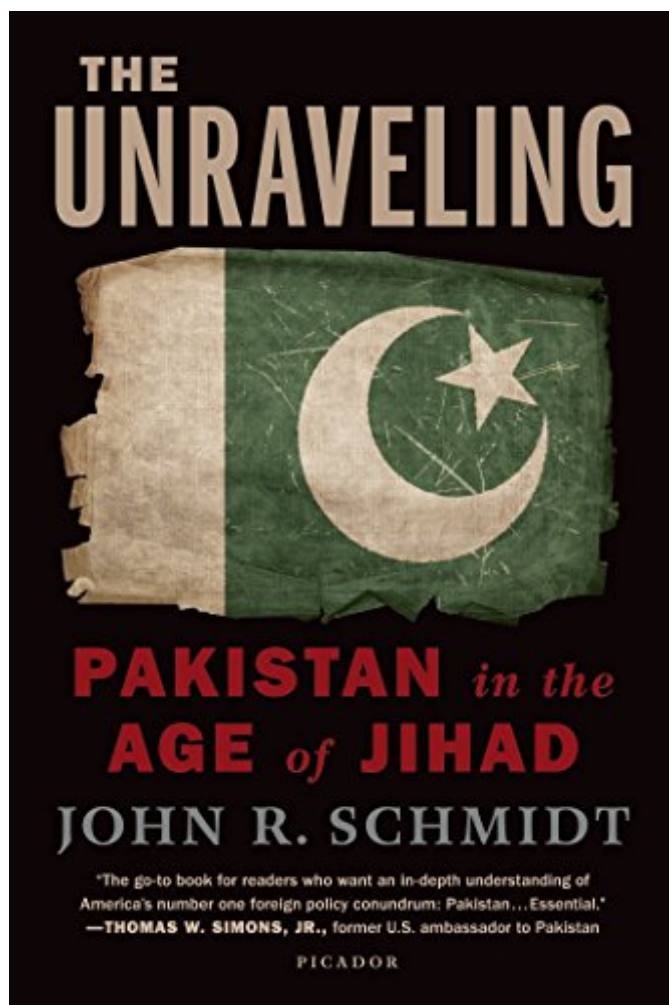


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The Unraveling: Pakistan In The Age Of Jihad



Synopsis

How did a nation founded as a homeland for South Asian Muslims, most of whom follow a tolerant nonthreatening form of Islam, become a haven for Al Qaeda and a rogue's gallery of domestic jihadist and sectarian groups? In this groundbreaking history of Pakistan's involvement with radical Islam, John R. Schmidt, the senior U.S political analyst in Pakistan in the years before 9/11, places the blame squarely on the rulers of the country, who thought they could use Islamic radicals to advance their foreign policy goals without having to pay a steep price. This strategy worked well at first--in Afghanistan during the anti-Soviet jihad, in Kashmir in support of a local uprising against Indian rule, and again in Afghanistan in backing the Taliban in the Afghan civil war. But the government's plans would begin to unravel in the wake of 9/11, when the rulers' support for the U.S. war on terror caused many of their jihadist allies to turn against them. Today the army generals and feudal politicians who run Pakistan are by turns fearful of the consequences of going after these groups and hopeful that they can still be used to advance the state's interests. The Unraveling is the clearest account yet of the complex, dangerous relationship between the leaders of Pakistan and jihadist groups and how the rulers' decisions have led their nation to the brink of disaster and put other nations at great risk. Can they save their country or will we one day find ourselves confronting the first nuclear-armed jihadist state?

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Customer Reviews

I was fortunate enough to be a student of the author when his book came out, and while I am usually annoyed when professors put their own books on the reading list, this is one that I was happy to buy. While so many books in the war on terror focus exclusively on the military side of the house, this book's strong point is in focusing the perspective from the State Department and much more political in nature. The author is clearly well versed in the country and issues, and in taking his class can attest to his even and fair handling of the material. It is a generally quick read, but he really is a great author and keeps the story moving. I like it, too, because the book stays true to its title: it focuses on Pakistan, and doesn't get distracted by events in Afghanistan - these events are important and briefly discussed, but the author keeps the focus on Pakistan. All in all, this is an excellent addition to any library on Pakistan and the region.

