

The Kindness of Strangers

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The Foreigner's Gift: The Americans, the Arabs, and the Iraqis in Iraq. By Fouad Ajami. New York: Free Press. 2006. 400 pp. \$26.00.

Since Laocoön's warning to his fellow Trojans went so tragically unheeded, the course of history has been strewn with the corpses of ungrateful nations which, despite the misery that stemmed from their inability to manage their own affairs, bitterly resented and actively resisted, the firm and forceful help of others. The stranger's gift of peace, order and prosperity is less welcome to us than the death, chaos and poverty that are our own doing. For in the end they are our own and that is what matters to us. Like truculent adolescents we do not want to be told how to do things or have them done for us; we want to make our own, even fatal, mistakes. We will take what we can use from what is offered, but we want, in the end, to do it ourselves: to manage our own lives however badly. The main thing about the stranger after all is that he is strange. He is not like us; he will never understand us. Our greatest fear, perhaps because the possibility is often so seductive, is that we will become like him and lose our selves. The stranger's gift never comes without strings, and we do not want to be tied.

We of the post-Enlightenment Anglo-Saxon West are among the most earnest of the givers. We are not, like our medieval Catholic ancestors, really proponents of the Crusade and the holy war against the heathen. We are at heart Protestant missionaries. We want to bring the good news and the benefits of civilization to the benighted of the earth. And if they don't want it, then like good Protestant parents, and entirely for their own good of course, we must

sternly make them accept it. Certainly we hoped to make good profits and attain political power in the process, but these were small prices that the benighted had to pay for the incomparable gifts we had to offer. Critics of colonialism miss the point if all they see is the profits and the power. Our civilizing mission was, and still is, as dear to us as the Jihad is to Muslims. Even when it is not Protestantism per se that we are offering, it is the children of the Protestant Ethic that we know as democracy, liberty, equality, and the free market. Our learned men tell us in fact that we are the foreordained bearers of a truth so fundamental that with its triumph history will come to an end, there being nothing left for mankind to achieve. If this is so, how can the benighted so stubbornly, and even violently, refuse our gift of a free leg up onto the stage of world history?

The continental Catholic colonial powers never paid more than lip service to the white man's burden, especially the Belgians (the French get a pass) but the British and later the Americans had it in spades. There is no question that we went into Iraq to defend our oil interests: that at least was the rational part. But the Holy Warriors of the White House saw a far greater opportunity. They could plant the banner of liberal democracy in the heartland of Arab totalitarianism, and thus change the world for the better. To do this was to collaborate with the inevitable progress of mankind: a sure winner of a policy. We would simply give the inevitable progress a friendly shove in the right direction. The "Iraqi People" (much invoked) would greet us as liberators and gratefully accept our gift of free elections. How could they possibly prefer the savagery of Saddam and the hegemony of the brutes of Baath? Once rid of these monsters, the "Iraqi People"—like people everywhere, as "lovers of freedom" (Rumsfeld's drumbeat) would set up a representative democracy modeled on our own. Ballot boxes and purple finger paint would be provided, political

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parties would be free to form, the press would be unrestricted. Once in place, this model democracy would stand as a rebuke and an example to the monstrous regimes in the Middle East, which would gradually succumb to the same happy fate. What is more it would be an Arab democracy, thus saving the Arabs from the embarrassment of Israel being the only democratic state in the region. Since democracies are inherently peaceful, the more of them in the region the better, and the better for our “national security.” And above all, as the guarantors of this liberal democratic paradise, we would have a continuing benign influence in the area, which would, incidentally, protect our oil interests. To get the “American People”—inherently suspicious of foreign entanglements, to support this noble enterprise, it was necessary to scare them with Saddam’s intentions and his putative WMDs. After both the Gulf War and 9/11 this was not hard to do, particularly with the trusted figure of Colin Powell leading the chorus, and Saddam behaving for all the world as if he really did have the damn things.

