

Canadian military spies on liberal war-critic

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The *Ottawa Citizen* revealed last month that the Department of National Defense—i.e., Canada’s military—had compiled an extensive file on the activities of Steven Staples, head of the little-known Rideau Institute for International Affairs.

The file was focused on Staples’s criticisms of the Canadian Armed Forces’ mission in Afghanistan, particularly his views on “...General Hillier’s plans to move the military away from peacekeeping and into more combat-oriented roles.” Twenty-five hundred CAF personnel are currently deployed to Afghanistan, primarily Kandahar Province, where they are playing a leading role in the counter-insurgency campaign aimed at propping up the US-installed government of Hamid Karzai.

The military’s file on Staples consisted of a report on a presentation he made to the Halifax Peace Coalition as well as email correspondence on press and popular reaction. It covered the 15-day period in which he traveled to Nova Scotia to speak at various anti-war events. The file was forwarded to more than 50 military officers, including two brigadier generals.

Initially, the Department of National Defense denied that the military was monitoring Staples, even the existence of the file in question. But under pressure from the Freedom of Information Commissioner, the military was forced to admit that it had been carrying out surveillance of Staples. The release of the file was accompanied by a statement from Deputy Minister of Defense Ward Elcock asserting that “the organization understands the importance of providing information to the public.”

The military’s attempted cover-up of its monitoring of Staples and the relative obscurity of the target strongly suggest that this is but the tip of the iceberg—that the military is conducting widespread, if not systematic, surveillance of the anti-war movement. The Deputy Minister of Defense who, after the military

was caught out in its lie, hastened to reassure the public as to the military’s support for public scrutiny of its activities is himself a former head of Canada’s domestic spy agency, the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS).

The Department of National Defense has defended its actions, saying, “Everyone engaged with communicating on Afghanistan should be made aware of [Staples’s] arguments so that they can be better prepared to deal with them.”

The claim that the military must spy on opponents of the war so as to be able to answer their arguments could be used to justify surveillance of any anti-war meeting or demonstration.

It also flouts the basic bourgeois democratic principle of the subordination of the military to the civilian government. It is the government’s right and responsibility—in this case the minority Conservative government of Stephen Harper—to answer public criticism of Canada’s leading role in the Afghan war and to explain and justify the actions of the CAF. The military, meanwhile, is supposed to stay clear of political debates over how and towards what ends it is deployed.

However, with the support of the previous Liberal government of Paul Martin and the current regime, the military has begun to assume a much more prominent political role, both at home and abroad. Recently the *World Socialist Web Site* reported on the role the head of the CAF, General Rick Hillier, played in negotiating an agreement with the Afghan government giving Canadian government personnel, most of them CAF officers, a prominent role in advising the Afghan government (see “The ‘Canadian Ministers’ of Hamid Karzai’s Afghan government”). The frequency with which Hillier has publicly dissented from the views of the Defense Minister Gordon O’Connor has caused considerable comment in the corporate media.

The military's attempt to explain away its surveillance of Staples as part of a public relations initiative aimed at keeping the public better apprised of the aims of the Afghan mission is an obvious lie. But it certainly does represent a further CAF foray into politics.

Staples and the Rideau Institute for International Affairs focus on the minutiae of parliamentary politics. They often suggest changes in motions by the Liberals to make them palatable to the social-democratic NDP, in the hopes of uniting the opposition to the Conservatives, so that they can rein in the militaristic prime minister and reestablish Canada as a "peace-keeping" nation. That the military is monitoring the leaders of a group whose activities are so benign, revolving as they do around the political establishment, underscores its sensitivity to and fear of the widespread and deepening popular anti-war sentiment and raises the question, "Whom else is the military monitoring?"

The military's monitoring of Staples is in accordance with the Conservative government's attempt to paint any criticisms of its conduct of the Afghan war as disloyal, if not semi-treasonous. Although it was the Liberals who initiated the current Afghan mission, Harper has accused them of being pro-Taliban and even told parliament Liberal leader Stephane Dion's criticism of the Defense Minister did not merit a reply, because Dion unlike, O'Connor, never served in the CAF.

The case of the military file on Steven Staples shows (as do the horrors inflicted upon Maher Arar, the security certificate debacle, and the continued assault on democratic rights) that the rapacious interests of the Canadian ruling elite are increasingly incompatible with the maintenance of basic democratic norms.



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