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A Canadian Response to an American War

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The keynote speaker at the CCPA's 25th anniversary banquet on May 27, 2005 was broadcaster and film-maker Avi Lewis. This is an edited version of his speech.

In our discussions about deep integration with the United States, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq are mostly treated as add-ons, items in a list of policies that integration is dragging us into.

In fact, war is now the primary focus of the economy with which we are integrating.

According to a new study by PriceWaterhouseCooper, the annual U.S. military budget reached \$417 billion in 2003, almost half of the rest of the world's combined military spending that year. And U.S. spending on arms and war is growing so fast that, according to PriceWaterhouse, it will equal the entire rest of the world's spending within 12 months.

That's a staggering statistic: a massive shift in the economy of the world's only superpower. And that shift is going to be paid for. By Americans, by Canadians, by Iraqis, by everyone.

Of course, huge military spending in the U.S. is nothing new. And neither is the real meaning of war: it's the ultimate expression of the economic agenda that we're fighting. Privatization, radical deregulation, the commodification and control of all public assets—and a beachhead strategy to spread this model to the parts of the world that have not yet embraced it: this is the true meaning of the war in Iraq.

I won't go deeper into that argument, because it has been made far more elegantly in the writings of one Naomi Klein. But right now, as the costs of integrating with a country waging war are becoming so clear—right now is exactly the time when the war itself is disappearing from view.

Correction. Not disappearing: *Being disappeared.*

The *Los Angeles Times* did a study of photographs of the war in America's major newspapers and magazines for a six-month period that encompassed both the second U.S. levelling of Fallujah and the carnage that encompassed both the U.S. and Iraqi elections.

Set aside for a moment what was *missing* from the *L.A. Times* study: any recognition of the fact that Americans rarely see images that humanize the more than 100,000 Iraqis who have died as a result of the war. *But in that bloody six-month period, in which 559 Americans and other westerners were killed, readers of many major U.S. newspapers and magazines did not see a single picture of a dead soldier.*

Not a one. Not in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *New York Times*, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, the *Washington Post*, *Time* or *Newsweek*.

It was an entirely transparent plan the Bush administration had: to change the story from that of a brutal and chaotic occupation into the story of a civil war, an ethnic conflict in which Iraqis are killing Iraqis.

With the full cooperation of major media in the U.S., that strategy is working like a charm. Thousands of people have been killed in Iraq in recent months. But it's no longer even called a war.

“The annual U.S. military budget reached \$417 billion in 2003, and is now growing so fast that it will equal the entire rest of the world’s spending within 12 months. War is now the primary focus of the country—and the economy—that Canada is integrating with.”

The Iraqi defense minister has announced a plan (to be carried out in close coordination with U.S. forces, of course) to build a concrete wall around Baghdad itself—which is exactly what Washington is supporting in Israel—and unleash at least 40,000 soldiers in a major offensive against the insurgency, in which a lot of civilians are going to die. And yet the daily reports of deaths in Iraq have already settled into a news rhythm to which we are topically anaesthetized.

If we're honest, we'll admit that the horror of war has simply worn off as the pictures have disappeared. That we're unable to generate any substantial outrage despite what we know to be happening right now, every single day. And clearly, for many years to come.

One of the points that the CCPA makes so well, and so regularly, is that the policies that transform our society are political choices, not weather systems out of the reach of mere mortals. And now that we're at risk of watching the ge-

neric and sterilized war reports with the equanimity with which we watch weather reports, I think it's worth going deeper into the causes of war as they relate to the fundamental choices we make as societies.

Beyond the rapid transformation of massive U.S. federal surpluses into unprecedented deficits, the war represents a monumental policy choice that is at least partly designed to make other policy options impossible.

If Congress approves the latest war appropriation, as it has all the others so far, the price tag for Iraq alone will be \$220 billion. Of course, that's the tip of the iceberg in real terms, but let's take a look at what that figure represents.

For that new spending item over the past two years, the United States could have—

- paid for health insurance for 103 million children;
- hired 3 million new teachers; or
- built one-and-a-half million new units of housing.

