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We could have freed 'guests'

When medieval Baghdad was capital of the Arab world, an endless procession of emirs, sheiks, princes and other assorted royalty came to pay homage to the Sultan. After listening to their expressions of fealty, the great Sultan would send his visitors home laden with rich gifts.

This process continues today. Hardly a week passes without some foreign statesman arriving in Baghdad, cap in hand, to meet Saddam and secure the release of hostages. To date, the guest list includes Austria's Kurt Waldheim, Britain's Ted Heath, Germany's Willy Brandt, and Japan's Yasuhiro Nakasone. All have returned home with gift-packets of hostages.

Now it's Canada's turn. Pierre Trudeau, as of this writing, appears to have turned down the idea of dash-ing off to Baghdad. But a gaggle of MPs seems Baghdad-bound, hoping Saddam will agree to hand over some of the 40 or so Canadians in Iraq who want to return home.

There's something particularly noxious about such kowtowing to a hostage-taker. And to seeing international thuggery on a grand scale be dignified or rewarded. Saddam should be totally isolated and his hostages written off. In theory.

But having felt like a hostage myself during my recent stay in Baghdad, I think it makes better sense to get the wretched "guestages" out any way possible, including bowing deep to the Sultan of Baghdad. After being inducted as junior member in a British hostage society in Baghdad, complete with my own "guestage" beanie, I don't have the heart anymore to suggest that they are disposable and should be forgotten.

Before leaving for Baghdad, I asked Libya's highly respected UN ambassador if he could help try to get



some Canadians out of Iraq. Even though Libya has condemned Iraq's invasion of Kuwait and the hostage-taking, the two nations remain on very good terms. The ambassador replied that he would and could help but that Ottawa had not asked. What's more, under U.S. pressure, Canada has been giving Libya the cold shoulder in spite of the two nations having diplomatic relations.

A polite request to Libya, where many Canadians still work, would have been more useful than sending MPs to Baghdad. But that would have angered George Bush who, I was just told by a recent visitor to the White House, has photos of his pal Brian Mulroney "all over the place." This news will make the NDP break out in hives.

While in Baghdad, I implored the deputy minister of information, one of the more western-oriented people in the Saddam regime, to send back some Canadian hostages as a token of good will. He sneeringly refused, saying, "If you want the 'guests' back, why don't you tell your friend Bush not to bomb us." Even so, I learned soon after that Iraq was considering releasing some Canadians.

That was until Joe Clark donned his shining armor, slammed down his visor and thundered that Canada

might shortly attack Iraq. Such bombast from a pipsqueak military power, a sort of mouse that roared, was a bad joke, as most Canadians commented.

Funny it was not for the Canadian hostages in Baghdad. Even though one of them had told me that he favored Canada's military involvement in the Gulf, the others, I suspected, hoped that Ottawa would take a more diplomatic stance — at least until they were safe at home. Not surprisingly, Baghdad suddenly stopped talking about releasing its Canadian "guestages." If I had been a hostage in Baghdad, I would not have spoken kindly of Clark's timing.

There is now talk I hear around the UN that Saddam may soon free all hostages except those from nations who are poised to strike militarily at Iraq — and this means the U.S., Britain and possibly tough-talking Canada. It's beginning to dawn even on the limited intellects of Baghdad's leadership that grabbing hostages from formerly friendly nations like France, Italy, Japan and Sweden was a terrible mistake.

The thought must also be occurring to Saddam and the small coterie around him that they may end up with no place to escape to if the angry Anglo-Saxons actually do invade Kuwait and Iraq. Wise tyrants always keep money stashed in Switzerland and a chateau outside of Geneva — just in case. Saddam has his own private airport and getaway jet in his maximum security residential compound next to Baghdad's old airport. But after having taken Swiss hostages, I don't think Saddam would find a warm welcome in Geneva. The Swiss are very, very angry. In fact, about the only refuge for an exiled Saddam would probably be Canada. He could show up at Pearson airport, hire a good immigration lawyer and settle down for an indefinite stay.