

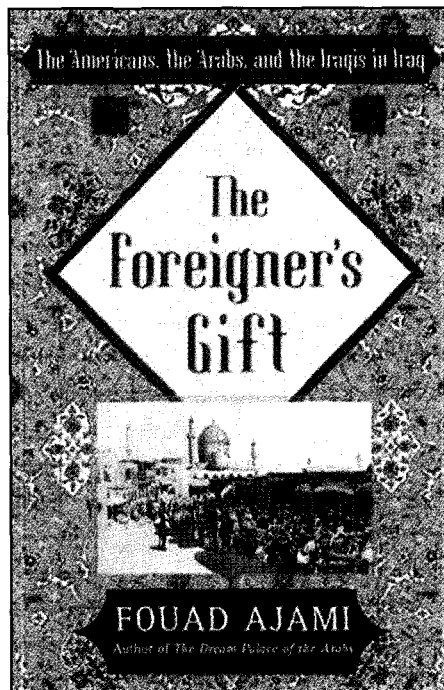
# The Gift That Keeps on Spinning

**Fouad Ajami predicted that American troops would be welcomed as liberators. You would never guess from his new book.**

By Christian Caryl

The promise and the predicament of Fouad Ajami's new book are neatly encapsulated in one of its opening scenes. It is the summer of 2005, and a friend of the author's, a minister in the transition government of Iraq, has invited Ajami along with him to an audience with the most influential man in the country: Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani. Most Americans couldn't pick Sistani out of a police line-up, much less describe his role. And yet, as Ajami rightly argues, it is Sistani—more than any terrorist, military commander, or elected politician in the country—who has used his power to decide the fate of Iraq at several critical junctures over the past three years.

Sistani is a jurist, an authority on Islamic law who runs the prestigious seminary in the holy city of Najaf. In his role as a *marja al-taqlid*, a "source of emulation," he is a living exemplar of the spiritual values that almost every Iraqi Shiite holds dear. That means that he commands the passionate loyalty of the majority of Iraq's population (most of whom, of course, are Shiites). And yet he has never sought out the media or courted the crowd. As Ajami writes, "I was not prepared for the simplicity of Sistani's house; it was a few steps removed from the shops, in the middle of an ordinary alleyway." Inside, the furniture seems to consist primarily of floor cushions; there is no air conditioning, quite a significant omission in those parts. Finally the Grand Ayatollah makes his appearance, strikingly affable in contrast to the severe public countenance that stares out of posters around



## The Foreigner's Gift

By Fouad Ajami  
Free Press, \$26.00

the country. But he gets straight to the point with his visitors: "The country was in the throes of a decisive fight over a new constitution," writes Ajami, "and Sistani's message to the man of the government was unambiguous. 'I want you to do everything you can to bring our Sunni Arab brothers into the fold.'" Sistani then presses for a change in the election laws to ensure that the Sunnis are given a greater share of power. "You are the elected government; the people voted for you; they went to the polls under mortar rounds."

It's a remarkable encounter, and

Ajami's account of it shows him at his best—the American public intellectual uniquely equipped, by background and learning, to explain the intricacies of Arab politics to American readers. The offspring of a prominent Lebanese Shiite family, Ajami is a member of the Council on Foreign Relations, the editorial board of *Foreign Affairs*, and the Johns Hopkins School for Advanced International Studies. He is also well-entrenched in the mainstream media, as a commentator for *U.S. News & World Report* and CBS, and as a frequent contributor to the op-ed pages. As for this book, *The Foreigner's Gift* is his account of six trips he has taken to Iraq since the beginning of the occupation. Ajami's aim here is to limn the ambiguities and contradictions of "American Iraq," that extraordinary experiment in "liberal imperialism" in the Middle East that began in the spring of 2003. It should be said that he often delivers. He has an enviable gift for charting those invisible lines of clan, tribe, and faction that structure the Arabic-speaking world. His chapter on the feuds and alliances among the great Shiite families of Iraq should be required reading for all American soldiers and policy-makers.

And yet, rather more importantly, this book reveals itself to be a remarkable study in schizophrenia, one that mingles blindness and acuity, clarity and obfuscation in almost equal measure. Ajami has the capacity to tell us some very important truths about Iraq because he is so intimately familiar with many of the political and cultural currents that lie beneath the country's bloody turmoil. But he also happens to be deeply and personally implicated in the policies he's describing—though you could easily

read this entire book without ever figuring it out.

