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## [Afghanistan's Descent](#)

### **New Book Explains the U.S.'s Nation Building Failure**

By [Spencer Ackerman](#) 07/14/2008

As [U.S. casualties continue to climb in Afghanistan](#), an American public distracted by the war in Iraq can be forgiven for wondering: what happened? How did a war that seemed won in late 2001, just months after the Oct. 7, 2001 air campaign against the Taliban, suffer this sharp reversal fortune in less than seven years?

A new book by one of the most respected journalists of Afghanistan and Pakistan contends that the years between 2002 and 2007 were as crucial to the stability of the region as they were squandered by the Bush administration. A combination of lassitude and ignorance on the part of President George W. Bush and his war Cabinet -- fueled by, paradoxically, the initial, rapid success of the Afghanistan war -- led to a vicious circle of both Afghan and Pakistani corruption, violence and instability.

["Descent Into Chaos"](#) by the prolific Pakistani journalist Ahmed Rashid chronicles how Afghanistan went from being a success story to a more dangerous place than Iraq; how Pakistan went from being a stalwart U.S. ally to a "bolt hole," in Rashid's words, for Al Qaeda, and the relationship of each to the other. It argues that Central Asia, rather than Iraq, is the major front on the war on terror; and methodically documents the success over the last six years of the forces of extremism, violence and terror. And it raises the uncomfortable prospect that, after nearly seven years in Afghanistan and billions of dollars spent supporting proxy governments in Kabul and Islamabad, the U.S. might be at greater danger from the region than at any time since Sept. 11, 2001.

With both presidential candidates attempting to checkmate the other on national security, Rashid's book raises an uncomfortable question: can anything be done to reverse the region's anti-American trends?

Over the last 15 years, Rashid has emerged as the West's principal journalist in Central Asia, publishing two acclaimed books, "[Jihad](#)" and "[Taliban](#)," that explained the phenomenon of rising extremism in Afghanistan and Pakistan when few outside those countries paid them any attention. One of the most respected reporters in the region, Rashid has an unparalleled group of contacts -- he interviewed everyone from Taliban leaders to U.S. military commanders to Pakistani opposition figures to Afghan President Hamid Karzai for this latest book.

The key mistake of U.S. strategy in central Asia, from Rashid's perspective, was to confuse momentary success for lasting stability. Pakistan and Afghanistan are inextricably linked -- their border, the so-called Durand Line, is an unsealable fiction of the map drawn by British imperialists in the 19th century -- and yet U.S. policy-

makers treated them as distinct problems.

In Pakistan, the late 2001 and early 2002 decisions by military dictator Gen. Pervez Musharraf to back America to the hilt convinced the Bush administration that he deserved unwavering support. In Afghanistan, the ease with which a small band of CIA operatives, U.S. Special Forces, Afghan militiamen and U.S. airpower routed the Taliban in late 2001 created a sense of cost-free omnipotence in Washington.

Rather than lock in the gains of each country during the pivotal year of 2002, however, the Bush administration turned its attention to Iraq. Karzai was a genuinely pro-Western leader who commanded widespread loyalty from a war-weary Afghan population. Brave, relatively honest and competent, Karzai was an ally practically straight out of central casting. Yet his capabilities were limited as the warlords, paid off by the U.S. to dislodge the Taliban, came to rule most of the country.

That didn't entirely bother the Bush administration. It cared more about playing whack-a-mole in pursuit of various Taliban and Al Qaeda figures in the wild southeast than tending to the stability of the country that had, months before, hosted both.

"The unstated strategy was to leave Karzai ineffectual in the capital, protected by foreign forces, while relying on the warlords to keep Pax Americana in the countryside and the U.S. [Special Operations Forces] to hunt down Al Qaeda," Rashid writes. "It was a minimalist, military intelligence-driven strategy that ignored nation-building, creating state institutions or rebuilding the country's shattered infrastructure."

Many times through 2002, Washington would abruptly reverse course, at last rhetorically. In April, Bush spoke of a new "Marshall Plan" for Afghanistan; but the Pentagon instead laughed at the idea of using U.S. troops to provide security for reconstruction. ("Ah, peace-keeping," Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld chortled from a Pentagon podium the same day as Bush's "Marshall Plan" speech.)

Most of the money for reconstruction didn't reach the Afghan people. By 2005, a report by the U.S. Government Accountability Office found that a small non-government organization built 40 schools in Afghanistan in 2004, spending, at most, only \$20,000 on each -- while contractors for the U.S. development agency USAID built only eight schools at four times the cost.

As much as U.S. officials lamented corruption in Afghanistan -- which is real and virulent -- they ignored corruption and politicization in their own government. "In keeping with prevailing views in the Republican Party," Rashid writes, "USAID became a source of funds for Christian fundamentalist NGOs [non-government organizations] active in the Muslim world -- giving them \$57 million between 2001 and 2005 out of a total of \$390 million distributed to all NGOs."

