

When Uncle Sam goes to war

Two important books analyse the chaos and consequences of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars with a mix of gloom and optimism

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Sunday June 22, 2008

Observer

Descent Into Chaos
Ahmed Rashid
Allen Lane £25, pp484

The Post-American World
Fareed Zakaria
Allen Lane £20, pp292

Standing watching the bombs falling at Tora Bora in Afghanistan in December 2001, a fellow journalist turned to me and commented that 'only fiction, only a great novel' could make sense of the extraordinary scenes we were witnessing and of the astonishing events of the first four months of the war on terror. The War and Peace of the early 21st century has yet to be written but, while we wait, the latest book by Ahmed Rashid, veteran reporter and chronicler of the recent history of his homeland Pakistan, Afghanistan and central Asia, will nicely fill the gap. The fruit of years spent on the ground, interviewing and reading, it is, if too laden with detail and lacking in narrative rhythm to be an easy read, still encyclopaedic and, in its way, gripping.

Rashid's anger at the crass incompetence that has marked the Western intervention in Afghanistan is both patent and justified. He blames the war in Iraq for distracting American policymakers and generals - as well as the international community - at a crucial time. From 2002 to 2005, the West, though supposedly committed to rebuilding Afghanistan, left the volatile and poor south-east of the country to rot, unguarded and undeveloped. In late 2003, I found children starving in the bathetically misspelt 'therapoetic feeding ward' of Kandahar hospital.

Unsurprisingly, by 2006 the Taliban had re-established themselves and opium cultivation had exploded. The international coalition won the war of 2001 easily, not least because the Taliban's repressive regime had alienated so many Afghans, and then it lost the subsequent peace. It is now fighting - and possibly losing - a second war that was never necessary.

Rashid is excellent on Afghanistan and Pakistan. As with his previous books, he digs out those nuggets of information that illuminate and explain. But he is less convincing on the United States. Even in Washington, it is hard to fathom US politics; from Lahore, the eastern Pakistani city where Rashid is based, it is well-nigh impossible. The bald statement that 'naming the adversary as "terrorism" enabled the neocons to broaden the specific struggle against al-Qaeda into a global conflict with Islam' is a gross misrepresentation of a complex and varied ideology and the aims of this American administration in the Muslim world.

Equally, though Rashid nicely nails Pervez Musharraf, the Pakistani President, by juxtaposing his claim that al-Qaeda's infrastructure had been 'shattered' on his country's soil with details of the various plots in the UK that have clear and proven links to the terrorist group's bases in the country's semi-autonomous tribal areas bordering Afghanistan, he is wrong to describe new militants in Europe as being 'unemployed young Muslim men in urban slums in British or French cities'. Some undoubtedly are poor, but the vast majority are from relatively comfortable backgrounds. But these are details. Rashid's new work is a major contribution to understanding the region and the events of recent years.

Fareed Zakaria, whose wise and perceptive editorials in the American magazine Newsweek should be required reading for policymakers around the planet, has written a minor masterpiece full of pragmatic, informed intelligence. Where Rashid is full of anger and gloom, Zakaria is optimistic, though far from complacent. While the title of his book - *The Post-American World* - might suggest otherwise, he certainly would not agree with the Pakistani author's assertion that 'as the Bush era nears its end in 2008, American power lies shattered... and the world is a far more dangerous place'.

Indeed, one of the first of the hundreds of statistics cited by Zakaria is there to prove that we are living through what are probably the most peaceful times in recent human history, even if it does not feel like it. He tells us that, according to a team of scholars at the University of Maryland's Centre for International Development and Conflict Management, 'the general magnitude of global warfare has decreased by over 60 per cent [since the mid-1980s], falling by the end of 2004 to its lowest level since the late 1950s'.

The Post-American World aims to demonstrate that the doomsayers predicting the imminent demise of American power are wrong and that, through openness and compromise and the values that made it a great power, the US can maintain its status, if not as global hegemon, then as *primus inter pares*. With just 5 per cent of the world's population, Zakaria points out, the US has generated between 20 and 30 per cent of world output for 125 years and that superiority is unlikely to disappear overnight.

Those who will lose out from the emergence of China, India, Brazil and other new economic powerhouses, he comments brutally and probably accurately, are the nations of Western Europe and Japan, 'locked in a slow, demographically determined decline'.

Zakaria argues that the US will remain by far the most powerful country in the world, but in a hybrid international system - more democratic, more dynamic, more open, more connected - with several other important great powers and with greater assertiveness and activity from all actors.

There is one possible fly in Zakaria's optimistic ointment. 'Across the world, economics is trumping politics,' he says early in the book, implicitly revealing his instinctive and very American sense that politics is that messy emotional stuff that people get up to when not settling down to save up for bigger cars. But this assertion of the primacy of the material over the emotional underplays the ability of people to act against their own rational interests and ignores the mixture of resentment, bloody-minded identity politics, jealousy and sheer meanness that often characterises even great nations' behaviour.

My recent travels through Saudi Arabia and Pakistan reveal the extent to which we need to feel part of defined communities with some degree of control over our lives and futures. A sense of shared history, however imaginary, is crucial. This need has only been exaggerated by the 'flatness' of the new globalised world. Most people prefer it spiky, as the grumpy reactions of voters to repeated attempts to push through eminently sensible European Union reforms shows.

Zakaria is too intelligent a thinker - and also too widely travelled - to entirely disregard this. He corrects the imbalance with a perfectly chosen anecdote from the waning days of Britain's rule in India, where he was born before going to America at 18, describing how its last viceroy, Lord Mountbatten, turned to Gandhi and said in exasperation: 'If we just leave, there will be chaos.' Gandhi replied: 'Yes, but it will be our chaos.'

This is a lesson American policy-makers have learnt the hard way in recent years, as Rashid's book shows. Nationalism has always perplexed Americans, Zakaria comments. 'Americans take justified pride in their own country - we call it patriotism - and yet are genuinely startled when other people are proud and possessive of theirs.'

Much of the most interesting analysis in Zakaria's book deals with China, which he resolutely believes will democratise as it gets richer. This will take time, he rightly points out, as China has a long way to go before reaching even 'middle income' status and thus the crucial threshold of \$5,000-\$10,000 per capita annual income at which the magical transformation of democratisation occurs. China is wrestling with globalisation and nationalism in the same way that other states are, but democratisation, Zakaria seems sure, will come, though perhaps after a period under some kind of mixed regime, as existed in Western countries in the 19th century.

One reason why he believes this, he says, is that the Communist party of China is a tiny elite of three million that is out of touch with the 1.3 billion people it rules. It is a revealing, if uncharacteristic, slip. In fact, the CPC numbers around 70 million and has sealed a solid and simple pact with those it rules: 'We govern, you get richer.' Only when one side of the bargain is unfulfilled will the party's grip on power ease. In the meantime, nationalism, far from being a destabilising threat, provides an easy means of bolstering legitimacy, as we saw earlier this year during the protests in Tibet and no doubt will see again during the Olympic Games in August.

Both of these works are thought-provoking and important. Read Rashid to know what should never have happened, but read Zakaria to know what has, should and will happen.