

LRC Review of Gwynne Dyer's "Future: Tense"

By Paul Heinbecker*

With this book, Gwynne Dyer performs two very welcome services. First, he delivers a comprehensive, but brief and very readable survey of the dangerous evolution of United States' foreign policy. Second, in explicating the impetus for the war in Iraq, which he ascribes to the ambitions of American "neo-cons", he lays out the stakes. "What is really at risk here", he argues, "is the global project to abolish war and replace the rule of force in the world with the rule of law, the project whose centrepiece is the United Nations." For those who have difficulty imagining an alternative world to the one we live in, a world without the UN, without international law and norms, and without a universal system of cooperation, Dyer's analysis makes for worrying reading. For others, especially the neo-Cans who apparently do not want to see beyond the presumed benefits of deeper North American economic integration and who would buy assured access to markets with foreign policy passivity, his book should be a wake-up call.

While the great majority of Canadians have made up their minds about the Bush administration and the war in Iraq, and increasingly about US foreign policy, as well, the Washington policy vortex exercises a strong undertow on Canadian policy makers. To some degree, this counter-pull, which is often reinforced by advisors and interest groups, is unavoidable. However irreconcilable the differences between Canada and the US, geography and economics being what they are, divorce is not an option. The Canada-US relationship is forever, and both partners, but especially the junior partner, have no choice but to make a go of it. Ottawa cannot allow itself the luxury of forgetting that Canada co-habits a continent with the most powerful country on earth, however benignly, comparatively, it has behaved towards Canada. When the national interest contradicts the national zeitgeist, governments still have to govern. At such times, as Brian Mulroney has argued, prime ministers have to spend their political capital on necessary but unpopular decisions, not horde it in the almost always vain hope of enjoying a revered political retirement. In Canada, as elsewhere, elected officials know, or should know, that political careers almost always end in disaffection, and too often in disrespect, and that redemption comes usually in the after-life if it comes at all.

At the same time, politicians know that they will not even reach their "use by" dates if their policy default position is set to defy the electorate. Canada's political leaders cannot afford to be captured by their officials, the business community or anyone else who does not ultimately have to face the electorate. Sometimes the national consensus is right. Disregard of it is done at a government's peril. Getting the balance right between responsiveness and responsibility is the key to peaceful sleep, if not political longevity. This is especially the case for Canada's relations with the United States. In an age of asymmetric warfare, how to position ourselves vis-à-vis US foreign policy is, or should be, a major concern for the Government of Canada. Dyer is writing for a wider audience than Canadians but few people need be more concerned about the logic of his thesis than we do.

Dyer's short book makes compelling reading, in part, for the context it provides in an historically amnesiac time and for the explanation it gives of the rationale for a system of collective, not state-based, security. He recounts briefly but effectively the extraordinary losses caused by 19th and 20th century wars, which were so destructive that they convinced the survivors that some new way of managing world affairs had to be found. The first attempt, the League of Nations, failed and 45 million more people died in World War II. "The greatest generation", the people who had fought and won the most destructive war in history, not some other-worldly romantics, persisted in the effort to devise a better system and created the United Nations. War had simply become too dangerous, even before nuclear weapons made their horrific debut, to

be left to the judgement of statesmen, which too often had proven catastrophically inadequate. As Dyer reminds us, prior to the adoption of the UN Charter, aggressive war was precluded only by the risks of losing.

The UN has not been a complete success, and one wishes that Dyer would have taken a bit more time to discuss its undoubted weaknesses. Still, the UN has been much more effective than UN-bashers would like others to believe. There is much truth in Dyer's observation that "the best measure of any institution's real importance is how much its enemies hate it." (Richard Perle, a leading Washington neo-con, writing in the Guardian in March 2003 saw two benefits to the war in Iraq—the end of Saddam Hussein and the destruction of the UN. On the latter, Perle's forecast was as premature as it was ill-advised.) While the nuclear stand-off between Moscow and Washington was a significant stabilizer while it lasted, the world would almost certainly have been a bloodier place without the UN. Dyer argues that while outlawing war does not mean that all wars will stop any more than outlawing murder has meant that all killings have stopped, the UN, nevertheless, has built up a strong international norm against aggressive war. As the UN's high level reform panel has recently observed, there were fewer interstate wars in the last half of the 20th century than in the first half, despite a four-fold increase in the number of states. Signing up to a Pax Americana, Dyer argues, would jeopardize much of what is valuable in the UN system, especially its proscription of elective, aggressive war, and would risk a return to the lawlessness and destruction of earlier centuries. Further, as the Americans might well not succeed, the world could end up with no UN and an America incapable of ensuring peace or security.

When Washington declared war on terrorism, on a heinous tactic but on a tactic nonetheless, not on a tangible enemy such as the Al Qaeda alliance, and when it portrayed terrorism in monolithic terms, it gave itself mission impossible. There is now, unlike during the Cold War, no common international perception of a threat, although there is an understandable anxiety about apparently growing Islamic fundamentalism on the one hand, and a considerable worry about the sometimes provocative character of American foreign policy, on the other. When the US attacked Iraq despite the sketchiest of links between Al Qaeda and the Iraqi regime, despite having no hard evidence that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction, and over the objections of undoubtedly the great majority of UN members, the US both isolated itself in world public opinion and generated volunteers for the cause of resistance to US policies. The US occupation of Iraq and uncritical US support for Israel vis-à-vis the Palestinians will not necessarily morph into a war of civilizations. There are wise people on all sides who recognize that this danger is best avoided but the world is undoubtedly transiting a dangerous period.

