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Reprint from Volume 20 Number 7

April 17 2008

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War Is Peace—Orwell wrote the Harper doctrine

Stephen Harper returned from last week's NATO meeting with the commitments he says he needed to justify keeping Canadian forces in Kandahar. So Canadians will face having our troops act as combatants in the Afghanistan war for at least three more years in a mission that started in 2001. At 10 years it will be, by far, Canada's longest war.

With these developments, it may be a good time to examine how Canada's traditional peacekeeping role regressed into war-making. We are being encouraged to celebrate news of how many people Canadian soldiers have managed to kill, with body counts reminiscent of US media coverage of the Vietnam War. From a country that made a unique contribution to peaceful conflict resolution, Canada now stands alongside the US in supporting aggressive military intervention. We seem to be devolving as a nation.

The most committed advocates of the war in Afghanistan, including Harper and John Manley, are characterizing Canada's new militarism as the natural extension of Lester Pearson's concept of peacekeeping. This concept is being sorely abused, with the same audacity as when the Americans named one of their nuclear missiles 'The Peacekeeper.'

In his February speech to the Conference of Defence Associations (CDA), Harper began by talking about Pearson, the Canadian reluctance to take up arms, support for the United Nations, and our international reputation for working among 'the world's poor and oppressed.' But this was just the set up for Harper's announcement of permanent increases to Canadian military spending and a profound shift away from peacekeeping.

Harper's plan will see Canadian troops exercising the 'robust use of force,' with purchases of new equipment for every branch of the military. Mixed in with a lot of talk about noble aims, Harper announced that Canadian security now includes protecting trade and investment opportunities for Canadian corporations in foreign countries. If that doesn't alarm you, it should.

Military Spending as 'Development'

Claiming Canada's new aggressive military 'missions' are consistent with our peacekeeping tradition is just one way to reframe militarism as humanitarianism. Another way is to tie it to development. Harper made this connection in his speech to the CDA, and even arms dealers—the main beneficiary of Canada's new foreign policy stance—are making it part of their sales pitch.

When the CBC sent Nelofer Pazira, known for her lead role in the film *Kandahar*, into an arms trade show, she tried to convey to the arms dealers present how people living in conflict

zones experienced their products. She told them she could remember as a child counting Soviet tanks on the streets of Kabul, and the fear they engendered.

But the response she got was dismissive. She was told 'You can't have development and reconstruction without having a minimum level of security.' The military wares being sold to Canada were the 'foundation of the solution' for Afghanistan. Up is down, war is peace.

Fear of Canada

Pazira appealed to Canadians to take a look at the equipment Canada was purchasing for use in Afghanistan and consider whether we would not feel fear if we saw it on the streets of our own cities. She was well aware that development could not happen without security, but in her view the overwhelming emphasis by Canada on military force actually undermined security for both Afghans and Canadian troops because it alienated the population.

Pazira warned that the hope that high-tech weaponry would enable Canadian forces to kill Taliban without causing civilian casualties was an illusion; the Taliban are intermingled with the population in places like Kandahar.

In their report documenting the rapid escalation of Canadian military spending, Steven Staples and Bill Robinson examine the perception that Canada spends little on its military—despite the fact that the military's budget is higher now than at any time since World War II. The cost of military operations in Afghanistan alone had reached \$7.2 billion by the end of March 2008. To put it in comparative terms, Canada has spent \$225 per Afghan citizen on its military mission in a country where per capita income is only \$293.

Abandoning Peacekeeping

According to Professor Walter Dorn of the Royal Military College, 'The first consequence of our current deployment in Afghanistan is that Canada is currently at a historic low in its UN peacekeeping contribution.'

Most Canadians would probably be shocked to learn that the federal government has all but eliminated Canada's role in United Nations peacekeeping. Professor Dorn reported in his testimony to the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs that Canada now contributes fewer soldiers than ever—a mere 55 out of a total 70,000 UN peacekeeping troops. Where Canadians used to make up 10% on average of UN forces, that figure has dwindled to 0.1%.

It is not because of a collapse of interest in peacekeeping that Canada's role is so diminished. The demand for UN missions and the number of peacekeeping soldiers is at an all

time high. What has collapsed is the commitment among Canadian political and military elites for peacekeeping as an alternative to war. So General Rick Hillier can say, without being contradicted by anyone in government, 'We are the Canadian Forces, and our job is to be able to kill people.'

How is the Canadian military operation in Afghanistan different from peacekeeping? Aren't our troops just protecting civilians from violent aggressors as they do in peacekeeping missions?

Back to Basics

Professor Dorn has contrasted Canada's role in Kandahar with the basic principles that define peacekeeping, principles that are critical to grasp given all the warm and fuzzy rationalizations being served up for the war. Canada is in Kandahar not as part of a UN mission but as part of the American 'Operation Enduring Freedom.'

The Canadian military is not impartial, does not have the consent of both parties to the conflict to be there, and is not limiting its use of force to the minimum required for self-

defence and protection of the civilian population—key trademarks of peacekeeping.

'Peacekeeping may be possible in some areas of Afghanistan but in the south, foreign military intervention is contributing to the violence by effectively weighing-in on one side of a civil war. And rather than look for ways to de-escalate the conflict, giving combatants whatever opportunities exist for alternatives to waging war, Canada's top general forecloses these opportunities by calling 'the enemy,' scumbags.

Efforts to build peace anywhere there is violent conflict are not for the faint of heart, and they can appear near impossible in Afghanistan. A Taliban leader was killed for offering to negotiate with the Karzai government. But peacekeeping missions have worked even in parts of the world with the worst history of violence, such as in Mozambique.

That was the genius of Pearson's idea, and it is a contribution Canadians are justly proud of. The Harper government seems bound and determined to denigrate it and erase it from what defines us as a nation. ✍