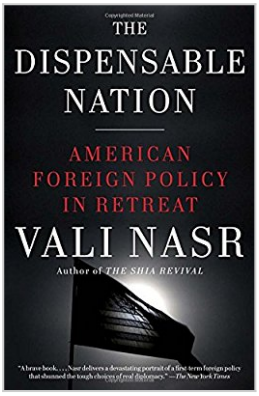

The Dispensable Nation: American Foreign Policy in Retreat

By Vali Nasr

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A *Financial Times* Best Book of the Year

Forcefully persuasive, *The Dispensable Nation* is a game changer for America as it charts a course in the Muslim world, Asia, and beyond. Vali Nasr shows how the Obama administration missed its chance to improve U.S. relations with the Middle East by continuing to pursue its predecessor's questionable strategies there. Nasr takes readers behind the scenes at the State Department and reveals how the specter of terrorism and the new administration's fear of political backlash crippled diplomatic efforts to boost America's foundering credibility with world leaders. Meanwhile, the true economic threats, China and Russia, were quietly expanding their influence in the region. Nasr argues that, as a result of the U.S.'s flawed strategy, a second Arab Spring is brewing—not a hopeful clamor for democracy but rage at the United States for its foreign policy of drones and assassinations.

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Editorial Review

Review
“A brave book. . . . Nasr delivers a devastating portrait of a first-term foreign policy that shunned the tough choices of real diplomacy. . . . *The Dispensable Nation* constitutes important reading. . . . It nails the drift away from the art of diplomacy—with its painful give-and-take—toward a U.S. foreign policy driven by the Pentagon, intelligence agencies and short-term political calculus. It holds the president to account for his zigzags from Kabul to Jerusalem. . . . Its core message is: Diplomacy is tough and carries a price, but the price is higher when it is abandoned.”
—*The New York Times*

“An original, powerful, and provocative critique of American foreign policy under President Obama.”
—George Packer, author of *The Assassins’ Gate: America in Iraq*

“Nasr delivers a sharp, sober, fast-paced and absolutely riveting critique of President Obama’s policies in the Middle East and Afghanistan.”
—Robert Kagan, Senior Fellow, Brookings Institution and author of *The World America Made*

“An indispensable book. Taking us into the secretive world of high-level American foreign policy, Vali Nasr shares astounding, previously unrevealed details about the Obama administration’s dealings with Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran. Nasr doesn’t just spill secrets—he also charts a path forward, advancing an insightful prescription for how the United States can regain its lost influence. This provocative story is a must-read for anyone who cares about America’s role in the world.”
—Rajiv Chandrasekaran, author of *Little America* and *Imperial Life in the Emerald City*

“A pugnacious book. . . . *The Dispensable Nation* is strongest when Nasr lays into the Obama administration’s policies in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran, three countries he knows exceptionally well, and on which he worked day-to-day at the State Department.”
—*The New York Review of Books*

“Vali Nasr was in the room during key moments of the Obama administration’s first two years as it faced some of its most important foreign policy challenges. His portrayal of strategic confusion inside Obama’s White House is devastating and persuasive. Nasr writes with the dispassion of one of the United States’ leading experts on the Middle East and South Asia and with the insider knowledge he gained as a senior adviser to Richard Holbrooke, the legendary diplomat. Nasr asserts that the Obama White House didn’t really believe in diplomacy in its dealings with the Afghans and Pakistanis and he makes his case with great cogency and clarity in this indispensable book.”
—Peter Bergen, author of *Manhunt: The Ten-Year Search for bin Laden, from 9/11 to Abbottabad*

“*The Dispensable Nation* is an important wake-up call by a thoughtful, astute and deeply knowledgeable scholar and policymaker. Anyone interested in the Middle East, China, or the future of American power should read it immediately and think hard about its message.”
—Anne-Marie Slaughter, Bert G. Kerstetter ‘66 University Professor of Politics and International Affairs at Princeton University and former Director of Policy Planning, U.S. Department of State, 2009-2011

“An impressive *tour d’horizon* which includes a personally frank eulogy to Richard Holbrooke’s failed

efforts to shape U.S. policy in Afghanistan, revealing insights into White House vs. State Department collisions over U.S. strategy, and a sweeping review of the escalating geopolitical challenges the U.S. needs to address more intelligently in the Middle East, the Far East, and especially Iran. Gutsy, intriguing, and challenging."
—Zbigniew Brzezinski