Just take that Iraqi government minister, the friend who brings Ajami along on the visit to Sistani. His name is Ahmad Chalabi. Yes, exactly, that Ahmad Chalabi. His is a persistent presence in this book, and at one point rather far into the narrative Ajami presents us with a long and eloquent defense of the man who made a name for himself as the Pentagon's favorite Iraqi. That Ajami feels such sympathy with the head of the Iraqi National Congress (INC) should not come entirely as a surprise. Chalabi, like Ajami, is the scion of Shia notables in his homeland who ended up making it big in America.

Still, if there's one thing that the story of the Iraq war should have made manifest by now, it's that Ahmad Chalabi is a deeply problematic figure on multiple levels—to the extent that it's a bit hard to know where to begin. When I was reporting from Iraq in 2003, the only name I heard locals use for Chalabi was "Ahmad the Thief." It was a nickname motivated by the speed with which his INC cronies moved to take over choice real estate and business concessions as soon as they were installed in Baghdad with the help of the American invaders. Various polls have determined that Chalabi has some of the lowest popularity ratings of any politician in Iraq, and he was not reelected to parliament in last year's elections.

Ajami doesn't seem to be aware of any of this, though. To him, Chalabi is merely tragically misunderstood, a noble patriot dropped by the Americans like a hot potato in the summer of 2004 when they realized that he wouldn't do their bidding.

Chalabi's enemies in the U.S. government have accused him of spying for the Iranians; to Ajami this is mere carping. "These charges were odd: Iran was next door, and a factor in the political life of Iraq," he writes. He's similarly dismissive of the scandal involving Chalabi's monumental bank failure in Jordan in the 1980s. (Chalabi was forced to quit the country and was tried in absentia for fraud and embezzlement.) Ajami insists that it was all just a Sunni plot, staged by Jordan's Hashemite rulers at a time when they were especial-

ly cozy with Saddam. (Never mind that the scandal turned up hundreds of millions of dollars in unsecured loans, and encompassed banks in Lebanon and Switzerland as well as Jordan—all convincingly documented in a piece by my *Newsweek* colleagues in May 2003.) And Ajami almost completely dismisses the most damning charges against Chalabi: that he and his INC colleagues purveyed faulty and fabricated stories of Saddam's WMD program to reporters, U.S. intelligence agencies, and decision-makers in the White House.

Of course, addressing these issues in a more critical spirit would expose Ajami himself, for he, too, played an important role in making the case for the war. It was Ajami's authority that Dick Cheney chose to cite in a speech in August 2002: "As for the reaction of the Arab 'street,' the Middle East expert Professor Fouad Ajami predicts that after liberation, the streets in Basra and Baghdad are 'sure to erupt in joy in the same way the throngs in Kabul greeted the Americans.'" A few months later, in the January 2003 issue of *Foreign Affairs*, Ajami laid out an eloquent case for coercive democratization in the Middle East. "Above and beyond toppling the regime of Saddam Hussein and dismantling its deadly weapons," he wrote, "the driving motivation of a new American endeavor in Iraq and in neighboring Arab lands should be modernizing the Arab world."

Most of what I read in this book suggests that Ajami still believes that that is a worthy cause, and that the bloody grind of the Iraqi insurgency is still far from consigning that dream to the grave. But that's just my guess. Nowhere in this book do we learn whether Ajami's earlier hopes have been changed, defeated, or strengthened by what he has found on the ground in Iraq; he is happy to focus his discerning gaze on the odd bystander, but he never deigns to turn it on himself. His guise throughout the book is that of the sharp-eyed observer—remote, patrician, often tangibly saddened, at times a bit bemused. You'd never guess that he's actually a player as well.

And that has all-too-obvious implications for the project at hand. When the

talk turns to that faulty intelligence on weapons of mass destruction, for example, Ajami's analytical rigor yields to a sort of shoulder-shrugging diffidence. "The Iraq campaign had entered a difficult stretch; the hunt for weapons of mass destruction had proved futile." As someone who argued the case for removing Saddam's tyranny even before it became clear that the weapons didn't exist, Ajami might argue that the allegations of a Bush administration bait-and-switch regarding the motivation for war don't really apply to him. But, again, we can only assume that this is the case. When Ajami touches upon the issue, his normally vigorous prose style suddenly dissolves into vagueness: "There is no marker, no exact turning point, that can with hindsight tell us when the war in Iraq turned into a campaign for the wider reform of the Arab world....In one plausible line of reasoning, the Wilsonianism had come to the fore when the hunt for weapons of mass destruction had run aground. The war, and its sacrifices, had to be justified...." Whew. That cynical turn to Wilsonianism—thank goodness Ajami didn't have anything to do with it. The inability to attribute precise agency here is all the more striking in an author who is constantly excoriating the Arabs for their failure to accept responsibility for their actions.

