

Central Asia

An opportunity missed

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AHMED RASHID has enjoyed mixed fortunes. His first great adventure—heading off from Cambridge University in 1971 to join a guerrilla war in Baluchistan—did not end well. But in 1979 he was in Kabul when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, and this was a stroke of luck. It gave him a grandstand view of subsequent developments, including the rise of the Taliban, with whom he lived and on whom he reported. Later he turned his inside knowledge into a bestseller on the movement. Since then this Pakistani journalist who lives in Lahore has been one of the world's pre-eminent commentators on the rise of militant Islam in Central Asia, with exceptional first-hand sources.

This background explains both the strengths and weaknesses of his latest book, which sets out to explain what he considers to have been America's missed opportunity in Central Asia after its quick victory against the Taliban late in 2001. The people of the region greeted the superpower's arrival with understandable trepidation. But at the same time, Mr Rashid argues, the Americans generated enormous expectations of change. A sustained commitment could have had a transformative impact not only on Afghanistan itself but also on the other post-Soviet "Stans" of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. This opportunity, however, was squandered when George Bush decided instead to veer off into the sands of Iraq, a benighted enterprise which Mr Rashid says—perhaps too glibly—has left American power "shattered", its army "broken", its credibility "in ruins" and the world a more dangerous place.

Mr Rashid's unique selling point is that he is a details man. He guides the reader around the unlovely Afghan warlords, describes the quarrels inside Afghanistan's new (and failing) government, dissects the illicit opium business, lays bare the malevolent machinations of Pakistan's intelligence services and attempts to describe the struggle for power in the lawless tribal regions between the two countries. For anyone with an interest in this sorry but potentially world-altering tale his book contains invaluable information, packed as it is with facts, names, numbers, anecdote and a fair dose of gossip.

Nonetheless, the book has a weakness. For all his contacts, Mr Rashid is neither an especially gifted storyteller nor the clearest of analysts, which means that in the end he lets the richness of his material overwhelm his narrative. That is no dishonour, given the breadth of the canvas, but in a way it is a missed opportunity of its own. He could have done with some sharper editing. In its absence, this book is needlessly hard work for the non-expert.

Descent Into Chaos: The United States and the Failure of Nation Building in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia.

By Ahmed Rashid.

Viking; 544 pages; \$27.95. Allen Lane; £25