"Vali Nasr is without peer in explaining how and why political order is crumbling across the Middle East, and how and why China may reap the spoils. Along the way, he lays out in never-before-told, granular detail why President Obama's first term was such a disappointment regarding foreign policy."
—Robert D. Kaplan, chief geopolitical analyst, Stratfor, and author of *The Revenge of Geography*

"[A] vivid firsthand account of White House policymaking...Nasr's shrewd, very readable analyses of byzantine Middle Eastern geo-politics are superb."
—*Publishers Weekly*

"An informed, smoothly argued brief that will surely rattle windows at the White House."
—*Kirkus Reviews,* starred review

About the Author

Vali Nasr is Dean of the Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins University and the bestselling author of *The Shia Revival* and *Forces of Fortune*. From 2009 to 2011, he served as Senior Advisor to Ambassador Richard Holbrooke, the Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan. A Nonresident Fellow at the Brookings Institution and a contributor to Bloomberg View, he lives in Washington, D.C.

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Afghanistan

The Good War Gone Bad

In late 2011, fighting in Afghanistan and frozen relations with Pakistan were endangering the president's plans to wrap up the Afghan war. The administration decided that it could use China's help. After all, the Chinese should want a stable Afghanistan, and should be worried about Pakistan, too. Beijing had made fresh investments in Afghanistan's mining sector, which appeared set for massive growth after the 2010 discovery of vast new mineral riches.1 And China had long and deep economic ties with Pakistan. So the administration asked a veteran diplomat, an old China hand, to reach out to the Chinese leadership. The diplomat made the rounds in Beijing, meeting with the Chinese president, premier, foreign minister, and a host of other political players. Their answer was clear and unequivocal: "This is your problem. You made this mess. In Afghanistan more war has made things much worse, and in Pakistan things were not so bad before you started poking around. We have interests in this area, but they do not include pulling your chestnuts out of the fire. We will look after our own interests in our own way." In short, "You made your own bed, now lie in it." Once they were done pushing back, they invariably asked, "What is your strategy

there, anyway?"

Afghanistan is the "good war." That was what Barack Obama said on the campaign trail. It was a war of necessity that we had to wage in order to defeat al-Qaeda and ensure that Afghanistan never harbored terrorists again.2 Obama took up promoting the Afghan war at least in part as an election-year tactic, to protect himself against perennial accusations that Democrats are soft on national security issues. Branding Afghanistan as a "war of necessity" gave him cover to denounce the Iraq war as a "war of choice" that must be brought to an end.

Obama's stance was widely understood at home and abroad to mean that America would do all it could in Afghanistan—commit more money and send more troops—to finish off the Taliban and build a strong democratic state capable of standing up to terrorism.

Four years later, President Obama is no longer making the case for the "good war." Instead, he is fast washing his hands of it. It is a popular position at home, where many Americans, including many who voted for Obama in 2008, want nothing more to do with war. They are disillusioned by the ongoing instability in Iraq and Afghanistan and tired of eleven years of fighting on two fronts. They do not believe that war was the right solution to terrorism and have stopped putting stock in the fearmongering that the Bush administration used to fuel its foreign policy. There is a growing sense that America has no interests in Afghanistan vital enough to justify a major ground presence.

It was to court public opinion that Obama first embraced the war in Afghanistan. And when public opinion changed, he was quick to declare victory and call the troops back home. His actions from start to finish were guided by politics and they played well at home. But abroad, the stories we tell to justify our on-again, off-again approach to this war do not ring true to friend or foe. They know the truth: that we are leaving Afghanistan to its own fate. Leaving even as the demons of regional chaos that first beckoned us there are once again rising to threaten our security.

When President Obama took office, the Afghan war was already eight years old. America went to Afghanistan in October 2001, less than a month after 9/11, to eliminate al-Qaeda. A quick victory made it possible to imagine a hopeful future there after more than two decades of civil war.

