

Losing the war against Islamic extremism

Daily Telegraph.co.uk, United Kingdom
Last Updated: 19/07/2008

Sameer Rahim reviews Descent into Chaos by Ahmed Rashid

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One month into the US and coalition attack on Afghanistan - launched in response to the attacks of September 11, 2001 - President Bush gave the world an ultimatum: "Over time it's going to be important for nations to know they will be held accountable for inactivity," he said. "You're either with us or against us in the fight against terror."

One country that seemed to have got the message was Pakistan. Fearful for his country's safety, President Musharraf pledged his support straight after 9/11.

In response, the US waived the sanctions imposed after Pakistan had tested a nuclear device in 1998; it also made available a \$600 million loan - the first of a series of cash incentives that to date has amounted to more than \$10 billion.

The strategy brought results: Pakistan, without informing its public, allowed US Special Forces, as well as refuelling and medical evacuation facilities, to be based on its soil during the war; its air bases hosted 57,800 bombing missions.

However, as the Pakistani journalist Ahmed Rashid details in this superbly researched account of post-9/11 Asia, Musharraf was never fully with the Americans.

Even after he pledged his support, the ISI, Pakistan's military intelligence agency, continued to supply arms, ammunition and fuel to the Taliban.

A week after Bush's ultimatum, Musharraf persuaded him to pause US bombing so that ISI operatives could be flown out of Afghanistan. According to Rashid, hundreds of Taliban commanders and al-Qa'eda members escaped with them.

Tacit support for the Taliban continued for the next five years. In 2006, as they re-emerged from the Pakistani tribal provinces, one frustrated Nato commander told Rashid: "It's time for an 'either you are with us or against us' ultimatum delivered bluntly to Musharraf."

What was Pakistan's plan? For years, it had cultivated the Taliban as a bulwark against pro-Indian forces in Afghanistan. It also helped fund extremist groups allied to the Taliban and al-Qa'eda, which were useful in launching attacks on Indian troops in Kashmir.

Musharraf knew that if he delivered some al-Qa'eda leaders to the Americans, he could keep his proxies mainly intact and ready for any future battle.

Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld, Bush's vice-president and defence secretary, appear to have agreed: time after time, it is argued in these pages, both men "turned a blind eye to the extremists" that Musharraf was encouraging.

At the same time in Afghanistan, the US was building up its own unsavoury coalition with the warlords and drug dealers known as the Northern Alliance (a name made to seem respectable by sounding like a Robert Ludlum thriller).

One of the US's early clients was allegedly a former "mentor to Osama bin Laden" who rejected the Taliban. According to Rashid, he was paid \$100,000 by a CIA agent to help in the hunt for al-Qa'eda suspects. He continues to have a strong influence in the Afghan judiciary, reports Rashid, while his militia "regularly appears in the western suburbs of Kabul to rob homes and rape women".

Such warlords were funded by the burgeoning poppy harvest. In 2003, after two years of US occupation, 4,200 tons of opium were produced (up from 3,600 tons the previous year); and the drug economy was worth \$2.8 billion, more than half the value of the legal economy.

The US secretary of state, Colin Powell, wanted US forces to arrest the drug dealers and develop alternative livelihoods for farmers. He was overruled by Rumsfeld, who didn't want to antagonise the warlords.

Rashid's fierce tone is the result of disappointment. The author of an acclaimed book on the Taliban, he saw the invasion of Afghanistan not as an "imperialist intervention" but as a chance to save the country. He also had faith in his friend Hamid Karzai, who bravely entered Taliban-controlled Afghanistan on a motorbike, and eventually claimed the presidency.

But once in power, Karzai failed to build popular support and was chronically indecisive; his showdowns with the warlords, writes Rashid, "all too often ended in a humiliating compromise or a climbdown".

Despite his criticisms, Rashid still has faith in interventionism. (He often advises world leaders: Tony Blair questioned him knowledgeably, but "with an element of showmanship as though he wanted to perform rather than learn".)

However, it is perhaps unrealistic to think that the US and Britain can combine nation building with hunting terrorists.

One of the lessons of this outstanding and depressing book is that countries seem incapable of long-term planning. Musharraf realised that strangling democratic and secular forces was a mistake only after Jaish-e-Mohammed - a group his intelligence services helped set up - tried to assassinate him.

More recently, the New Yorker's Seymour Hersh has reported that the CIA is now funding anti-Iranian militias within the country, even if they "had operated against American interests in the past".

According to one former CIA officer: "The irony is that we're once again working with Sunni fundamentalists, just as we did in Afghanistan in the 1980s."