Dyer asserts what many dare not allow themselves to think, viz., "that the whole world needs the United States to lose the war in Iraq." This provocative view is evocative of attitudes in UN corridors in the Spring of 2003, given most graphic expression by a P5 ambassador when he observed with no evident satisfaction that "the US needs to burn its fingers on Iraq", so that it does not carry on with a policy that will do such harm to the world body, to the US, and, ultimately, to all those closely aligned with its aggressive foreign policy. US fingers are suffering third degree burns. As the war grinds on and Iraqi casualties grow, US soldiers are dying, US treasure is wasted and US standing in the world is plummeting. According to a report done last year for the US State Department by Ed Djerejian of Rice University, a former US ambassador to Israel and Syria, "the bottom has indeed dropped out of support for the United States" in the Islamic world. In Europe, appalled officials watch the excesses of the war in Iraq and fear the terrorist consequences for their own countries. Meanwhile, in the US, a frightened populace returns the authors of this elective war to office, the neo-cons remain in their jobs, the Defense Secretary evades accountability, and

the man who denied the salience of international treaties to the decisions of the US commander-in-chief in war-time and who called the provisions of the Geneva conventions “quaint” is named Attorney General.

The gap between American self-perception and the perception of the United States by others is becoming dangerously wide. In his acceptance speech at the Democratic National Convention in August, candidate Kerry said that “[t]he USA never goes to war because it wants to. We only go to war because we have to.” At a Memorial Day ceremony, President Bush uttered almost exactly the same sentiment: “[i]t is not in our nature to seek out wars and conflicts. We only get involved when adversaries have left us no alternative.” American history, however, is one long contradiction of these beliefs; consider the Barbary Wars, the Mexican War, Nicaragua (several times), the Spanish American War, the Philippines, China, Cuba (more than once), Panama (several times), Haiti, Vietnam, Cambodia and Grenada, not to mention Iraq, or the democratically elected governments that the US helped to overthrow in Chile, the Congo and Iran, decisions for which the US is still paying. In all of these target countries, however, American intervention is part of the national narrative and not a positive part. Unlike Americans, they have not moved on.

Dyer acutely observes that the key books and articles that have set the intellectual tone inside “the beltway” have addressed a world that bears little resemblance to reality as experienced by most non-Americans. The authors proceed from a view of America that others do not recognize and presume a dispensation from behavioural norms that others are unwilling to grant. The notion of America-as-exceptional dates from the Puritan migration and has ebbed and flowed in the American psyche ever since. De Tocqueville observed it in 19th Century America and Margaret MacMillan discerned it in US attitudes at the Paris peace talks of 1919. US exceptionalism” was given contemporary currency by President Ronald Reagan, when he portrayed the United States as the “shining city on a hill”, the self-appointed standard bearer of democracy. At the 2004 Republican Party convention, Senator Libby Dole proclaimed that America was great because its people were good, tapping into a common belief in the inherent qualities of the American character. (To the rest of the world the issue is not that Americans are good, or think that they are good, but that they are human, with all the qualities and failings that that entails.) More recently, stung by criticism of the US’s reaction to the Asian Tsunami, American leaders missed few opportunities to proclaim their own generosity.

In fact, American “exceptionalism” unquestionably has had its positive as well as its negative characteristics. The US exercised exceptional leadership, for example, in the development of post-war institutions, in the promotion of human rights and the development of international law and in the preservation of stability, particularly among Japan, China and Russia in North-East Asia. It is the more self-serving expressions of exceptionalism, however, that have, inter alia, led to an American questioning of the applicability of the UN Charter, indeed of international law writ large, to the United States, alienating many others in the process. US abuse of the UN Security Council and the Charter in its campaign against the International Criminal Court, was seen by many as exceptionalism taken to extremes, an unapologetic demand for one law for the goose and another for the gander. The ICC experience was a straw in the wind for the war in Iraq. US neo-cons, and many others on both sides of the political aisle, seem to expect to lead not by example but by exception. It was not always thus. At the end of the Second World War, when the US bestrode the world even more colossally than it does today, President Truman told the assembled UN delegates in San Francisco that “[w]e all have to recognize that no matter how great our strength, we must deny ourselves the license to do always as we please.” A cooperative, multilateral future is not, therefore, impossible.

The US needs an effective multilateral system as much now as it ever has in the past. The US has given itself the most powerful military in history and has made itself less secure in doing so. 9/11 showed that while the US is invincible, it is not invulnerable. Perhaps the intractable reality of failure in Iraq will provide the check on US power that its own electorate has not done. What is clear is that Canada has much to be concerned about if an aggressive American foreign policy destroys the international system that the post-war generation built. The government needs advice that incorporates a world view that extends beyond Washington, central as Washington undoubtedly is to Canadians' interests. That is why books such as Dyer's "Future: Tense", which put US foreign policy into its proper global context, merit reading by Canadians, particularly those in Ottawa charged with charting Canada's course in our unstable world.

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