With international help, Afghanistan got a new constitution, a new government, and a new president whom the West celebrated as an enlightened partner in the effort to rebuild the country. President Hamid Karzai cut a dashing figure, debonair and progressive, the avatar of America's goal to free the Muslim world from the clutches of extremism. Even the designer Tom Ford had something to contribute, anointing Karzai "the chicest man on the planet today."3

Meanwhile, the Taliban and al-Qaeda had retreated to Pakistan,4 seeking refuge in the country's northwesternmost region: the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), an uncertainly governed and ruggedly mountainous region the size of Massachusetts that is home to about 4 million Pashtun tribespeople. Consequently, while Washington was looking to build a new democratic and forward-looking Afghanistan to act as a bulwark against terrorism, it also relied on a close relationship with Pakistan to hound al-Qaeda in its FATA lair. Billions of dollars went into Afghanistan and Pakistan during the Bush presidency, supporting not only counterterrorism efforts but also democracy promotion, schooling for women and girls, and rural development.

But the investment failed to pay the hoped-for dividends. Long before President Obama took office, things had begun to change. By 2006 the Afghan government's stride had slowed, and there was little doubt that

war and instability had returned. In that year the number of attacks by returning Taliban and al-Qaeda fighters rose 400 percent and the number of those killed in such attacks was up by 800 percent.5 In June 2006 more international troops died in Afghanistan than in the Iraq conflict, more than in any other month since the war started.6 The Taliban were making a ferocious comeback against what they saw as an American occupation and a vulnerable puppet government in Kabul.

By 2008 the fighting had morphed into a full-blown insurgency. The United Nations used to issue security maps for aid workers on which green marked safe areas and yellow those areas with some security problems, and red was used for dangerous areas under insurgent control. By 2008 large areas of the maps were in red. Many Afghans thought that the Taliban looked poised for victory, and when it comes to insurgencies, what the locals think often dictates the outcome. One Western observer back from Kabul in mid-2008 said every shopkeeper in the city (the most well-protected part of Afghanistan) thought that Taliban fighters would be in the capital by the year's end. Afghanistan was fast slipping into chaos.

Everything about Afghanistan was a challenge—its rugged geography, its convoluted ethnic makeup, labyrinthine social structure, and jealous tribalisms, its byzantine politics, and the bitter legacy of decades consumed by war and occupation. But the biggest problem lay across the border: Pakistan.

The Taliban operated out of the FATA, but its leadership had set up shop farther south in Quetta. They used the Pakistani city's relative safety to regroup and orchestrate the insurgency in Afghanistan. Taliban commanders recruited foot soldiers from seminaries across Pakistan's Pashtun areas and ran training camps, hospitals, and bomb-making factories in towns and villages a stone's throw from the Afghanistan-Pakistan border.

Moreover, since the Taliban's formation in 1994 the insurgent organization has maintained close ties with Pakistan's intelligence agency and received financial and military support from Islamabad. Pakistani support sustained Taliban military offensives throughout the 1990s, and even after the U.S. offensive broke the Taliban's hold on Afghanistan that relationship continued.

Pakistan has viewed the Taliban as a strategic asset that could keep India out of Afghanistan and under Pakistan's control. That makes the Afghan insurgency a regional problem. It is hard enough to fight an insurgency, but one that has a safe haven to retreat to within a sympathetic population and can rely on the financial, intelligence, and military support of a neighboring country is a tougher challenge still, by orders of magnitude. The Taliban and al-Qaeda would fight in Afghanistan, and when things got too hot, they would hasten south across the border to tend their wounds, recruit and train fresh fighters, and plan for more war. Indeed, the collective leadership of the Taliban became popularly known as the Quetta Shura, after the city where it met. The Afghanistan fight was starting to eerily resemble Vietnam, with Pakistan acting roughly like Laos, Cambodia, and Maoist China all rolled into one. The war was taking on a new, expensive shape, one that needed urgent attention.

By the time President Obama moved into the Oval Office, the Taliban juggernaut looked unstoppable. They had adopted a flexible, decentralized structure that reported to the leadership in Pakistan, but organized locally. There was a national political infrastructure in place too, with shadow governors and district leaders for every Afghan province. In some cases, this Taliban presence was nominal—the Taliban are almost exclusively a Pashtun phenomenon and do not reach into every corner of multiethnic Afghanistan—but elsewhere the Taliban were in control.

The Taliban had a strength that belied their numbers. The U.S. government estimated that in 2009 the Taliban were no more than 35,000 strong. Of these, only a core of at most 2,000 were battle-hardened

veterans of Afghanistan's earlier wars. A larger number, maybe 5,000 to 10,000, were in the fight to avenge government abuse or the death of kith and kin in U.S. raids and aerial bombings. The largest number of fighters, 20,000 or more, were mercenaries, in it for a few dollars a day.

