

BOOK REVIEW

Ahmed Rashid's 'Descent into Chaos': terrifying The 'Taliban' author's latest book details the betrayals and confusions fueling the endless war in Afghanistan By Roger Gathman

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In 2000, when Ahmed Rashid published "Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia," few Americans gave Afghanistan much thought. Though Bill Clinton had launched cruise missiles at Osama bin Laden's Afghanistan headquarters in 1998, by 2000 the issue had been so forgotten that in the foreign policy debate between Al Gore and George Bush, neither the Taliban nor al Qaeda were mentioned by the questioners or the candidates.

Rashid's ominous book fell on deaf ears. Americans weren't much interested in Afghanistan's toxic mixture of Pakistani foreign politics (Pakistan's secret police more or less created the Taliban) and Islamicist extremism. Even al Qaeda's October 2000 bombing of the U.S.S. Cole did little to disturb Americans, much less the presidential election that took place three weeks later.

Then came 9/11 and, supposedly, everything was going to be different. ("Taliban," for instance, became a best-seller more than a year after its publication.) In the aftermath of the attack, Afghanistan was invaded by the U.S. and the Taliban was thrown out. The American press celebrated this as a triumph, and compared it gleefully to the Soviet Union's record in Afghanistan. After all, the Soviets spent a decade failing to impose their will on that country. Surely the U.S. had found the magical formula — advanced military technology and good intentions — to win all wars cheaply and quickly.

The triumphal certainties of that moment have warped into the amorphous uncertainties of today, symbolized by the Schrödinger's Cat status of Osama bin Laden. Is he in Afghanistan? Is he dead? Is that him in this or that video? Both the American and Pakistan governments have seemed content to let him exist more as a useful bogeyman of the past than as a living, breathing and plotting man of the present.

Meanwhile, the war in Afghanistan continues. In the past two years, 12,000 people have died in it, as a resurgent Taliban sorties out from its bases in Pakistan to take on Hamid Karzai's government in Afghanistan. Many of the casualties are the results of American aircraft strikes. There were 2,100 air strikes in the last six months of 2006, for example.

How did we get here?
'Chaos' theory

In his new book, "Descent Into Chaos," Rashid, who seems to know everybody of note in Afghanistan and Pakistan and has upper tier sources in D.C. as well, has assembled that story in Rashomon-like fashion, traveling from one national viewpoint to another. The strong narrative theme is that the United States, Pakistan and Afghanistan — each led by a stubborn man trapped in his own bubble — have strategized with little regard for each other in pursuit of incongruous goals. The Bush administration, after December 2001, wanted nothing more than to put Afghanistan on the back burner as it ramped up to invade Iraq. The people of Afghanistan, after suffering under the Taliban for years, wanted freedom, but they also wanted to make a living — and the only Afghani export product that has a real international demand is heroin. Pakistan, under General Pervez Musharraf, was playing the deepest game; its real concern is always to stymie its perceived rival, India.

And so, for seven years, these nations, ostensibly friendly, have double-crossed each other and sent conflicting messages. Meanwhile, the Taliban, which regrouped in Pakistan just over the border from Afghanistan, has regained power as the U.S. loses interest.

The trouble began in the early phase of the war the press celebrated, back in 2001. Osama bin Laden's escape from Tora Bora has been well documented; Rashid notes that "Pakistani officers ... were amazed that Rumsfeld would not even put 1,000 U.S. soldiers into battle," and concluded that America was not serious about the war. This reaffirmed Musharraf's belief that the Americans would grow tired of Afghanistan and allow it once again to fall to forces more pliable to Pakistani administration, namely, the Taliban.

Less noted was another great escape. In Kunduz, in the northeastern part of Afghanistan, the U.S. surrounded 8,000 Taliban, Arab and Pakistani forces in November 2001. The Pakistanis were ISI, Pakistan's secret service, who were fighting with their Taliban allies against the Americans. At Musharraf's request, the Americans allowed Pakistan to send in tow planes and airlift its people out. It's unclear who, precisely, was evacuated, but according to Rashid's sources, "Hundreds of ISI officers, Taliban commanders and foot soldiers belonging to the IMU (an Uzbekistan guerilla group) and al-Qaeda personnel boarded the planes."

