

Wikileaks cable exposes Canadian duplicity in Iraq war

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A classified diplomatic note provided to the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) by *Wikileaks* shows that on March 17, 2003—just two days prior to the “shock and awe” onslaught launched against Iraq by American, British and allied militaries—Canadian foreign affairs officials told Washington that Canada’s armed forces could be “discreetly” deployed in support of the invasion of Iraq

The Canadian assurance was provided to an unnamed US diplomat the very same day that Liberal Prime Minister Jean Chrétien, amidst much fanfare, rose in the House of Commons to declare that Canada’s military would not be mobilized as part of President George W. Bush’s “coalition of the willing.”

Prior to his March 17 parliamentary announcement, Chrétien had consistently refused to say what his Liberal government would do if the US went to war without United Nation’s sanction, dismissing the question as “hypothetical.” He did, however, repeatedly voice support for the US-British military build-up, saying the threat of war was needed to compel Iraq’s disarmament (that is to force Baghdad to give up its non-existent “weapons of mass destruction.”) And, at his government’s instruction, leading Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) personnel participated throughout the preceding fall and winter in the Pentagon’s war planning.

Canada had previously signed on to support the U.S.-led “Operation Enduring Freedom” —an operation that served as a cover for the war preparations against Iraq. In the name of “combating terrorism,” Canadian warships, aircraft and 1,200 naval personnel were deployed alongside US and NATO battleships to the Persian Gulf.

But ultimately Chrétien balked at publicly associating Canada with the invasion of Iraq, under conditions where war had not been authorized by the UN and was opposed by many of Canada’s NATO allies, including France and Germany.

Several factors contributed to this decision, which was vehemently opposed by much of Canada’s elite, including Stephen Harper, then the leader of the Official Opposition and now Canada’s Conservative prime minister.

The war was hugely unpopular, especially in Quebec where the Liberal opposition was poised to unseat the pro-Quebec independence Parti Québécois as the provincial government in an April election.

Chrétien and sections of the Canadian establishment deplored the US’s turn to unilateralism and the open breach between Washington and what the then US Secretary of Defense Donald

Rumsfeld derisively dismissed as “old Europe.” They feared that the sundering of the alliances forged between the principal imperialist powers during the Cold War would make it more difficult for the Canadian ruling elite to assert its own interests on the world stage.

Much has been made of Chrétien’s duplicitous statement disassociating Canada from the impending U.S. led invasion. At the time, it prompted a standing ovation from his fellow Liberal MPs. Also leaping to their feet were the parliamentary representatives of the *indépendantiste* Bloc Québécois (BQ) and the social-democratic New Democratic Party (NDP). Indeed, in the CBC article on the *Wikileaks* cable concerning Canada’s role in the Iraq War, journalist Greg Weston notes that Chretien’s March 17 speech has been “widely hailed as nothing less than a defining moment of national sovereignty”.

Certainly, the Prime Minister’s announcement served to buttress the government’s standing amongst liberal-nationalist and anti-war sections of the electorate. But, as the *Wikileaks* cable now reveals, the Chretien government was all the while secretly promising U.S. officials that it could be counted on to provide clandestine military assistance to Bush’s war for “regime change” in Iraq.

Within hours of Chretien’s statement, Foreign Affairs official James Wright—who is now the Canadian High Commissioner in London, England—quietly informed U.S. diplomats of Chretien’s double-game. “Political director Jim Wright,” states the leaked American diplomatic cable, “emphasized that, despite public statements that the Canadian assets in the Straits of Hormuz will remain in the region exclusively to support Enduring Freedom, they will also be available to provide escort services in the Straits and will otherwise be discreetly useful to the military effort. The two ships in the Straits now are being augmented by two more en route, and there are patrol and supply aircraft in the U.A.E. (United Arab Emirates) which are also prepared to be ‘useful’.”

The cable continues, “This message tracks with others we have heard. While for domestic reasons...the GOC (Government of Canada) has decided not to join in a U.S. coalition of the willing...they are prepared to be as helpful as possible in the military margins.”

The U.S. ambassador in Ottawa at the time, Paul Cellucci, told the CBC that the version of events outlined in the leaked memo “sounds right.” Said Cellucci, “the message from the Canadians was pretty clear. We are not putting boots on the ground in Iraq.