Globally, that money could have almost single-handedly met the UN's Millenium Development Goal of cutting world hunger in half by 2015, or filled the Global AIDS Fund for at least 15 years.

These political choices, like the ones governments have been making in Canada for a generation, reveal an underlying world view that must be named and fought for what it is.

So I would argue that the Bush administration's war, inspired by its central ideological text, the Project for a New American Century, and its doctrine of pre-emptive warfare, represents nothing less than the elevation of radical individualism to the status of a national ideology.

At its core, the guiding belief is that what's good for America is good for the world. That justice, freedom and democracy for all will be best served by an aggressive pursuit of what the U.S. considers to be in its own interest.

This deeply Darwinian philosophy is echoed in the White House's catch-phrase for its domestic agenda: have you heard the term the "Ownership Society"?

I've become obsessed with it. Because I think it's a useful lens through which to zoom in on the cellular structure of this ideology: the DNA of American capitalism.

The Ownership Society. It was first used by the Bush team to sell the privatization of social security: recasting what has been seen historically as a truly public project—the wider society taking care of people after they retire—as an individual, private responsibility. But it has since been embraced by the Bush administration as a term that represents its entire domestic agenda.

As White House advisor Peter Wehner explained the phrase in a recent memo to conservative supporters, "We have it within our grasp to move away from dependency on government and toward giving greater power and responsibility to individuals."

What's so revealing about the language of the Ownership Society, of course, is the way that it elevates individualism—which has always been a strong streak in American society—to the status of a nation-defining quality.

The Ownership *Society*. Everything previously considered in the collective realm redefined in terms of private ownership, private gain, and private responsibility. A society in which the collective interest is best served by individuals aggressively pursuing self-interest: in other words, the Project for a New American Century, the blue-

print for American Empire, scaled down for application at home.

I think this fundamental struggle of two world views, one more collective, one more individualist, is how many of us characterize the difference between "Canadian" and "American" values.

For the record, I don't like those reductionist and oversimplified constructions. I don't believe we've earned it, historically, in Canada, and I believe there's a difference between the American people and the U.S. regime.

But I do believe that it's still possible to appeal, in Canada, to a common interest, a public good, a notion of taking care of one another that transcends the human impulse to self-interest. And those are the terms in which we ought to engage with the war economy and the security state, and their active transformation of Canadian society.

If John Manley, Tom d'Aquino, and their U.S. counterparts are going to bundle security issues with economic integration, then we ought to respond to war and security with the same energy that we muster to fight their economic agenda.

The Secretary-General of Amnesty International has called the U.S. detention centre in Guantanamo Bay the "Gulag of our times," and the United States "a leading purveyor and practitioner of torture." To quote Amnesty further: "When the most powerful country in the world thumbs its nose at the rule of law and human rights, it grants a license to others to commit abuse with impunity and audacity."

In the case of a country like Canada, already deeply integrated with the U.S., it doesn't just grant a license, it actively implicates us in these crimes.

First we learned at the Arar inquiry that CSIS encouraged the consular officials who visited Maher Arar in that Syrian prison to gather intel-

ligence on him, rather than focus on getting him out. Then came the smoking gun memo: CSIS actively lobbied to keep Arar in prison in Syria because they knew they didn't have enough evidence to jail him under Canadian law.

So not only is Canada cooperating with the American outsourcing of torture—that alone is illegal and unacceptable, and we've been slammed

by the U.N Committee Against Torture for it.

But worse, our intelligence service clearly views the process of deporting people to torture the way the U.S. does; as a great intelligence-gathering tool, and more importantly, as an efficient and acceptable means of implanting fear, and therefore obedience, in specific ethnic communities.

This is integration at its most insidious: the integra-

tion of world view.

Now, the good news, of course, is that the majority of Canadians are offended by the war, against the occupation, and dead-set opposed to extraordinary rendition and giving up our sovereignty to the U.S. economic and security agenda.

The problem, as always, is how to make this latent resistance active. To change our government's behaviour. To move from defensive campaigns—fighting against developments that come to light after they're already enshrined in government practice—to positive policy alternatives that we can put forward, campaign on, and win.