For the missionaries this was a chance too good to be missed. The “criminal enterprise” as Fouad Ajami calls Saddam’s regime, was ripe for plucking. There was no way its army could stand up to the superior Western forces, and once the army was disbanded, the criminals tried, and “de-Baathification” completed, the grateful freed “People of Iraq” would take it from there. They would need help and firm guidance from the missionaries of course. They would make mistakes and there would be all the baggage of dictatorship to unpack. But it had been done in Japan and Germany with startling success, why not in Iraq? (Both totally misleading examples as it happens). To suggest otherwise, said Bush, Rumsfeld and Cheney in chorus, was to suggest that the “Iraqi People” were somehow inherently incapable of “freedom and democracy.” That was to be condescending and colonialist. Everyone everywhere wanted these benefits, and only wicked regimes prevented them from realizing these universal human goals, towards which, we must not forget, mankind was inevitably evolving anyway.

I am not caricaturing this position. Those who would see the ideology as a cynical cover for the Armaments Industry, Haliburton and Big Oil interests, are missing what is truly at issue here, and what is much more frightening. The colonial powers always look out for their economic and strategic (power) interests, of course; it would be foolish of them not to. But they have also always believed in the “civilizing mission” as just as important. This was justified by religion partly—bringing Christianity to the heathen, but was also seen as an end in itself: the production of an industrial, peaceful, democratic (sometimes socialist) world.

Herbert Spencer was the chief nineteenth-century apostle of this creed. As societies evolved from military to

industrial institutions, so would peace and democracy spread around the globe. Free Trade advocates repeat it today: the more we are dependent on each other through trade, the less likely will we be to fight each other. Trade requires the rule of law, the rule of law promotes democracy, and democracies don’t fight each other... We know the logic. The White House Warriors, with Wolfowitz at the helm, are caught in this same chain of reasoning. President Bush’s second inaugural spelled it out. One British newspaper announced: BUSH THREATENS WORLD WITH FREEDOM. This is the fundamental belief of the missionaries. We have a precious gift that we can give the nations of the world, and whether they want it or not, we are going to give it to them. If they think they don’t want it, then they must be re-educated, with force if necessary, to realize that they do. History is going to end in universal liberal democracy (Hegel is God and Fukuyama is his prophet) so they might as well learn to cooperate with the inevitable.

The problem for Euro-American liberal/radical critics of Bushism is that they really believe this too. It is no longer fashionable to think that some form of communism or socialism will be the inevitable end product, except among the remaining lumpen Marxists in the universities. But some kind of democratic open society is seen as the only alternative for the de-colonized peoples of the world. It is hard to find any fervent post-colonialist who will agree that having thrown off the imperial yoke the ex-colonial peoples should be free to choose dictatorship, theocracy, tribalism, nepotism, clitoridectomy or the rule of warlords. Respect for “indigenous cultures” goes only so far. The left-liberals assume as fervently as the Bushites that people everywhere really aspire to a state of liberal democratic polity where human rights and the rights of women will be assured, and tolerance and religious freedom will be institutionalized. It is their constant embarrassment that this doesn’t happen, and fifty years later the excuse that the failure lies in the pernicious after-effects of colonialism is wearing thin; they do not really believe it themselves (they have substituted neo-colonialism or neo-liberalism or globalization or transnational corporations or...) But the alternative is hard to bear for the progressive mentality that assumes we can indeed write our own script and exclude all those factors of “human nature” that seem so stubbornly to resist our enlightened blandishments. The only allowable fact of “human nature” accepted to by right, left and center alike is the rather vague “love of freedom.” This might well be true, but we all then eagerly assume that given free choice “they” will opt for a form of freedom we recognize and approve of, namely one leading to the liberal democratic institutions we have fought so hard to develop, protect and preserve.

