

Canada's Liberal government boosts military, courts Bush administration

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Under Paul Martin, Canada's Liberal government has given increased importance and prominence to the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF). In answer to demands from Canadian big business and Washington that Canada increase its contribution to "global security," Ottawa has announced new or speeded-up weapons purchases, deployed troops to Haiti, extended the CAF mission in Afghanistan, and all but dotted the i's and crossed the t's on Canadian participation in the Bush administration's missile defence program.

In marked contrast to Jean Chrétien, his predecessor as prime minister, Martin has made a point of showing up at Canadian Armed Forces installations and rubbing shoulders with the military brass. The recent Liberal budget gave CAF personnel deployed in combat zones or potential combat zones an income tax exemption.

For the Martin government, this increased attention to the military and military affairs is bound up with its attempt to mend fences with Washington. The Bush administration was surprised and "disappointed" when Chrétien pulled the plug on plans to have Canadian troops join the US-British invasion of Iraq and responded by cancelling a May 2003 presidential visit to Ottawa.

Front and center in Martin's attempt to assuage the Bush administration is his orchestration of Canada's participation in the missile defence program. In January 2004, just weeks after Martin had assumed power, his Defence Minister, David Pratt, wrote US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld to formally request negotiations on Canadian involvement in the US National Missile Defence (NMD) program.

A successor to the Reagan administration's Strategic Defence Initiative ("Star Wars"), NMD was begun under the Clinton administration, then given dramatically increased importance by Bush's. While NMD is publicly promoted by the Bush administration as an innocuous defensive measure, its leading advocates hope that by freeing the US from the fear of a nuclear strike, any impediment to the full deployment of its military and geo-political power will be removed. In this regard, it is important to note that the Bush administration has moved on a number of fronts to lower the threshold for the use of nuclear weapons, including advocating the development of a new type of lower-impact nuclear weapon.

The Canadian military, along with significant sections of Canadian industry, have been pushing for involvement in Washington's missile defence program, arguing that it will provide contracts for business and access to advanced technology

and ensure the continued relevance of NORAD, the North American air defence alliance under which the CAF is partnered with the US military.

In its April 2004 policy platform, the Canadian Council of Chief Executives, which represent the heads of Canada's 150 largest corporations, called for greatly enhanced Canadian-US military cooperation, including "increased interoperability of forces on land, at sea and in the air, collaboration in securing marine approaches and continued Canadian participation in joint aerospace defence, both through NORAD and the planned ballistic missile defence system."

While the Canadian ruling elite hopes for closer collaboration with an increasingly militarily and geo-politically aggressive US, the general population is largely opposed. Chrétien was widely criticized by Canada's corporate and political elite for having "capitulated" to antiwar sentiment and "reflexive anti-Americanism." But in the ensuing year popular antipathy toward the Bush administration has only increased as a result of the exposure of its lies about Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction and the occupation force's brutal and callous treatment of the Iraqi people.

The Liberals thus face a problem in how to sell to the public Canada's participation in missile defence and, more generally, closer military and geo-political cooperation with the US. To the Martin government's dismay, press reports in late April revealed that its claim to be still pondering over whether to participate in missile defence is a sham. For all intents and purposes the decision has already been made. Even while purportedly still in discussions with Washington about Canada's *possible* participation, Ottawa has assented to part of the North American early-warning system essential for NMD being deployed in Canada.

Martin responded to this revelation by presenting participation in the NMD program as a way of winning a seat at the "planning table", and thereby ensuring that missile defence will not lead to the weaponization of space. This position was echoed in a May 1st *Globe & Mail* editorial extolling the virtues of Canada's participation in the anti-missile program: "Similarly, by being part of the development of this ambitious radar and interception program, Canada will be in a better position to fine-tune the system and suggest improvements. The country will not be selling its soul; it will be asserting its sovereignty by standing up for itself where it counts, within NORAD. It is not a position Mr. Martin should be nervous about promoting, even in the shadow of a

difficult election.”

For its part, the Bush administration has been willing to accommodate the Martin government’s need for the NMD issue to be downplayed pending the outcome of Canada’s upcoming federal election. When Martin met with Bush at the White House April 30th, the missile defence program was reputedly left off the agenda.

