

# Canada's 'No' To Iraq War A Defining Moment For Prime Minister, Even 10 Years Later

Posted: 03/19/2013 7:36 am EDT Updated: 03/20/2013 8:41 am EDT

TORONTO -- Liberal prime minister Jean Chrétien's decision to break with U.S. President George W. Bush on the 2003 invasion of Iraq was a very public and rare expression of Canadian sovereignty that many critics here feared would jeopardize U.S.-Canada relations for years.

Privately for Chrétien, it was also one of the defining moments of his 40-year political career, including a decade as prime minister — a bold declaration of independence and one that many Canadians supported despite this country's record of joining previous U.S. military efforts, including the 1990-91 Persian Gulf War, Afghanistan War and Korean War.

“There was no big bitterness. There was certainly disappointment from the president, no doubt about it, and [British prime minister] Tony Blair, too,” Chrétien reflected ahead of the 10-year anniversary of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

“But we're an independent country, and in fact it was a very good occasion to show our independence,” he told The Huffington Post.

It was March 17, 2003, less than nine months before he would resign as one of Canada's most successful prime ministers, when Chrétien stood up in the House of Commons and stated: “If military action proceeds without a new resolution of the [United Nations] Security Council,

His announcement was met with sustained applause from a majority of MPs. A 2003 poll for The Toronto Star indicated that seven-in-10 Canadians approved of his decision.

At the time, Canada was engaged in the U.S.-led war on terror in Afghanistan, where 158 Canadian Forces personnel would die by the time Canadian combat operations wound down in 2011.

Chrétien recalls feeling pressure from both sides of the Iraq debate: The populace appeared divided; many newspaper editorials and columnists pressed him to say yes.

Canada's current Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper -- then the leader of the Opposition Canadian Alliance -- co-authored a letter to the Wall Street Journal telling Americans that he strongly disagreed with the prime minister and supported the war.

“This is a serious mistake,” Harper wrote, along with foreign affairs critic Stockwell Day. “The Canadian Alliance -- the official opposition in Parliament -- supports the American and British

position because we share their concerns, their worries about the future if Iraq is left unattended to, and their fundamental vision of civilization and human values."

In 2008, Harper -- by then prime minister -- announced that he had changed his mind and now felt that the war was a mistake.

Chrétien, however, was steadfast that he would not commit troops without U.N. backing.

"It was a very difficult decision to make, because it was the first time there was a war where the Americans and the Brits were involved and Canada was not there," he said. "But my view was there were no weapons of mass destruction, and we're not in the business of going everywhere and replacing dictators. If we were to do that, we would be fighting every day."

The U.S. launched its attack two days later with the backing of Bush's "Coalition of the Willing," a group of 49 countries that the U.S. said supported the mission despite the lack of authorization by the U.N. Security Council.

Paul Heinbecker, Canada's ambassador to the U.N. until December, 2003, was Chrétien's eyes and ears inside the international body tasked with deciding whether it would authorize one of its most powerful members to attack another country.

In the months leading up to the invasion, the U.S. doggedly sought authority from the Security Council to enter Iraq and remove Saddam Hussein from power on grounds the dictator had amassed weapons of mass destruction and was "a danger to the world."

Heinbecker reviewed the intelligence and called Chrétien frequently to offer advice. He opposed the war and proposed more time for U.N. weapons inspectors, led by Hans Blix, to look for Iraqi weapons of mass destruction.

"I was very skeptical of the intelligence that people were offering on the Iraq situation," Heinbecker told The Huffington Post.

That skepticism, reflected in his reports back to Ottawa, conflicted with other assessments the prime minister received.

"He was being told by counterparts, notably the British, that this was a 'slam dunk,' that they would be getting their authorization to go to war, and it would be good for Canada to get on board," Heinbecker said. "I told him there was no prospect of U.N. Security Council approval of a resolution mandating attacking Iraq. It just wasn't going to happen -- nobody in New York was convinced of the necessity of the action."

Heinbecker did not believe the pronouncements by the U.S. and Britain that Iraq was buying uranium from Africa, and he said it should have been clear to anyone paying attention that the allegations were highly doubtful.

He blames American hubris and emotion for the rush to war.

“Americans took the information and put exclamation marks where they should have been putting question marks,” he said. “They just wanted to kick somebody’s ass after 9/11, and Iraq was a case.”

The U.S. misjudged its support on the Security Council, especially since a number of sympathetic countries, including Ireland, Singapore and Colombia, had been replaced that year with more antagonistic ones such as Germany, Pakistan and Chile.

