

# Learning Hard Lessons from Canada's Covert War in Iraq

By Richard Sanders, coordinator, Coalition to Oppose the Arms Trade

In February 2003, hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets across Canada—including more than 100,000 in Montréal alone. The goal of these protests was to stop the government from joining the Iraq war.

Seeing the growing strength of this movement, Canada's Liberal government launched a clever PR campaign in which they pretended to acquiesce to widespread public demands for peace. Government officials made it appear that they were refusing support for the U.S.-led war, while behind closed doors they did all they could to support it. This clever smoke-and-mirrors game was a brilliant move to undermine and disempower the anti-war movement's growing momentum.

Despite all the hype, Canada *did* become an active participant in this horrible war which has since claimed the lives of at least 1.3 million Iraqis.

However, through constant repetition, the official narrative has taken a firm grip on most Canadian's perception of history. Many peace activists fell also prey to the deception and even helped spread the myth that Canada did not join the Iraq war. As such, this was one of the most successful PR campaigns ever foisted upon Canadians.

So powerful is the myth of Canada's nonparticipation in Iraq, that even when confronted with hard cold facts about this country's concrete support for the war, many still persist in arguing that the important thing is the *symbolism* of Canada *saying* no.

Canada's support for the invasion was gratefully acknowledged by then-U.S. Ambassador to Canada, Paul Cellucci. On March 25, 2003, during the obscene "shock and awe" bombardment of Iraq, Cellucci duly noted that:

"ironically, Canadian naval vessels, aircraft and personnel...will supply more support to this war in Iraq indirectly...than most of those 46 countries that are fully supporting our efforts there."<sup>1</sup>

Although, Cellucci let the cat out of the bag, his recognition only begins to scratch the surface of Canada's

tremendous military collaboration with the U.S. in helping to wage war in Iraq.

A week before Cellucci's statement, then-U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell announced, to much fanfare, that the U.S. had brought together what he described as "a coalition of the willing...who have *publicly said they could be included in such a listing*."<sup>2</sup> (Emphasis added.)

Canada's notable absence from this list of "willing," *publicly-admitted* participants in the Iraq war, coupled with the Liberal government's profuse political rhetoric, was immediately declared as solid evidence of Canada's supposed refusal to join this highly unpopular war. What went unnoticed and ignored is that Powell also said "there are 15 *other* nations, who, for one reason or another *do not wish to be publicly named but will be supporting the coalition*."<sup>3</sup> (Emphasis added.)

Many Canadians fell for the clever ruse that allowed Canada to support the Iraq war without being "publicly named" as a part of the "Coalition of the Willing." As a result, Canada's substantial, yet furtive, participation in Iraq has remained largely unknown.

Most disheartening is that among those conned were many well-meaning people who should have known better than to accept empty government promises. The peace movement's failure to see through the government's elaborate hoax ensured that there have been no significant protests against Canada's very real complicity in the Iraq war.

The government's propaganda trick worked so well in 2003, that the

Liberal's used the same ploy again in 2005 when claiming to oppose the U.S. "Ballistic-Missile-Defence" (BMD) weapons program. In reality—as documented in three issues of *Press for Conversion!*<sup>4</sup>—government institutions and Canada's heavily-subsidised war industries, continued to heartily support BMD-linked weapons research, development and deployment. The deception that Canada "said no" to BMD, was unfortunately pushed by peace activists who immediately spread victorious pronouncements like "We win on missile defence!"<sup>5</sup> By naively accepting government pronouncements and encouraging activists to send congratulatory letters to the Liberal government for supposedly "not joining" BMD, another strong movement was undermined and protests ground to a halt.

It is still vitally important to reveal the disturbing history of Canada's active role in the Iraq war. By exposing how progressives can be tricked into unwitting submission by clever public relations campaigns, we can hopefully prevent similar fiascos from happening again in the near future.

## References

1. Speech, Paul Cellucci, Economic Club of Toronto, March 25, 2003. [ottawa.usembassy.gov/content/textonly.asp?section=embconsul&document=cellucci\\_030325](http://ottawa.usembassy.gov/content/textonly.asp?section=embconsul&document=cellucci_030325)
2. Interview, Colin Powell, International Wire Services, March 18, 2003. [www.state.gov/secretary/former/powell/remarks/2003/18810.htm](http://www.state.gov/secretary/former/powell/remarks/2003/18810.htm)
3. Ibid.
4. *Press for Conversion!* issues 56, 57, 58.
5. Mass email, Steve Staples, Polaris Institute, Ceasefire.ca, Feb. 25, 2006. [coat.ncf.ca/Slides/3in1/127.htm](http://coat.ncf.ca/Slides/3in1/127.htm)



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**Paul Cellucci,**  
U.S. Ambassador  
to Canada  
(2001-2005)