

From “peacekeeper” to war hawk—Canada and NATO's war on Serbia

By Keith Jones
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With few dissenting voices, Canada's political elite and opinion makers have applauded NATO's bombing campaign against Yugoslavia. Indeed, Canada has been among the most bellicose of the 19 NATO states. Before the war was a fortnight old, Liberal Defence Minister Art Eggleton was suggesting NATO should consider a ground troop invasion of Kosovo.

Eggleton's remarks caught government spokesmen in other NATO capitals off guard, but on several occasions since, Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chretien has pledged Canada will support and join any NATO ground assault on Yugoslavia. On Monday, Chretien announced the dispatch of 800 "combat capable" troops to Macedonia. Members of an Edmonton, Alberta-based armoured regiment, the Canadian troops will purportedly assist a British brigade in helping Kosovar refugees, while awaiting future deployment in Kosovo "as peacekeepers." Chretien insists the Canadian troops will enter Kosovo only when a peace agreement is reached with Yugoslavia, but military analysts have been quick to point out that they are heavily armed and battle-ready.

Timed to coincide with Washington's call-up of 30,000 reservists, Chretien's troop announcement "will add to the uncertainty in Milosevic's mind that he could be facing a NATO ground offensive in about 45 days," Graham N. Green, Canada's former ambassador to Croatia, told the *Globe and Mail*.

Canada is one of the five countries supplying planes and pilots for the NATO bombing campaign. Initially, the Canadian force was comprised of just six CF-18s, but once it became clear NATO would be mounting a protracted air war Ottawa increased its contribution to the bombing raids to first 12, and then 18 CF-18s.

NATO's attack on a sovereign state that had not attacked or even threatened any of its members marks a sea-change in alliance policy. Needless to say, it also marks a major shift in Canada's military and foreign policy. However this change has elicited little comment, let alone any real debate, in either Parliament or the press. Harrowing reports of the plight of the Kosovar refugees have been used to divert attention from the fact that Canada is waging war, although Ottawa has made no declaration of war, and is doing so in violation of the diplomatic principles and precepts that Canada has hitherto

claimed are the basis of its foreign policy.

The absence of debate and Canada's frontline support for the NATO war effort indicate that Canada's political elite is among those spearheading the change in NATO's *raison d'etre* from an ostensibly defensive military alliance into a global policeman of Western economic and geopolitical interests.

Canada has been militarily aligned with the US through NATO and a strategic air defence alliance for decades. But until last month, Canadian military forces had not seen battle service, except in missions authorized by the United Nations, since World War II. For four decades, from the Korean War to the Gulf War, Canadian troops exchanged fire only when policing UN sponsored truces and peace settlements. That Canada's role is essentially that of a "peacekeeper" in international relations has been incorporated into Canadian nationalist mythology.

Yet all five parties in Canada's parliament quickly endorsed NATO's bombing campaign and have already indicated their readiness to support the introduction of ground troops.

The Bloc Québécois, which advocates Quebec's secession from Canada's federal state, issued a press release April 9 urging a debate on whether NATO should launch a ground war. The Quebec nationalists are clearly anxious to prove to Washington that an "independent" Quebec would be a faithful ally.

In supporting the NATO action against Yugoslavia both the governing Liberals and the social democrats of the New Democratic Party are taking a position radically at odds with their stand on the 1991 Gulf War

The Liberals, then the Official Opposition in Canada's Parliament, refused to support an attack on Iraqi forces in either Kuwait or Iraq until the US succeeded in obtaining UN sanction for such military action. Today the chief spokesman for the Liberals in those debates, current Foreign Affairs Minister Lloyd Axworthy, dismisses the UN as irrelevant.

In 1991, the social democrats of the New Democratic Party opposed the military assault against Iraq, preferring a UN-sanctioned, US-led, economic blockade. Yet the NDP endorsed the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia from day one, and Svend Robinson, the NDP foreign affairs critic and the standard bearer of the party's left wing, was soon urging that

the military campaign be extended to ground troops. In the face of criticism from peace, labor and church groups, the NDP has since modified its position. It is now urging an end to the bombing if the Serbs cease their military operations in Kosovo.

What opposition party criticism there has been of the government's war policy has revolved almost exclusively around the question of whether the House of Commons should be allowed to vote on any decision to use Canadian troops to invade Yugoslavia. Chretien has refused to promise such a vote, saying it would serve to highlight divisions in Canada over the war. This stance indicates the government, notwithstanding the near unanimity in the political elite, fears that, as the war intensifies and the public begins to probe the real reasons for NATO's intervention, significant popular opposition will emerge.

The press, for its part, has largely blacked out any protests against the war. Between them, Canada's two national dailies devoted just one paragraph to an April 12 press conference at which Canadian Auto Workers President Buzz Hargrove, former Ottawa Mayor Marian Dewar, Liberal Senator Nick Taylor and others called for Canada to immediately withdraw from the NATO bombing campaign.

Certainly, there is an important distinction to be drawn between those who support the bombing of Yugoslavia, thus legitimizing a new interventionist role for NATO, and those opposing Canada's participation in NATO's war in the name of Canada's tradition of "peacekeeping."

But it must be said that this tradition is a myth; moreover one that serves to undermine a critical attitude to the policies of Canada's rulers. This myth has been integral to the government and press propaganda in support of Canadian participation in the NATO war on Serbia. Whereas in the past Canada has upheld the peace, or so the refrain goes, now, given the horrors in Kosovo, it must help "make" it.

The claim that Canada has been a benign force in international relations is bound up with a liberal-social democratic Canadian nationalism, which extols Canada as a haven of class peace and social justice, in contrast to the rapacious and militaristic dollar republic to the south.

The truth is Canada is an imperialist power. "Pacific" Canada was a party to the carve-up of the world in the First and Second World Wars. During the First World War, Canada led the so-called White Dominions (Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa) in demanding a greater share in the running of Britain's colonial Empire.

The myth of a pacific Canada, like that of a social-reformist Canada, was rooted in the post- Second World War period. The postwar boom made it possible for the Canadian bourgeoisie to extend concessions to the working class in the form of the welfare state; while the Cold War confrontation with the Soviet Union compelled the various rival imperialist powers to cede world political and military leadership to the US.

Because it did not have a past as a direct colonial power and

was the trusted ally of one of the two major protagonists in the Cold War, Canada found itself called upon to police peace agreements in various world "trouble spots," from the Middle East to Vietnam.

The first of these "peace missions," which arose out of the 1956 Suez Crisis, exemplifies Canada's true role. The last major attempt of Britain and France to pursue an independent course in world affairs, the invasion of Suez was viewed by the US as a challenge to its own strategy to dominate the Middle East. For this reason, Washington welcomed the initiative of Canadian diplomat and future Prime Minister Lester Pearson to broker an end to the fighting. As part of the Pearson-drafted peace settlement, Canadian troops were dispatched to the Middle East to keep the "peace" and help defuse a crisis the US perceived as a threat to its interests.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of Japan and Western Europe as powerful economic rivals to the US, a new struggle for markets and influence has erupted--a struggle in which military might is being called into the balance. If Canada's political elite is so eager a participant in the latest Balkan War, it is because it wants to ensure a place at the table in leading what former US President George Bush has called the new world order.

"Observers on both sides of the border," reported the April 19 edition of *Time*, "agree that Canada's unhesitating cooperation with NATO in the Balkans has earned points in Washington." Nevertheless, many in the US security establishment still feel Canada cut its military and intelligence gathering capabilities too deeply at the end of the Cold War. Says an analyst at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Georgetown: "If Canada wants to have influence at the table, it has to do more."

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