to puncture wounds is ignored by most parents with the stoicism of a fighter ace going into battle. Clearly, there is an unquestionable loss of moral fiber by the descent to a paper diaper with a snap-on grip requiring little skill and no courage.

This problem involves the great complexity of water consumption; detergent pollution, habitat destruction, pesticide use, energy consumption, exhaust emission; and waste disposal. The battle is being fought out on the basis of facts, figures, and cost-benefit analysis without the usual charges and countercharges of villainy and conspiracy. It is intriguing to contemplate the unlikely possibility that other environmental dilemmas could be approached in the same manner. One might consider the cost of converting all glass bottles to one or two types of glass so that recyclability would become easy. Adding the cost of shopping bags to grocery purchases to increase the incentive of bringing your own reusable cloth bag could also be contemplated at this level of objectivity. Zoning to aid public transportation and limits on gas guzzlers could be similarly analyzed.

Of course, there is still the possibility that the diaper problem may be elevated to yet a higher level of indignation. There are some who would rather smell ozone than a dirty diaper. When this dilemma gets to Congress in the form of a Dirty Air Act it seems inevitable that diapers will precipitate a highly partisan debate. Yet at the moment the policy controversy seems unique as a model for avoiding lofty philosophical principles and concentrating on the bottom line.—DANIEL E. KOSHLAND, JR.

American Association for the Advancement of Science

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