John Schmidt has the connections necessary to lend his narrative authenticity, many years spent in the Foreign Service, three of them in Pakistan, and marriage to a former Ambassador to Pakistan. But he does not lean heavily on those credentials but instead displays his command of the facts (where there are facts) that govern the political, cultural, and religious life of modern Pakistan. To a western mind, not acquainted with the history and geography, to say nothing of the tribal, governmental, military, and religious cultures within Pakistan, Schmidt's command of the varied and shifting history of Pakistan is truly amazing. Few will finish the book with any sense that they have mastered the material presented. Nonetheless Schmidt manages to justify his book's title by showing how the various structures that have provided some measure of stability are "Unraveling" as a result of political misjudgment, military paranoia over India's designs, infiltration of jihadist organizations, radicalization of local religious entities, and of course, interference from outside sources like the United States, India, and Afghanistan. I have only two complaints to register, one minor the other more serious I believe. Schmidt's narrative, while never dull or uninteresting to this reader, is too often repetitive. That may simply be a product of the complex history he is dealing with. It may be necessary to connect things already spoken of in one era with events in later eras, however I found myself thinking too frequently, I've been over this before. The more serious criticism is Schmidt's frequent (that isn't a strong enough word) reliance upon unnamed sources, the Pakistani General close to the decision makers, the U.S. State Department colleague who was privy

to secret negotiations, etc. In the case of Pakistani's I can understand the need to preserve their anonymity; to not do so might jeopardize their lives. But it should not be necessary to conceal, on such a wholesale basis the U.S. sources of information. It has been my practice, when encountering a book that leans so heavily on "hidden sources" to simply lay it aside as not credible. Schmidt runs the risk, I believe, that some may do so with his work. However, I think his credentials, his obvious scholarship, and the story he has to tell overcomes my objections at least to the extent that I believe his work should constitute one of the reliable sources those seeking to understand Pakistan can turn to.

Great book - a thorough review of the history and personalities that created Pakistan and got it where it is today. Great to hear the first hand conversations with senior military and diplomats - their private perspective is enlightening!

After years of piecing together Pakistani political history from news snippets, this book was a relief. It gives a thorough run-down on Pakistani political history since just before the creation of the state. It brings in the right level of detail about India, Afghanistan, and the US, as the major drivers of Pakistan's foreign policy. It also focuses on the motivation and mindset of the different parties, which can be very foreign to those familiar with Western political systems, but which is absolutely critical to understanding Pakistani actions. And it's exceedingly well written--I was thoroughly engaged the whole time. John Schmidt certainly knows whereof he speaks, having worked at a high level with the State department in Pakistan. My only quibble was that I would have liked a glossary of political and religious groups, and their acronyms. I made my own and found myself referring to it frequently.

I am not impressed with *The Unraveling*. It is a biased review of one person's own personal impressions, backed with diplomatic language from the US State Department. I picked up the book during a trip thinking that it would make a good addition to the research that I was doing on Pakistan's battle with extremist organizations, only to find that the writer put the entire blame for the problem at the feet of Pakistan's intelligence service that since 9/11 has been dogged by the US government. He seemed to go to great extents to not mention the mainstream political parties that support, shelter and encourage these same jihadi groups in their provinces so that he could make the entire base of his argument blaming the ISI. This is more of a memoir of a mid-level diplomat than a true account of the problems that Pakistan as a nation struggles with.

I am an American of Pakistani origin and picked up the book on a Sunday at Barnes & Noble naturally intrigued off its title. The book seems written from a single-dimensional political-science view. That may well have been its intention. But for a layman reader it lacked in dimension. It read like a who-is-who chronology of political parties and jihadist groups in Pakistani contemporary history. I did find it educating and a fair discourse on history. Although Mr. Schmidt makes mention of it, I felt that the Saudi and US involvement in fanning religious ideology for resistance in the Afghan-Russia war, such as was illustrated in the movies Charlie Wilson's War, was downplayed. Mr. Schmidt's compilation of facts and historical events was impressive. Overall, I found myself agreeing with him. The leaders, and ultimately the people there, are fully responsible for what's happened and its ominous posture.

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