

Obama's Foreign Policy: The View from Canada



CANADIAN AUTHOR MARGARET ATWOOD famously described the border between our country and the United States as the world's longest "one-way mirror."

I think this metaphor holds both for popular culture and politics. Canadians follow events south of the border closely, sometimes even with more interest than events in their own country. Progressives, for example, regularly held pub nights to watch the 2008 U.S. Presidential primaries and election debates. We were all glued to our television sets watching the returns come in that November, and many a leftist up here has admitted to shedding some tears upon seeing Jesse Jackson and the rest of the revelers in Chicago's Grant Park that historic night. By contrast, Americans, and frankly this includes many progressives, could most often care less what takes places in Canada.

A couple of geography-related anecdotes illustrate the point. Here in Vancouver, on Canada's Pacific coast, I was working with a Palestine solidarity group to bring a prominent U.S. academic to do a public event. He was based in the Midwest, but his cordial email reply asked us to "wait until next semester when I'm in New York – it will be a shorter trip for me." A few months later, a good friend of mine was asked by his interviewer from a Pacifica radio station in San Francisco, "What time zone are you guys in up there?" (We're both in the Pacific Time Zone.)

To modify a memorable Gore Vidal-ism, to this northern observer it sometimes looks like the United States of Myopia.[1] I open with this point not to be cantankerous or to express a vulgar nationalism, but rather to implore U.S.-based progressives to look north a little more often. As much as sometimes we in Canada hate to admit it, the reality is that our political contexts are not that dissimilar, especially when it comes to foreign policy.

Canada remains stuck with a Bushite in power, for goodness sake. Our Conservative prime minister, Stephen Harper, supported the Iraq War, and so did our Liberal opposition leader Michael Ignatieff, who at the time echoed Bush's rationale for the invasion from his influential perch at Harvard.[2] Although Canada was mercifully forced to stay out of the "coalition of the willing," successive governments have almost completely aligned themselves with U.S. foreign policy priorities. Canada's military explicitly pursues integration with U.S. forces, and our foreign policy direction can be understood as following similar imperatives. From Afghanistan, Israel/Palestine, and Iran to Haiti, Ottawa and Washington work in close tandem. The impasse, or at least downturn, that the anti-war movement in the United States confronted, due in part to "the Obama factor" – imperialism with a human face, in Tariq Ali's memorable turn of phrase[3] – has reached all the way into Canadian politics. Forces that once railed against "Bush's war" in Afghanistan have fallen silent, even as that war literally doubled in scale over the first year of the new U.S. administration.

And this is the ultimate reason that what happens north of the 49th parallel should matter to progressives in the United States. Together, we need to fashion an integrated, powerful movement for peace and justice. This essay is written with that overarching goal in mind.

FOR DECADES, Canada has had an almost entirely undeserved reputation as a neutral arbiter in world affairs – a consummate “peacekeeping” nation, committed to multilateralism and to the framework of international cooperation as organized through the United Nations.

The reality is that Canada has always been a key player in the NATO alliance, and a loyal upholder of the interests of the capitalist world system and its military enforcement. Even when particular Canadian governments appear to poke the U.S. Empire in the eye by not going along with a particular military venture, they work hard to provide support by other means. During the Vietnam era, Canada never sent troops to bolster that unpopular war, but it was a key supplier of weapons to the United States; chemical weapons such as napalm were in fact developed and tested in Canada.

In this sense, the significant events of early 2003 fit squarely within the historical pattern. Then Liberal Prime Minister Jean Chrétien, seeing crowds of hundreds of thousands on the streets in Quebec and across the rest of Canada in January and February of that year, made the popular announcement that Canada would not join the Iraq invasion.