The Taliban had become politically more savvy and militarily more lethal.7 Gone was their objection to pictures and music, and in came the use of both in their recruiting videos. In their statements, the new Taliban claimed to be open to women going to school. Talk of chopping off hands and lopping off heads in public was put aside.

Other beliefs, more ominously, were put aside as well. Steve Coll, the journalist and longtime observer of Afghanistan, writes that in the 1980s, when Afghan warriors were battling Soviet occupation, the CIA was desperately seeking someone to set off a massive vehicle bomb inside the 1.6-mile-long Salang Tunnel. The tunnel is a crucial north-south link running beneath a difficult pass in the towering Hindu Kush mountain range, and blowing it up would have cut the main Soviet supply route. In order to be effective, the bomb would need to go off mid-tunnel, meaning certain death for its operator. In effect, the CIA was looking for an Afghan suicide bomber.8 No one volunteered. Suicide, said the Afghans, was a grievous sin, and quite against their religion. And yet, fast-forward to 2009, and there had been more than 180 suicide bomb attacks in Afghanistan.9 The Taliban had evolved to make Afghanistan an even more dangerous place.

Shortly after he took office, President Obama appointed Richard Holbrooke as his point man on Afghanistan—his special representative—to help him quickly gauge the situation in that country and come up with a strategy to deal with it. At the time the military was urgently lobbying the new president for more troops, needed to hold the line against the Taliban while Washington thought through the problem. Obama asked for a quick strategy review—a quick read of the situation—and tapped former CIA and Clinton White House Pakistan point man Bruce Riedel to lead the effort.10 The review took sixty days, and its findings (popularly known as the Riedel Report) argued for beefing up American troop presence in Afghanistan, "fully resourcing" counterinsurgency operations there, and getting tough with Pakistan. Holbrooke, who served on Riedel's commission, disagreed. He did not favor committing America to fully resourced counterinsurgency and thought America would get more out of Pakistan through engagement.

Riedel met the president alone to brief him on his report's findings. Holbrooke thought the president should have heard from more people. Absent a proper debate on the report's findings and recommendations, thought Holbrooke, the president moved too quickly to deepen the war.

In February 2009, Obama announced that he was sending 17,000 more troops to Afghanistan, buying enough time for the president and his advisers to determine their next steps. Soon after, he also asked his commander in Afghanistan, General Stanley McChrystal, to review the war strategy and outline what we needed to do to win.11 As General McChrystal prepared his review, the National Security Council (NSC) pulled together facts, figures, opinion, and analysis from across the government (mostly from the Pentagon, State Department, CIA, and U.S. Agency for International Development) in order to prepare the president to evaluate McChrystal's recommendations. The goal was to place before President Obama a set of clear options from which he could choose.

The Obama administration was facing a bedeviling two-headed problem. Even as the Taliban were regrouping and growing more formidable, our local partner, the Karzai government, was proving to be weak and ill suited for the task of democracy building.12 The shine had come off Hamid Karzai even before Obama took office. In the administration and Congress's minds the smartly dressed, enlightened leader of a

new Afghanistan had somewhere along the line been reduced to a venal, corrupt, and unreliable partner, and as such a chief reason why the Taliban were doing so well. Whatever the “new” Afghanistan was supposed to look like, in the real, existing Afghanistan, clans and extended families mattered. Karzai’s clan, unfortunately, looked a lot like the Sopranos. The president’s brother Ahmad Wali was actually the fixer in Kandahar, a Taliban stronghold. He worked notoriously with both the CIA and the Taliban and had his hand in every deal and all the political wrangling in that wayward city. Karzai also patronized an array of corrupt local grandees with ties to the drug trade. They bolstered his rule and he gave them the means to line their pockets while abusing the local population.13

Aid workers, members of Congress, ordinary Afghans, and ordinary Americans alike were angry and frustrated, but the situation regarding corruption tended to be misunderstood. Yes, there was waste and graft, and millions were embezzled. But it was also true that Afghanistan was still a tribal society in which tribal leaders and local bigwigs saw it as their duty to take from the state resources for their community. Karzai felt the need to satisfy that demand to survive at the top. That sort of corruption is not alien to politics, and certainly not in Afghanistan.14

Users Review

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