“If you’re looking for one word, it was hubris: They thought they could do damn near anything and that people would just fall in line,” Heinbecker said. “That was partly how they miscalculated Ottawa, because they just presumed that if they wanted to do something, then Ottawa would go along with it. And Ottawa didn’t.”

Not only did Chrétien oppose the war, he offered advice to two new Security Council members from the Americas — Mexico and Chile. Since Canada had recent experience on the body, having held a seat in 2000-2001, the newcomers pledged to follow Chrétien’s lead, further raising the ire of the United States.

The draft resolution to invade Iraq was abandoned on March 17, 2003, when it became clear that the U.S. and Security Council allies Britain — another permanent member — and Spain would fall well short of the nine affirmative votes required for action. The U.S. announced that diplomacy had failed and entered Iraq with its coalition.

Chrétien had candid conversations with both Blair and Bush well in advance of his declarative “no” in Parliament, giving them ample warning that Canada’s participation required a U.N. resolution.

Chrétien recalls telling Blair during a visit to South Africa in 2002 that he was not convinced that Hussein was harbouring weapons of mass destruction, the justification used for removing the dictator from power. He said that the U.S was choosing to go after Hussein instead of Zimbabwe’s Robert Mugabe because Iraq had oil and the African nation did not.

“I said we would work with them if there was a resolution, but if there was to be no resolution, I knew that we were not to be there,” he said.

And at a ceremony at the Detroit-Windsor Ambassador Bridge in September 2002, Chrétien told Bush he didn’t believe there was enough proof to warrant a U.N. resolution.

Michael Kergin, the Canadian ambassador to the U.S. at the time and the self-described “nexus of diplomatic communication,” said he ensured that Chrétien’s message was made clear at meetings with the U.S. National Security Council, State Department and the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Kergin had participated in months of diplomatic planning, meetings held at the same time the U.S. was engaged in military planning. He believes the Bush administration was set on invasion, whether it had U.N. authorization or not, and it was just a question of timing. When it became apparent that the U.S. would fail at the U.N. and that Canada would not change its mind, Kergin was excluded from talks, he said.

Chrétien's announcement was no surprise to officials in the highest executive branches, as diplomats had been discussing their positions for months, he said.

Days after the invasion began, Paul Cellucci, the U.S. ambassador to Canada, issued a blunt message: "We are disappointed that some of our closest allies, including Canada, have not agreed with us on the urgent need for this military action against Iraq."

But diplomatically speaking, the message was tame, Kergin said.

"Their strongest language, if you will, is that they were disappointed that Canada wasn't part of the 'coalition of the willing,' and that's not particularly strong diplomatic language," he told The Huffington Post.

Behind the scenes, Kergin was dealing with bewildered members of the U.S. Congress, who found out that Canada would not participate in the mission only after Chrétien's announcement was picked up by U.S. networks. They accused Canada of being a "fair-weather friend" that abandoned its ally in its time of need, he said.

"I got a bit of heat from them," Kergin said.

The fallout for Canada was minimal in the end. Some congress members were angry; some Americans boycotted Canadian products such as Quebec maple syrup; Bush's visit to Ottawa scheduled for that May was cancelled.

But the feared hit to trade and military contracts awarded to Canadian companies never materialized.

"The thing about the U.S. is they separate capitalism from politics," Kergin said, adding that the Pentagon appeared to be placated by Canada's crucial role in Afghanistan.

That those "doom and gloom" consequences some had predicted did not occur had a historical precedent in Canada's opposition to the Vietnam War, Heinbecker said.

"When you look back, it turned out (U.S. President Lyndon) Johnson was wrong, we were right, and there were virtually no consequences to our doing the right thing," he said. "The same thing turned out as regards to Iraq."

Canada's position proved to be prescient, Heinbecker said, as the Iraq war dragged on and American public opinion began to sour.

“History rendered it a terrible decision by the Americans,” he said. The war cost the U.S. an estimated \$2 trillion and took as many as 189,000 lives.

Chrétien cited a recent Angus-Reid poll in which 55 percent of Americans said they believed Canada and other countries made the right call.

“Now that it looks like we made the right decision, some of them have told me, ‘You were very wise,’” he said.

Although these key Canadian players have no regrets about the country’s decision, Kergin and Heinbecker concede that Chrétien’s decision could have been delivered more diplomatically.

“They did the right thing, but they didn’t do it right,” Heinbecker said, recalling the “circus-like” response to the announcement made during the House of Commons’ rancorous Question Period.

In what should have been a solemn moment, there was an explosion of applause that Americans didn’t take well, he said.

