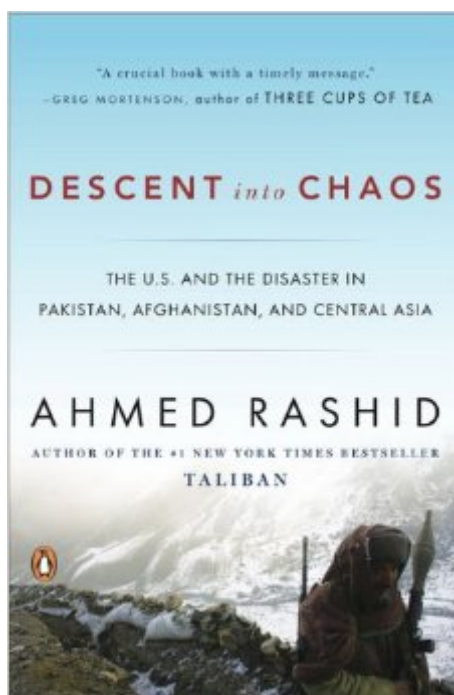


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Descent Into Chaos: The U.S. And The Disaster In Pakistan, Afghanistan, And Central Asia



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.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Ahmed Rashid has long been a leading expert on Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the Muslim states of Central Asia that were once part of the Soviet Union. In 2000, the year before 9/11, he published 'Taliban', a book which politicians rushed to read after the attack on the Twin Towers; and if Central Asia catches fire, they will doubtlessly rush to his following book, 'Jihad', first published in 2002, which is an equally authoritative account of the dangers lurking in that area. After a brilliant introduction of 21 pages, the first three chapters of the present book give the story of American involvement in Afghanistan before 9/11. The characteristic unreliability of American policy is brought out: help given to the Islamic forces and to Pakistan while the Soviets were in Afghanistan; then a total lack of interest in the period after the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, when Afghanistan was first torn apart by competing war-lords and was then overrun by the Taliban. No longer in need of Pakistan, the USA then imposed sanctions on that country because it, like India, had carried out

tests of nuclear weapons. The next 15 chapters are essentially a sequel to the author's Taliban, and chronicles in great and sometimes in dense detail, right up to early 2008, the story of Afghanistan and Pakistan after the expulsion of the Taliban at the end of 2001 and the installation of Hamid Karzai as interim President. The victory had been not only been swift (it took two months), but had also been cheap for the Americans. They had fought the campaign from the air, leaving the land fighting to the war-lords of the Northern Alliance. The Americans lost just one man killed. Karzai was installed as interim president.

As the Obama administration rolls-out an ambitious new counter-insurgency strategy in Afghanistan and Pakistan teeters on the edge of political collapse this detailed account of recent events in "the region" by the veteran Pakistani journalist Ahmed Rashid could not be more relevant. Unfortunately, it is marred by the author's biases, naïveté, and hyperbole. Although I take issue with many points in this book, Rashid's central argument is a valid one. Namely, that the US never took Afghanistan seriously after the Soviet withdrawal and consistently underestimated the threat from both the Taliban and Al Qaeda. Rashid's biggest gripe is the Bush administration's federalist "warlord strategy" for initially stabilizing Afghanistan and the lack of meaningful nation building efforts since 2001, especially after the invasion of Iraq. He is an unabashed proponent of building a strong central government in Kabul and stripping the regional ethnic bosses of their power, both military and political. But most of all Rashid is disappointed - almost personally offended - that his voluminous writings and recommendations for how to fix Afghanistan and Pakistan have been consistently "ignored" by the Americans, his presumably erstwhile friend Hamid Karzai, the hated Musharaff and his cronies, and, to a lesser extent, the international community. After the first few hundred pages, his whining self-promotion really starts to grate. More surprisingly, one gets the sense that Rashid is every bit as ignorant of realities on the ground and a prisoner of his own worldview as the Bush administration neoconservatives that he attacks with such scorn and relish.

This timely and critical book gives and experts overview of the current situation in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Uzbekistan and should serve as a wake up call for policy makers interested in the region and people interested in the threat that instability and renewed Islamism pose. Here we are walked through the current unending war in Afghanistan and given a tour of the history of the American relationship with Pakistan before the author plunges into the nitty gritty of what is taking place. The book examines both the opium crop in Afghanistan and the renewal of the Taliban and their offensives against coalition and government troops. We are given an account of the rise of

Islamism and the endurance of Al Qaeda in the tribal areas of northwest Pakistan and the coming apart of the Musharraf consensus in the wake of the death of Bhutto. As a last vignette we are taken to Uzbekistan where the author asks 'who lost this country?' In fact this last part is where 'central asia' comes into play but it should have been beefed up. Instead of one chapter detailing the problems in Uzbekistan the book should have included discussions of the rest of 'Central Asia' which appears in the subtitle. What of Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan and Tajikistan and the threats that might emerge from them? The other subtitle is the question of 'nation-building' and here we are asked to consider the 'failure' of American arms, diplomacy and money. In Pakistan it is not a question so much of failure but rather of the inability of the U.S to invade the parts of that country which have been taken over by Al Qaeda. In fact Pakistan is failing not only in the NWFP tribal areas but also in Baluchistan.

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