

# DESCENT INTO CHAOS: THE UNITED STATES AND THE FAILURE OF NATION BUILDING IN PAKISTAN, AFGHANISTAN, AND CENTRAL ASIA<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

*Six weeks before 9/11, an old Afghan friend of mine came to spend the day with me at my home in Lahore. We had lunch and then began an intense discussion that went on until the evening, without reaching a conclusion. He had come to discuss a specific problem he faced. At issue was his future, his safety, and the fate of his country, which was inextricably linked to my life as a journalist for the past twenty-three years and to the fate of my own country, Pakistan.*<sup>3</sup>

So begins Ahmed Rashid's journey into the fate of Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the Central Asian region. In his next breath, the author exposes his visiting friend as Hamid Karzai, future president of Afghanistan.<sup>4</sup> Ahmed Rashid's personal involvement in the events he portrays remains a prevalent source of information throughout his book. *Descent Into Chaos* is the fourth in a series of books by Rashid dedicated to documenting the effects of powerful nations and radical Islam on the governments and people of Central Asia.<sup>5</sup> Ahmed Rashid is a Pakistani journalist living in the midst of the events he reports.<sup>6</sup> He is often trusted by both sides of a conflict for his objectivity,<sup>7</sup> and respected by leaders within the region.<sup>8</sup>

*Descent Into Chaos* diligently portrays the complex history of central Asia and in particular Afghanistan and Pakistan, but fails to adequately address the author's overall thesis: Nation Building failed in Afghanistan because the U.S. invasion of Iraq diverted essential resources.<sup>9</sup> Ahmed Rashid provides only anecdotal evidence to support this assertion. Rashid's failure to fully develop and analyze how the Iraq war affected Afghanistan undermines the effectiveness of the book.

## Chaos, Hope, Chaos

The journey into the fate of modern central Asia begins with an understanding of the history of Pakistan and the establishment of a military dominated Islamic regime in the 1970s.<sup>10</sup> As the influence of the Soviet empire in Central Asia rapidly dissolves in the late 1980s, the rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan, and the increasing violence in Kashmir combine to create a safe haven for extremism in Afghanistan.<sup>11</sup>

In 1999, Ahmed Rashid and a collection of international scholars met with U.S. and Iranian diplomats to suggest solutions to the growing extremist threat in Afghanistan.<sup>12</sup> Without support from the Clinton administration to mobilize an international effort, the diplomatic approach faced certain failure.<sup>13</sup> In 1999, the outgoing Clinton administration addressed

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<sup>1</sup> AHMED RASHID, *DESCENT INTO CHAOS: THE UNITED STATES AND THE FAILURE OF NATION BUILDING IN PAKISTAN, AFGHANISTAN, AND CENTRAL ASIA* (2008)

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<sup>3</sup> RASHID, *supra* note 1, at 3.

<sup>4</sup> *Id.*

<sup>5</sup> Ahmed Rashid's previous works include *The Resurgence of Central Asia: Islam or Nationalism* (Zed Books 1994), *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia* (2001), and *Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia* (Penguin Books 2003).

<sup>6</sup> RASHID, *supra* note 1, at inside back cover.

<sup>7</sup> *Id.* at 10.

<sup>8</sup> *See id.* at 126, 392-93.

<sup>9</sup> *See id.* at XLI, 65, 182, 185, 194-95, 196; *see also The Charlie Rose Show: A Conversation with Ahmed Rashid* (television broadcast June 17, 2008), available at <http://www.charlierose.com/view/interview/9135>.

<sup>10</sup> *See* RASHID, *supra* note 1, at 36-39.

<sup>11</sup> *Id.* at 24-43.

<sup>12</sup> *Id.* at 54-55.