About those Arabs, by the way. Ajami has always been a harsh vivisectionist of Arab pathologies, and especially when the Arabs in question are Sunni. Not that there's anything wrong with that; the dysfunctional Arab establishment is largely a Sunni one, after all. (I particularly enjoyed his portrait of Sunni religious scholar Yusuf al-Qaradawi, who inveighs against the infidels even though his children have all studied at British and American universities. "Qaradawi partook of the modern world but agitated against it," as Ajami notes with characteristic acerbity.) But there are moments in this book when his fatalism about "Araby" (as he likes to call it) becomes rather disconcerting—which is saying a lot. "There was little that a foreign power could do to reach that impenetrable core of beliefs; there were no hearts and minds in Araby to be won for this American campaign and no way

of convincing an appreciable body of opinion in the Arab world of the justness of this campaign." The Americans, for their part, can do virtually no wrong. Even the most egregious failings—such as the criminal nonchalance with which the Bush administration prepared for the occupation—earn but a few throw-away lines, usually related second-hand. Perhaps Ajami has been reading too much Henry James. There is much melancholy talk of American innocence in the face of Arab moral depravity and Machiavellian maneuvering. The Americans, as Ajami puts it, are the latest in a series of would-be imperial conquerors to capture the commanding heights of an Arab territory, only to be defeated by the locals' capacity for intrigue. "For centuries, its [the Arab world's] ramparts may have been woefully inadequate and its people unable to ward off foreign armies, but its alleyways have always been bewildering to strangers from afar."

In this telling, if the experiment of American Iraq ends in failure, it won't be because it was wrongheaded and doomed from the start, or because the Bush administration shoved aside the vast State Department prewar plans and stocked the occupation authority with hapless greenhorns from the Texas Republican party. It will be because of Arab intransigence, and the inability of the (Sunni) Arab establishment to understand that an American military presence smack-dab in the center of the Middle East is the best thing that could have happened to it. And it certainly won't be because experts like Ajami predicted that the locals would welcome the invaders as liberators and friends (conveniently allowing policy-makers to assume that the occupation would be short and bloodless even while relying on a minimum of troops). In that sense, perhaps, it is not only the American generals and proconsuls who are trapped in the alleyways of Mesopotamia. Perhaps I am being overly cynical, but I was left with the feeling that Ajami is already working on an exit strategy of his own.

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# An historian's tale

## Richard Hofstadter and the rise and fall of American liberalism.

By Jacob Heilbrunn

A biography of a historian seems fated, more often than not, to be a rather boring affair. Unless the historian has played a leading role in great events, it's hard to imagine what even the most diligent biographer can uncover. That his subject read a lot of books, took copious notes, visited libraries and archives, and sat behind a desk, or, these days, computer screen, for a good part of the day?

Somehow David S. Brown has surmounted these obstacles to produce a biography of Richard Hofstadter, the historian and author (*The Paranoid Style in American Politics, Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*), that is not only a revelation, but also a fascinating read. Brown, an associate professor of history at Elizabethtown College, has written an account worthy of Hofstadter himself: wry, humane, and illuminating. In *Richard Hofstadter: An Intellectual Biography*, Brown perceptively uses Hofstadter's life as a lens through which to view the rise and fall of liberalism. It becomes clear from this book that Hofstadter, was the first great historian of American conservatism, understanding like few on the left, the grievances that have always animated America's right wing. Indeed, his writings eerily presaged the ascendance of the far right in America well before George W. Bush came to power.

One of the most renowned historians of the past century, Hofstadter



### Richard Hofstadter: An Intellectual Biography

By David S. Brown  
University of Chicago, \$27.50

taught for much of his life at Columbia University where he twice won the Pulitzer Prize for his writings on American history and politics. Hofstadter was born in Buffalo, N.Y., in 1916, to a Polish-Jewish father and his German-Lutheran wife. His mother died when he was a little boy, a trauma that left a permanent mark on him; Hofstadter's son, Dan, later described him as a "cheerful melancholic." Hofstadter, as he would do later on when his first wife died, plunged into his