Only a short time later, however, Chrétien announced a new beefing up of Canadian forces in Afghanistan, a measure that many correctly noted freed up more U.S. forces for Iraq – a sort of de facto endorsement of the invasion. Indeed, despite the refusal to commit troops, the Canadian government wished the U.S. forces a speedy victory in Iraq. Canada also found myriad other ways to provide concrete support to the illegal U.S. war.[4]

A year later, in February 2004, Canada worked hand-in-hand with the governments of France and the United States to back a coup d'état that drove elected President Jean-Bertrand Aristide from Haiti, and which resulted in years of severe repression.[5]

In the decade since the “war on terror” began following the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States, Canadian elites have worked to transform this country’s foreign policy in a more explicitly aggressive direction. Although the peacekeeping label was never strictly warranted, it was a national self-perception of sorts that coincided with the preferences of a majority of the Canadian public. Just as in the United States, then, hawks in Canada saw 9/11 and in particular the war in Afghanistan as the impetus to push the idea of a “warrior” nation, finally abandoning what they saw as the emasculated posture of peacekeeping and working through the United Nations.

Successive Canadian governments have pursued foreign policies closely aligned with the interests of the U.S. Empire. Both Liberal and Conservative governments have pushed through extensions of Canada’s military mission in Afghanistan. But both traditional governing parties have been careful to avoid allowing the war to become an election issue. Prime Minister Harper has repeatedly stated that Canada’s military mission in Afghanistan will end in 2011. Hawks and doves alike agree that the Canadian military is at the limit of its fighting capacity, its battle-ready forces over-extended after years in Kandahar Province, a site of consistent insurgent activity.

However, the government has left itself wiggle room to keep hundreds of “trainers” in Kabul or elsewhere. The game now for the government is to continue to give as much political and military support to the occupation of Afghanistan as possible without arousing too much popular opposition, especially in traditionally anti-war Quebec.

In March of this year, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton came to Ottawa for meetings in advance of the June 2010 G8/G20 summit to be held in Toronto. On her visit, she made clear that Washington would like Canada to stay militarily in Afghanistan beyond 2011. The reaction was a

testament to the continuing “Obama factor” in Canada: Harper politely reiterated the position that the military mission would end in 2011, though pledged other forms of support and assistance (including, upon clarification, troops and top military officials to act as “trainers,” a blatant euphemism for anyone with memory of Vietnam). Contrary to what would have happened had a George W. Bush or Donald Rumsfeld urged Canada to overturn a parliamentary decision to curtail participation in the war, there was limited public outcry against Clinton’s request. The opposition New Democratic Party basically said nothing, consistent with the social democratic leadership’s behavior on the war in the year and a half since Obama came to power.[6]

Obama in Afghanistan and Haiti

AS MENTIONED, the focus of Canadian foreign policy over the past decade has been the war in Afghanistan. A secondary focus has been on Haiti, where since the 2004 coup Canada has focused on police training and enforcing the politicicide of the popular Lavalas movement through various means. Afghanistan and Haiti are the top two recipients of Canadian foreign “aid,” and the painful results of all this intervention are apparent: these countries remain dead last on the Human Development Index (HDI) for Asia and the western hemisphere, respectively.[7]

For progressive observers and critics of Canadian foreign policy, there were fewer illusions regarding Obama as a “peace candidate,” since our attention has been focused more on Afghanistan and Haiti than on Iraq in recent years. The fact that he had opposed the “dumb war,” as he called it in his much trumpeted 2002 speech,[8] was no big deal to Canadians – since 80 percent of them shared this sentiment about the Iraq war and most believe their government was not implicated in the slaughter. This is to say that it’s hard to share the feeling of “betrayal” that some have expressed about Obama’s ramping up of the war in Afghanistan, or his other aggressive foreign policy moves, such as endorsing (after

initial token or rhetorical opposition) the regime-change-by-coup in Honduras or his expansion of the “Drone War” in Pakistan.

On Afghanistan and Haiti we can only observe that Obama kept to his word from the campaign trail. The same goes for Iran and the Middle East, though analyzing those cases is beyond the scope of this piece. We can say that on foreign policy Obama has been even worse than we feared. But to speak of betrayal only betrays one’s own utterly false hopes and projections. It’s useful to consider these two specific areas of Obama’s foreign policy in relation to the movement’s activity – the organized push back or lack thereof – on each front.

