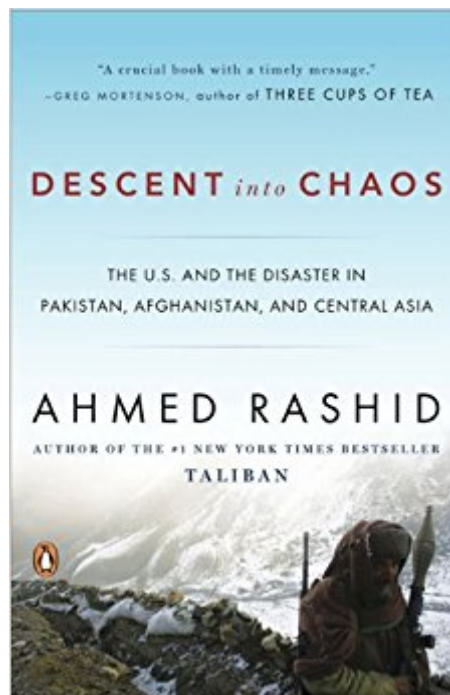




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Descent Into Chaos: The U.S. And The Disaster In Pakistan, Afghanistan, And Central Asia



Synopsis

After September 11th, Ahmed Rashid's crucial book *Taliban* introduced American readers to that now notorious regime. In this new work, he returns to Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia to review the catastrophic aftermath of America's failed war on terror. Called "Pakistan's best and bravest reporter" by Christopher Hitchens, Rashid has shown himself to be a voice of reason amid the chaos of present-day Central Asia. *Descent Into Chaos* is his blistering critique of American policy—a dire warning and an impassioned call to correct these disasterous strategies before these failing states threaten global stability and bring devastation to our world.

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Customer Reviews

Starred Review. Long overshadowed by the Iraq War, the ongoing turmoil in Afghanistan and Central Asia finally receives a searching retrospective as Rashid (*Taliban*) surveys the region to reveal a thicket of ominous threats and lost opportunities—*in Pakistan, a rickety dictatorship colludes with militants, and Afghanistan's weak government is besieged by warlords, an exploding drug economy and a powerful Taliban insurgency. The author blames the unwillingness of American policymakers to shoulder the burden of nation building. According to Rashid, the U.S. invaded Afghanistan and subsequently refused to commit the forces and money needed to rebuild it; instead the U.S. government made corrupt alliances with warlords to impose a superficial calm, while continuing to ignore the Pakistani government's support of the Taliban and the other Islamic extremists who have virtually taken over Pakistan's western provinces. With his unparalleled access to sources*—*I constantly berated [Afghan President] Karzai for his failure to understand the*

usefulness of political parties. Rashid is an authoritative guide to the region's politics and his is an insightful, at times explosive, indictment of the U.S. government's hand in the region's degeneration. (June) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to the Preloaded Digital Audio Player edition.

Pakistani journalist Rashid presciently warned about the problem of Islamic extremism in Taliban (2000), and in this work, he reviews the efforts since to defeat the fanatics. Sympathetic to the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan, he proves to be highly critical of American-led strategy since and of the role in events of Pakistani leader Pervez Musharraf. Personally acquainted with many involved in the attempted reconstruction of Afghanistan, such as its president, Hamid Karzai, Rashid covers years of international military, diplomatic, financial, and civil-affairs endeavors; in fact, the imposing quantity of information he presents makes his point: nothing tried so far has rescued Afghanistan from being a failed state. Afflicted by warlords, opium cultivation, ethnic divisions, and a resurgent Taliban, Afghanistan prompts pessimistic analysis from Rashid. He describes the support and haven that extremists in the mountainous tribal areas on the Afghan-Pakistani frontier have received from Pakistani intelligence. He then suggests that reform in Pakistan may improve matters in Afghanistan, which is indicative of the political difficulties dealt with by this well-informed current-affairs observer. --Gilbert Taylor --This text refers to the Preloaded Digital Audio Player edition.

Ahmed Rashid is a journalist, and a good one at that. He is courageous, and the reader cannot help but marvel that he has not met an "untimely end" due to his criticism of various leaders. From his base in Lahore, Pakistan he has had a vital "South-central Asian" perspective on many of the events that have become of essential importance to the United States, and to a large extent, the Western world, in the "post 9/11 era." His "beat" is Afghanistan, the five central Asian "stans," India, and his native country. His book, Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia, Second Edition, written in 2000, became essential reading for American policy makers a year later. Rashid's book is an essential compliment to Junger's book, WAR. Junger covers the combat conducted over a year's period, by one unit of the 173rd Airborne Brigade, in a remote valley near the Pakistani border. To quote Junger: "The men know Pakistan is the root of the entire war, and that is just about the only topic they get political about." Rashid covers in detail the internal political situation in Pakistan, most tellingly, the "double game" that has been played, and continues to be played by the Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate (ISI), which is Pakistan's intelligence