Kergin said Canada could have been “more sophisticated” in its delivery. The moment the House erupted in cheers, he started making calls to his contacts, he said.

“I didn’t know when it would exactly happen, and I was suggesting to my people back home to give the Americans a bit of a heads up, and they decided that that wasn’t the right thing,” he said. “I think it was that part that probably got a little more publicity than needed and stoked a bit of irritation — not the decision itself, because they knew it, but the precise timing and the manner of the announcement.”

But the former prime minister has no regrets about the way he told the world he was standing up to his neighbour.

“It felt that the people were waiting for a decision, and I thought that to announce it to the people of Canada first was very important,” Chrétien said.

“[The Americans] perhaps were surprised, but as [White House chief of staff] Andrew Card told me one day, ‘You have been very clear with us, you did not double-cross us. We were disappointed, but we knew that you had said that,’” he continued. “Some of them thought ‘at end of day you will come along anyway,’ and they were a bit surprised that I did not come along anyway.

“But they could not complain about the clarity of my position.”

# WESTON: Canada offered to aid Iraq invasion: WikiLeaks

By Greg Weston, CBC News Posted: May 15, 2011 9:26 PM ET Last Updated: May 16, 2011 7:43 AM ET

The same day Canada publicly refused to join the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, a high-ranking Canadian official was secretly promising the Americans clandestine military support for the fiercely controversial operation.

The revelation that Canadian forces may have secretly participated in the invasion of Iraq is contained in a classified U.S. diplomatic memo obtained exclusively by CBC News from the whistleblower website WikiLeaks.

On March 17, 2003, two days before U.S. warplanes launched their attack on Baghdad, prime minister Jean Chrétien told the House of Commons that Canadian forces would not be joining what the administration of then U.S. president George W. Bush dubbed the "coalition of the willing."

Chrétien's apparent refusal to back the Bush administration's invasion, purportedly launched to seize weapons of mass destruction possessed by Iraqi ruler Saddam Hussein (which were never found), was hugely popular in Canada, widely hailed as nothing less than a defining moment of national sovereignty.

But even as Chrétien told the Commons that Canada wouldn't participate in Operation Iraqi Freedom, Canadian diplomats were secretly telling their U.S. counterparts something entirely different.

The classified U.S. document obtained from WikiLeaks shows senior Canadian officials met that same day with high-ranking American and British diplomats at Foreign Affairs headquarters in Ottawa.

The confidential note, written by a U.S. diplomat at the gathering, states that Foreign Affairs official James Wright waited until after the official meeting to impart the most important news of all.

According to the U.S. account, Wright "emphasized" that contrary to public statements by the prime minister, Canadian naval and air forces could be "discreetly" put to use during the pending U.S.-led assault on Iraq and its aftermath.

At that time, Canada had warships, aircraft and over 1,200 naval personnel already in the Strait of Hormuz at the mouth of the Persian Gulf, intercepting potential militant vessels and providing safe escort to other ships as part of Operation Enduring Freedom, the post-Sept. 11, 2001, multinational war on terrorism.

**'While for domestic political reasons... [Canada] has decided not to join in a U.S. coalition,... they are also prepared to be as helpful as possible in the military margins'**—*Secret U.S. diplomatic cable*

The U.S. briefing note states: "Following the meeting, political director Jim Wright emphasized that, despite public statements that the Canadian assets in the Straits of Hormuz will remain in the region exclusively to support Enduring Freedom, they will also be available to provide escort services in the Straits and will otherwise be discreetly useful to the military effort.

"The two ships in the Straits now are being augmented by two more en route, and there are patrol and supply aircraft in the U.A.E. [United Arab Emirates] which are also prepared to 'be useful.'

"This message tracks with others we have heard," the U.S. diplomat wrote in his briefing note to State Department bosses in Washington.

"While for domestic political reasons... the GOC [Government of Canada] has decided not to join in a U.S. coalition of the willing,... they are also prepared to be as helpful as possible in the military margins."

'Please destroy cable'

The original U.S. briefing cable, dated the day of the meeting, was marked "unclassified." Two days later, the U.S. Embassy in Ottawa issued an urgent internal notice to "please destroy previous cable," replacing it with the same message but marked "confidential."

The Canadian official involved, James Wright, is now Canada's high commissioner in London. He declined to comment for this report.

The U.S. ambassador to Canada at the time, Paul Cellucci, says he couldn't be at the meeting in Ottawa that day — he was stranded in a snowstorm in the U.S. — but the version of events in the leaked memo "sounds right."