Afghanistan

CANDIDATE OBAMA PROMISED to focus the war machine back on Afghanistan, the “good war,” the “necessary war.” The scale of the escalation in Afghanistan was the only thing in doubt. It was especially glaring and frustrating that the major U.S. peace groups did little during the period in the summer and fall of 2009 when the Afghan War was supposedly under comprehensive review. While General McChrystal openly called for a large surge, and Ambassador Eikenberry wrote memos urging against a big surge, the anti-war movement applied very little pressure at all.

So far, the surge has predictably resulted in a surge in violence and deaths on all sides. October, 2010 will be the ninth anniversary of the war, and would be an ideal time to mobilize a truly global day of action. The Canadian anti-war movement is preparing a national mobilization in October, and movements in other NATO countries would be likely to come on board. The key would be to get broad-based organizations in the United States organizing seriously; it’s well past time to see mass demonstrations against the war in the United States as well.

Haiti

SOMETIME IN 2008, I happened to flip the channel to David Letterman interviewing candidate Obama. My ears perked up when the host threw in a question about what Obama might do for the beleaguered people of Haiti. It must have been soon after one of the devastating hurricanes that hit Haiti that year. I hoped against hope for some substance from the candidate. "You know, Haiti's a country that's had a real string of bad luck..." Nothing concrete followed, and certainly no hint that Washington had repeatedly overthrown Haitian democracy.

With this year's earthquake in Haiti, the situation has gone from terrible to catastrophic. Obama's move to appoint Bill Clinton and George W. Bush to head up relief fundraising was a slap in the face, and there should have been more outcry, given the murderous policies they have both imposed on Haiti. The United States has opportunistically used the earthquake to expand its military presence in the Caribbean. This development, combined with the reactivation of the fourth fleet of the U.S. Navy and the expansion of military bases in Colombia, bodes ill for all of Latin America. Anti-war activists must keep Haiti in our hearts, minds and actions in the months and years ahead.

How Can the Anti-war Movement Overcome the "Obama Factor"?

HERE, THE VARIOUS ORGANIZATIONS that make up the skeleton of the mass anti-war movement that North America desperately needs to rebuild would be wise to borrow the wisdom of Karl Marx in his non-sectarian mode: "every step of a real movement is more important than a dozen programs." The movement, broadly defined, should avoid making a fetish of anyone's analysis of Obama's politics. In their understandable frustration with those who see the president through rose-colored glasses, some bend the stick too far and throw away all those people they disagree with as incorrigible liberals, opportunists or some other form of scoundrel.

In real life, with respect to the urgent needs of movement-building, it doesn't so much matter whether you think Obama is a craven opportunist bourgeois center-right politician, or a genuine progressive and all-around great guy constrained by recalcitrant conservatives in the U.S. Senate and the inertia of Washington. Wherever you are on that spectrum, if you want to end the war in Afghanistan the imperative is to organize a mass movement including big demonstrations and dozens of other tactics aimed at achieving that end. Those with greater "faith" in Obama, in fact, should be more energetic in organizing this type of pressure from below, since they presumably believe "their" candidate really wants to go in this direction anyway. The most fruitful inter-progressive debates about Obama's real politics will come in the context of working together around concrete campaigns.

It's easy to restate that the war in Afghanistan should be opposed more vigorously. But how to oppose it? A few suggestions for those in the United States from an outsider's perspective:

Point out that the world is against this war. While it's true that Afghanistan is another "American" war, it has always had, especially in the early years after 9/11, a veneer of multilateralism. Therefore, it's worth educating Americans about just how unpopular this war is in almost all other NATO countries. And it's worth noting that some of the partners are jumping ship. Most importantly, the story of the Netherlands pulling out should be told, since their government fell over this question and since they were doing heavy fighting in the south of the country; they were a key military player in recent years, like Canada, which is also scheduled to leave. Even more important than European or Canadian opinion, it's important that Americans learn what the Afghans really think. Scores of dubious opinion polls have purported to show support for the occupation over the years. But dramatic shifts have taken place in recent years and months. In Kandahar, for

instance, the latest poll shows over 90 percent of the population prefers negotiations over continued war – and this is the province where NATO planned in June to launch a key military offensive. It's now unclear whether that offensive will even be carried out.

