

A sliver of hope

Despite his bleak, brilliant analysis of the Afghan region's descent into chaos, Pakistani author Ahmed Rashid hasn't abandoned all optimism

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Descent into Chaos

By Ahmed Rashid

Viking, \$31

Ahmed Rashid ends his bleak new book on a note of hope.

The respected Pakistani journalist, whose previous books have educated the western world in the ways and ramifications of Islamic extremism, concludes *Descent into Chaos* with the fervent wish that the global community learn from the mistakes it has made in Afghanistan and the nations surrounding that woefully failed state.

But it is a faint hope, almost a pro forma way of bringing to a close a 400-page tale of missed and bungled opportunities, lies and deception, tragically flawed decisions and unforgivable ignorance. For all its exhaustive scope, nuanced interpretation and analytical brilliance, *Descent into Chaos* (subtitled *The United States and the Failure of Nation Building in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia*) is both depressing and frightening.

But for Rashid, the prognosis is not completely dark.

"I am not without hope," he said by phone last week from New York, where he was on the American leg of his international book tour. The Lahore-based journalist, author of *Taliban* (2000) and *Jihad* (2002), visits Ottawa this week to participate in an invitation-only symposium on Parliament Hill on "Cosmopolitan Identity in the Islamic World," sponsored by the Centre for International Governance Innovation think-tank.

What gives him hope are the results of the February elections in Pakistan, where the late Benazir Bhutto's Pakistan Peoples Party won shared power with another former opposition party. "Those elections were positive," says Rashid, who contributes regularly to such publications as London's *Daily Telegraph* and the *International Herald Tribune*.

"In the long term, the people of Pakistan voted for a secular party."

That is reason for optimism, he says, despite the continuing problem of military influence and the Islamic extremists harboured up and down the country's border with Afghanistan.

And that is reason for optimism in Afghanistan itself, which continues to suffer from Pakistani-based Taliban incursions such as the recent Kandahar jailbreak that freed as many as 1,100 prisoners, nearly 400 of them Taliban militants. When the situation starts improving in Pakistan, it should have an impact on Afghanistan. But as Rashid makes clear, there is a vast distance to go.

Descent into Chaos is that rarest of literary creations, a crucial book -- necessary reading for any cogent understanding of how we have landed in this morass, and what we can do about it. But despite the penetratingly bright light it shines into the darkness, it is not a comforting book. Both hawks and doves on the question of Afghanistan will find much in it to enlighten, but little to support previously held views.

Rashid, who received a Pakistani award for courage in journalism and who is a consultant for Human Rights Watch, dissects the extraordinarily tangled geopolitical mess in his native part of the world with insight, warm sensitivity and surprising readability. This is a skilled analysis that, like all good journalism, never forgets the human element at the heart of the events. Readers are presented with as many empathetic, fleshed-out portraits of people and moving accounts of their role in unfolding history as they are with reportage that might otherwise seem dry.

Descriptions of children flocking to reopened schools, of Afghans scarred by war and hardship waiting in long lines on election day with patient good humour, of the energetic hope embodied by wise old peacemakers like UN representative Lakhdar Brahimi -- all put a memorable face on dusty facts.

Rashid, 60, writes with the benefit of decades of experience, uniquely informed by both his personal and professional life in Pakistan as well as his breathtaking wealth of connections. He has addressed both the United Nations General Assembly and NATO ambassadors on the situation in Afghanistan, and he counts Afghan president Hamid Karzai as his friend, though he is far from uncritical. "I'm able to be very blunt with him," he says, which may explain his characterization in the book of Karzai's leadership as weak, vacillating and impotent in the face of warlords and rampant corruption.

But *Descent into Chaos* is about so much more than the failure of Afghan leadership. At heart, it is about the catastrophic results of the failure of the U.S. and its global allies to do their duty -- to recognize the need for nation building and engage in it. What Rashid presents, based on vast intimate knowledge and experience, is a picture of an escalating global crisis that could have been avoided.

NATO's boasts that it has won all its battles are hollow, he writes, since it has no "overarching strategy ... for transforming military victories into development, reconstruction, good governance, and political strategies."

Because of such failures, along with those of the Karzai government to improve the lives of the Afghan people, the Taliban have been "winning by default."