There could be no reconstruction without security, however, and security was illusory. As far back as 2002, Rumsfeld's deputy Paul Wolfowitz signaled Washington's distaste for using U.S. troops to secure the country. He dignified thuggish warlords -- some, human-rights groups documented, were mass murderers -- with the term

"regional leaders."

Rumsfeld justified the parsimonious U.S. troop presence, which never rose above 50,000 troops at any time, with a lecture about traditional Afghan xenophobia. With this, Rumsfeld handed allied nations an excuse for similar inactivity.

"The excuse the international community gave was that the Afghans would not tolerate a foreign military presence for long, just as they had not tolerated the British or Soviet occupations," writes Rashid. "Yet this was not an occupation, and the Afghan people were literally on their knees begging for a greater international presence so that their benighted country could be rebuilt."

Within a few short years, neither security nor prosperity came to Afghanistan, leading Washington and its allies to cede the initiative to resurgent Taliban figures, warlords, drug dealers and assorted insurgents. In 2005, the Iraq-learned tactics of vehicular suicide bombings and roadside explosives came to be used in Afghanistan -- a signal that Al Qaeda was regaining strength.

Indeed, just over the barely-existent border, Al Qaeda was reconstituting what a 2007 U.S. National Intelligence Estimate called a "safehaven." Just as ominously, a five-foot-tall extremist named Beitullah Massoud established, for the first time, a Pakistani Taliban that gave succor to insurgents fleeing U.S. forces in Afghanistan -- and attempted to exert control over the Afghan insurgency. In February 2007, Lt. Gen. Karl Eikenberry, commander of all U.S. and NATO troops in Afghanistan, told a disinterested Congress that, unless something was done about the Pakistan sanctuaries in the lawless Northwest Frontier Province, the Afghan war could not be won.

But Musharraf's answer to the sanctuaries was either inaction or outright appeasement. His forces, in 2006, struck a ceasefire with Massoud, undercutting the Bush administration's central rationale for supporting him.

By mid-2007, the wages of the ceasefire came due: not only did Pakistani Taliban-aligned forces use the radical Red Mosque as a stage for a bloody fight in the middle of the capitol city of Islamabad, but European intelligence officials traced a host of thwarted terrorist attacks in Europe to the Pakistani "bolt hole" for Al Qaeda. Rather than crack down on the extremists, Ali Jan Orakzai, governor of the Northwest Frontier Province, called Massoud's Taliban "a national liberation movement."

Washington never broke with Musharraf, even as his increasingly unpopular government both failed to fight Al Qaeda and cracked down on domestic dissent. He illegally fired Pakistan's chief justice, Iftikhar Chaudhry, sparking a popular uprising that he failed to suppress.

U.S. officials attempted to save Musharraf by brokering a political accord with secular opposition figure Benazir Bhutto, a twice-deposed prime minister, but shortly after her return to Pakistan, she was assassinated in December 2007. Musharraf's government denied responsibility, but immediately scrubbed the crime scene of all evidence and did not conduct an autopsy. A few months later, his allies agreed to a power-sharing agreement that has only left Pakistan more adrift and weak.

Debate now rages over what is to be done. More than 30,000 U.S. and allied troops are still in Afghanistan, but violence is at an all-time high. Some argue that the U.S. must bolster its troop presence in the fragile Central Asian country.

"Afghanistan has been allowed to devolve largely back into chaos, making it a prime breeding ground for terrorist activity and training, all because we went to Iraq," said Jon Soltz, a retired U.S. Army captain and Iraq veteran who chairs the veterans' group VoteVets. "NATO troops are leaving at a pretty fast clip, because we're showing no interest and no leadership in stabilizing the region and going after Al Qaeda, which is based there and strongest there, and we're not filling the vacuum. Basically, if we don't get our troops and equipment out of Iraq soon and over to Afghanistan, we'll lose complete control of that country and hand Osama bin Laden's followers their most significant victory since they drove the Soviets out."

Others aren't as sure. A former CIA official told The Washington Independent recently, "When you have a sufficient number of occupying troops then you become the issue -- the resistance is generalized, and then you're in a situation no one has ever solved."

Barnett Rubin of New York University, one of the West's leading experts on Afghanistan, is less certain, but sympathizes with that view. "It's quite possible," he said when asked if more troops would, at this point, do Afghanistan more harm than good. "I lean that way. I'm not a military analyst, but at this point, there are too many other issues that have not been addressed -- preventing more troops from [being] helpful. Especially as long as the insurgency has its main recruitment pool, training and logistics centers across the border."

Rubin had high praise for "Descent Into Chaos." He noted that Rashid has been a longtime contact. "It's the only comprehensive analysis of things that have gone wrong in Afghanistan and Pakistan over the last few years," Rubin said. "Given that Barack Obama has said it's the most important foreign-policy issue and John McCain was saying it's one of the most important, it's remarkable that there hasn't been so much reporting and analysis about it. The book is essential for that reason."