

*William Dickinson served for many years as manager of the Washington Post Writer's Group. This organization syndicates the Post's writers to other papers. He is a writer himself, as this piece demonstrates so well.*

## A LETTER FROM THE HEARTLAND

By William B. Dickinson

Dear Fellow Citizen:

From the west hills of Lawrence, Kansas, the Wakarusa Valley stretches off to a far horizon and gives the impression of endless space and plenty. Less than two centuries ago, Indian tribes wandered unhindered across the landscape and encamped on the banks of the Kaw River just to the north. Not until 1870 did buffalo disappear from Kansas. As a student at the university 40 years ago, I remember a downtown where merchants catered to farmers who came to town on Saturdays to cluck over the price of shovels and wheelbarrows. Kansans take some relish in never spending a nickel but they think it is a dime.

I have come home to Kansas as a semi-retiree after four decades in urban America. Much has changed. The population of Lawrence is booming — up 10 percent in the 1980s to 68,000. There's now a suburban feel to the place, with one of every eight people commuting daily to jobs in Kansas City (40 miles east) or Topeka (25 miles west). Traffic tie-ups are bad enough to warrant future construction of a mini-beltway to funnel vehicles away from the city. Save-the-downtown traditionalists are pitted against those who want to build shopping malls catering to baby-boomer families attracted by housing developments wrapped around golf courses.

Conditions here will never be confused with rush hour on I-66 in suburban Washington, but there's no denying that the wide open spaces are not as wide open as they were even a decade ago. Preserving the quality of life for future generations is a real concern. And not just in Lawrence, Kansas.

Since I retired from the Washington fray, one of my new interests involves pressing the case for population stabilization, both in this country and around the world. It's a job that can cause loss of sleep. The worst-case scenarios for overpopulation already are being played out in urban areas of the Third World, where peasants driven from the land by poverty and primogeniture flee in search of a slightly better existence. Perhaps I should be writing this from Mexico City, Dhaka, Nairobi, Rio de Janeiro, Cairo, Manila, Calcutta or Algiers. But the agony of these places has been well-documented and strikes us as uninteresting because hopeless. What do you do about a place like Algeria, where 75 percent of the population is under 25 years of age and nearly 30 percent of the work force is unemployed?

Attention should be paid, however, because the

world continues to live on what former Colorado Governor Richard D. Lamm has described as "the upper slopes of some awesome logarithmic curves." Consider this: when I was born, in 1931, the world's population was 2 billion. Between 1930 and 1960, the third billion was added, despite a world war. The fourth and fifth billion were added in 14 and 13 years respectively. That takes us up to 1987. With an annual population increment of more than 90 million people a year, A.D. 2000 will be ushered in with 6 billion people on the face of the Earth.

For most of the industrial age, population increases took place in Europe and North America, where economies were expanding rapidly. Standards of living rose with population. But since 1960, more than 85 percent of the world's population growth has occurred in the poorest nations.

The Earth's resources and the number of people sharing them are on a collision course. But we avoid confronting the implacable arithmetic. We talk about the state of the Earth, all right, but people seem mysteriously absent from the discussion. It's less threatening to talk about the greenhouse effect, or ozone depletion, or air and water pollution than to address the obvious connection between such environmental problems and the rising number of people. If mankind is to find a permanent and fruitful place in the scheme of things, the notion of infinite growth in a finite world must be discarded.

There are those who keep trying to break through the denial mechanism. I think of Robert McNamara, former president of the World Bank. He warned in a speech in December that the world's population could triple in 100 years (to 15 billion) and wipe out all the 20th century's social advances. He proposes an \$8-billion-a-year global birth control program, an expensive and politically inconvenient solution that has only the nurturing of the human condition to recommend it. Chances are your hometown newspaper didn't carry an account of his address.

Common sense (and many biologists) tell us there is a limit to how many people the Earth can sustain, though no one knows yet what the upper limit is. We won't know until it is too late. And subsistence is no longer enough. The expected standard of living incorporates such amenities as varied diet, plenty of water, decent housing, good schools, access to health care, clean air and aesthetically pleasing surroundings. To describe the neo-Malthusian realities of a world

where runaway population presses on resources of all kinds, we need to think in terms of "carrying capacity." This refers to the number of individuals who can be supported in a given place without degrading the physical, ecological, cultural and social environment over the long term.