But I would go further: Instead of concentrating mainly on how the United States is transforming our domestic policy, I think it's time we

devoted some collective brain power to figuring out how we can start transforming theirs.

I have a concrete, if modest, proposal of one place to start.

But before I get to that, let's take a quick look at the major recent victories for Canadian sovereignty, and see what we can learn from them. I want to propose a policy that I think would represent a major victory for Canadian sovereignty, and it has to be qualitatively different from the kind we've had in the last few years.

I think it's generally accepted that the two biggest examples of Canada standing up to the U.S. recently are Chrétien's stand on the Iraq war, and Martin's position on ballistic missile defense. And I'm going to be fairly cynical about both of them, as I believe their authors were, but before I do that, let's be honest about what they represent as victories.

Both political moments are testaments to the classic model for achieving change to which organizations like the CCPA are rightly committed. You do the research, get the facts and arguments right, and fuel the debate. You don't spend your life lobbying behind closed doors to achieve micro-tweaks in the language of legislation: you go right to the public and make the case; against the war, against missile defense.

And in coalition with progressive forces across society, who take your research and turn it into energetic campaigns, you swing the supertanker of public opinion around so that the pragmatic power-addicted leaders see their political capital enhanced by doing the right thing.

I mean, do we really believe that Paul Martin and Jean Chrétien located their inner Trudeau and decided to give Uncle Sam the finger? (Actually, if memory serves, it was not the U.S., but Canadians exercising their right to dissent who received that gesture of respect from Trudeau.)

I would argue that the Bush administration's war, and its doctrine of preemptive warfare, represent nothing less than the elevation of radical individualism to the status of a national ideology."

But of course not. Martin and Chrétien didn't locate their inner Trudeau, they located their in-house pollster, and did what the majority of Canadians clearly wanted them to.

But here's the problem with this model of change. It lends itself to symbolic gestures which we cling to as evidence of our sovereignty, but slip away when we examine the record later.

Chrétien's brave and principled stand against the invasion of Iraq, we learned later, was part of a savvy bait-and-switch, which saw Canadian troops providing backup to U.S. operations in Afghanistan and the Persian Gulf, and hundreds of millions of dollars of foreign aid money redirected to the so-called reconstruction of Afghanistan and Iraq.

As a report co-sponsored by the Canadian Council of Chief Executives approvingly notes, "When Canadian troops hunt terrorists and support democracy in Afghanistan, or when Canadian ships lead patrols in the Persian Gulf, they engage in the 'forward defense' of North America by attacking the bases of support for international terrorism around the world."

So our status as little brother, tag-along pre-emptive warrior is intact, despite or actually *because* of Chrétien's decisions.

And then the story broke that Ottawa is negotiating with the United Arab Emirates to make our so-called secret Camp Mirage, which everyone knows is just outside Dubai, a permanent base to support the Canadian presence in Afghanistan.

Permanent bases in the region kind of undercuts our principled stand on the war, doesn't it? But as a piece of propaganda, it was marvelous. And I believe that the symbolic effect around the world was real.

And then there's Paul Martin on missile defense.

Let me read you one extraordinary account of the reaction to the Prime Minister's decision, from Lawrence Martin in the *Globe and Mail*: "The media, to the tune of about 90%, ripped the Martin government to pieces over its decision to reject Washington's missile-defense plan. The people went the other way; they favoured the decision...by a 20% margin, which, in political terms, is a landslide.

"Today's press, most strikingly on the question of U.S. relations (missile defence, Iraq, defense spending, taxation, etc.), has become concertedly conservative, moving to the right of the people. The conservative media tend to favour a closer embrace of the United States and its values. Canadians themselves show little inclination to go that route. It is a storyline—the press versus the people—that runs right to the heart of the debate over the future of the country."

He goes on to say that, in the right-wing media, missile defense "...was examined not so much on the basis of what Canadians think, but on what the Bush administration would think. It was as if—after 138 years of existence—we were still strapped down to a client-state mentality wherein the driving imperative was approval from a higher authority."