agency. Numerous members of the agency openly support the Taliban, while paying lip service to the Americans that they are fighting them. One of the most astonishing vignettes told by Rashid is dubbed "the Great Escape." It occurred on November 15, 2001, when there was an imposed lull in the fighting at Kunduz, so that Pakistani planes could fly in and evacuate members of the ISI, and untold number of Taliban, to Pakistan, thwarting the efforts of the United States, and the Northern Alliance, in the very early days of the ground combat in Afghanistan post 9-11. Rashid documents again and again how the American leadership turns a blind eye to the ISI's double-dealing, and continues to support General Musharraf's dictatorial rule of Pakistan, and his double-dealing with the reactionary forces of Islamic fundamentalism. But there is much else besides. Rashid knew Hamid Karzai before he became Afghanistan's current leader. He gave a concise account of his background, and the logic behind his selection by the Americans. Karzai is a Pashtun counterweight to the Northern Alliance. His coverage of "the Stans" is incisive. Each ruled by a dictator, who milk the Americans for rights to bases. Graft and corruption are the norm; the ruling elite become fabulously rich, which only helps fuel an Islamic fundamentalist backlash in each of these countries. Telling, Rashid echoes a variation of a once famous question in the American '50's: Who lost Uzbekistan? Rashid also provides vital explanations of what he terms "Al Qaeda bolt-hole," which are their sanctuaries in the Northwest frontier provinces. Is Osama Bin Laden still there? Rashid draws no definitive conclusions, but the continued lack of real interest in bringing him to justice, almost 10 years after 9/11 remains disturbing. Rashid's frequent travels to the West provide an opportunity to report on the Western leaders as well. He renders scathing indictments of the American "neo-con" leadership, Cheney, Rumsfeld et al., and how they blew a truly wonderful opportunity in Afghanistan by refusing to engage in even modest "nation building," a term anathema to them, and their almost total focus on Iraq, which created the conditions for the Taliban to become resurgent. Is imitation the sincerest form of flattery? A telling anecdote is on the author's website, easily reached via Google. George Bush, in his book "Decision Points" lifted Rashid's account (without attribution) of the meeting between Karzai and a Tajik warlord on Dec. 22, 2001. But I did have some problems with the book, and found it a bit of a slog to finish. Journalists, to generalize somewhat, seemed inclined to produce "cut and paste" books from their work. The book could use much tighter editing; for example, three times in three pages the reader is told that East Pakistan became Bangladesh in 1971. The history of Pakistan, as related in Chapter Two, has a "stream of consciousness" style about it. And there are numerous misspellings, the type that even a reasonable publisher would have caught via "spell-check." Rashid clearly has his opinions on various individuals, for example, "brutal," "corrupt", and renders them, but sometimes without

providing the reader with his basis. Another reviewer, Timothy Graczewski, calls the author out on his statements about Toyota Landcruisers travelling 150 mi/hr in the open desert. Did he mean kilometers? Doesn't matter. Anyone who has travelled in the open desert knows, that, save for perhaps the Bonneville Salt Flats in Utah, you cannot travel that fast due to the wadis, and innumerable dry water courses that would destroy the suspension on any vehicle. Overall though, a vital, essential book. It was published just before President Obama took office. With the President's increased focus on this area, including augmented troop levels, Rashid's account is more important than ever, and will almost certainly be the most comprehensive view of the area that will be available in the West. 4-stars.

Rashid's book is an in depth look at the mistakes made by the US in post-war Afghanistan. Mistake # 1 was believing that we could trust or count on the Pakistani government. It spells out in unprecedented detail how Pervez Musharraf, the Pakistani military and the Pakistani Intelligence services took the Bush administration for a ride, by being our "ally" against Al Qaeda and simultaneously supporting the Taliban. Mistake # 2: Rumsfeld's policy of buying the cooperation of Afghan warlords in the search for Al Qaeda, who as we now know had already found their way in to Pakistan. Rashid also puts into context the warlords on the US pay-roll (Wolfowitz likes to call them "regional leaders") who carved up Afghanistan and billions in reconstruction funds. He makes a compelling argument that the war lords and the US policy of buying them off was the chief obstacle to reconstruction and the establishment of government rule in Afghanistan. I think the book is overly generous and forgiving of Hamid Karzai (though Rashid makes it clear that he is a friend and admirer of Karzai on the very first page) because it never really addresses the issues surrounding the reasons that the Pashtuns viewed him as untrustworthy. Beyond being a first class journalist, Rashid is an insider's insider in this world and the book provides a level of insight and detail that only he could give.

Let me begin by saying that I liked *Descent into Chaos* by Ahmed Rashid because it provided a useful and readable of the events surrounding Pakistan and Afghanistan leading up to and post 9-11 and the United States war there. However, the book is labeled as a discussion of the failure of nation-building in Central Asia. Most of the chapters revolve around Afghanistan and Pakistan with a brief word tied in occasionally about the other countries. The point that the fates of all of these places is interconnected because they deal with many of the same problems of radical extremism, ruling corruption, and bad economic and educational conditions, but I would've wanted to hear a

little bit more about the other countries of the Central Asia regions he discusses. I was also concerned when he referred to Harmid Karzai as his good friend in the first few pages of the book that it was going to be a Karzai love piece...by taking care to criticize Karzai for failings at several points he alleviated those concerns. Overall a good book on the nuts and bolts of Afghanistan and Pakistan, but you'll need another book to dig further into the larger Central Asia region.

Ahmed Rashid, is the bravest and most talented writer/journalist I know of when it comes to Central and Southern Asia!!! He had actually been invited by the U.S. Government as an advisor. He has also meant with, and is a good friend of Hamid Karzai. I am reading Descent Into Chaos now, I am half way through; like all the other books Mr. Rashid has written... it's excellent! I would recommend this book to anyone studying international relations/studies; or anyone that wants to know what's going on in Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, and the other central Asian countries. I will be looking for new books from Mr. Rashid; I hope he keeps on writing for another twenty years! God Bless you Ahmed; you're a teacher, writer, journalist, and expert in International Studies/Relations....

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