"The message from the Canadians was pretty clear," Cellucci told CBC News. "We are not putting boots on the ground in Iraq. We will say good things about the United States and not-so-good things about Saddam Hussein."

And finally: "We will keep our ships in the Persian Gulf helping in the war on terror — and any way else we can help."

Exactly what that meant for the Canadian naval ships and surveillance aircraft in the Gulf region at the time — and how much they ultimately became involved in the Iraq war — remains a matter of considerable debate.

Before the invasion of Iraq, the duties of the Canadian ships had been mainly to protect other vessels from attacks by militants and to intercept craft suspected of gun-running and other potentially militant-related activities.

The issue is what, if anything, changed after the Chrétien government decreed those ships and aircraft couldn't be involved in intercepting vessels connected to the Iraq war.

Three months before the Iraq invasion, the then Canadian defence minister John McCallum, right, met with U.S. counterpart Donald Rumsfeld, left, whose diplomats had told him to keep his expectations 'modest' for what Canada might contribute to the war. ((CBC))

Eugene Lang, chief of staff to then defence minister John McCallum, says there was no end of internal debate over whether the Canadian Forces were being put into a mission impossible.

"How do you know if something is connected to terrorism or Iraq? When you are intercepting unknown boats, you don't know what you have taken over until you have taken it over."

Lang says that after "painful" consultations with federal lawyers, the Department of National Defence issued Canadian naval commanders in the Gulf clear orders not to engage in anything to do with Operation Iraqi Freedom.

"But who knows whether in fact we were doing things indirectly for Iraqi Freedom? It is quite possible."

McCallum's former chief recalled a bitter internal battle over whether to pull the Canadian ships out of the Gulf altogether to avoid any confusion.

"For a long time, the [Canadian] military pushed really hard not to be in Afghanistan, and instead be part of a full-blown boots-on-the-ground Iraq invasion," Lang said.

"So the military was dead set against pulling out [of the Gulf], and in the end the government decided we would stay mainly, I think, for Canada-U.S. relations."

Former defence minister McCallum recalls he and his officials having "extremely long and detailed meetings to make sure that we were not in fact committing to help the war in Iraq."

"Now, what happens on the high seas is not something I can prove or disprove, but those were the orders that the military had."

U.S. didn't seem to care

Ironically, after all the fuss, the Americans didn't seem to care whether Canada contributed a lot of military might to the Iraq mission.

A former senior Canadian bureaucrat said: "The Americans knew we were stretched to the limit on the military side, and they really just wanted a political endorsement of their plan to go into Iraq."

Former U.S. ambassador Cellucci concurred: "We were looking for moral support. That's all we were looking for.... We were looking for 'we support the Americans.' "



Flight deck crew watch as a U.S. F/A-18 Hornet launches from an aircraft carrier in the Persian Gulf one week into the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Canada had two warships nearby at the time, and secretly offered to make them 'useful' to the U.S., a leaked American document says. ((Steve Helber/Associated Press))

Then defence minister McCallum met with his counterpart, U.S. defence secretary Donald Rumsfeld, three months before the Iraq invasion. McCallum recalls Rumsfeld never even mentioned Canada's possible military contribution to Iraq.

A U.S. diplomatic briefing note prepared for Rumsfeld prior to the meeting states: "As for what Canada might bring to the table, our expectations should be modest."

The memo, also obtained by CBC News from WikiLeaks, goes on to say: "Canada probably would need to use assets currently devoted to Operation Enduring Freedom, including a naval task group [in the Gulf] and patrol and transport aircraft."

If the secret U.S. memos cast doubts on Canada's status as a refusenik of the Iraq war, the public also didn't exactly get the whole truth about a group of Canadian soldiers the government admitted were in Iraq.

From the outset, the Chrétien government said a "few" Canadian soldiers embedded with the U.S. and British militaries as exchange officers would be allowed to remain in their positions, even if they wound up in Iraq.

While the revelation caused a ruckus in Parliament, it all sounded relatively innocuous at the time.

But Lang, defence minister McCallum's chief of staff, says military brass were not entirely forthcoming on the issue. For instance, he says, even McCallum initially didn't know those soldiers were helping to plan the invasion of Iraq up to the highest levels of command, including a Canadian general.

That general is Walt Natynczyk, now Canada's chief of defence staff, who eight months after the invasion became deputy commander of 35,000 U.S. soldiers and other allied forces in Iraq. Lang says Natynczyk was also part of the team of mainly senior U.S. military brass that helped prepare for the invasion from a mobile command in Kuwait.

The Department of National Defence refused to comment on Natynczyk's role, if any, in the invasion of Iraq.