Against this naïve optimism of the missionaries of whatever stripe, we can set an opposing view that is

historical and what we might call naturalistic. It sees that the institutions we so prize are not the *product of* a freedom-loving human nature but the result of many centuries of hard effort to *overcome* human nature. However desirable they may be, they are not natural to us. We maintain them with constant vigilance and the support of hard-won economic, political, legal and social structures that give them a chance. These have taken literally thousands of years to put in place. In England universal suffrage had to wait until 1928 when women under thirty were finally included. In the US it was only after the Voting Rights Act of 1965 that we can be said to have achieved true democracy. Again in England it was not until 1688, after a bitter civil-religious war and a period of hard totalitarianism, that we were able to set up a system whereby political factions could compete for votes and, most amazingly, the losers would voluntarily cede power. This was possible then under the umbrella of a constitutional monarchy, and it should give pause for thought that the most stable democracies in the world are the constitutional monarchies. But far from being a fact of human nature, this voluntary ceding of power after elections, this basic feature of liberal democracy, actually flies in the face of nature. It is self-evidently absurd. Our political opponents are always disreputable and their accession to power will be the ruin of the country. Listen to the rhetoric of campaigns: it almost amounts to criminal malfeasance to allow the opponents to take over. Yet that is what we do after a mere counting of heads: cede control to the villains and incompetents.

The cynic will say that the only reason we allow this to happen is because we know that in truth there is no real difference between political parties in these systems, and so we join in a conspiracy of the willing to take turn and turn about. Even so, this willingness that we take so for granted is an amazing and unusual and a fragile thing. Ajami quotes an Arab proverb, *min al-qasr ila al-qabr*: “from the palace to the grave.” Once you have power, in the name of God and the good of the people, you keep it, and the voluntary relinquishment of power is simply seen as weakness or stupidity. Even in the USA it is only fairly recently that we have given up the idea of elections as spoil systems. And our Western democracies still struggle with nepotism and corruption whose energetic persistence should tell us something. How could we believe then that we could walk into a country like Iraq and do in a few months, or even a few years, or even several decades, what millennia had failed to evolve spontaneously? Because “the Iraqi People” like everyone “loved freedom”?

Ajami’s book, subtle, intelligent and moving as it is, makes almost painful reading. He is supportive of the removal of Saddam and the potential shake-up of the region as its bully-boy dictators quail at the sight of one of their

number on trial (and now hanged) for sins that are commonplace among them. At the same time his intimate knowledge of the country and region shows how ill-equipped it is to face the task of governing itself according to the foreigner’s model. He paints a vivid picture of the earnestness and sincerity of the attempt by American commanders, especially Gen. Petraeus, to understand and help in “reconstruction.” At the same time he sums up their situation as “bewilderment” in the face of the intransigence, as they see it, of the ungrateful natives. The old colonial administrators could have told him a few things about ungrateful natives.

For a start, there are no “Iraqi People.” The phrase should be banned as misleading and purely rhetorical. Iraq as a “nation” (like the “nation” of Kuwait) was devised by the compasses and protractors of Gertrude Bell when the British and French divided up the Middle East in 1921. We know well enough the ethnic-religious division into Kurd, Sunni and Shia. People who know very little else can rehearse that one (even if they do not really know the difference). But what is not understood is that Iraq, like the other countries of the region, still stands at a level of social evolution where the family, clan, tribe and sect command major allegiance, and the idea of the individual autonomous voter, necessary and commonplace in our own systems, is totally foreign, and would not make sense to the “average Ahmed.”

I received a call in 2003 from a *New York Times* reporter, John Tierney, who was baffled by what he discovered in his Baghdad hotel. Each week there was a lavish wedding in the hotel dining room and ballroom. It looked very Western, until he discovered that the bride and groom were inevitably cousins, and more than that they were mostly paternal parallel first cousins, as the jargon has it. In English: they were the children of two brothers, and if they were not that close, then the bride was usually from the same clan/tribe as the groom. Occasionally a woman from the mother’s paternal clan was married, as in the case of Saddam Hussein. When questioned about this, the young people told the reporter, “Of course we marry a cousin. What would you have us do, marry a stranger? We cannot trust strangers.” Such a system of close cousin marriage, the commonest form of preferred marriage in Arab society, literally keeps the marriage in the family. This goes to the heart of the matter. These groups are inward looking and suspicious of strangers. It is the “mafia solution” to life: never go against the family. Trust is only possible, ultimately, between close relatives, and preferably those of the paternal clan. The idea of voluntarily doing anything for strangers (non-kin) has to be worked at. It is another of those things we in Western democracies do every day without thought: it is “human nature” for us. We give large sums of our money to complete strangers to distribute to

