
AN INTERVIEW WITH GWYNNE DYER

Gwynne Dyer is an independent Canadian journalist and scholar. He has served in the Canadian, American and British naval services and completed a Ph.D. in Military and Middle Eastern History at King's College London in 1973. A prolific writer, Dyer has written books such as *War: The Lethal Custom* (2005) exploring the nature of military conflict and *Climate Wars* (2008), which delved into the geopolitics of climate change. He has produced radio programs for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) and film documentaries that are seen around the world. Dyer's twice-weekly syndicated column on international affairs appears in over 175 newspapers worldwide. The following interview was conducted by Mark Phillipowich of *NeoAmericanist* after Dyer delivered a talk entitled, "Never Waste a Crisis: Can Obama Change the Game?" The talk was given in February as part of the Centre for American Studies Speaker Series at the University of Western Ontario.

NEOAMERICANIST (NA): Barack Obama, up until the 2004 Democratic convention, was a relatively unknown politician.

DYER: He's an Illinois politician, like Lincoln as he would hastingly point out.

NA: Yet he has risen to the status of cultural icon in an almost unstable period of time. There is, however, still some scepticism about him. Why do you think that is?

DYER : The enthusiasm and the scepticism rely on different parts of the world or on different corners of the country. There is a very broad perception in the United States—I just came back from there today—that a lot of things are broken and that we've been going down the wrong track and a lot of things need to change. So Obama is responding to a quite widespread sentiment that a lot of things need to be fixed and a lot of things need to be changed: nobody's been minding the store for the last eight years.

Obama is not just imposing this on a population that was quite happy the way they were, he's responding to a felt need. Why the cynicism? Why the doubts about his ability? Well, first of all because nobody can walk on water and some of what he is required to do would mean being able walking on water. But also because the culture wars haven't ended—they have subsided a bit—but they're far from over. And so there's a significant fraction of the American population that cannot stand any Democrat and who regard Obama as a dangerous leftist radical. He's not a dangerous leftist radical. He may be a dangerous centrist radical, but he's not very left. But that's not the way it's seen by the right of American politics.

NA: Every president has had challenges and directed the country one way or another. Obama's struggles seem especially dire in light of the last presidency.

DYER: Yeah, he inherited the "in" box from hell.

NA: Why is there the added sense of urgency for his presidency?

DYER: Well have a look! The economy's down the tubes, two foreign wars neither of which can be won or have any prospect of winning, a global climate problem which the United States has not only been ignoring but actively conspiring against the solution of for the last ten year—and as a result it has become a much bigger problem that now requires more expenses and more urgent measures. And you have no money because taxes have just collapsed because as people lose their jobs they stop paying taxes. I mean, the federal deficit this year is going to be eye watering—probably on the order of a trillion and a half dollars. You know, a trillion here and a trillion there adds up, pretty soon...

NA: Why has “change” been the central focus of Obama’s election campaign? Is this a real direction or simply rhetoric?

DYER: All political platforms are about change. The only political platforms that aren't about change are when you've been in power for twenty years and you're trying to get re-elected—then you can't really say “change.” But in the vast majority of cases, including sitting governments, change is always part of the rhetoric. What else are you going to promise, continuity? People are never fully satisfied so you've got to promise them that somehow things will be better. Very few people got elected saying, “I promise not to change anything and things will be just the same in your life if you vote for me. Because things are so chaotic right now it almost seems counter-intuitive that people would be willing to experiment with “change.” When people are all comfortable and sitting pretty and they know there are no problems on the horizon they're actually quite happy with the status quo. When they're scared of losing their jobs or they've already lost them, when they're scared about losing their houses, when they're scared about losing their medical insurance because generally it comes with the job and it leaves with the job, they are not happy campers.

At that point, anybody who can promise that they can change things enough that these worries will go away—or at least go hide around the corner somewhere where nobody will have to confront them everyday—is going to get a hearing. I think this is exactly the sort of time when large changes become possible. I never actually quoted the guy in here but what I called this lecture today was “Never Waste a Crisis,” which is a direct quote from Obama’s chief of staff, Rahm Emanuel.

Emanuel made that statement in response to some question—actually before [Obama] took office; it was back in November or December—“never waste a crisis.” When a crisis arises change becomes possible because people are much more open to change when they have a really strong sense of insecurity or dissatisfaction and that things can be better if only we only... So don't waste a crisis, use it to push through the changes you want to make.

NA: Given all the crises that Obama faces, which do you feel take precedence?

DYER: He doesn't have a choice in this one. The economic crisis takes precedence: the house is on fire. But there are some he can continue to pursue—other purposes he can continue to pursue—while he deals with it. And if you can't multitask you shouldn't be president.

The criterion is that you can't deal with ones that require a lot of money right now because the money is committed to dealing with its own crisis. On the other hand, if you can make progress without spending

large amounts of federal money up front—it's alright if it's got to be spent in four or five years time—than you can get on with that even as you deal with the economic crisis you're in.

So, for that reason, you can go on working on climate, you can't do much about health care and education because [the former] doesn't take much money up front and [the latter] takes a great big watch. The triage is done without much thought. It's just obvious.

NA: Although his presidency has just begun, Obama has already made strong efforts to improve standings internationally. Is it working?

DYER: Just by being there, I mean, he doesn't have to do anything he just has to stand there and smile and everybody goes, "Ah-hah, the Americans have finally chosen somebody who knows how to tie his shoelaces and probably knows how to do his tie up as well." And he's black, which is a real bonus even for people who aren't themselves of colour, in terms of cultivating a sort of feeling that America's turned a corner.