

PAUL THE PRESIDENT'S MAN

Following the January 15 meeting between Prime Minister Paul Martin and U.S. President George W. Bush at the Summit of the Americas in Mexico, Canadians may be left wondering what really has been gained from the first encounter between the two leaders.

Prime Minister Martin went to Monterrey with the goal of fostering closer ties between Canada and the United States. He'll be leaving Monterrey with nothing more than a few minor concessions from the Americans, and arriving back in Ottawa with Canadians wondering what he's traded away behind closed doors.

A major announcement from the meeting between Martin and Bush was that Canadian companies would be eligible to bid on the second round of reconstruction contracts in occupied Iraq. Although presented by the Americans as a special courtesy to Canada, and largely reported in the mainstream media as a major concession, this was an offer that had already been extended to Germany, France and other vocal critics of the war.

This was also an agreement that did not emerge out of the much-anticipated face-to-face meeting between the two leaders. It already existed. Just hours after Martin and Bush met, the telecommunications company Nortel announced that it had won a reconstruction contract in Iraq, while a Toronto-based company indicated it had received a contract to help rebuild the Baghdad airport.

The other major announcement was that the United States would now inform the Canadian government when it detains a Canadian citizen on suspicion of terrorism-related activities, as it failed to do in the case of Maher Arar. While this announcement was celebrated in the mainstream media, the fact is that President Bush agreed to nothing more than a basic right that already exists in international law.



Paul Martin speaking at a media conference in Monterrey.

Photo: Guy Caron

Steven Watt, Mr. Arar's lawyer, called this agreement "window dressing" and stated that Mr. Arar "was afforded the right of access; he saw counsel, but that didn't stop him from being removed to Syria." The real story is that President Bush did not apologize for the actions of his government in sending a Canadian citizen to be tortured in Syria.

Also lost in the hype around Mr. Martin's so-called "wins" was the Declaration of Nuevo Leon, the main statement emerging from the summit. This declaration, signed by the Prime Minister and the other 33 leaders present, signals support for the continuation of negotiations toward a Free Trade Area of the Americas agreement. With plans already in the works for Martin and Bush to meet within 60

days of the conclusion of the Summit of the Americas, Canadians must ask, What did Martin have to give the U.S. for these so-called concessions? What else is Martin prepared to offer in his pursuit of closer ties with the U.S.?

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