other strangers for purposes often unknown to us. This is taxation. It is everywhere hated, but absolutely necessary to run a complex society. We trust strangers to do things absolutely essential to our lives and welfare (Fukuyama, to his credit, has recognized how fundamental this is). We take it for granted they will do them: they are doing their jobs. But this is as foreign to much of the world as our odd acceptance of the relinquishment of power. And to that same world it borders on the immoral as well as the insane. In those places where the state cannot be trusted with the welfare of individuals, they turn to the older and wiser certainty of kinship, to the clan and the tribe.

The history of sociology is a history of our concern with the massive transformation of society that was involved in the shift away from the kinship-dominated, religiously integrated, tight community. Spencer (military to industrial) we have mentioned, but the transition was central to the thinking of Tönnies (*gemeinschaft*-community to *gesellschaft*-association), Maine (status to contract), Durkheim (mechanical to organic), Redfield (folk to urban), Marx (pre-industrial to capitalist), Morgan (gentile to political), Popper (closed to open), Dumont (collectivism to individualism), Parsons (particularistic to universalistic) and above all Weber (traditional to rational, with a big push from the Protestant Ethic). And while all were ambivalent about what was lost and what was gained by the transition, all agreed that it was inevitable, if often savagely painful. The whole of “development” sociology was about helping “the undeveloped world” (which later became “the third world”) over the hump. Weber most clearly saw that charismatic leadership (“rooted in biology”) was always there in the wings, ready to return us from the fragile rational–legal and bureaucratic state to the more natural condition of traditional authority and the patrimonial, status-governed, kinship-theocratic condition from which we emerged. Only Tönnies perhaps saw that the tribal “community” was radically natural: the default system of human social nature, and therefore the one that was literally the most “attractive.”

If in the West it took us two millennia to emerge from this default system, and if we have only partly succeeded, why do we think the Arabs can do it, or should want to do it, out of enlightened self-interest more or less overnight (in historical terms)? When it doesn't work we are “bewildered.” The hospitals in Baghdad were up and running except that there was no electricity. And the main reason was that as soon as copper wire was laid to connect them, the Iraqis came out in the night and stole it. Copper brought a good price. When the troops expostulated with those caught and tried to make them see that their theft was against “the Iraqi People”—the indignant thieves demanded to know who these “Iraqi People” were who got between them and the feeding of their starving families and relatives.

They were not responsible for some mythical Iraqi People, but for their kin: their cousins who were their spouses. The few ambulances in Baghdad cannot function properly to get the injured from bombings to the hospitals. The armed clansmen of the injured commandeer the ambulances and turn out the unrelated wounded. Often firefights break out between armed groups competing for the ambulances (these are my examples not Ajami's). Remember the graphic scene in *Lawrence of Arabia* where the tribal chief Aouda (Anthony Quinn) is told he should join in the attack on the Turks in Aqaba for the sake of “the Arabs.” “Who are these Arabs?” he asks. He recites the tribes he knows, but demands to know what tribe is “the Arabs” that he should sacrifice for them. “The English” he understands as a tribe he can ally with against his enemies, including the Turks if it suits him. Thus some of the sheiks in Anbar province will ally with the Americans against Al Qaeda and its allies if it suits them. But their and Aouda's sole concern is with their tribal advantage. This was Aouda's highest moral imperative. And Aouda loved freedom above all other things.