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For my forebears, life was much simpler. They migrated to Kansas from Virginia in the 1850s, attracted by cheap land in the Great American Desert that turned out to be bounteous when put to the plow. The trip west involved a raft on the Ohio River and ox-drawn wagons. There was even room for a pet bear, Cuff. Upon arrival in Brown County in northeast Kansas, a stone barn was built, with slits in the walls to hold off any marauding Indians. The weather willing (which often it was not), a man could provide for a sizable family by working 80 acres.

Today, that ancestral land is still productive, but not without the heavy use of pesticides and fertilizers that have thinned and hardened the soil. By one measure, one-eighth of an inch of topsoil hereabouts is lost to wind and water every year. Around the world, too, deforestation, erosion and overuse of tillable land raise the spectre of ecological and human disaster not far down the road. Technological progress is a wondrous thing, but it is confronting unprecedented growth in population that makes solutions seem chimerical.

My files bulge with the telling facts of overpopulation: The U.N. Population Fund estimates that 560 million people are living in absolute poverty. China is said to have 100 million jobless peasants. In Bangladesh, 118 million people live in a country the size of Wisconsin. Population pressures there oblige people to live on any clump of land that rises above the sea; the risk of drowning is preferable to the reality of starving. Such are the necessities of overpopulation. Egypt has 55 million people and is adding another 1 million every nine months; half of its food is imported. Street urchins, a symptom of the social fabric unraveling, are a common sight in the world's poorest cities and are hunted like rabbits by paramilitary death squads. And so on.

Human populations that have exceeded the carrying capacity of their place and time are restive, on the move. An immigration crisis confronts Western Europe and has turned into a major political issue. Thousands of desperate and impoverished Albanians board ships and are turned back at Italian ports.

Vietnamese boat people are jammed onto an island off Hong Kong awaiting forcible return home. Thousands of Haitians fleeing disorder and economic chaos are picked up by U.S. Coast Guard vessels and transported to Guantanamo Bay to await final disposition. Hundreds of Mexicans and other peoples slip across the border into the United States every night, a stream that cumulatively has put at risk the health, education and welfare services of California, the nation's richest and most populous state.

Democracies, especially those like the United States, that fashion themselves as built on liberal immigration policies, are ill-equipped to deal with the logarithmic realities of such migrations. Fringe candidates and hate groups enter the vacuum in public discourse, scaring off mainstream reformers who would rather let things go on as they are than be smeared by the same brush.

But the warnings are ignored at our peril. Many who labor in this field believe that the 1990s present the last opportunity to control human population growth. The task is made harder by the studied indifference of a U.S. president who has refused to support resumption of financial aid for the U.N. Population Fund. Unless we develop some sense of urgency, I fear that in the lifetime of my grandchildren exponential growth of human numbers will overwhelm the resources and infrastructures of civilization built up in the whole course of human history.

As citizens we need to ask questions of our elected representatives that go to the heart of the matter. Why are they failing to tie U.S. foreign aid to progress in controlling population in Third World nations? Why have they allowed the bitter debate over domestic abortion policy to cripple rational family-planning programs for nations with demonstrably ruinous population increases? Why do they persist in enacting ever more liberal immigration laws that allow nations, heedless of their growing numbers, to use the United States as a safety valve for excess people?

In the end, it is up to us to demand that this crisis be brought front and center on the political stage. Election year 1992 provides a fleeting moment to push for the start of a dialogue on the future of mankind on an overcrowded planet.

Outside my double-paned window, cold winds howl off the plains. The temptation is strong to light a fire and settle down with a good murder mystery. Yet it is certain that Lawrence, Kansas will not long remain a hidey-hole from the convulsion in human behavior that will grow as population escalates. I think about the eagles that soon will return to nearby Lake Clinton for the nesting season. How many more years before the imbalance between population and environment drives away these last symbols of the Wild West? Why are we waiting so long before facing up to an issue of sheer survival?

Sincerely,  
(s) William B. Dickinson