

Bush administration ratchets up pressure on Ottawa

By Keith Jones
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The Bush administration has ratcheted up its pressure on Canada's Liberal government, even as the Liberals seek to placate Washington on a range of issues, from Iraq to cross-border security.

In a press briefing prior to the Evian G-8 summit, US National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice amplified previous American criticisms of the Canadian government for not joining the US-British invasion of Iraq. Washington was disappointed by Canada's stand, said Rice. "And that disappointment will, of course, not go [away] easily. It will take some time, because when friends are in a position where we say our security is at stake, we would have thought—as we got from many of our friends—that the answer would have been, 'Well, how can we help?'"

Instead, complained Rice, "there seemed to be some questioning of American motives and some lack of understanding ..." As a result Canada-US relations have seen "difficult times."

In effect, Rice demanded that the US's most important commercial partner—Canada-US cross-border trade is valued at close to two billion dollars per day—provide it with unquestioning diplomatic and military support whenever Washington claims US security is at stake. No matter that the US invasion of Iraq was illegal and the claims the Bush administration gave to justify it—the existence of a clear and present danger due to Iraqi weapons of destruction and an Iraq-Al-Qaeda nexus—were fabrications.

The significance of Rice's re-interpretation of the six-decades-old Canada-US military-strategic partnership is underscored by the fact that she was speaking on behalf of President Bush. Tradition calls for the US President to brief a select number of reporters from the G-8 countries prior to the annual summit. But Bush sent Rice in his stead, while he met

with reporters from the countries he was to visit in Eastern Europe and the Middle East upon leaving the summit.

Rice's scolding notwithstanding, the Canadian government has been at pains to prove that it remains a steadfast US ally and downplay its decision to stay out of the war.

In mid-March, Prime Minister Jean Chrétien called war against Iraq "unjustified." Since then he has repeatedly claimed the dispute at the UN over military action against Iraq was a difference of interpretation among friends, and that once the war was launched the issue became moot.

Chr(tien's position that the legality or illegality of the war is a pointless debate makes a mockery of Ottawa's longstanding claim that relations between states should be underpinned by a system of international law. It has been buttressed by a series of actions meant to demonstrate Canada's support and readiness to assist in Washington's colonial occupation of Iraq.

Eager to distinguish itself from the position of the French government, Canada called for the removal of all UN sanctions on Iraq almost as soon as US troops had entered Baghdad, and subsequently announced plans to send a contingent of Royal Canadian Mounted Police officers to Iraq to train a police force for the US's puppet government.

The day before Rice issued her verbal broadside against Ottawa, Canada's defence minister, John McCallum, announced that Canada has agreed to negotiations with the Bush administration on Canadian participation in the US missile defence shield. "Canada and the United States have disagreed many times on many matters," McCallum told Parliament. "Never have we parted company with the United States...in co-defending our continent. We are not about to do that

today.”

The announcement was not surprising, given that one top Liberal after another had publicly called for Canada to embrace the US initiative. Nevertheless, it marks a reversal of longstanding Canadian government policy, which has held that the deployment of a missile defence system could spark a new arms race, lead to the militarization of space and make nuclear conflict more, not less, likely. Even the Mulroney Conservative government balked at Canadian participation in an earlier version of an anti-ballistic defence system, Reagan’s Strategic Defence Initiative.

McCallum told the *Globe and Mail* that the US had been exerting pressure on Canada to sign onto the missile defence program by reducing the flow of US intelligence to the Canadian military and by cutting Canadian Armed Forces personnel out of some meetings of NORAD, the bi-lateral North American Air Defence Command. “We’re talking about a process where Canada used to be fully engaged in all the dimensions of NORAD. Now, with the changing technology and Canada’s...non-commitment to [missile defence]...there are areas in which Canadians are all of a sudden becoming uninvited.”

There is a powerful constituency in Canada for joining the missile defence program, and not only to placate the Bush administration. The Canadian military is desperate to maintain its participation in NORAD because it gives it access to advanced US weaponry and an important role in continental military planning. Also, there are a large number of Canadian military and electronics companies that are hoping to land lucrative defence contracts and they have been aggressively lobbying Ottawa. Last but not least, the overwhelming consensus of the Canadian bourgeoisie is that Canada must be part of any Fortress North America. By acting as the junior partner of US imperialism, the Canadian bourgeoisie hopes to leverage its position on the world stage.

In its attempts to scold and bully the Chrétien government, the Bush administration is being actively encouraged by the Canadian Alliance and the Alberta and Ontario Tory governments, which themselves have developed close connections to the Republican right. Thus, former Tory Prime Minister Brian Mulroney, himself a close friend of the Bush family, recently denounced Chrétien for endangering Canada’s

“partnership” with the US and bringing Canada-US relations to their “lowest point in modern history.”

In terms of social policy, the Chrétien Liberal government has been far and away the most right-wing government in post-World War Two Canadian history. It has presided over massive budget cuts that have gutted health care and other key public services and rewarded the well-to-do with the biggest tax cuts in Canadian history.

Yet the Bush administration and a large section of the Canadian ruling class are seeking to destabilize, if not bring down, the Chrétien Liberal government because they consider it unwilling or unable to mount a frontal assault, in the name of privatization and deregulation, on all remaining public services and legal restraints on capital.

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