<sup>13</sup> *Id.* at 55-56.

the al Qaeda threat in Afghanistan and drafted concept papers calling for the rearmament of the Northern Alliance.<sup>14</sup> The incoming Bush administration, anxious to undermine Clinton-era foreign policy, essentially ignored the information.<sup>15</sup> The Bush administration elected to focus its foreign policy on gaining the support of Pakistan's over empowered intelligence organization, the Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate (ISI).<sup>16</sup>

On 11 September 2001, al Qaeda and Afghanistan took center stage for U.S foreign policy. Within three weeks of the 9/11 attacks, U.S. agents were already organizing Afghan Northern Alliance leaders.<sup>17</sup> By the end of 2001, new hope emerged in Afghanistan. The Taliban's defeat promised peace after decades of war.<sup>18</sup> However, that hope quickly disappeared. By early 2002, Ahmed Rashid understood "that the United States had no intentions of rebuilding Afghanistan, disillusionment set in as I saw that Iraq was the real target."<sup>19</sup>

The reconstruction of Afghanistan, both its government and its infrastructure, proved to be a herculean task. "Afghanistan had been more comprehensively destroyed after twenty-two years of continuous war than any country since World War II apart from Vietnam."<sup>20</sup> The world community called for a "Marshall Plan for Afghanistan,"<sup>21</sup> but, "the Bush neocons had simply no interest before or after the war in doing anything like this."<sup>22</sup> Without a centrally coordinated effort, aid agencies and non-governmental organizations poured money into a haphazard reconstruction effort. Fraud, waste, and duplicated efforts frustrated the reconstruction of Afghanistan.<sup>23</sup> The United States, preoccupied with Iraq, failed to provide the proper leadership during the critical stages of the reconstruction effort.<sup>24</sup>

The hunt for Bin Laden also obscured the importance of nation building in Afghanistan.<sup>25</sup> The United States sought the assistance of Afghan warlords and Pakistan's military regime to continue the hunt for Bin Laden.<sup>26</sup> United States support to these entities frustrated the establishment of a functioning central Afghan government.<sup>27</sup> With cash flowing from the CIA, warlords in remote regions, and even those working directly for Hamid Karzai, increased a feudal power base that directly subverted the Karzai government's bid to tame and rebuild the nation.<sup>28</sup> Pakistan's ISI continued to support the Taliban and spur unrest in the border areas of Northern Pakistan.<sup>29</sup> The United States simultaneously supported rogue leaders in Central Asian nations to secure real estate for military logistical operations.<sup>30</sup> United States support to warlords and duplicitous regimes directly contributed to the continued destabilization of the region. Instability provided the necessary conditions to allow al Qaeda to flourish, extremism to thrive, and the Taliban to reorganize.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> *Id.* at 56.

<sup>15</sup> *Id.*

<sup>16</sup> *Id.* at 56–57.

<sup>17</sup> *Id.* at 63.

<sup>18</sup> *Id.* at 64.

<sup>19</sup> *Id.*

<sup>20</sup> *Id.* at 171.

<sup>21</sup> *Id.* at 172.

<sup>22</sup> *Id.*

<sup>23</sup> *Id.* at 177–81.

<sup>24</sup> *Id.* at 182.

<sup>25</sup> *Id.* at 124, 125, 132.

<sup>26</sup> *Id.* at 128, 131–32.

<sup>27</sup> *Id.* at 132–33.

<sup>28</sup> *Id.*

<sup>29</sup> *Id.* at 265–87.

<sup>30</sup> *Id.* at 342–47.

<sup>31</sup> *Id.* at 384–87.

The current state of Afghanistan is a loss of the optimism and hope experienced after the defeat of the Taliban. Pakistan is experiencing severe unrest; the Taliban is reconstituted; al Qaeda continues to threaten security and peace throughout the world; and the whole of Central Asia has descended into chaos.<sup>32</sup> Rashid believes Iraq caused the descent.<sup>33</sup>

### Why Iraq? Where is Afghanistan?

Ahmed Rashid is a dedicated and courageous journalist<sup>34</sup> and a vast resource of knowledge for world leaders and anyone concerned with the future of mankind. *Descent Into Chaos* is a key hole for the reader to tap into that wealth of knowledge. The stated purpose of the book is to “attempt to define history in the making.”<sup>35</sup> *Descent Into Chaos* is a history book and a journalistic portrayal of current events, but it is also a critique of the decisions and actions of the individuals and nations creating that history.

