



THE HARPER RECORD

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Harper, the Military, and Wedge Politics

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WHEN THE HARPER Conservatives won the federal election in January 2006, and formed their minority government, they inherited from the previous Liberal government a war in southern Afghanistan, a rapidly escalating defence budget, and a military led by General Rick Hillier, arguably the most charismatic and politically powerful Chief of Defence Staff in living memory.

When Prime Minister Stephen Harper announced his five priorities in his first Throne Speech, fighting a war and spending billions more on arms were not on the list. But it became quickly apparent that bolstering the military — and convincing a skeptical Canadian public to embrace a Canadian war-fighting global role — had indeed become an unofficial sixth priority of his government.

In a more politically astute move, Harper could have accepted the war as something the Liberals started and that he was obliged to prosecute until the end of the Liberals' commitment to February 2007. If things went well, he could claim credit, but if they went badly, he could blame the Liberals. This approach seemed logical, given that he had a minority government and was obliged to navigate carefully or risk being defeated by the other parties — two of which were opposed to the war.

But, rather than governing through compromise and accommodation, the Conservatives chose a different political strategy: aggression

and “wedge politics.” The theory goes that a politically united and well-organized minority can beat a divided and disorganized majority. In a game of “chicken,” the most committed will stare down a less committed opponent and win the stand-off. Aggression is rewarded, and the strategic use of issues to divide your opponent’s ranks will give you the upper hand.

That is one reason why the Harper government moved quickly to embrace the military and claim the war in Afghanistan as its own. Harper intended to use the war to rally his base, and widen the divisions between opposition parties — and even within the Liberal party itself.

Harper visited Afghanistan within weeks of taking office, and appointed retired General Gordon O’Connor, a former defence industry lobbyist, as his first Minister of National Defence. These early moves signalled that national defence and the military would be one of his unofficial priorities.

While he ignored or cancelled programs initiated by the Liberals, such as the child care program and the Kelowna Accord with First Nations, Harper pledged to fulfill Paul Martin’s 2005 Budget promise to increase defence spending massively, by \$12.8 billion over five years. In his own first federal Budget, Harper went further and committed an additional \$5.3 billion on top of what was already the largest increase in military spending in a generation.

Today, Canada’s military spending is rising above \$19 billion a year, sixth highest in NATO and 15th highest in the world, dollar for dollar. When adjusted for inflation, Canada’s military spending is at its highest since the Second World War, even exceeding the Cold War peak in the early 1950s.

Conservative party enthusiasts loved it. The moves to wrap the government in camouflage-green garb strengthened Harper’s political base. Red-Shirt Friday rallies to “support the troops” were backed by the military, and government officials used them to rally support behind the Conservatives. Remembrance Day ceremonies and other memorials to mark past military milestones, such as the 90th Anniversary of Vimy Ridge, were politicized to glorify the military and the Conservative party’s support of it.

Even more, the Conservatives used these opportunities to try to write a new Canadian historical narrative, one that recasts Canada as a war-fighting nation, not as a peacekeeper. Canada is a nation that came into being in the bloody (and pointless) military battles of the First World War, in Harper's historical memory.

The Conservatives view Canadians' support for peacekeeping, the United Nations, soft power initiatives, and disarmament treaties such as the Landmines Treaty as Liberal symbols. It is important for them to create a new national narrative, with new symbols to replace the Liberal ones.

In the future, under a Conservative government, Canada's international standing would be based upon pursuing "national interests," and our influence would rely upon delivering hard military power.

Harper's first Throne Speech mentioned "interests" numerous times, especially in the section called *Canada: Strong, United, Independent and Free*, where it was invoked three times in just four paragraphs:

Canada's voice in the world must be supported by action, both at home and abroad. Advancing our interests in a complex and sometimes dangerous world requires confidence and the independent capacity to defend our country's sovereignty and the security of our citizens.

The Government will work cooperatively with our friends and allies and constructively with the international community to advance common values and interests. In support of this goal, it will build stronger multi-lateral and bilateral relationships, starting with Canada's relationship with the United States, our best friend and largest trading partner.

More broadly, this Government is committed to supporting Canada's core values of freedom, democracy, the rule of law and human rights around the world. In this regard, the Government will support a more robust diplomatic role for Canada, a stronger military and a more effective use of Canadian aid dollars.