If the tribal “mentality” we are dealing with is closer to the default system of human nature than is our cherished individualistic democracy, then we ignore its appeal at our peril. The marriage of close cousins may appear to us backward, unhygienic or immoral, but it is the pattern that has dominated the world until fairly recently in historical terms. If we could get into God's memory we would find that ninety percent of marriages have been with close cousins. Most of these however have been “exogamic” in that they have been with cousins out of one's own clan. The Arab custom of marrying paternal parallel cousins, however, produces closed kinship groups that lack the wider social ties that can result from exogamic (out-marrying) rules. Ajami describes the “small number of clans around Saddam Hussein, closed off from the rest of the country by intermarriage and inbreeding.” At one time Saddam banned the use of tribal surnames. This might appear puzzling, but it was because most of his government was filled with his own tribe, and the surname *al-Tikriti* betrayed this too obviously. There are, we are told, some 23 or 24 “militias” in Baghdad. No one thinks to add “tribal” to militias. Warfare continues in the supposedly “pacified” southern Basra province, which is overwhelmingly Shiite and so lacks the sectarian component. The fight there is for power between the Shia tribes (read “militias”) and the criminal gangs formed around various clans. Again these will either use or attack the British troops as it suits them. The British have largely given up on certain tight tribal areas and concentrate on trying to seal the border with Iran (unsuccessfully). They are now planning to leave and are being congratulated by Washington on a mission completed.

In the West we had to move from tribalism, through empire, feudalism, mercantile capitalism and the industrial

revolution to reach our present state of fragile democracy (shrugging off communism and fascism along the way). We were helped in the shedding of dominant kinship groups by the relative individualism of the Angles and Saxons with their emphasis on the independent nuclear family, and then by Christian monogamy and the banning of cousin marriages by the church. And we had to do it by our own efforts, pull ourselves up by the social bootstraps, to make it stick. We have seen in Germany, in Italy and in Spain how fragile this really is. Russia never did make it. France is always problematic. Latin America and The Balkans continue to be a mess. But in making this move we had to change the entire particularistic, communalistic, ritualistic, kin-dominated society that is natural to us. We had to make “nepotism” and “corruption” from tribal virtues into criminal offenses, and we have to keep at it all the time. I live in New Jersey and I stare into the pit.

Does this mean we should not make the attempt? Absolutely not. The best of the colonial regimes left at least part of their legacy that was accepted and still more or less works in some places. India is a prime example. So is the West Indies. In Africa Kenya and South Africa have struggled but survive. In all these cases there has had to be accommodation between the stubborn tendencies of our tribal human nature and the demands of unnatural democracy, but it is reached. The very diversity of India seems to help in that the democratic parliament and the English language (and perhaps cricket) are the only things that hold it together. Even so the political class in Indian is heavily criminalized, and the country is scarcely a model of liberal democracy in most other ways. So what makes us think we can expect to transform Iraq and the so-called Iraqi People into clones of our democratic selves overnight, particularly as an occupying force? We gave them ballot boxes and they voted almost entirely on tribal and sectarian lines: they voted as they were told to vote—or in the case of the Sunnis originally as they were told not to vote. The Kurds have a virtually independent state that we keep quiet about. It refuses to fly the Iraqi “national” flag and patrols its own borders with its own army. We set up “national” police and a “national” army and both have been infiltrated by tribal and sectarian militias. Army units recruited in the provinces are unwilling to leave their tribal areas to move into dangerous Baghdad. We set up a “unity government” that was inevitably Shia dominated and riddled with corruption. Under Bremer and the “provisional authority” Ajami reports, precious funds needed to equip and pay the troops and police simply disappeared. Prime Minister Allawi admitted: “There was no auditing. Airplanes were flying in and the money out in suitcases.” Once the “Iraqi People” were liberated, they looted everything in sight, and once there was a public purse in place, they looted that. They were providing for their families and clans with what was

there. What is there is there to be exploited *now*. There is little sense of a public good, no collective deferred gratification. The future is hypothetical.

