

Iraq war commander named head of Canada's military

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Canada's Conservative government has announced that a Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) officer who helped direct the US-British occupation of Iraq for a year, beginning in January 2004, will become the next head of the Canadian Armed Forces.

While seconded to the US Army's Third Corps, Lieutenant-General Walter Natynczyk served first as the Deputy Director of Strategy, Policy and Plans and then as the Deputy Commanding General of the Multinational Corps—"the tactical unit responsible for command and control of operations" of the US military and its allies "throughout Iraq."

According to the *Globe and Mail*, for much of Natynczyk's deployment to Iraq, he was the deputy commander of 35,000 US and allied troops; that is, the second in command of a force "far larger and wielding far more combat power than the entire Canadian army" and one "waging a fierce counterinsurgency" war. Interviewed by *Maclean's* magazine in 2004, Natynczyk faithfully peddled the Bush administration's justifications for the carnage wrought by US imperialism on the Iraqi people. "There's a heck of a lot of people," asserted Natynczyk, "who will have a better life and a better future because of what we are doing here today."

Like his predecessor as CAF chief, General Rick Hillier, Natynczyk is a graduate of the US Army War College.

Natynczyk's appointment was not unexpected. He is currently the vice-chief of defence staff, Hillier's deputy. Nevertheless, Natynczyk's promotion, which does not follow the standard practice of rotating the top CAF post among the army, navy, and air force, was clearly meant to send a strong message to the Canadian elite, the military, and Washington.

The Conservative government is determined to make good on its pledges to expand the CAF to the point where the world's great powers take notice and to use Canada's military to aggressively assert "Canadian interests"—that

is, the interests of Canada's capitalist elite—on the world stage.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper, who has brought Canada's foreign policy even more closely in line with that of the Bush administration while championing the leading role the CAF is playing in the Afghan counter-insurgency war, said Natynczyk's "service record includes a broad range of achievement at home and abroad. The Canadian Forces are a vital institution making a tremendous contribution to our country. Walter Natynczyk is the ideal person to lead the Canadian forces forward."

Defence Minister Peter MacKay and Natynczyk himself stressed the extent to which the new CAF chief, who is to assume his command at the beginning of next month, will continue the transformation of the CAF undertaken by Hillier.

"This will bring great continuity within the Canadian Forces," declared MacKay.

Speaking of Hillier, Natynczyk said, "In many ways, we are the same person."

"We have to look at the huge success we have had over there in Afghanistan," added Natynczyk. "We're hearing from allies how much they recognize the quality of our men and women—we don't take back seat to anybody. Hillier and the Armed Forces have done a great job of putting us on the right path. The question is, how do we accelerate that?"

In late 2003-2004, the outgoing CAF head pressed the then Liberal government to deploy more than 2,000 CAF troops to Kandahar, in southern Afghanistan, where they have taken a leading role in the US-NATO counter-insurgency war. For Hillier, and this was subsequently fervently embraced by the Conservative government and corporate media, the CAF expedition to Afghanistan has served as a means to bury the notion, associated with Liberal Prime Minister Pierre Elliot Trudeau, of the CAF

as a peace-keeping force and revive, in fact and public image, Canada's military as an instrument of war.

Hillier also flouted the notion of the subordination of the military to the civilian government, famously declaring at one point that his responsibility as CAF head was as much to the men and women in uniform as it was to the government and people of Canada. Yet he was the object of gushing tributes from the government and media when he announced his impending retirement in April.

Natynczyk said that one of his first priorities will be to visit Afghanistan: "I've got to get back over there pretty soon. I was just there in February."

The CAF top brass, the government, and media have trumpeted the Afghan mission as a great success. But 85 CAF personnel have lost their lives in Afghanistan, proportionately the highest casualty rate of any foreign army in Afghanistan. The CAF has repeatedly been forced to deploy more men and equipment, including tanks, to Afghanistan, and it faces much opposition from the local population because of its support for a corrupt US-imposed government and readiness to call in air strikes, which inevitably result in heavy civilian casualties, and propensity to kill civilians who stray too close to CAF vehicles or roadblocks.

At Friday's press conference at which his appointment was announced, Natynczyk touted the relevance of his Iraq experience for the CAF's counter-insurgency war in southern Afghanistan—recently extended by a bi-partisan Conservative-Liberal motion till the end of 2011. Said Natynczyk, "The tactics and techniques and procedures" for pacifying Iraq and Afghanistan "are exactly the same. So are the risks."

Natynczyk will also have responsibility for overseeing a Conservative plan to greatly expand the CAF's firepower and overseas deployment capabilities. Last month the government announced its Canada First Defence Strategy under which Ottawa will spend upwards of \$40 billion on re-equipping the CAF over the next 20 years.

While Natynczyk's appointment underscores the current government's plans to revive Canadian militarism, it also serves to expose the hypocritical character of the Liberals' refusal to deploy the CAF alongside US and British troops in the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

Under Liberal government orders, the CAF was intimately involved in the Pentagon's planning for the invasion of Iraq. Only at the eleventh hour did the Chretien Liberal government—to the consternation of Harper and his Conservatives and much of Canada's

corporate elite—decide to pull the CAF out of the invasion. It did so for two reasons: the mass antiwar sentiment, which was manifested in some of the biggest demonstrations in Canadian history and, secondly, apprehension over Washington's willingness to trash the system of multilateral alliances through which the Canadian bourgeoisie had long sought to contain US power.

Nevertheless, Canada was completely complicit in the illegal US invasion and occupation of Iraq, which has led to some one million Iraqi fatalities, as well as 4,000 US war dead. Natynczyk was one of several dozen CAF officers who participated in the war while on exchanges with the US military. Moreover, the Canadian navy was helping to blockade the Persian Gulf. And from the beginning of the war, Chretien made clear that Canada supported a rapid US victory, while dismissing the question of the legality of the war as essentially irrelevant.

In 2004, as the anti-US insurgency was gathering force, the Liberal government, now headed by Paul Martin, agreed to assist the US by deploying Canadian forces to the center of the Taliban insurgency in southern Afghanistan.

Except when stumping for votes, the Liberals have since sought to downplay their decision to keep Canada officially out of the Iraq war. In late 2006, they came close to selecting an enthusiastic supporter of the war, Michael Ignatieff, as party leader. Ignatieff is now deputy Liberal leader.

Earlier this year, the Liberals rallied behind their ostensible Conservative government opponents to ensure a further 34-month extension of the Canadian military intervention in southern Afghanistan.

Not surprisingly, Liberal defence critic Bryon Wilfert welcomed Natynczyk's appointment, noting his long experience, especially working with US military forces. "I think it's the right choice at the right time," said Wilfert.



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