Just as it honours the past efforts of our veterans, the Government stands firmly behind the vital role being played by our troops in Afghanistan today. The dedicated Canadians in Afghanistan deserve all of our support as they risk their lives to defend our national interests, combat global

terrorism and help the Afghan people make a new start as a free, democratic and peaceful country.

— *Speech from the throne, delivered by Gov. Gen. Michaëlle Jean, April 4, 2006.*

There would be no room for bleeding-heart sentimentality in the pursuit of Canada's national interests. Soldiers' deaths would be a necessary price for defending our national interests, and so flags would not be lowered to half-mast in Ottawa.

No more mushy, middle-power, "boy scout" foreign policies for Canada. The United Nations would be looked upon askance. When a Canadian soldier died from "friendly" Israeli fire at a UN post in Southern Lebanon, the Prime Minister expressed sadness, but coldly questioned why the soldier and his detachment of UN peacekeepers were there in the first place.

Canada's contribution of soldiers to UN peacekeeping missions would hit rock bottom, continuing a trend started under the Liberals. In July 2008, total Canadian personnel contributions to UN operations were a mere 167, ranking Canada 53rd of 119 contributing nations, next to Slovakia at 52nd and Malawi at 54th. The United States ranked higher than Canada at 47th.

Most of the Canadian personnel were police (112), with military observers (39) and troops (16) making roughly a quarter of Canada's contribution. That month, the total number of personnel participating in UN operations reached 88,634, comprising police (11,517), military observers (2,582), and troops (74,535).

Prosecuting the war in Afghanistan and defending the Arctic have emerged as emblems of the Conservative's policies on security and sovereignty. The Arctic, in particular, became a priority under Stephen Harper and he pledged to deploy the Navy to defend the increasingly accessible Northwest Passage, using armed naval patrol ships. To the surprise of many, he challenged U.S. territorial claims in the Arctic soon after he was elected.

To some observers, the Conservative approach largely carries on trends established by the Liberals, especially when it comes to supporting U.S. foreign policy and the "war on terrorism." However, there

is a view that, while Paul Martin's Liberals sought to appease the Bush administration to avoid Canada's being "punished" for not toeing the line, the Conservatives' approach is to emulate U.S. foreign policy and to embrace the war on terrorism as its own.

While subtle, and resulting in largely the same outcomes in terms of Canadian policy, the difference could be described as the Liberals wanting Canada to be an arm of the United States, and the Conservatives wanting Canada to be a clone of the United States.

There is an unmistakable copy-cat effect in the Conservatives' policies when compared to the Bush Administration's policies. Canada should cut taxes, drive up military spending, reject multilateralism, and transform its military into a powerful fighting force to win praise from military allies and invoke fear from "enemies."

Harper's policies begin to mimic Bush's, and even his speeches sound the same when he uses phrases such as "we won't cut and run." But the apparent tiff over the U.S.'s unwillingness to recognize Canadian Arctic sovereignty elicited a rebuke from Harper, as if to say that Canada will defend its sovereignty no less than the U.S. would defend its own. More recently, the Conservatives blocked a \$1.3 billion foreign takeover of a Canadian firm that produced satellites for Arctic monitoring, and built the iconic Canadarm. The unprecedented move was supported by many Tories, who argued that the Americans would never allow such a sale to proceed south of the border.

The effect of Harper's embrace of militarism to define his own government's tenure has been costly to Canada.

In terms of dollars, the massive increases to Canadian military spending has siphoned dollars away from social programs. If any Canadian wondered where the national child care program funding went when Harper cancelled Martin's plan, one can find it sitting on military bases in the form of new military aircraft and tanks.

According to the military's own figures, since the Liberals' last Budget in 2005 and the first Conservative Budget in 2006, overall spending on defence has climbed by 30% compared to 2004.

Even Harper's opponents would have to grudgingly admit that he has skillfully used militarism and the Afghan war to his political advantage, though the cost to Canada has been great. What to do about the

war, dragging on for more than half a decade, has divided the left and the opposition parties, allowing Harper to steamroll the opposition and push through his agenda.

In May 2006, taking advantage of the fact that the Liberal party was without a permanent leader and several of the leadership candidates were in favour of the war, Harper introduced a motion to extend the mission by two years to February 2009. The NDP and the Bloc Québécois opposed it, but, even though many Liberals also opposed the motion, so many Liberal MPs were absent for the vote that a few dozen hawkish Liberals led by Michael Ignatieff delivered enough pro-war votes to Harper that the motion passed by a slim majority.