work, becoming class president and valedictorian in high school. During his years at the University of Buffalo, Hofstadter dabbled in radical politics. His energetic and charismatic girlfriend and future wife, Felice Swados, was a staunch leftist. As a graduate student at Columbia during the Great Depression, he attended meetings of the Young Communist League with her: "While Felice's commitment to party discipline led her to the edge of intellectual surrender," writes Brown, "Hofstadter's radicalism was of a more cerebral, critical, and pessimistic kind." Still, Hofstadter joined the Columbia graduate unit of the CP for a few months, abandoning it in February 1939 out of repugnance for the Moscow show trials. Hofstadter's first tussles against anti-intellectualism, Brown observes, were against the left. Indeed, Hofstadter was anything but a fan of the New Deal, which he, like many on the left, viewed as a poor substitute for sweeping reforms that would directly attack powerful industrialists. According to Brown, Hofstadter's "most visceral memories were of the weaknesses and inconsistencies of the old liberalism; its failure to end the Depression, contain fascism, condemn racism, or develop a productive intellectual system to counter native veneration for the yeoman and frontier."

Hofstadter, who landed a job at the University of Maryland during World War II, was determined to write his way into the big time. And he did. The books and essays poured forth from his typewriter. Like many successful academics, Hofstadter knew that it took a ritualized schedule that was never deviated from to crank out the necessary words. All his life, Hofstadter followed it. He published a critique of Social Darwinism at age 28 that was well-received; but it was his first whack at the struts of the Progressive school, in his wildly popular *The American Political Tradition*, that made his name. Pungent, whimsical, and searching, it consisted of a collection of 10 biographical sketches

of notable Americans from Jefferson to FDR, along with group portraits of the Founding Fathers and the robber-barons of the 1920's. Hofstadter dispensed with the pieties of earlier generations and depicted flesh-and-blood human beings whose motives were sometimes less than lofty. Never much interested in archival research, Hofstadter offered something else—lively prose, irreverent asides, and sweeping judgments. He had a special flair for bringing characters to life, portraying Theodore Roosevelt as a kind of closet fascist who wanted "stern dedication to nationalism, martial values, and a common spirit of racial identity and destiny," writes Brown. Lincoln was as much opportunist as great emancipator. Jefferson an egalitarian? In truth, he was an aristocrat. Or was he? Where Hofstadter was concerned, reputations existed to be overturned, but it was a necessary corrective to decades of pious historical interpretations. Besides, as he himself said, he was an admirer of H.L. Mencken and wanted to infuse his writing with more than a pinch of wit and buffoonery. He did. Fifty years after its publication, *The American Political Tradition* still sells thousands of copies a year.

For all his playfulness, however, Hofstadter represented something of a serious change in the way America understood itself—he was the avatar of a new, and largely Jewish, immigrant generation that viewed populism as almost tantamount to nativism. He was, moreover, part of a new generation of historians that wasn't breaking with shibboleths of an older one—it was demolishing them. In essence, the old progressive historians like Charles Beard and Vernon Parrington had romanticized the Populists as noble agricultural workers standing up to industry. Beard, in a kind of watered-down Marxism, was obsessed with economic forces as the motor of history. He portrayed the Founding Fathers, for example, as drafting the Constitution almost solely to protect their own

financial interests. The notion that they could have been animated by more noble aspirations was foreign to him. The Populists, for Beard and Parrington, by contrast, were unblemished heroes because they were farmers who were standing up against the avaricious plutocrats of Wall Street. Beard also opposed America's participation in World War II, accusing Franklin D. Roosevelt of tricking the United States into an unnecessary conflict. Hofstadter would have none of this. He viewed this as a hopelessly romantic and sentimental view of America's past. He saw, by contrast, that racism, anti-Semitism, and right-wing sentiments were an ineradicable part of populism. As tempting as it might be to revere the yeoman farmer, it was delusional.

Hofstadter knew of whence he spoke: The University of California history department contemplated offering Hofstadter a job, but one member wrote, "I am not yet quite sure that he is the man we want. His point of view strikes me as rather typical of the New York Jewish intelligentsia, although I do not even know that he is a Jew." Some of these older, nationalistic historians believed that Jews lacked the innate ability to comprehend Anglo-American history, just as English departments refused to accept Jewish professors because it was believed by some that they would never be able to understand the great works written by George Eliot or William Shakespeare. Mercifully, change was inevitable. Lionel Trilling had been the first Jew to win tenure in the English department at Columbia. Daniel Bell, Jacques Barzun, and Seymour Martin Lipset taught there as well. They jokingly called it "the Upper West Side Kibbutz." There never has been such a concentration of intellect at an American university and might never be again.

Hofstadter's efforts to combat obscurantism reached their high-water mark in his book *Anti-*