Ajami would attribute this to the brutalizing (in the correct sense) of the people by the Baath regime. It is partly that; it is also inherent in the pre-democratic condition of the state, which can only hold together through common national beliefs and rituals (which it does not have in this case) or by force, or both. The British in their brief tutelage of Mesopotamia, stuck by indirect rule. They left the aristocracy and tribal leaders and the social hierarchy in place, together with the “old habits of ethnic and religious accommodation” which, Ajami declares, characterized their traditional dealings at their best. The British, who also wanted the nation they cobbled together out of three provinces of the defeated Ottoman empire to be a model for the region, gave it a more-or-less constitutional monarch from outside (Faisal the Hashemite) as a focus of loyalty. In 1958 his son and successor, and the royal family were slaughtered, and the tribal thugs from Tikrit and Mosul, took over. In all this the Shia resisted, revolted, and suffered massively, most recently when they were deserted by Bush senior and the allies after the Gulf War: a betrayal they have not forgotten and that echoes through all their dealings with the Americans.

Ajami is at his best describing Arab attitudes, particularly those of the Shia. The great puzzlement of the US liberators was why there was not immediate gratitude and total cooperation from the Shia. But Ajami insists that anti-Americanism will always trump gratitude. Thus the Shia Hezbollah in Lebanon supported Saddam against their sectarian brothers in Iraq, because he was anti-Israel/America. In general the Arabs supported the evil regime of Saddam particularly in his war against “the Persians.” That they could not deal with it themselves, and that the foreigners (read Americans) had to come in to clear it out, only added to Arab “humiliation.” This, along with “anger”—which seems to justify any excess, is their favorite word. Thus the Shia in Lebanon originally welcomed the Israeli ouster of the tyrannical (Sunnite) PLO, but soon turned on their liberators and Hezbollah was born. Wars of liberation have a short shelf life. There is a serious limitation to the gratitude of the liberated. The “freed” Shia in Iraq must avoid the taint of collaboration with the infidels to keep their credit with the other Arabs and Muslims generally. They can use the infidels to consolidate their new grip on power, but “there can be no Shia Trojan Horse for the Pax Americana.”

The complications are endless and ultimately absolutely frustrating. Ajami is excellent at describing the convolutions of Arab thinking and the despair it causes the strangers, who can only see it as “shiftiness” or “deception.” Deception is synonymous with diplomacy for Arab

and Persian alike. Confuse and deceive your enemy. This is the aim of the game. The Persians are playing it beautifully with their nuclear strategy, and we are shocked, shocked to find they have been “lying.” The Sunni–Shia divide, we are painfully learning, goes deeper into Muslim history than the Catholic–Protestant in our own. When students ask about the sectarian dispute I tell them: “think Catholic versus Protestant at the height of the Wars of Religion.” The President tells us that what we are *really* fighting are the “terrorists” in Iraq—specifically Al-Qaeda. There were no Al-Qaeda terrorists in Iraq, of course, before the invasion. If they are there now it is because we gave them this golden opportunity. “Bring ‘em on!”

But are they there specifically to do harm to our way of life and our precious freedoms? Perhaps, but this is not their more immediate aim. They are there to kill “heretics”—the Shia, the allies of the hated Persians, the new upstarts who threaten the long-established Sunni dominance. If they can do damage to the Americans in the process, well and good, but their target is the heretics. A chilling letter from Abu Musab al-Zarqawi to Osama bin Laden was intercepted. Ajami writes: “The letter was remarkable for its brutal candor: the jihadist was pleading for help from ‘the battlefields of Iraq.’ He had victories and accomplishments to report, ‘martyrdom operations’ he had overseen, prepared and planned throughout the country. ‘Praise be to Allah I have completed 25 of these operations, some of them against the Shia and their leaders, the Americans and their military, and the coalition forces.’ But he was at work in a difficult land, a ‘political mosaic’ of races and ethnicities. The Americans were there but there were ‘apostates within,’ there were Shia and Kurds scheming with the Americans, and there were the Sunnis of the land, like ‘orphans at the dining tables of the wicked,’ lost and divided among themselves. It was at knife’s edge in Iraq, Zarqawi wrote: the infidels were taking heavy losses, but the Shia heretics, ‘cowardly and deceitful’ were ‘the real danger,’ ‘the enemies of God’ killing ‘the people of Islam in the name of law and in the name of order.’” The letter goes along in the same vein and concludes: “People follow the religion of kings: their hearts may be with you but their swords are with the powers.” Ajami describes that for Al Qaeda: “This is why a sectarian war against the Shia “*rafida*” (refusers of Islam) was the way out for the holy warriors.”

