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How the 'good war' turned bad

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DESCENT INTO CHAOS: THE UNITED STATES AND THE FAILURE OF NATION BUILDING IN PAKISTAN, AFGHANISTAN, AND CENTRAL ASIA, by Ahmed Rashid, Viking (2008) 544 pages, $27.95

News coming out of Afghanistan and Pakistan in recent months has unsettled many assumptions about the U.S. war on terror.

To most casual observers of the war on terror, Afghanistan served until recently as a reassuring contrast to the grim and bewildering conflict in Iraq -- the ?good war? as opposed to the ?bad war?.

Unlike Iraq, Afghanistan offered a war which was unambiguously undertaken in response to the 9/11 attacks. The framing of the war on terror in Afghanistan presented obvious good guys (the secular democratic government of Hamid Karzai) and bad guys (al Qaeda and the Taliban). Above all, Afghanistan seemed to be a success story for peace and democracy.

Only in recent months has this optimistic narrative been challenged in the mainstream press. The resurgence of the Taliban and the perceived danger of Afghanistan turning into a failed ?narco-state? have led both U.S. presidential candidates to call for increased troops and resources to stabilise the country.

News from Pakistan, supposedly a key U.S. ally in the war on terror, has been even more worrisome. New evidence has surfaced linking the country?s powerful intelligence service to support for Islamic militant groups and to the Jul. 7 bombing of the Indian embassy in Kabul.

Although these developments may be disturbing, Pakistani journalist Ahmed Rashid makes the case that they should not be at all surprising.

In his new book, *Descent into Chaos: The United States and the Failure of Nation Building in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia* (Viking, 2008), Rashid demonstrates that the failures and contradictions of U.S. policy in the region have been visible from the beginning of the war on terror. He contends that if the media and policymakers have only recently discovered these problems, they have nothing to blame but their own neglect.

Rashid?s account stresses the interdependence of politics throughout the region, and begins by relating Afghanistan?s recent history as a battlefield for proxy wars between other powers.

The U.S. support for the mujahideen against the USSR in the 1980s is well known. But the rise of Islamic militancy in Afghanistan, Rashid shows, must be viewed not only in the context of the Cold War but also of the rivalry between India and Pakistan.

To combat Indian influence in Afghanistan, Pakistan?s Inter-Services Intelligence Agency (ISI) has long supported the Taliban and other militant groups -- as part of a broader policy that also led it to support similar groups in Kashmir.

The U.S. largely turned a blind eye to these practices during the Bill Clinton administration. After 9/11, however, the George W. Bush administration made Pakistan a key ally in the war on terror, and demanded that President Pervez Musharraf reign in the ISI.

But Musharraf was unwilling to do so, perhaps sensing that he would be unlikely to win a power struggle with the military and the ISI. As a result the Pakistan played a duplicitous game with the Bush administration. They publicly aligned themselves with the war on terror -- and cracked down occasionally when pressed by the U.S. -- while continuing to clandestinely support the Taliban and other militant groups.

Al Qaeda and its allies found sanctuary in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of Pakistan bordering Afghanistan, in which the central government exercised almost no control. A September 2006 agreement legitimized Taliban power in the Waziristan region of the tribal areas, and this safe haven was to prove crucial in the ultimate resurgence of the Taliban.

In a case of chickens coming home to roost, the militant fundamentalists that the ISI has nurtured now pose an increasing threat to the Pakistani state. The prospect of a nuclear-armed Pakistan falling to radical Islamic forces has led Washington to continue to support a weakened and unpopular Musharraf. But the coalition government?s move to impeach Musharraf Thursday is only the latest in a series of signs that the one-time strongman is not a viable long- term solution for the country.

As for Afghanistan, Rashid documents how mismanagement and neglect squandered the initial wave of goodwill that followed the 2001 U.S. invasion.

From the beginning, the United States was already looking ahead to Iraq, and was therefore unwilling to devote much blood or resources to Afghanistan. The result -- with ultimately disastrous effects -- was what former state department official James Dobbins called ?the least resourced American nation-building effort in our history?.

Then Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld -- skeptical of nation-building in general -- refused to expand the U.N.-mandated International Security Assistance Force to provide security outside of Kabul, and the U.S. dragged its feet in disarming and reintegrating local militias. This meant that security at the local level was provided not by the state but by warlords, undercutting the power of Karzai?s central government.

Rashid calls Rumsfeld?s ?warlord strategy? his most fatal mistake in Afghanistan. In addition to hindering the development of a centralized state, the move also aided the Taliban, which had first gained popularity during the civil war of the 1990s with a law-and-order message that resonated with a population weary of the abuses of local warlords.

The lack of troops on the ground proved harmful in other ways as well. Most notably, it forced U.S. and NATO forces to rely heavily on airpower as its primary military tool. The large number of civilian casualties resulting from reliance on air strikes alienated the Afghani people and handed an enormous propaganda coup to the Taliban.

Rashid explains that a major cause of the massive rise in opium cultivation in Afghanistan is the lack of funds for development projects and protection for civilians in the countryside. The Western response to this problem is to pay farmers to eradicate their poppies -- but without creating any alternate source of livelihood for the farmers, this could never be an effective solution.

By 2006, the opium sector accounted for 46 percent of Afghanistan?s gross domestic product -- with much of the money going to fund the Taliban insurgency.

The situations in Afghanistan and Pakistan may have already deteriorated, but Rashid sees the potential for the rest of the region to get much worse. The next trouble spot, he argues, will likely be Uzbekistan, where the brutal dictatorship of Islam Karimov has resisted all calls for reform. Abetted by a U.S. policy that made cooperation in the war on terror a higher priority than political liberalisation, and made a practice of ?rendering? detainees for intelligence purposes to a regime known for such atrocities as boiling its prisoners alive.

In retrospect, Rashid argues that a viable U.S. policy would have required ?nothing less than a Western-led Marshall Plan for the region and a commitment that would have to be measured in not months or years but decades?.

He does not say whether this sort of solution would still be feasible, or whether seven years of ineptitude have squandered any chance at satisfactory resolution of the region?s problems. Regardless, it seems unlikely that there exists sufficient political will in the West for such an ambitious nation- building project, with Washington?s attention focused on the recent debacle in Iraq and a potential confrontation with Iran.

But if there is to be any hope in the region going forward, policymakers should study the lessons in Rashid?s sobering book. If it cannot point towards any easy solutions, it can at least help us grasp the roots and magnitude of the problems ahead.

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