

During an exchange with Guttmacher, Nelson asked, "Do we have a right not to have public hearings and not to make the information available on the ground that all the press may not carry it the way some people think they ought to carry it? Or that it is too complicated for the public to understand? Is this the kind of decision that we have a right to make, to withhold knowledge developed by the [Government itself], or should these matters be made a matter of public knowledge, counting, as it seems we always have to do, upon the ultimate good judgement of the public to come to a reasonable conclusion?"

"Very frequently, in a free country, people do not come to reasonable conclusions," Nelson went on. "That is no reason for substituting an arbitrary system. . . . This is one of the risks, it seems to me, of having a free society in which there are many risks."

It is useful to see The Pill first of all as a piece of technology, much as DDT, say, is a piece of technology, albeit in a vastly different area. We did not know what we were doing when we bought The Pill, just as we did not know what we were doing when we bought DDT. The testing of The Pill having been ludicrously inadequate, and massive unscientific and sometimes dishonest promotion of The Pill having proceeded apace despite the inadequacy of testing, we are today, and will remain for a long time, ignorant of the full range of its potentials for pollution of the bodies of millions of human beings. We have not even undertaken the studies which would tell us of possible effects on the offspring of some of those human beings.

The issue is not whether sales of The Pill would be halted (among other things, this would create a bootleg market). Neither is population control the issue (not only because Senator Nelson is for it, but also because the effectiveness of The Pill in controlling world population has been drastically oversold). The issue, rather, is the rational and humane use of technology. It is not easy to forgive a con game in which women who do not need The Pill, because they have acceptable alternatives, are induced to use it in order to provide reassurance to women who do need it.

[From the Evening Star, March 13, 1970]

WASHINGTON CLOSE-UP—'PILL' RAISES ISSUE OF RIGHT TO KNOW

(By Judith Randal)

Two weeks ago today, Sen. Gaylord Nelson, D-Wis., then conducting hearings on oral contraceptives, raised one of the most crucial issues confronting society in the 1970s.

By that time, Nelson had been charged with inciting the press to sensationalism, fostering scare headlines, and—by bringing to public attention what the scientific community already knew about possible risks from "the pill"—threatening efforts to contain the population explosion. But what no one else had said in so many words was that the real issue raised was the public's right to know.

Nelson saw the opportunity to bring this issue to the fore when Dr. Alan F. Buttmacher, president of Planned Parenthood-World Population, came to the witness table. After pointing out that other contraceptive measures, as well as pregnancy, also carry risks, Guttmacher indicated that the dangers of the pill would better have been aired behind closed doors.

"I have little faith in detailing the hazards of a drug . . . to a patient," he said, explaining that scientific data is too complicated for laymen to understand.

Nelson saw this as a "right-to-know" issue and decided to attack it head-on. Said he:

"We debated on the floor of the Senate at great length the antiballistic missile, which is an incredibly complicated mechanical device which probably nobody in the Congress could explain from a technical standpoint. Should that be discussed because it is complicated and the public really cannot understand it, or should it not?"

" . . . Do we have a right . . . to withhold knowledge developed by the Federal government itself through research and studies and conferences like (those held by) the National Institutes of Health, or should these matters be made a matter of public knowledge, counting, as it seems we always have to do, upon the ultimate good judgment of the public to come to a reasonable conclusion?"

Nelson, who is on record in favor of family planning and who is an advocate of zero population growth in this country and abroad, has touched a sensitive