In “freeing the Iraqi People” what we did was effectively to free the Shia. In giving the Iraqi people free elections we put the Shia in power. In dethroning the Sunni we started an insurgency. The insurgency gave cover to foreign terrorists—notably Al-Qaeda. The anti-Shia violence of the terror squads gave rise to a sectarian war. We are told we must have “victory” against an “enemy” or we will be creating a safe haven for the “terrorists” who will then attack us in our homeland. If we truly want rid of Al-Qaeda in Iraq, then

logically we should back our allies the Shia, let them defeat the Sunni, and let their Mahdi Army make short work of Al-Qaeda, which it would (there is no way this would be a final solution since Saudi Arabia would continue to support the Sunnis, Iran the Shia, and the mess would continue). But our leaders are not interested in the logic of the situation. They want to defeat everybody in order to save them all for freedom and democracy.

Anyone who thinks there is any kind of straightforward answer by way of a “surge” in American forces, or a strengthening of the “national unity government,” or a pouring in of more aid to alleviate unemployment, or any other “gifts” should read Ajami—not only this book but his other works like *The Dream Palace of the Arabs* on the failure of pan-Arab nationalism and socialism. And they should do this particularly because Ajami remains sympathetic with the attempt to change the face of the area and produce something like a decent democracy there. No one knows the Arab intellectuals better, or interprets their ambivalence and delusional natures with more skill. But like all the progressives of both right and left, he sees the world in his own progressive image, and so fails, as they do, to admit the power of the primordial attraction of the kin-based *gemeinschaft*, and of charisma (the next man with a mustache,) and of theocratic certainty, and of the grim stability these provide. The only reason our own numerous and stern religious fanatics do not force their own theocracy on us, is because we do not let them—so far.

The old formula of: “no bourgeoisie, no democracy” still holds. What small middle class there was in Iraq, with its need for the rule of law to guarantee contracts, was destroyed by Saddam’s criminal enterprise. It is not something we can recreate with any amount of aid or surges, nor can we force it upon “the Iraqi People” (the Kurds are sitting it out waiting for the result — if the Turks do not move in first). The price of failure, says the President, is too high. But failure was written all over this enterprise from the start. The goals set, beyond the toppling of Saddam, were impossible, and the real mystery is why our leaders ever thought they could be achieved. The administration may, by increased force and bribery (the Iraqi People understand both very well), patch up some kind of “order” for a while. But they cannot create the whole civil infrastructure and the sea change of values and attitudes that underpin a working liberal democracy. To do that you have to turn tribesmen into citizens.

These White House children of the Protestant Ethic should understand how hard won is the open society we live in, how much it is the work of centuries of struggle and suffering, how fragile it is, and how *we had to do it for ourselves*. Our fundamentalist Islamic opponents have on their side the atavistic attractions of the closed society, and we should take them at least as seriously as they take us.

Before we try to make them over into our image, we should remember how unnervingly recent was our own makeover, and act with becoming humility and caution. A helping hand here and there may not be amiss, but we should never be surprised at the rejection of the foreigner's gift.

I told my Lebanese in-laws, who are Maronite Christians, that I was much impressed by a book written by a fellow Lebanese, Fouad Ajami. "Ajami?" they said, "Is he a Muslim? Where was he born?" In West Beirut, I told them, but he's really pretty secular. He's lived in the US for many

years; he's a professor at Johns Hopkins. "He's a Muslim," they said, and there was no more discussion.

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