I don't know if you remember where you were when you read that column, but I thought I'd accidentally slipped through the fabric of the space-time continuum and entered an alternate universe in which I didn't have to yell at the *Globe*

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and Mail every single morning, and I would have to write Larry Martin a thank-you note!

So it was with almost cosmic relief, two months later, that I stumbled on a tiny, digest-style story that put the whole missile defense incident in perspective.

Dateline Whitehorse: The Governments of the Yukon and Alaska have agreed to co-finance a study to show the benefits of a long-discussed rail link between Alaska and Canada. A consult-

ant's report commissioned by the Yukon government announces enthusiastically that the railroad would support missile-defense silos now being built in Fort Greeley, Alaska, and would allow Washington to develop an Alaskan port to station up to three missile defense ships in the northern Pacific, outside Korean territorial waters.

And I was really under Larry Martin's spell there for a moment.

But the fact is that we have a long-standing pattern here. Canadian leaders, playing the nationalist card, make the right noises or even take the right stands when it comes to the decisive issues of sovereignty from the U.S. But then, over the years, the information trickles out that we cooperated anyway. That our government had a tacit agreement that certain symbolic spasms of independence were an unpleasant political necessity, but that compliance would always be there for the little technical matters.

Like U.S. nuclear weapons on our soil. Canadian troops mopping up after invasions in the

Middle East. A U.S.-sponsored coup in Haiti. Canadian citizens being deported to torture, or held on security certificates, without charges, without hearing the evidence against them, in solitary confinement, without seeing their families. For years.

We need to fight these violations of human rights and this Canadian complicity in a global American war.

We need to reclaim, not harmonize, our immigration and refugee policy.

We have to put integration, with its insidious bundling of security and economic issues, back on the front burner, like it was in the free trade fights of the late '80s and early '90s.

We have to abolish security certificates, ensure that we will never again deport anyone to torture, reverse Canada's supporting military role for U.S. adventures in Haiti, Iraq, Afghanistan, and whatever comes next.

We need to fight on all the economic fronts, and audaciously advance progressive policy alternatives at every opportunity.

But we also need a real sovereignty victory to re-assert our distinctive values. One we can measure: that is symbolic in its scope, but utterly concrete in its achievement.

And this sovereignty victory must achieve a number of objectives.

It needs to address the American war: not just in Iraq, but wherever the doctrine of pre-emptive warfare will focus its beam next.

It needs to affirm a different set of values from the underpinnings of a privatized military economy: radical individualism and the Ownership Society.

It needs to support and preserve those achievements of our deeper faith in the public sphere: those very policies that are eroding so ominously in this era of carefully cultivated insecurity, and sneaky integration.

We need to fight this Canadian complicity in a global American war. We have to put integration, with its insidious bundling of security and economic issues, back on the front burner, like it was in the free trade fights of the late '80s and early '90s."

And finally, it ought to link progressive people across the border: to tap into the tremendous collective power of American liberals. The millions in the U.S. who feel that they are trapped in a nightmare of war in the name of democracy; the same people who believe that there is a utopian land of pot-powered same-sex community to the North.

(We can let them hold on to that fantasy for a while—it's potent political fuel, after all...)

So here it is:

We have in our midst a group of Americans who have come here because they refuse to serve in an illegal war. They are facing harsh sentences if returned to the U.S.: one conscientious objector named Pablo Paredes was recently sentenced to three months hard labour for refusing to fight in Iraq.

Jeremy Hinzman, Brandon Hughey, and others seeking refugee status in Canada face the possibility of years in prison if they are returned to the U.S.

They are the draft dodgers of today: people who want to live in a country where war is not celebrated, where they can raise their children in public child care with public health care, where you can say "social justice" and not be sniggered at, where you can consume media that is infuriating and right-wing, but not yet Orwellian.

They want to live in the Canada they have found, and the Canada they want to help build.

So we need to reaffirm, as a matter of public policy, the most progressive thing, in my view, that Pierre Trudeau ever said: *that Canada should be a refuge from militarism.*

We need a special immigration program to welcome U.S. war resisters to this country.