Humanize the people of Afghanistan by telling their stories. Pointing to the work of the many analysts from across the political spectrum who argue that the war is now unwinnable is important. There's a consensus emerging and that should be broadcast far and wide. That will help us end the war. But to prevent future disasters, and to really create a different vision of foreign policy, we must humanize the Afghans with the goal of spreading a greater understanding of the culture and history of that troubled land, and of building links of real solidarity. The voice of Afghan dissidents like Malalai Joya, and the heroic underground activists of the Revolutionary Association of Afghan Women (RAWA), should be given special emphasis.

Tell the hard truth about the American Empire. Commentators on the right have long ago begun to frankly discuss the imperial nature of the United States. In the past, there may have been good strategic reasons for progressives to focus on ending one war at a time, rather than focusing on a broader analysis of U.S. foreign policy. There is no such excuse now for avoiding confronting head on the fact that the United States is a declining empire. It was a mistake to separate out Afghanistan from Iraq to maximize public support for getting out of the latter. These wars were always linked, and the fact is that the Washington hopes to maintain military occupations of both countries for decades, including massive permanent bases.

Talk about torture. The horror of Abu Ghraib never actually ended. It just moved and got subcontracted. An important analytical link between Afghanistan and the Empire can be made by talking about Bagram airbase. A stop for many

of those poor souls on their way to indefinite detention in Guantanamo Bay, it was and remains a site of extra-legal measures against “enemy combatants.” And while Gitmo will, eventually, close down its detention center – though Obama’s promise to close it within a year of his inaugural has not been kept – the United States is busy expanding Bagram. Afghans, in fact, call it a “second Guantanamo.”

I hope this piece hasn’t conveyed a lack of gratitude for the immense contributions of activists and critical intellectuals in the United States, or taken too pessimistic a tone. Strong foundations have been laid for the work that must be done, much of it by those who struggle within the “belly of the beast.”

We do, however, need to renew the imagination and initiative of the movement. We should take heart that the majority of the public is with us in both Canada and the United States, even if the opposition to war is tepid or uncertain. Where our level of organization is weak, cross-border collaboration and coalitions can help pull us through.

The anti-war movement is in fact winning in other NATO countries. In the UK a whopping 77 percent are now opposed to the war.[9] In the Netherlands, as noted, the government was recent toppled when it tried to renege on its pledge to pull out starting this year.

In North America, it is a matter of turning apathy and resignation into action and power. In other words: yes we still can, end the war in Afghanistan.

Footnotes

1. Gore Vidal referred to his country’s lack of historical memory as the United States of Amnesia – indeed most critics of U.S. foreign policy have this insight as a basic starting point. ([Democracy Now!](#), May 21, 2004.)

2. Ignatieff was a key public intellectual making the case for the war in Iraq and the wider “war on terror” during the early years of the Bush administration especially. He returned to Canada in 2005 after more than 30 years abroad and quickly ascended to the leadership of the talent-starved Liberal Party.

3. I [interviewed Tariq Ali](#) for *rabble.ca*, a Canadian progressive web publication, Feb. 16, 2009.

4. Richard Sanders, “[Canada’s secret war in Iraq](#),” *Common Ground*.

5. Yves Engler and Anthony Fenton have written a short but comprehensive history of Canada’s role in the 2004 coup. [Canada in Haiti: Waging War on the Poor Majority](#) (Black Point, Nova Scotia: Fernwood, 2005).

6. At their federal convention in 2006, the NDP made a call for troop withdrawal from Afghanistan a cornerstone of their policy, following a keynote address by Afghanistan’s dissident MP Malalai Joya.

7. We will never be anywhere near a decent world so long as GDP remains a more important indicator of societal well-being than [HDI](#).

8. Obama’s 2002 speech details a number of what he describes as necessary wars from U.S. history, including the response to 9/11; in a way, this little war-as-peace speech was a warm-up for his 2009 address to the Nobel Prize Committee in Oslo.

9. “[Afghanistan: A conspiracy of silence](#),” *Independent* (UK), April 18, 2010.