Meticulously researched and documented (there are 48 pages of footnotes alone), his book follows the tortured path of events, since 9/11, in Afghanistan, Pakistan and the troubled surrounding region.

It considers the dangerous situation in Pakistan, where Islamic extremists have been not only harboured but nurtured, and looks at the repeated failings within Afghanistan of both the Karzai

government and the various international powers that have left their heavy footprint.

It examines the needs of the area, and the determinedly deaf ear turned toward those needs by the administration of George W. Bush, as well as by NATO. It looks at the legacy of Bush and his henchmen Paul Wolfowitz and Donald Rumsfeld, zeroing in on the catastrophic results of their pathological obsession with Iraq, which meant an abandonment of Afghanistan.

Staring into the face of a thoroughly ravaged country, writes Rashid, "scholars and diplomats now argued for a Marshall Plan for Afghanistan." But, he continues, "the Bush neocons had simply no interest before or after the war in doing anything like this." And at home there was little genuine protest against such inaction as "the American public remained largely ignorant of the humanitarian crises escalating everywhere."

Descent into Chaos also explores the numerous ripe conditions that have contributed to the rise of Islamic extremism in the area, including not only an ill-waged battle for hearts and minds, but also such pragmatic realities as the rise in opium production in the "narco-state" of Afghanistan.

"The Taliban resurgence, al-Qaeda's reorganization and the restarting of its training camps for international terrorist groups after the U.S. invasion would have been impossible without the explosion in heroin production," writes Rashid, who notes that in Helmand province alone last year, for example, there was a staggering 45-per-cent increase in opium production.

Rashid also provides provocative tidbits. He describes, for example, the hugely expanding "cottage industry" in the manufacture of IEDs (improvised explosive devices) in the Taliban-heavy border areas. He details the blundering of U.S. Gen. Tommy Franks that essentially permitted the escape of Osama bin Laden. He lists the countries that help the U.S. out by providing secret detention facilities for rendered prisoners.

He also offers intriguing glimpses into the realities of a region deeply foreign to, and misunderstood by, most westerners. Rashid writes (in terms Canadians will certainly recognize) of young Pakistan's tenuous sense of national identity. He describes the calculatedly split political personality of Pervez Musharraf (known as "double-talk Musharraf"), contrasting his present with his past as a fun-loving young man and indifferent student. He tells the almost romantic tale of Karzai's return home to Afghanistan in October 2001 -- on the back of a motorbike, with an old satellite phone that he keeps today as a reminder of that incredible journey.

Canada figures into Rashid's book, but only marginally. He cites the Maher Arar case in "America Shows the Way," his chapter on torture, renditions and secret jails. But the country itself appears primarily as just another member -- albeit a fully contributing one -- of a NATO presence that has been confused and misguided. He also writes of Canada's ongoing public debate on its role in Afghanistan, a heated discussion echoed by other NATO members.

"The critical mistake Canada made," he said in last week's interview, "was that it had no policy toward Pakistan. It just went along with whatever the Americans were telling them." (And the American perspective, in Rashid's view, was spectacularly flawed.) This had its impact as Canada arrived in Kandahar, where it "didn't have a clue about what to expect. You can not look at Afghanistan without looking at the neighbouring countries. You need to have a strategic policy that looks at the entire region." Rashid is referring to the whole of Central Asia, republics like Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, with their poverty, unstable governments and exploding populations of Islamic militants. His book suggests that they constitute a far greater

global threat than Iraq.

Rashid's recommended strategic policy would also address what he calls the "biggest conundrum," the vast and proliferating safe havens for Islamic terrorists along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border.

In the meantime, he says, Canada should probably wait and watch, along with the rest of the world, to see what happens next November in the U.S. presidential election.

Republican hopeful John McCain is not talking much about Afghanistan, says Rashid, because it has become an embarrassment to his party. But he is encouraged -- a little -- by the Democrats' Barack Obama, who, he says, has suggested he'll concentrate on Afghanistan, rather than Iraq. "He needs to put flesh on this policy," says Rashid, but it may be a good sign.

So no, he says, based on recent events, he is not entirely without hope. But in the disastrous narrative of that powder-keg world he knows so well and describes with such compelling authority in *Descent into Chaos*, it will be difficult for the average reader to share that sliver of optimism.

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