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Nine reasons to oppose the war in Afghanistan

Canadians should call on the federal government to withdraw from the conflict zone.

Dateline: Monday, May 26, 2008

by Rev Fred Cappuccino

[Editor's Note: this article is excerpted from a speech Rev Cappuccino gave at Algonquin College in Ottawa.]

I'd like to suggest nine reasons that Canadian Unitarians should oppose the Afghan War:

1. The current shaky regime is not worthy of defending with Canadian lives.

The current parliament of Afghanistan does have a token group of women — about 27. But the vast majority are drug barons. Thirty-four seats are led by one Hekmatyar Gulbuddin, 1 who, according to *The Nation* magazine, got his start throwing acid at women. He got 600 million dollars from the Americans. It is true that today in some areas girls are going to school, but that is only in some areas. Harmid Karzai's government rules only Kabul.

As a result of Canada's involvement in Afghanistan, Canadians are less safe overseas.

2. From what I read, we are not winning the war, and we cannot win. The military ever tend to be over-optimistic. Warfare for some is a kind of play activity — a sport.
3. Rather than discouraging the growth of Islamic fundamentalism, the war seems to be furthering Islamic fundamentalism, which is outstripping the secular forces in Turkey, Egypt, and elsewhere. The reason perhaps is that

fundamentalism is the only effective way people can resist US domination.

The prophet Hosea said, "For they have sown the wind; they shall reap the whirlwind."

4. If I am not mistaken, about a third of our returning veterans are suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome (PTSS). Not only that, but apparently the Canadian Government is turning a deaf ear to their claims for medical treatment. The government offers weak reasons like, "Sorry — you weren't there long enough — you don't qualify."

How many Americans died in Vietnam? Somewhere around 50,000. But an astounding result of that war is that of the veterans who returned, many more than 50,000 committed suicide! Why would these young men and women commit suicide? Maybe because they suffered PTSS and could not find treatment.

5. Our own news media don't have access to the war zones. We don't know — really — what our young men and women are being asked to do. We hope they are not as bad as the American woman soldier who with an attack dog was threatening a naked prisoner at Abu Ghraib. Now, this was likely a result of the indoctrination she received, but unfortunately she was the one who was blamed. Without press coverage, we don't know.

Can we assume that Canadian personnel are different? Perhaps they are, but we do have the example of torture of prisoners by Canadian soldiers in Somalia. War does strange things to people, especially if there are no media to monitor the events.

6. Canadians are less safe overseas. My wife Bonnie has been travelling in Asia for some 36 years. In most government offices she visited, they loved Canada. "Oh, you're from Canada! Come right in!" Bonnie was proud of our reputation as a country who led the world in peace-keeping. She felt safe as a Canadian. She saw American travellers with Canadian flags on their backpacks. They felt safer.

But that all changed when Canada was dragged into George Bush's Afghan War. Canada has lost something very precious. Canadians overseas are now lumped together with what many see as war-mongering Americans.

Arundhati Roy is the Indian author who wrote *The God of Small Things*. In a later book she points out that "since World War II the United States has been at war with, or has attacked... Korea, Guatemala, Cuba, Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia, Grenada, Libya, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Panama, Iraq, Somalia, Sudan, Yugoslavia and Afghanistan." That's sixteen countries. We can add the Philippines, Lebanon, Iran, Kosovo and Bosnia — and even that doesn't include other countries where the CIA has covertly wreaked havoc. Some might possibly apply the term war-mongering to the US.

7. The war is brutalizing the Canadian people. When General Hillier was criticized for turning prisoners over to Afghanistan officials to be tortured, Hillier's reply was, "Look, we are not babysitters."

Large numbers of Canadians now say, "Well, perhaps torture is okay if it can save Canadian lives." What about the presumption of innocence? What about due process?

8. Because of the war mentality, Canadians are losing our civil liberties. It is always in the name of patriotism that freedoms are suppressed.

Many of you are too young to remember the Dark Days of Senator Joe McCarthy. Back in the States we were really scared. A Methodist minister colleague was jailed for refusing to give names of people who attended his summer camp. My name was certainly on various government lists of dangerous people. Apparently I'm not yet on a no-fly list.

We tend to forget Marshal Goering's statement after he was captured: "When a government wants to assume absolute power, they just point to an external threat. It works with any type of government."

In Canada people are being harassed and intimidated. Just one example:

The high school age daughter of family friends organized about a dozen of her pals to demonstrate on Parliament Hill in support of Tibet — at a time when the Chinese community had several thousand demonstrating in support of China. Later on she was called on her cell phone by the RCMP, who wanted to question her. She said, "Well, I'm on my way to work." They picked her up anyhow and took her away in a black van and questioned her:

"Who was the organizer of your demonstration?"

She said, "I organized it myself."

"No, you're too young to do that. Tell us really who organized it?"

"I organized it."

"Why didn't you have a permit?"

"I didn't know we had to have a permit."

"Give us the names and phone numbers of the others in the demonstration."

"No, I won't give you any names."

"You realize that doing this kind of thing can go on your record, and you might have difficulty getting a job in the future."

After about an hour of grilling she was released.

My understanding is that the police are not supposed to interrogate a minor without a parent present.

9. Canada is spending billions on war that should be going to our children's medicare and education. Ontario is talking about a lack of trained workers — a severe lack of nurses.

The only winners to the Afghan and Iraq wars are the multi-millionaires who hide behind the names of their oil corporations and munitions companies.

What then should we do?

First, don't take my word for it that the Afghan War is a horrendous tragic mistake. Study it yourself. If we agree

that the war is a huge boondoggle, then let's not be quiet bystanders. Canadian Unitarians, as individuals, as social action groups, as congregations, should become known as people who take a stand on the most important issue of our time.

There is precedent. When the Vietnam War was in full swing, Daniel Ellsberg leaked the top-secret Pentagon Papers, outlining the real story of the horrendous things Americans were doing in Vietnam. Unitarians, through our *Beacon Press*, printed the whole thing. This was an illegal act. While the government was pondering whether to jail the Unitarian national Board of Directors, the *New York Times* took courage and also printed the Pentagon Papers. Unitarians played a huge role in turning the tide against the Vietnam War.

Some time ago I was on a committee doing a Vigil for Peace in a United Church. Five hundred peace marchers were coming down from Parliament Hill. We had a dozen speakers scheduled to speak for three minutes each. My job was to seat them in the choir loft, in the order of their speaking, so as to save time getting them to the pulpit. I had their names neatly placed on the choir chairs. One woman came in, and sat down in the wrong place. I made small talk with her, and then said, "Well, um — your seat is over here."

She looked at me and said, "It's all right. I'm an anarchist." My quick and agile mind considered several possible responses. But, in the end, I just laughed. I have always been intimidated by the weaker sex. Her name was Laurel Smith, from Vancouver Homes Not Bombs. In her 3-minute speech she had the entire audience standing and cheering. Anarchists of the world, unite!

Rev Fred and wife Bonnie Cappuccino are founders and directors of Child Haven International, which operates eight homes for destitute children and women in India, Nepal, Tibet and Bangladesh. They have been married 37 years with two biological sons, and have adopted and brought up 19 boys and girls from 11 countries, most of them in the Far East. They have received the Order of Canada and UNESCO's prestigious Honorable Mention "for the teaching of human rights," the first time that this honor has been bestowed on Canadians. Fred usually blames everything they have done on Bonnie. They live near Maxville, Ontario.

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