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The Saturday Profile

Frontier Years Give Might to Ex-Guerrilla's Words

By [JANE PERLEZ](#)

LAHORE, [Pakistan](#)

FRESH out of [Cambridge University](#) in the late 1960s, and steeped in the era's favorites — Marx, Mao and Che — Ahmed Rashid took off for the hills of Baluchistan, a dry, tough patch of western Pakistan. He stayed for 10 years.

He was a guerrilla fighter and political organizer, and with a couple of like-minded Pakistani pals, led peasants seeking autonomy against the Pakistani Army. He emerged, after bouts of hepatitis, malaria and lost teeth, not exactly disillusioned but defeated, he recalled recently from the comfort of his study overlooking a garden of palms.

Yet the experience became the launching pad for his real career as a prolific chronicler of [Afghanistan](#), Central Asia and his homeland of Pakistan, places that Western writers have often found difficult to gain access to, let alone comprehend in their full depth and complexity.

An expert on the [Taliban](#) — until 9/11 he knew them better than almost any outsider — Mr. Rashid has over the decades turned out to be something of a prophet in the region, though mostly of the Cassandra type, issuing repeated warnings that are ignored by policy makers.

As fluent a talker as he is a writer, Mr. Rashid, 59, has just published his fourth book, "Descent into Chaos, The United States and the Failure of Nation Building in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia," a caustic review of the mistakes by the Bush administration in tackling Islamic militancy.

His central argument is not original: that the money and blood spent on Iraq should have been invested in Afghanistan, rebuilding the country from 2001 to prevent the resurgence of the Taliban. But it is hard to argue with, now that the Taliban are indeed back, and [NATO](#) and the United States are enmeshed in a tough fight with them.

The Bush administration, he said, was too gentle with Pakistan's president, [Pervez Musharraf](#), after he pledged to support the antiterrorism campaign after 9/11. "The Americans never said strongly enough that Pakistan had to stop supporting the Taliban — that was because Musharraf was giving them the [Al Qaeda](#) types,"

capturing a few top Qaeda operatives and handing them over to the United States. Mr. Bush should have insisted that Musharraf quash the Taliban too, he said.

One of his insistent themes is the seamlessness of the Pakistani Taliban and the Afghan Taliban. They reinforce each other, he said, and so cannot be treated in isolation.

The Pakistani Army and Pakistan's powerful [Inter-Services Intelligence](#) agency protected the Afghan Taliban in Quetta, the provincial capital of Baluchistan, as "a strategic asset" for use in the future as a buffer against India, he said. But that makes it virtually impossible for them to deal with the Pakistan Taliban and its most prominent leader, [Baitullah Mehsud](#).

"Until Pakistan is willing to give up the leadership of the Afghan Taliban based in Quetta, Pakistan is not going to be able to deal with Mehsud and Al Qaeda," he said. Mr. Mehsud stands accused by the Pakistani government and Washington in the assassination of [Benazir Bhutto](#).

Mr. Rashid has a long history with the Taliban and Afghanistan. Baluchistan, where he fought in the '60s and '70s, shares a border with Afghanistan, and in 1978 Mr. Rashid was in Kabul for the coup that put the Communists in power. He was in Kandahar a year later when the Soviets rolled in.

"I saw the invasion, when all the Soviet tanks came from the town of Herat into the bazaar in Kandahar," he said. "The soldiers got off their tanks and asked for tea. There was no tension." The tanks continued on to Kabul.

With his perfect English and British education (a photo on the wall of his study shows him as a teenager on the rugby team of Malvern College), Mr. Rashid became what he calls the "intellectual repository" for Western journalists who parachuted into the Afghan capital for the Soviet Union's last big invasion.

It is a role he has played on a larger canvas ever since: as journalist, author and, sometimes, behind-the-scenes adviser to diplomats who have grappled with Afghanistan's troubles, not least the Taliban.

His book, "Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia," an account of the rise of the mullahs in Afghanistan, was published months before 9/11 by Yale University Press. It immediately became an essential item in the backpacks of reporters covering the war in Afghanistan in late 2001. It has sold 1.5 million copies in English, an astonishing number for an academic press.

He said he was the first foreign journalist to visit the Taliban in 1994 as they emerged out of the civil strife that consumed Afghanistan after the Soviets left. He was struck immediately by how different they were from the warlords and guerrillas he had been dealing with.

"I persuaded an ABC television journalist to come with me to Kandahar, and I was shocked they wouldn't allow us to take pictures," he said of the Taliban. "I'd been

living with the mujahedeen, who loved publicity. When these guys in Kandahar wouldn't be photographed, I suddenly realized this was a completely new thing."

Intrigued, he joined their battle groups, soaking in all he could, and he was in Kabul with the Taliban when they overran it in 1996. In his reporting, which appeared in *The Far Eastern Economic Review* and *The Independent*, a British newspaper, he warned against Pakistan's decision in the mid-1990s to support the Taliban. "I wrote that it meant a continuation of the Afghan civil war."

With the publication of his book, he wore out his welcome with the Taliban. These days, rather than trekking through the Hindu Kush mountains, he is more likely to be found around the dining table of his Lahore home, which is known for its fine cuisine.

NOW something of an elder statesman, Mr. Rashid is sought after for advice by diplomats in Islamabad and Kabul, and by policy makers in NATO capitals and Washington. "As recently as last summer, I said to the U.S. ambassador, you have to arrest Mullah Omar and the shura," he said, referring to the leader of the Taliban, who has taken refuge near Quetta.

When Benazir Bhutto was prime minister, she asked whether he would be interested in becoming Pakistan's ambassador to Afghanistan but he demurred, preferring the rough and tumble of frontier reporting.

His writings have never sat well with the Inter-Services Intelligence, a subject he said he does not want to go into beyond saying he is "unpopular." Like many Pakistanis, he has watched the unraveling of Mr. Musharraf, but declined to predict his moment of exit.

He is on good terms with [Asif Ali Zardari](#), the widower of Ms. Bhutto and leader of her party, the Pakistan Peoples Party, who is now regarded as the most powerful man in the country. But after a two-hour lunch with Mr. Zardari recently, Mr. Rashid said that he worries the new government "has no clue" about the "multilayered terrorist cake" that flourishes in the tribal areas.

As Mr. Rashid travels the world, he said he remains a patriot of Pakistan. Of the new government's attitude to the Islamic militants, he said: "They are not briefed, and I am deeply concerned."