

The “coalition of the willing” was what President Bush called the group of 48 countries that supported the invasion of Iraq, despite the lack of United Nations authorization.

Absent from that group was one of America’s strongest allies – Canada.

[Paul Heinbecker](#) was Canada’s ambassador to the UN at the time.

He speaks with anchor Marco Werman about Canada’s decision to stay out of the US-led invasion of Iraq.

### **Read the Transcript**

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**Marco Werman:** Coalition of the Willing, that was what President Bush called the group of 48 countries that supported the invasion of Iraq; despite the lack of U.N. authorization. The list of countries in this Coalition of the Willing range from Britain and Australia, to El Salvador and Micronesia. Not on the list, one of America’s strongest allies, Canada. In March 2003, then Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chrétien made this announcement in the House of Commons.

**Jean Chrétien:** ‘Canada worked very hard to find a compromise to bridge the gap in the security council. Unfortunately we were not successful. If military action proceeds without a new resolution of the security council Canada will not participate.’ • [APPLAUSE]

**Werman:** Paul Heinbecker was Canada’s ambassador to the U.N. at the time. He joins us now from Ottawa. Ambassador Heinbecker, what was it like at the U.N. during that time? What kind of pressure was coming from the U.S. on a country like Canada to authorize an invasion?

**Paul Heinbecker:** There was a presumption, I think based on hubris, probably, that when the time came Canada would sign up like everybody else did. We were signaling that we were not there, but Washington wasn’t on receive at the time, it was on send, and I don’t think that they were listening to us. I was the ambassador in New York, I had access to the reports of the U.N. weapons inspectors, and it was evident to me that the U.S. was putting exclamation points in places where they should have been putting question marks, that the evidence really wasn’t persuasive.

**Werman:** What has been the biggest question for you?

**Heinbecker:** Fundamentally, Hans Blix, the chief weapons inspector and his people, were basically going pretty much where they wanted to go in Iraq, and he wasn’t finding anything, and I went to see him and I said to him ‘What’s happening?’ • He said ‘I have asked the United States for the best intelligence they have and what they’ve given me, I go and investigate and I don’t find anything.’ • That was one thing, another thing was when the President said in the State of the Union Address that there is uranium material being imported from Africa to Iraq. I have a colleague who worked at the International Atomic Energy Agency in Vienna. It took them one day to show that that was a forgery, yet the United States was building a whole case of going to war, in part, on such evidence. The person who signed the document who was supposed to be authorizing this transfer wasn’t in office at the time the document was supposed to have been signed.

**Werman:** We've heard this week from a number of players at the time about the intel reports, that the intel reports the U.S. saw were being confirmed by the Chinese and the Russians, by other parties. Why do you think Canada rejected those positions?

**Heinbecker:** We belong to a 5 country intelligence-sharing operation; United States, Britain, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. So we have quite a bit of experience with looking at intelligence, and when we looked at the intelligence we just didn't think it was convincing. For reasons which were never perfectly clear to me the United States seemed to find a rationale for acting on the basis of pretty sketchy intelligence. And others too came to this conclusion. You talked about the Coalition of the Willing; I think I'd more likely call it the Coalition of the Credulous and the Calculating. There are those who are willing to take the United States word on it, and there are others who thought that it was better to go along with Washington, and to get along with Washington. In other words, they weren't prepared to question what they were being told because it was evident that it was a major priority for Washington, for the Bush government.

**Werman:** Canada has often gone along with U.S. leads. What was the U.S. reaction to Canada's unwillingness to join the Coalition of the Willing?

**Heinbecker:** They say they were disappointed. I think that's the official word. Disappointment is not the worst thing that can happen to you in diplomacy. And I think the sum total of the cost was some Canadian maple syrup being poured down the drain and a visit by President Bush being postponed.

**Werman:** How much was this about Canada taking a moral stand or perhaps you would say a logical stand, and how much was it political? The fact that Canada was already deeply involved in the war in Afghanistan and polls at the time showed very little stomach among Canadians for Afghanistan, and certainly not another war in another country, in Iraq.

**Heinbecker:** Well, the politics of it were generally not favorable but I have to observe that senior military officers were promoting joining the war. The Canadian business community actually mounted a mission to Washington to basically apologize for the position taken by their government because they were so concerned about what might happen to their prospects. The punditry and the academics were full of the view that Canada had no choice, that when the United States took an action that it considered to be in its own national security interest, that Canada must go along. So there was quite a bit of opposition and it took the government, it took some courage on the part of the government to look at all of that and proceed the way they proceeded.

**Werman:** Ambassador, thank you.

**Heinbecker:** Thank you.

**Werman:** Paul Heinbecker was Canadian ambassador to the United Nations from 2000 to 2003. He's currently with the Center for International Governance Innovation and directs a center for global relations at Wilfrid Laurier University.

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