We will say good things about the United States and not-so-good things about Saddam Hussein. We will keep our ships in the Persian Gulf helping in the war on terror—and any way else we can help.” On several previous occasions Cellucci has asserted that Canada did far more in support of the conquest of Iraq than many members of Bush’s war coalition.

As the *Wikileaks* cable makes clear, this support included material support in the Iraq War theatre, not just the Martin Liberal government’s 2004 decision to have a 2,000-strong Canadian Armed Forces’ expeditionary force assume a lead role in the counter-insurgency war in southern Afghanistan. As was widely noted at the time, the CAF deployment to Kandahar freed up an equal number of US battle troops to fight in Iraq.

Details of exactly what naval and airborne support was provided by the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) during the invasion of Iraq and subsequent counter-insurgency war remain a tightly-held secret. But it has been confirmed that some of the several dozen Canadian officers embedded with US forces in the Persian Gulf as part of various exchange programs were involved at the highest operational levels in planning and executing the Iraq War. Canadian General Walt Natynczyk—the current head of the CAF—was elevated from a central war-planning position to become deputy commander of 35,000 U.S and allied soldiers in Iraq.

The Canadian government also provided significant political assistance to US imperialism in the Iraq War. No sooner had the war begun than Chrétien publicly affirmed his support for a US victory, while dismissing the question of the legality of the US-British invasion as an arcane and irrelevant matter about which lawyers and historians will quibble for decades to come.

At the behest of the federal Liberal government, Canada’s election commission created and then led the International Mission for Iraqi Elections (IMIE) in 2005. The IMIE’s ostensible purpose was to determine whether a January 30 vote for a 275-member provisional Iraqi National Assembly and subsequent votes to ratify a new constitution and elect a fresh National Assembly were free and fair. But the IMIE’s real mandate—as the mission’s origins, composition, and conduct demonstrated—was to drum up international support for the sham elections the US ultimately staged in Iraq.

In 2005, the Liberal government also came to the support of the US by signaling to Canada’s Immigration and Refugee Boards that they should take a hard-line against US war resisters, members of the US armed forces who fled to Canada because they opposed the Iraq War. Intervening at the refugee hearing for US Army deserter Jeremy Hinzman, a lawyer representing Canada’s Solicitor-General argued that Hinzman could not raise as part of his refugee claim that he was being forced to fight in an “illegal war” because the issue of the war’s legality was outside the purview of Canada’s judicial system.

The government’s claim was quickly endorsed by Canada’s Refugee Board and has repeatedly been invoked in denying Iraq war resisters political refugee status and returning them to the US military for court-martial and incarceration.

Although the Canadian government and military provided significant support for the US’s illegal invasion and occupation of Iraq, the Chrétien Liberal government’s failure to publicly

participate in the war coalition angered the Bush administration and the Pentagon.

In an effort to placate Washington and to some degree Canada’s own military—which was embarrassed and outraged at Chrétien’s eleventh-hour decision not to have the CAF join the Iraq invasion force—the Martin Liberal government decided to make Afghanistan “Canada’s war.”

Repeatedly extended and expanded with the support of the Liberals and Conservatives, the now six-year long CAF deployment to southern Afghanistan has been used to acclimatize the population to the bloodshed and the use of military force as an instrument for advancing “Canadian interests and values.”

In March, all four parties in the House of Commons, including the NDP, which on occasion postures as an opponent of Washington’s predatory foreign policy, supported the CAF’s joining the imperialist assault on Libya.

In 2003, the Liberal government, for political and geo-strategic reasons, thought it necessary to take a two-faced attitude toward the US invasion of Iraq, publicly refusing to commit Canadian troops, while providing “discreet” military support behind the scenes.

In the ensuing eight years, in response to the rise of new Asian powers and the erosion of North America’s economic and geo-political hegemony, the Canadian ruling elite has come to the conclusion that it must draw still closer to Washington to defend and assert its interests on the global stage.

Harper, who came to power in 2006 and secured a parliamentary majority for his Conservatives earlier this month with strong support from corporate Canada, has made a major objective of his premiership overcoming any remaining frictions between Washington and Ottawa over Canada’s Iraq war stance. Among the chief priorities for his government in the coming year is negotiating a common North American Security Perimeter—a framework for joint policing of North America’s land, borders, and coastal waters akin to that provided by NORAD, the North American Aerospace Defense Command.



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