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HEADLINE: Mark Thomas on an al-Qaeda recruiting campaign; It's not true that most Iraqi exiles want a war. Who would want 3,000 missiles raining down on their relatives in 48 hours? Not even Prince Philip would wish that on Fergie, writes Mark Thomas

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BODY:

Tessa Jowell, the Culture Secretary, cares so much for Britain that she will fight to save every blade of grass in Hyde Park. The anti-war movement may scoff, but it is that kind of freedom and security that Iraqi grass can only dream of. Soon Jack Straw will publish a **dossier** of Iraq's fauna abuse. Not that we need further proof - look at where Saddam Hussein lives. In a desert! That is how he treats his own grass! That is why we must bomb the Iraqi people to freedom.

And amid this roar to war, amid the government's cant, rants and lies is the discernible sound of the Labour left shuffling rightwards to support the attack on Iraq. Led by the likes of Clare Short, who yet again treads her well-worn path from rebellion to barbarism. Her threats of resignation, again, amount to nothing: she is like those Tory comedians who offer to leave the country should Labour win but never do. After raising concerns about military action, she invariably backs it. Had she been around in the Second World War, her initial doubts about the civilian deaths from the bombing of Dresden would naturally have been assuaged by 'the international community's pledge of Savlon'. The Labour left has a long history of capitulating before the armchair generals, so it should come as no shock when supposed liberal commentators, such as David Aaronovitch in the Observer (among other notable hacks), join the ranks of the libertarian bombers. As an ex-member of the Communist Party, Aaronovitch probably has a tendency, now the Berlin Wall is down, to support any trundling tank that passes his way.

There is one question he and his ilk pose that does need to be looked at: 'What do we do about Saddam Hussein?'

There are many in the anti-war movement who would say that, actually, they don't have an answer. But whatever is done should follow the Hippocratic principle of 'do no harm'. The UN predicts that figures for Iraqi civilian casualties in a war will come to roughly 500,000. Even though these deaths may be (according to Aaronovitch et al) well-intentioned, freedom-loving deaths, they do by any definition amount to 'harm'.

Any war in Iraq will not only result in large numbers of civilian deaths but will be the best recruiting campaign al-Qaeda will ever have. When Colin Powell says that the invasion of Iraq may be funded by Iraqi oil, he might as well be painting Osama Bin Laden's freephone number on the side of every bomber and Jeep in the Middle East. Every time George W Bush talks of 'weapons of mass destruction' but fails to mention Pakistan, India, Israel, North Korea, Russia and the US, he might as well be sending a mail-shot of leaflets bearing a picture of a turban and a beard over the slogan 'Uncle Osama needs you!' straight into Saudi Arabia. Surely the prospect of thousands joining al-Qaeda counts as causing 'harm'.

Yet somehow, the pro-war pundits claim to represent the Iraqi people when they ask, 'What do you do about Saddam Hussein?' In reality, a minority of British Iraqis want an invasion to

topple Saddam. Many I have talked to and corresponded with have relatives in Iraq. Why would they want them bombed? The US talks of raining 3,000 missiles on Iraq in 48 hours - who in their right mind would want their relatives and friends to endure that? Not even Prince Philip would wish that on Fergie . . . All right, that may be a bad example, but you get the argument.

The apologists for war might claim to represent the Iraqis but their actions do not. The US budget for post-conflict humanitarian aid to Iraq is \$15m. The population of Iraq is roughly 23 million, so Iraqis are in line for 65 cents each. This is how much the war camp cares: 65 cents' worth of care. Sixty-five cents for enduring a hell to be rained upon them.

Maybe I am wrong and the Iraqis are rubbing their hands with joy and muttering: 'A whole 65 cents, just to be bombed with cruise missiles. Easy money!' But I don't think so.

The dream outcome for the Americans, and therefore Tony Blair, is a palace coup before war breaks out, and another strong man taking power. This time the dictatorship will no doubt be a benign one, a sort of new Labour New Dictator kind of thing, where torturers respond to focus groups and the secret police learn teamwork by paintballing each other at weekends. Neither liberation nor total tyranny, but a Third Way for dictators.

So what do we do with Saddam? Lift sanctions. It is as simple as that. Obviously, keep the military restrictions, but lift the economic sanctions that have, according to Unicef, cost the lives of half a million Iraqi children under the age of five.

The first effect would be to start to reverse this awful toll on the Iraqi people. The second would be to remove the power that Saddam Hussein has gained through controlling the distribution of food in a country where 60 per cent of the people are dependent on food aid. Far from punishing the Ba'athist regime, sanctions have consolidated its power. Without sanctions and without the US and UK bombing raids (there have been more than 90 since 11 September 2001), the Iraqis might stop regarding their enemies as those who starve and bomb them. Maybe they might just turn their sights on Saddam.

Domestically, the most turbulent years of Saddam's rule were from 1988 to 1990, when, after the war with Iran, thousands of veterans returned to civilian life to find poverty and hardship. Saddam faced about two assassination attempts each year.

Maybe, without the violent distractions of war and sanctions, the Iraqi people will topple Saddam. Without huge civilian casualties, without regional instability, without creating a new brigade for al-Qaeda and without America's empire rolling into town, Iraq might have the chance to save itself.

Maybe the Labour pundits and dinner-party generals will consider this the next time they talk of liberation as the brandy and mints go round.

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