The fact that a decision of this importance would be put to a parliamentary vote is a credit to Harper, since the Liberals had never done so themselves and low-balled important decisions about the war when they were in power. (The decision to move Canadian forces from the relative safety of the northern city of Kabul to the volatile southern province of Kandahar was announced practically in passing by the Liberal Defence Minister before a parliamentary committee in the spring of 2005.)

The Canadian public is deeply divided on this issue. Opinion shifts, but more often than not a majority of Canadians are opposed to the war. This opposition, however, has not translated into political victories in Parliament. This is in part because the anti-war sentiment is spread among several parties, each seeking ways to separate itself from the others.

In the summer of 2006, needing a way to sharpen its own position and mollify a vociferous leftist faction in its own base, the NDP adopted the position that troops should be withdrawn immediately, in a “safe and orderly fashion.” It was a position supported by a great many Canadians, but rejected as unreasonable and unrealistic by policy elites, opinion leaders, and soft or left-leaning Liberal supporters.

The Liberals supported the mission (while criticizing some aspects of the way it was being conducted), but demanded that the combat role in the south be ended at the specified expiration date of February 2009. This position was loudly championed by the party’s new leader, Stéphane Dion (who had voted against the extension in May), and he repeated-

ly asked if the government had informed NATO that Canadian troops would be withdrawn in 2009.

The Bloc Québécois, suffering from its own internal divisions, adopted essentially the same view as the Liberals. However, the deaths of several soldiers from Québec did not galvanize the generally anti-war Québec public, requiring the weakened Québec based-party to tread carefully.

Harper's "divide and conquer" strategy served him well. Opportunities to unify anti-war positions were missed in 2007 when opposition party motions in Parliament were written to intentionally make it impossible for other anti-war parties to support them. The Liberals, in particular, introduced an opposition motion that explicitly supported the mission in its current form, but called for its end in February 2009. The NDP felt forced to vote against the motion because of its uncritical nature, and, ironically, helped the Conservatives defeat the motion. A subsequent motion by the NDP likewise failed to bridge the gap with the Liberals.

These political misfires occurred at a time when Canadians were realizing that the mission in Afghanistan had become increasingly dangerous for Canadians with the move to the Kandahar, and that our troops were no longer peacekeepers, but engaged in constant combat.

Fatalities in 2006 claimed 36 soldiers and a diplomat, when only eight soldiers had been killed in the previous four years combined (four of those fatalities at the hands of a U.S. fighter pilot). A ground-breaking study by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives showed that Canada was shouldering a disproportionately high number of casualties in NATO, and that Canadian troops were in more danger than their U.S. counterparts in Iraq.

Further controversy erupted in April 2007 over prisoners taken by Canadian troops and handed to Afghan authorities, where they were abused and risked torture. This posed a serious challenge to Harper, but he responded in his characteristically aggressive fashion, accusing the opposition parties of caring more about terrorists than Canadian troops. The controversy, along with other factors, did eventually remove Gordon O'Connor from his post as Defence Minister in an August 2007 cabinet shuffle, but otherwise did not fundamentally jeopardize the Harper minority government or its ongoing prosecution of the war.

Upping the ante in 2007, and putting further pressure on the Liberals, Harper shrewdly chose the hawkish former Liberal minister John Manley to head a panel to review Canada's role in Afghanistan. Along with other Conservative and pro-Bush administration panel members, the Manley panel presented a report in early 2008 that largely endorsed the Afghan war and called for an indefinite extension beyond February 2009.

Harper accepted the report and, when challenged by the Liberals, introduced another vote to extend the Canadian mission to December 2011, extending the war by nearly three years beyond the previous expiration date of February 2009. With his foot on the neck of the Liberals, who were beset with continuing internal divisions and desperately wanted to avoid going into another election, Harper made this a vote of confidence, daring the opposition parties to defeat it and force an election that none of them at that time wanted. (This was the same tactic he used to push through other controversial policies in Parliament that a minority government normally wouldn't even attempt.)

The weak Liberal leader, Stéphane Dion, who had been so confidently calling for an end to the mission when it expired in February 2009, reversed his previous position and gave Harper the support he wanted to prolong the war to December 2011. It was a momentous victory for Harper, a great tribute to his aggressive and divisive political strategy. It was also an effective way to muzzle a Canadian public, increasingly growing weary of a war that clearly was now going badly.

