

Building schools does more than missiles to undermine terrorism

Since 9/11, Westerners have tried two approaches to fight terrorism in Pakistan, President Bush's and Greg Mortenson's.

Bush has focused on military force and provided more than \$10 billion – an extra-ordinary sum in the foreign-aid world – to the highly unpopular government of President Pervez Musharraf. This approach has failed: The back-lash has radicalized Pakistan's tribal areas so that they now nurture terrorists in ways that they never did before 9/11.

Mortenson, a frumpy, genial man from Montana, takes a diametrically opposite approach, and he has spent less than one-ten-thousandth as much as the Bush administration. He builds schools in isolated parts of Pakistan and Afghanistan, working closely with Muslim clerics and even praying with them at times.

The only thing that Mortenson blows up are boulders that fall onto remote roads and block access to his schools.

Mortenson has become a legend in the region, his picture sometimes dangling like a talisman from rearview mirrors, and his work has struck a chord in America as well. His superb book about his schools, *Three Cups of Tea*, came out in 2006 and initially wasn't reviewed by most major newspapers. Yet propelled by word of mouth, the book became a publishing sensation: It has spent the last 74 weeks on the paperback best-seller list, regularly in the No.1 spot.

Now Mortenson is fending off several dozen film offers. "My concern is that a movie might endanger the well-being of our students," he explains.

Mortenson found his calling in 1993 after he failed in an attempt to climb K2, a Himalayan peak, and stumbled weakly into a poor Muslim village. The peasants nursed him back to health, and he promised to repay them by building the village a school.

Scrounging the money was a night-mare – his 580 fundraising letters to prominent people generated one check, from Tom Brokaw – and Mortenson ended up selling his beloved climbing equipment and car. But when the school was built, he kept going. Now his aid group, the Central Asia Institute, has 74 schools in operation. His focus is educating girls.

To get a school, villagers must provide the land and the labor to assure a local "buy-in," and so far the Taliban have not bothered his schools. One anti-American mob rampaged through Baharak, Afghanistan, attacking aid groups – but stopped at the school that local people had just built with Mortenson. "This is our school," the mob leaders decided, and they left it intact.

Mortenson has had setbacks, including being kidnapped for eight days in Pakistan's wild Waziristan region. It would be naive to think that a few dozen schools will turn the tide in Afghanistan or Pakistan.

Still, he says that the Taliban recruits the poor and illiterate, and he also argues that when women are educated they are more likely to restrain their sons. Five of his teachers are former Taliban, and he says it was their mothers who persuaded them to leave the Taliban; that is one reason he is passionate about educating girls.

So I have this fantasy: Suppose that the United States focused less on blowing things up in Pakistan's tribal areas and more on working through local aid groups to build schools, simultaneously cutting tariffs on Pakistani and Afghan manufactured exports. There would be no immediate payback, but a better-educated and more economically vibrant Pakistan would probably be more resistant to extremism.

"Schools are a much more effective bang for the buck than missiles or chasing some Taliban around the country," says Mortenson, who is an Army veteran.

Each Tomahawk missile that the United States fires in Afghanistan costs at least \$500,000. That's enough for local aid groups to build more than 20 schools, and in the long run those

schools probably do more to de-destroy the Taliban.

The Pentagon, which has a much better appreciation for the limits of military power than the Bush admin-i-stration as a whole, placed large or-ders for *Three Cups of Tea* and invited Mortenson to speak.

"I am convinced that the long-term solution to terrorism in general, and Afghanistan specifically, is educa-tion," Lt. Col. Christopher Kolenda, who works on the Afghan front lines, said in an e-mail in which he raved about Mortenson's work. "The con-flict here will not be won with bombs but with books. ... The thirst for edu-cation here is palpable."

Military force is essential in Afghanistan to combat the Taliban.

But over time, in Pakistan and Afghanistan alike, the best tonic against militant fundamentalism will be education and economic oppor-tu-nity.

So a lone Montanan staying at the cheapest guest houses has done more to advance U.S. interests in the region than the entire military and foreign policy apparatus of the Bush administration.

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