Ahmed Rashid primarily critiques the Bush Administration and “the neocons.”<sup>36</sup> As the title portrays, the book is about how the United States failed at nation building. Unfortunately, the title and the general tone of the introduction create an initial impression that *Descent Into Chaos* is a typical and unrevealing assault against the Bush administration. Contrary to that initial impression, Ahmed Rashid presents a squarely objective, analytical, and readable portrayal of the issues facing Central Asia. However, when the author addresses the U.S. invasion of Iraq, objectivity and thorough analysis fall by the wayside.

Ahmed Rashid’s primary and overarching theme is that the Bush Administration saw Iraq as the prize and failed to recognize that stability in Afghanistan held the key to blocking the spread of radical, Islamic terrorism.<sup>37</sup> A stable Afghanistan would improve the lives of the people of central Asia and undermine the resources of al Qaeda.<sup>38</sup> The idea of Iraq diverting emphasis away from the importance of Afghanistan is not a new concept. In the 2004 presidential election campaign, “[t]he contention that the Iraq invasion was an unwise diversion in confronting terrorism [was] central to Kerry’s critique of Bush’s performance.”<sup>39</sup> Despite a broad acceptance of this thesis, *Descent Into Chaos* does not utilize the conclusion to synthesize a solution or direction for nation building in Afghanistan.

Ahmed Rashid fails to provide a framework for why and how the invasion of Iraq frustrated U.S. efforts in Afghanistan. Marvin G. Weinbaum articulates six prerequisites to nation building.<sup>40</sup> The prerequisites range from functioning government institutions to support for visionary leaders.<sup>41</sup> These prerequisites can provide a framework for mapping future efforts in Afghanistan. The invasion of Iraq cannot be undone. However, analysis of the effects of Iraq on Afghanistan can light the path for improvements in both countries. Analyzing the effects in terms of a framework similar to Dr. Weinbaum’s prerequisites more clearly identifies a future strategy for regional and world leaders.

Regardless of the framework used, the analysis should extend beyond the scope of dollar values and numbers of troops.<sup>42</sup> “Nation-building outcomes naturally result from much more than quantity of inputs. Success depends on the wisdom with

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<sup>32</sup> *Id.* at 374–404.

<sup>33</sup> *See id.* at 64–65.

<sup>34</sup> Ahmed Rashid received the 2001 Nisar Osmani Award for Courage in Journalism from the Human Rights Society of Pakistan. *See* Ahmed Rashid, *Biography*, [www.ahmedrashid.com/biography](http://www.ahmedrashid.com/biography) (last visited Mar. 26, 2009).

<sup>35</sup> *E.g.*, RASHID, *supra* note 1, at XL.

<sup>36</sup> *Id.* at 64–65.

<sup>37</sup> *See id.*

<sup>38</sup> *Id.*

<sup>39</sup> Barton Gellman & Dafna Linzer, *Afghanistan, Iraq: Two Wars Collide*, WASH. POST, Oct. 22, 2004, at A01, available at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn/A52673-2004Oct21>.

<sup>40</sup> Marvin G. Weinbaum, *Rebuilding Afghanistan: Impediments, Lessons, and Prospects*, in *NATION BUILDING: BEYOND AFGHANISTAN AND IRAQ* 126–28 (Francis Fukuyama, ed. 2006).

<sup>41</sup> *Id.*

<sup>42</sup> JAMES DOBBINS ET AL., *THE UN’S ROLE IN NATION-BUILDING: FROM THE CONGO TO IRAQ* 225 (2005).

which such resources are employed and on the susceptibility of the society in question to the changes being fostered.”<sup>43</sup> *Descent Into Chaos* does not analyze how the U.S. invasion of Iraq left the international effort in Afghanistan wanting for qualitative and quantitative U.S. resources. Ahmed Rashid states only that the Iraq invasion *had* qualitative and quantitative effects on nation building in Afghanistan.<sup>44</sup> The reader is left frustrated by U.S. policy decisions, but lacking a clear understanding of how those decisions affected a particular aspect of nation building in Afghanistan.

In support of its thesis that nation building in Afghanistan failed due to the war in Iraq, *Descent Into Chaos* discusses the loss of intelligence satellites.<sup>45</sup> The loss of the satellites to Iraq contributed to the conditions that allowed Taliban forces in southern Afghanistan to reorganize.<sup>46</sup> This is but one resource. Rashid does not address how Iraq absorbed more ambiguous resources such as public support,<sup>47</sup> attention,<sup>48</sup> and leadership.<sup>49</sup> *Descent Into Chaos* does not address how harnessing these resources would improve nation building in Central Asia nor where they should be concentrated.

Aside from the Iraq issue, *Descent Into Chaos* meticulously analyzes several aspects of the U.S. approach to Afghanistan. For instance, Ahmed Rashid is critical of continued U.S. support to Afghan warlords despite the warlord power base undermining the establishment of a legitimate Afghan central government.<sup>50</sup> During an interview on the Charlie Rose television program, Ahmed Rashid spoke candidly to this issue with a former CIA agent, Milt Beardon.<sup>51</sup> Rashid agreed in some respects with the necessity of the U.S. approach to warlords.<sup>52</sup> Rashid’s analysis exposes the shortcomings of the approach and recognizes some of the necessities.<sup>53</sup>

Ahmed Rashid also remains critical of the U.S. relationship with various dictators throughout Central Asia. In particular, the United States and Musharraf relationship is a recurring theme.<sup>54</sup> The duplicitous dealings of Musharraf and the Pakistani ISI exposed by the author call into question many of the actions taken by the United States in dealing with Pakistan.<sup>55</sup> However, *Descent Into Chaos* provides the background for the reader to analyze U.S. involvement and support to Pakistan.<sup>56</sup> Was the United States fool hardy or did U.S. support to Musharraf amount to a calculated risk in a complex, diplomatic situation? Rashid provides the information and background necessary for the reader to recognize the complexity of such a question.

Despite the lack of support for the main theme, one may safely assume that the invasion of Iraq detracted from the U.S. effort in Afghanistan. However, Ahmed Rashid’s purpose in writing *Descent Into Chaos* was not to simply criticize the United States or expose some fatal flaw in the Iraq invasion. “If we can better understand what has happened before, what has gone wrong, and what needs to go right, as this book attempts to do, then we can better face up to our collective future.”<sup>57</sup> Had *Descent Into Chaos* fully addressed how the Iraq invasion affected progress in Central Asia, the book would have produced a clearer roadmap for future international efforts in the region.

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<sup>43</sup> *Id.*

<sup>44</sup> RASHID, *supra* note 1, at 182, 185.

<sup>45</sup> *Id.* at 223, 248, 359.

<sup>46</sup> *Id.*

<sup>47</sup> *Id.* at 195.

<sup>48</sup> *Id.* at 64.

<sup>49</sup> *Id.* at 173.

<sup>50</sup> *Id.* at 125–44.

<sup>51</sup> *The Charlie Rose Show: A Conversation about Afghanistan, with Ahmed Rashid and Milt Beardon* (television broadcast Jan. 30, 2002), available at <http://www.charlierose.com/view/interview/2707>.

<sup>52</sup> *Id.*

<sup>53</sup> RASHID, *supra* note 1, at 125–44.

<sup>54</sup> *Id.* at 57–60, 236–37.

<sup>55</sup> *Id.* at 219–39.

<sup>56</sup> *Id.*

<sup>57</sup> *Id.* at 404.

## Conclusion

In *Descent Into Chaos*, Ahmed Rashid shares with the western world a concise and in depth history and analysis of Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Central Asia. Once the reader overcomes any assumptions of the book garnered from the tone of the introductory pages, Ahmed Rashid's journey into the history and recent events of this pivotal region are sure to produce a lasting impression. A deeper respect for the plight of the Afghan people and a desire to see positive changes in the U.S. approach to central Asia are inescapable results of reading this book. Despite the shortcomings of support for the overall theme, *Descent Into Chaos* provides a starting point for searching for positive solutions to the maddening situation in central Asia. *Descent Into Chaos* is essential reading for any military officer preparing to do "what needs to go right"<sup>58</sup> in Afghanistan.

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<sup>58</sup> *Id.*