While Harper was using the Afghan war and national security as political hammers in Parliament, the military and defence establishment was exploiting his militant posturing to extract billions in military contracts — so much so that today the defence lobby wields power and influence in Ottawa on an unparalleled scale.

Harper's embrace of the military and his government's lavish allocation of nearly \$20 billion a year on the military has been a bonanza for the defence industry.

In June 2006, the government announced \$17.1 billion of planned spending for long-range and medium-range military transport aircraft, helicopters, trucks, and three new support ships. Later, in a surprise move, the government announced more than \$1 billion more for Cold War-era tanks.

The military spending tap remained open. In the subsequent months, new programs were announced, amounting to billions more for warship upgrades, Arctic patrol vessels, unmanned aerial vehicles, and a plethora of new equipments programs. Many of these programs didn't even require public disclosure if their price tag was less than \$100 million, but several were in the \$1 billion range, and a few – such as the helicopters and medium-range aircraft – will involve expenditures as high as \$5 billion.

When the Conservatives finally released publicly their Canada First Defence Strategy, the total price tag for their plans amounted to \$490 billion over the next 20 years in defence spending. Could we ever expect to hear that the Harper government was committing such vast sums to improving health care or the environment?

The rush to commit money for the military quickly, while Harper's Conservative minority government remained in power, has meant that 20-year commitments of massive amounts of government spending are being made with little long-term planning.

Even worse, some of the spending is meant to avoid political conflicts and satisfy special interests rather than to meet legitimate defence needs. For instance, in 2006 there was a difference of opinion between Chief of Defence Staff General Rick Hillier and Defence Minister Gordon O'Connor. Hillier reportedly preferred a larger fleet of medium-range transport aircraft, and O'Connor wanted a smaller fleet of much more expensive long-range aircraft. Rather than resolve the difference, the decision was to purchase both fleets of aircraft. This was only possible because so much money was flowing to defence that hard political choices could be avoided.

Even worse, taxpayers are being fleeced because the government has sidestepped competitive contracting procedures, tacking untold billions onto the costs of these programs because sweetheart deals are being made with preferred companies, almost all of which are American-based. A study by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, for example, revealed that more than 40% of defence contracts in 2006–07 were deemed “non-competitive” by the government.

Internationally, NATO allies are reported to be privately offended or amused by Canada's podium-banging calls for more troops to be sent to

the south of Afghanistan. Canada had sought out the dangerous mission in part to impress the United States, according to Liberal government officials at the time the decision was made in 2005, even though they had little knowledge of the danger threatened by the new role. More sophisticated European allies were wisely cautious about taking up a mission so heavily under U.S. influence and in a very dangerous region.

As well, whatever greater influence the Conservatives had hoped to gain from such a lethal and “hard power” military operation has not materialized in NATO, where no nation other than the United States has answered Canada’s calls for assistance.

But these impacts, as egregious as they are, are just the surface of more significant shifts in Canadian policies. The war in Afghanistan has also had a corrosive effect on Canada’s democracy at home.

The military establishment has frequently overstepped its non-partisan tradition and ventured into the political arena. Between 2005 and 2008, Chief of Defence Staff General Rick Hillier used the war and the Defence Department’s public affairs machinery, in addition to his own inimitable communications style, to shift the political balance in his and the military establishment’s favour. So effective was his influence that even the Harper government felt it needed to rein in the General at times. Hillier changed the nature of civilian-military relations in ways that may not be apparent for years to come.

The Harper government’s increased fixation on national security has made it a secretive government. Despite campaigning on greater accountability, the government itself has limited access to information about military activities. The ultra-secret JTF-2 commandos operate outside of proper government oversight. Media complaints that access to information is diminishing are widespread, and in Afghanistan journalists are required to sign conditions on reporting in order to be “embedded” with Canadian Forces. The government is spending millions for military public relations, including funding military front groups such as the Conference of Defence Associations which casts itself as an independent observer while being bankrolled by the military.

The greatest harm, however, is to Parliament itself, where the military, the war, and the lives of soldiers have been used shamelessly for political gain. When Parliamentarians concerned about human rights

are labelled as terrorist sympathizers; when critics of the war are castigated as “not supporting the troops” and are put under surveillance; and when billions of dollars needed for social programs are handed out instead to (mostly U.S.) defence corporations, the country’s democratic traditions are seriously at risk.

The Harper record on the war and the military should raise an alarm for Canadians who want to protect our democratic values, fund our social programs, and pursue our international traditions of peace and diplomacy.