We've done it many times before: for people fleeing the former Soviet Union, for "boat people" in the 1970s. Canada's courts have consistently ruled that those fleeing a regime engaging

in an illegal war should be granted asylum if they are coming to Canada because they oppose the war. That's how we dealt with the Iraqis who refused to participate in Saddam's war on Kuwait, and with Serbs who deserted from the war in Kosovo.

But this time it would be a little sassier.

Now set in the context of deep integration, and the myriad, intractable issues of trade, security, privatization and sovereignty, this may seem like a proposal that is too modest by half. So let me take a moment to articulate why I think it is effective, powerful, progressive, futuristic, and ... winnable.

1. A special immigration program to welcome U.S. war resisters is not yet prevented by any trade or security deal, and, better still, it would drive the White House, David Frum, and John Manley absolutely crazy. Especially David Frum.

2. It directly addresses the war, and the economic logic which it embodies and enforces, by posing Canada as a clear global alternative to American Empire and the Ownership Society. We may cause some hernias in the beltway, but around the world, we'd be heroes.

3. It directly recalls the last time the Canadian government embraced a dramatically different social vision with a massive social result: 50,000 progressive Americans who came in the Vietnam period, half of whom stayed and helped build Canada's system of public health, broad-

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casting, justice, and social services, not to mention lefty think-tanks...

4. The U.S. military is desperate, and talk of a draft in America cannot be dismissed. There are more than 5,000 soldiers who are officially acknowledged to be AWOL in the U.S.—the real number could be many times that.

The U.S. Marines have missed four monthly recruiting targets in a row. The U.S. Army's top recruiter said he will start this fall with the smallest pool of recruits in at least a decade, and the Rand Corporation described this prediction as "near disastrous."

Frantic recruiters are threatening young people with prison time for not keeping appointments, giving others laxatives to help meet weight requirements, and instructing others on how to cover up past drug use for medical tests.

Counter-recruiter groups have started throwing recruiters out of high schools across the U.S. And an unprecedented one-day stand-down was called recently so the Army can give its recruiters emergency ethics training.

Okay, they might need more than a day.

So, if there is another U.S. invasion, or major terrorist attack, the likelihood of a draft is real. If we were already fighting for, or had already won an official policy of accepting war resisters, the floodgates would open. And we would be ready.

5. Let's talk openly about those floodgates. Despite an ugly backlash in the early 1970s—remember the danger of appealing to nationalism and "Canadian values"—Vietnam-era draft dodgers made an historic contribution to the very things about Canada that progressive Americans now look at with naked envy.

We could really use an infusion of immigrants who would fight for public health care, national child care, a more inclusive immigration and refugee system, a public broadcaster that stays public, and against deeper integration with the very system they are fleeing.

With another 35,000 to 50,000 people in this country repulsed by war and the fundamentalist takeover of their government, we might actually save those things worth saving about Canada.

And talk about making alliances with progressive movements in the States: why don't we go further and start a grassroots campaign to recruit Americans who are disgusted by what their country has become.

Move to Canada! It could be the most successful movement-building slogan this country has ever heard.

This is an ideal moment to push the idea of a special immigration program to the forefront. After the tumultuous events in our minority federal government last spring, the NDP now has even great claim to the balance of power. The party needs another concrete achievement, and let's face it: it should be a non-monetary item. The right-wing media would target more public spending commitments like a fat, farm-raised salmon in a barrel.

But this policy alternative, which would be excoriated in all the daily papers in Canada, but embraced, I believe, by most Canadians—this is something worth spending political capital on.

This is a policy that says: "We're not anti-American, we're anti-war!"

We're against the racism of war, and the racial profiling of all its victims. We're against the classism of war. We're against the war economy—its distorted priorities, its scandalous corporate welfare, its attack on civil liberties.

And we're against the economy of war: war as the extreme trade agreement, the harshest structural adjustment program, the unmasked face of neoliberalism.

And we believe that our country should be a refuge: we welcome people who feel the same way to come and join us in building something better. 