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## Book review: Descent into Chaos

The wrong targets

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**Descent into Chaos**

by **Ahmed Rashid**

**Allen Lane, 544pp, £25**

JUDGED AS A WAY OF BANKRUPTING the American empire as quickly as possible, the US-led war on terror has been a striking success. Viewed as an effective response to the new challenges posed by global Islamist terrorism, it has been a spectacular failure. There are times when you can only wonder whether even Joseph Heller would have been able to plumb such satirical depths.

Ahmed Rashid is one of Pakistan's finest journalists. Author of a seminal study on the Taleban, he has emerged as one of the most cogent commentators on Central Asia post-9/11 and, in his latest volume, a trenchant critic of the Bush administration.

Accusing this White House of arrogance and ignorance is nothing new, of course. Journalists all over the world have feasted on the numerous examples of neo-con hubris for years. With the benefit of seven years' hindsight, the proclamation from one Bush adviser in the aftermath of 9/11 that "We're an empire now and when we act we create our own history" looks prescient for all the wrong reasons.

Rashid has long argued that the true frontline of the war on terror stretches across Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia, rather than Iraq, and that American neglect of this region is having disastrous consequences. The mayhem in Pakistan's mountainous tribal areas that border Afghanistan and currently play host to some of the nastiest terrorists in the Islamic world bears witness to the failure to strike at the heart of al-Qaeda. One could add that the parlous state of both Pakistan and Afghanistan today represent twin indictments of the US strategy.

One of the most damning statistics in this compulsively readable volume (and there are many) is that 90 per cent of the \$10 billion in aid the US has provided Pakistan since 9/11 has gone to the military – think looting dictators – rather than development. In neighbouring Afghanistan, an avowed mission to bring democracy to a benighted nation has instead seen Washington pursuing a policy of getting into bed with warlords and drugs barons. No wonder hatred of the Americans in particular and the West in general is becoming endemic in the region.

One can take issue with many of Rashid's arguments. His contention, for example, that Central Asian leaders would be persuaded to ditch their dictatorships in favour of something more benign "only if they saw an unfaltering western military and aid presence on their doorstep" begs a one-word question in response: Iran?

A prolonged American military presence in Central Asia and the Middle East has

proved rather good news for Tehran. It has cost the Iranian government extraordinarily little to bloody Washington's nose in the sands of Iraq and snuff out any hopes of regime change next door. Pakistan, meanwhile, has paid a heavier price for its unstinting efforts to undermine Afghanistan. Decades of support for the Islamists by its military and intelligence agencies have spawned a domestic monster dedicated to the destruction of the Pakistani government and the West.

It is fashionable to decry the intellectual poverty of the neo-cons, to lament their ignorance of and lack of interest in the countries they chose to invade. This is true, yet intellectual rigour, cultural sensitivities and linguistic prowess are no guarantee of success. Take the formidably well qualified British officers in Iraq in the 1920s, figures such as Gertrude Bell, Colonel Leachman and Bertram Thomas.

Few today could match their skills yet the British were hustled out of Iraq soon enough, in the wake of a bloody rebellion. Maybe we're just not very good at nation-building and should think long and hard before invading countries.

Pity the American taxpayer for years to come. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, during which time the US defence budget has rocketed from \$293 billion to \$647 billion, have now cost an estimated \$1 trillion. Americans must hope their government loses its expensive taste (and tragic ineptitude) for nation-building as soon as possible.

The religious perverts of al-Qaeda, meanwhile – streets ahead in the battle of ideas, coffers bulging from narco-terrorist revenue – must hope the war on terror lasts for ever.