

FYI Notes on Ahmed Rashid, *Descent Into Chaos: The United States and the Failure of Nation Building in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia* (2008)

What follows is intended to alert people to the basic themes and arguments of Rashid's factually dense and historically invaluable new work. Big trouble lies ahead from Islamic extremists, Rashid warns, unless more democratic, economically viable societies can be developed, especially in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Central Asia. This will require a major effort of international aid, diplomacy, and oversight.

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SOME NOTES ON KEY CHAPTERS

Introduction. (*Handout pp. lii-lvii.*) After 9/11, Bush failed to consider the root causes of terrorism in Afghanistan—poverty, injustice, lack of security and of health and education services, and ongoing regional conflicts, like Kashmir, which foster violence. The American unwillingness to do "nation building" has led to what increasingly looks like a failed state, with the Taliban now in resurgence aided by al Qaeda and local Islamist groups. In Pakistan, the blowback from the "self-destructive and double-dealing policies" of the military is threatening the state itself. Analogously, the unilateralist and militarist policies of the U.S. neoconservative elite have backfired, producing anti-American attitudes throughout the Middle East. The Karzai regime thus finds itself in increasingly desperate economic and military circumstances. With sadness and outrage, Rashid recounts the failure of his personal efforts to get the U.S. to do "nation building" in Afghanistan, and his shock when the U.S. shifted its resources into an ill-conceived war in Iraq. The crisis Rashid then predicted for Afghanistan has now come to pass, he argues, complaining that "Bush did more to keep Americans blind to world affairs than any American leader in recent history." This book is a many-sided account of how the ongoing crisis in Afghanistan happened. The next locus of failure, Rashid predicts, will be Uzbekistan.

Chapter 1, "A Man With a Mission." At the outset, Rashid acknowledges his old friendship and frequent consultations with Hamid Karzai. In the early 1990s, Karzai was the sole Pashtun in the Tajik-run government of the Northern Alliance. He escaped Kabul during one of the shellings of the city. In 1995 Pakistan backed the Taliban against the Northern Alliance, which had ties to Iran and Russia. For a brief period, the U.S. aligned itself with Pakistan's pro-Taliban policy, then backed off. Karzai believes that Ahmad Shah Masud could have unified Afghanistan had al Qaeda not plotted his assassination. However, bin Laden has always wanted to isolate the Taliban, keeping it loyal to himself, ever since his arrival in Afghanistan in 1996. Reinforced linkages between the Taliban and al Qaeda in Pakistan's FATA region have made counter-insurgency more difficult than ever. For these and many other reasons, Rashid argues, America's unwillingness to help stabilize Afghanistan in the post-Soviet period has been a costly blunder for which all concerned will pay a heavy price.

Chapter 2, "Pakistan's Long Search for Its Soul." The history of Pakistan's Islamist movement goes back to the 1857 uprising, after which the British privileged Hindus and marginalized Muslims. In the 20th century Muslim leaders developed a "two nations" concept based on religious identity, and from 1940 on the Muslim League campaigned for an independent Muslim state. Ever since its emergence in 1947 amid sectarian violence, but especially since the administration of General Zia in the 1980s, Pakistan has been dominated by a military alliance with Islamic religious parties. Consequently, Pakistan's political culture has remained weak. The Pakistan People's Party has been systematically subverted by a powerful military establishment backed by U.S. aid. General Musharraf publicly backed the Taliban until 9/11, when he was warned that not signing onto Bush's program would mean India would take Pakistan's place as America's regional ally. Rashid contends that the Pentagon knows the names of the Pakistani officers supporting the Taliban, but is unwilling to press the issue for fear of losing military support for the campaign against al Qaeda.

Ch. 5, "The Search for a Settlement: Afghanistan and Pakistan at Odds." On the U.S.-led military campaign in Afghanistan from Oct. 2001 to Feb. 2002. Following Hamid Karzai's dramatic escape from the Taliban in Uruzghan in October, George Tenet decided to treat Karzai as "the guy who will lead a free Afghanistan." Musharraf met Bush at the U.N. and told him not to let Northern Alliance (NA) forces do the fighting. Let the ISI run the war instead, he argued. All Bush promised was to keep the NA out of Kabul, which turned out to be impossible. As soon as the Taliban vacated Kabul on Nov. 12, NA general Muhammad Fahim (a Tajik & Masud's successor) moved his 6,000 fighters into the capital, angering the Pakistanis. The ISI claimed India now controlled Kabul. Warlords vied for control of different regions. Rashid argues that General Tommy Franks made a fatal mistake by refusing to put American troops on the ground, partly because it led to the escape of Taliban and Al Qaeda leaders. Musharraf called Bush

and asked for a U.S. bombing pause so Pakistani planes could ferry his officers out of Kunduz. The result was an "air bridge" for hundreds of leading Arab and Pakistani fighters. Cheney alone had given approval for this, apparently to save Musharraf's reputation. Many Taliban escaped by bribing NA commanders. Most were left behind to surrender to Gen. Dostum's Uzbeks. As a result, many of them were brutally executed. Rashid argues that General Dostum's war crimes at this juncture were a direct consequence of Gen. Franks's decision to leave the fighting to the Northern Alliance.

Chapter 6, "A Nuclear State of Mind: India, Pakistan and the War of Permanent Instability."