In addition to embracing missile defence, the Liberals have extended the terms of various CAF deployments in support of US imperialism. Last year, Canada took a leading role in the NATO force that is working alongside the US military to prop up the puppet regime the US has established in Kabul. Two thousand CAF personnel are currently based in the Kabul region and Martin recently announced that a significant Canadian contingent will continue to be deployed there till August 2005, i.e., for an additional year.

Defence Minister David Pratt also recently announced that the CAF deployment of 500 troops and six helicopters to Haiti has been extended by three months. The CAF troops, originally part of a 3,600-strong US-led force that oversaw the deposing of Haiti’s elected president, Jean-Bertrand Aristide, will be “relabelled” as components of a UN mission set to begin June 1st.

Speaking at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars during his April visit to Washington, Martin emphasized that Canada is eager to work alongside the other imperialist powers in assuring “global stability” and will deploy many more troops overseas in coming years. “The fact is,” boasted Martin, “Canada currently ranks second among NATO nations when it comes to the percentage of troops deployed abroad in multi-national operations. Ahead of the French, the British, the Italians, the Spanish and everyone else except the Americans. Nor do we foresee an early end to the kinds of security challenges we face. That is why, recently, we announced major new procurement decisions to ensure our military has the equipment it needs to get the job done.”

The procurement decisions referred to by Martin were publicly revealed in mid-April by the Defence Minister, in an appearance at the Gagetown CAF base. The \$7 billion in new and accelerated purchases include, \$3 billion for helicopters, \$2.1 billion for three supply ships and \$700 million for 66 Stryker armoured vehicles.

All of these purchases are seen as important in enhancing the CAF’s ability to participate in overseas interventions. The supply ships are designed to service naval task forces and provide offshore command platforms for CAF overseas engagements like that in Haiti. The Stryker is an eight-wheeled light armoured vehicle described as most suitable for “close and urban terrain.” The vehicle has been used by the US military in Iraq, and is manufactured by General Dynamics Land Systems, a company based both in Canada and the United States.

As substantial as these expenditures are, they are merely down payments on the Liberals’ repeated promises to reinvigorate the CAF following a comprehensive review of Canada’s foreign and defence policies.

One of the major issues involved in this review is determining parameters for the Canadian military’s participation in “peace-making”—i.e., wars like the 1991 and 2003 Iraq Wars—as opposed

to “peace-keeping.”

In the latter decades of the Cold War, peacekeeping—i.e., policing truces, frequently under the auspices of the United Nations—became an important CAF function. But much of Canada’s corporate and political elite now view “peacekeeping” as having undermined its interests, by enfeebling Canada’s military capacity and reducing public support for military aggression.

In his Woodrow Wilson speech, Martin argued for the imperialist powers to rewrite international law so as to sanction and legitimize intervention in so-called trouble spots: “What is required is an open discussion about the need for intervention in situations that offend the most basic precepts of our common humanity. We need clear agreement on principles to help determine when it is appropriate to use force in support of humanitarian objectives.”

Notably, Martin rejected the United Nations as a suitable forum for deciding when interventions are legitimate, thereby distancing himself from the argument the Liberal government advanced under Chrétien when opting out of the Iraq war.

Initially, the Canadian government had been prepared to join in the invasion of Iraq. It was only shortly before the invasion that the Canadian government, citing the need for UN approval as an excuse, backed out and instead sent CAF troops to help the US in Afghanistan. The Chrétien government was concerned both about the massive popular opposition to the war and the repercussions that Washington’s unilateral and patently illegal action would have for the system of multilateral alliances the Canadian elite has long promoted as a means of securing its interests in a world dominated by larger powers.

Bob Woodward’s recently published book *Plan of Attack* included the revelation that, the day before the US invasion of Iraq, an unnamed Canadian official told US National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice that, although Canada couldn’t participate, it could promise to keep “rhetoric at a low boil—just enough to satisfy Canadian public opinion but without being belligerent or provocative.”

Although Martin publicly supported the decision not to join the invasion, he has repeatedly signalled that if he had then been the prime minister the decision might well have been different. Thus he named as his defence minister, David Pratt, one of only a handful of Liberal MPs who publicly opposed Chrétien’s stance on the war. Speaking at the Woodrow Wilson Centre to a crowd comprised of Washington’s power elite, Martin repudiated the pretext under which Chrétien opted out of the Iraq. And when Martin finally commented on the torture of Iraqi prisoners by US troops, he deplored it on the grounds that it undermined the “fight against terrorism,” thus parroting the Bush administration’s lies about the reasons for the invasion and occupation of Iraq.



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