The Pakistan factor

In short, the American victory in 2001 was not a final triumph, but a station in a war that has proceeded briskly ever since. It is a most curious affair. The U.S. has proclaimed, over and over again, that our great ally in the war is Pakistan. And we have poured a lot of money into Pakistan — \$10 billion in overt aid, and an equal amount, Rashid

estimates, in secret aid.

In return, Pakistan allowed the U.S. to use its ports to disembark military goods, a vital logistics advantage in 2001. And, when really pushed, Musharraf has used his military against the Islamicist guerrillas operating within Pakistan. This has always led to disaster. Time after time, the military has been either defeated or stymied by the guerrillas. The reason, Rashid suggests, is rooted in the secret part of Musharraf's strategy: Far from cutting links with the Taliban and al Qaeda's guerilla allies, the ISI has supplied them with intelligence and money.

Why didn't this cause an uproar in D.C.? There are two important reasons. First, Musharraf carefully cultivated Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld, who believed that the general was standing between order and chaos in nuclear-powered Pakistan. Second, Rumsfeld, who took responsibility for Afghanistan away from the State Department, was averse to nation building. For him, it was better to say the war was over than that it had barely begun.

Furthermore, focusing on Afghanistan would divert resources from Iraq. Thus, Musharraf's maneuvers were allowed by a White House more fearful of paying attention to Afghanistan than of things going wrong in Afghanistan. Even as the Taliban was mounting its largest campaign in 2006, Rumsfeld was removing American troops from the country.

Finally, Rashid gives us an account of the Afghanistan government that mirrors his disappointment with his friend, Hamid Karzai. Karzai, who was elected with such hopes, has turned out to be a feckless leader, unable to outmaneuver Pakistan and doubly unable to understand democracy. Karzai associates political parties with the Communist Party in Afghanistan of the '80s, and would prefer that Afghanistan not have any. A democracy without parties is either a dictatorship or an oligarchy. Afghanistan tends towards the latter. Karzai relies on tribal leaders and, increasingly, warlords.

Back to the back burner

Rashid's narrative isn't always easy to follow. "Descent into Chaos" — the title is, perhaps, unintentionally apt — is packed with the names of obscure Afghanistan valleys and warlords, with a shifting caravanserai of paramilitary organizations and cadres of advisers from Pakistan, Afghanistan, the United States and NATO. Sometimes this has a distinctly dulling effect.

But the outlines of the story are important. What Rashid has described is a stalemate that could go on for decades, unless the U.S. rethinks certain basic premises.

In his 2004 book, "A Treatise on Efficacy: Between Western and Chinese Thinking," the China scholar Francois Jullien contrasted the military

strategies of the famed thinkers Sun Tzu and Carl von Clausewitz. Jullien noted that Sun Tzu believed in transforming the enemy force — bringing them over to one's side, destroying their belief in themselves — whereas Clausewitz insisted on annihilating the enemy. The American military's reliance on technological superiority is a direct product of the Clausewitzian worldview. But as Rashid shows, it is the wrong strategy to pursue in Afghanistan, especially as the U.S. has signaled weakness at every turn by depending on a treacherous ally — Pakistan — to effect the destruction of al Qaeda.

The last time the U.S. engaged in a two-front war was in 1941 — and that lasted only four years. Seven years after the commencement of the war in Afghanistan, we seem no closer to capturing Osama bin Laden or defeating the Taliban. It might be time to concentrate on finding mediators (for instance, the Saudis) rather than saber rattling and investing in Afghanistan's infrastructure rather than airstrikes and endless patrols. In other words, it might be time to trade in Clausewitz for Sun Tzu.

But there seems little chance of that happening any time soon. As "Descent into Chaos" arrives in bookstores, we are in the midst of another election season and, again, little attention is being paid to Afghanistan.