(*Handout pp. 109-111.*) "Since 1947, no U.S. administration has recognized how crucial the India-Pakistan dispute over Kashmir is to stability in the region. In the years between 1989 and 2004, the insurgency in Kashmir was exploding, but the U.S. had lost interest in the region. After 1997, al Qaeda and the Taliban joined forces in training Kashmiri militants, and Pakistan's Afghan policy was focused on denying India any advantage in Kabul. For Pakistan, the "strategic disaster" of Afghanistan under the Karzai regime (backed by Pakistan's chief rivals-- India, Iran and Russia) made some kind of ISI support for the Taliban inevitable. Rashid's brief history of the Kashmir problem includes a useful account of the stages by which Pakistan came to back religious rather than secular Kashmiri fighting groups. (Note: the Kashmiri shift from secular nationalism to moderate, Muslim Brotherhood-aligned to Islamist jihadi groups follows the basic historical pattern of politics throughout the Middle East.) During the same period, the CIA learned of extensive contacts between al Qaeda and Pakistani nuclear scientists. The founder of Pakistan's nuclear program, Abdul Qadeer Khan, had several meetings with bin Laden and al-Zawahiri. Rashid argues that the Pakistan army has undermined every civilian attempt to make peace with India, while the U.S. has been strengthening its alliance with India. Writing just before Musharraf's reign of power ended, Rashid concludes that his dangerously opportunistic policies have backfired, including his militarist approach to India.

Chapter 7, "The One-Billion Dollar Warlords." (*Handout pp. 128-135.*) In the early 1990s, regionally based warlords divided up Afghanistan into fiefdoms. The chaos and suffering they brought to the Afghan people provided the Taliban with an opportunity to impose their own totalitarian order over much of the country. In 2001, when the U.S. forces defeated the Taliban, its warlord allies again took over the political landscape, and became wealthy through road tolls, the drug trade, and foreign patronage (they were on the CIA payroll for starters). Rashid argues that the warlords were "immeasurably strengthened" by the Taliban defeat, and their regional divisions were institutionalized by Rumsfeld's desire to shift resources away from Afghanistan to Iraq. As a result, the Karzai regime was fatally weakened. Rumsfeld rejected the State Dept. effort to use American troops outside Kabul. He trusted the warlords more than tribal leaders, and asserted that the U.S. "does not do nation building." Furthermore, the Tajik bias of the warlords, led by Muhammad Fahim, left Pashtuns out of Karzai's government, and the Taliban became the embodiment of Pashtun interests.

Chapter 8, "Musharraf's Lost Moment: Political Expediency and Authoritarian Rule." After the 9/11 attack, Gen. Musharraf pretended to curb jihadism but only did the minimum (making promises and handing over a few al Qaeda leaders) to continue getting U.S. funding. The Pakistan ISI saw the Taliban as its only Afghan ally against India, and it helped them regroup in Pakistan's FATA region. Even as the ISI was helping the CIA run down al Qaeda leaders in Pakistan cities, it was providing training bases for Islamist militants preparing for attacks on Indian troops in Kashmir. Gen. Musharraf used Bush's War on Terror to strengthen the military's dominance over democratic forces, organizing his own political party (MLP-Q) to help legitimize the 1999 coup. In the October 2002 elections, only the alliance of six religious parties (known as the MMA) was allowed to hold rallies. The religious parties had the state machine at their disposal since they helped the military fend off the democratic opposition, at least until 2008. However, President Bush refused to tie U.S. aid to democratic reforms. In Uzbekistan and Tajikistan as well, Rashid argues, repressive regimes are backed unconditionally by the U.S. for strategic reasons, which will have disastrous future consequences.

Ch. 12, "Taliban Resurgent." After the Taliban's defeat in 2001/2, the militants were given safe haven in Pakistan by the military and a range of Islamic groups. From the standpoint of the Pakistan military elite, obsessed with India and fearing an India-backed government in Kabul, the Taliban had to be the

future of Afghanistan. The ISI was surprised that the U.S. did not commit its ground forces in the campaign against the Taliban, choosing instead to leave the ground fighting mostly to Northern Alliance forces while providing aerial support. This was taken as a sign that the U.S. had no interest in taking charge of Afghanistan, and would leave fairly soon. The Taliban forces were told to bide their time in Pakistan safe areas. After the JUI won political control of both the NWFP (North-West Frontier Province) and Balochistan province in the 2002 elections, these areas as well as FATA (the Federally Administered Tribal Areas) were freely used by Arab and Central Asian fighters as well as by the Taliban for training and military operations in Afghanistan and Kashmir. The veteran Islamist warlord Gulbuddin Hikmetyar returned from Iran in 2003 and allied with both the Taliban and al Qaeda without joining either. Quetta (Pak.) became the main Taliban base for cross-border operations in Afghanistan. Militants simply terrorized their fellow Pashtuns into cooperation. The presidential elections of Nov. 2004 formally legitimated Hamid Karzai's Afghan presidency while diminishing the warlord presence in the cabinet. But Karzai did not have the resources the warlords did to counter Taliban operations outside Kabul.

Ch. 13, "Al Qaeda's Bolt-Hole." (*Handout pp. 265-267.*) After Dec. 2001, the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) became a new base for al Qaeda. Historically, the juridical autonomy of the FATA goes back to the colonial era. It's ruled by the Pakistan president through the governor of the NWFP, who appoints "political agents" for different FATA areas. Taliban fighters ignore the 1893 Durand Line established by the British, which Afghanistan has never officially recognized, and move freely between Afghanistan and Pakistan. The U.S. was unsuccessful in getting Musharraf to go after them. Currently, the Taliban are imposing harsh Islamist codes on village communities in Waziristan, eliminating the tribal leaders. In 2006, the Pakistan military tried to calm North and South Waziristan by making peace deals, telling the U.S. that the Taliban were Pashtun nationalists with no connections with al Qaeda. But the Taliban stepped up its attacks on U.S. forces. Moreover, Rashid observes, "almost all latter-day al Qaeda terrorist plots around the world had a FATA connection."