

Descent into Chaos – How the war against Islamic extremism is being lost in
Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia by Ahmed Rashid.
Allen Lane 2008.

Ahmed Rashid is Pakistan's leading journalist, but he is also probably the best informed observer of events in his region in the world. His previous books, particularly *Taliban and Jihad*, were ground-breaking and provided information on and insight into both subjects to a depth that had not previously been widely available. As a journalist he has known and worked with many of the key individuals in recent Pakistani and Afghan history, and his intimate knowledge of events gives his writing an authority that few others possess.

In *Descent into Chaos*, Ahmed Rashid details the systemic failure of the United States to do what was necessary in Afghanistan, a failure that started during the Clinton administration and has merely been exacerbated during the disastrous presidency of George W Bush; he describes the cavalier way in which the Pentagon, under the non-leadership of Donald Rumsfeld, failed to do the right thing at the right time with appropriate troop numbers, and he also illustrates the cynicism of the CIA's engagement with a variety of tribal warlords whose brutal treatment of their own countrymen and women almost defies description.

Rashid writes of the brave and decent but weak and indecisive President of Afghanistan, Hamid Karzai, whom he has known for many years and whose errors of judgement, particularly with regard to facing down specific warlords, or removing them from governmental or regional positions, has made difficult situations much worse. But perhaps the greatest amount of material concerns Pakistan which has played the United States for a patsy since 9/11, reaping huge financial rewards for its armed forces and credibility for its erstwhile soldier president, Pervez Musharraf, at the same time as its secret service, the ISI, actively supported Taliban elements fighting the Americans and carrying out acts of terrorism.

The grimmest part of the book, and the most portentous, is that which focuses on the federally administered tribal areas, the FATA, to which the leaders of Al Qaeda escaped from the Tora Bora mountains, where they, and the Taliban have re-grouped with ISI practical and logistical support and which is now the principal focus for destabilising attacks within Afghanistan and Pakistan. This area, Ahmed Rashid argues, more than any other, poses a huge threat to the entire region, and he is far from optimistic that the threat will be satisfactorily dealt with, if the past US and NATO record is anything to go by.

Descent into Chaos is essential reading for anyone who wishes to be aware of the true nature of the threat facing the West from Central Asia as well as being a damning indictment of recent US foreign and military policy in the region.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh