

**William B. Dickinson**  
1617 Alvamar Drive  
Lawrence, Kan. 66047  
785-832-1899; [wdicki2@LSU.edu](mailto:wdicki2@LSU.edu)

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Dear Fellow Citizen:

For the last 22 years, I have had the good fortune to write regular mini-essays for the Biocentric Institute, a nonprofit foundation dedicated to the enhancement of quality of life for all peoples. My particular effort comes to an end with this letter, as old age and foundation priorities dictate. I am grateful for my long run and the complete freedom to explore the many components that go into quality of life. My thoughts usually take the form of a letter addressed to “fellow citizens.” Pride of U.S. citizenship has fallen into some disrepute, with young people often seeing themselves as “citizens of the world.” But the issues that determine good living begin at home with an engaged citizenry. At least, that’s how my Midwestern sensibilities see it.

Most of my pieces have addressed the evolving controversies over environment and population -- deeply intertwined components of a balanced, sustainable life on planet Earth. But other issues, still largely unresolved, often impact the day-to-day and generation-to-generation lives of Americans of every race and economic condition. Looking back over the last two decades of foundation work, I found several letters that highlight ongoing problems:

*Criminal Justice:* The United States has the highest incarceration rates in the world. We have conflated violent offenses with nonviolent ones, sending many of the nonviolent offenders to prison or jail. Prisons have become the employer of last resort in rural areas and small towns, a further impediment to reform. In the Biocentric letter of Oct. 1, 2007, I concluded: “Our criminal justice and prisons systems are breaking. The impact of mass incarceration on prisoners, on taxpayers, and on the families the convicts leave behind can’t be measured in quantitative terms alone. Quality of life itself is at stake, especially for the society to which most of those imprisoned will someday return.” Five years after this was written, legislators are beginning to reconsider the wisdom of mandatory sentences and the warehousing of prisoners.

*Gambling Mania:* The scale and scope of gambling all across America takes the breath. One does not have to read many newspapers to find accounts of ordinary bank tellers and county clerks on trial for crimes traced to runaway gambling addictions. “But it is clear that the guilt and shame of being a gambler have vanished from the American conscience,” I wrote on April 1, 2005. “Where the new era of tolerated gambling will take us cannot be known. But a visitor of Las Vegas on a busy weekend comes away with a question. To what end are we heading when so much of America’s entrepreneurial, technological, creative and marketing expertise is marshaled on behalf of a multi-billion-dollar industry that caters to adult whims and weaknesses?” Update: It was recently reported that 23 states have partnered with gaming companies to set up networks of small local casinos that target the working class and the poor.

*Military Draft Reconsidered:* The so-called All-Volunteer Force that has replaced the short-term citizen-soldier may make sense in today’s technology-driven armed services. But without a sharing of sacrifice and risk with the broader population of young people, unintended consequences have weakened the democratic experience. Our foundation’s letter of Nov. 1, 2012 concluded: “For all its failings, conscription was a litmus test of our

nation's willingness to go to war – with conviction. For most of our history, the draft put our own sons at risk, not just the sons of others. Today's war on terror has been so broadly defined that it promises to be a series of conflicts without end. Meantime, all the problems of equity and shared sacrifice remain unaddressed.”

*Hard Times Revisited:* The Great Recession turned 2009 into a desperate year for millions of Americans. Hard times took a toll not just on jobs and home prices but on the generally positive view of economic prospects in place since the end of World War II. We began to fear not just for ourselves but for our children and, indeed, for the future of America itself. For our Dec. 1, 2009, letter, I opined: “The ‘Greatest Generation,’ forged by Depression and a world war, no longer holds the reins of power. The shared sacrifice they exemplified has become a slogan, not a creed. And the discontents of democracy challenge the problem-solving abilities of a fractured society. We desperately need a renewal of the public philosophy – the belief that we are members of a community with a central tradition.”

*Biodiversity:* Writers who quote E.O. Wilson, the eminent biologist and philosopher, do so at their peril. Wilson's passion for biodiversity and the protection of all forms of life combine with lyrical writing to make others who address the subject seem shallow and clunky, I told readers on Dec. 1, 2006. If you read only one book in the next year, Wilson's *The Creation: An Appeal to Save Life on Earth* (2006) would be an informative and inspiring choice. Wilson believes that, “The more we learn about the biosphere, the more complex and beautiful it turns out to be....Earth, and especially the razor-thin film of life enveloping it, is our home, our well-spring, our physical and much of our spiritual sustenance.” Wilson describes humankind as a “giant meteorite of our time,” a species “blinded by ignorance and self-absorption.” Despite that, he concludes that we still have time “to assume the stewardship of the natural world we owe to future human generations.” Time, maybe, but not much time.

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So, there you have it: a few of my favorite topics. For those who wish more, now or in the future, the last 10 years of Biocentric Institute essays are available on a web site maintained by the Clifton Institute, our nonprofit sponsor. Go to [www.cliftoninstitute.org](http://www.cliftoninstitute.org), and click on Biocentric Institute Newsletters.

Faithful readers may have noticed that in this communication I have neglected the overpopulation that threatens to undo or make impossible a better quality of life for billions of people, especially in poor areas of the world. It is polite to refer to “developing” countries when, in fact, many should be described as “imploding” – victims of corrupt autocrats who have little interest in a better life for their subjects. Such places, Africa in particular, will account for much of the projected growth in world population from 7.2 billion today to 9 billion by 2050. Will we witness an era of mass migration to Western Europe? Optimists suggest that world population will top out at 10 billion by the end of the century. Don't bank on it. When I started my essays two decades ago, some overpopulation-deniers forecast a ceiling of 7 billion.

It is true that fertility rates in many industrialized nations have fallen below replacement level. But we mistakenly equate economic growth with population growth, creating a scenario in which only those developed nations willing to increase their numbers by procreation or immigration can prosper in a Darwinian globalized economy. Will this become a race to the bottom? I worry, too, about the unexamined rush to urbanize. China intends to move 10 million people a year for the next decade off their ancestral land into pop-up high rises in big cities. Is this policy designed to improve quality of life or to make it easier for China's regime to control its restive people? Such are some of the pressing questions that fresh minds will need to address.

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