

Stones into Schools: Promoting Peace with Books, Not Bombs, in Afghanistan and Pakistan¹

Alice A. Booher²

In June 2009, the *Navy Times* carried a brief summary of the all-hands meeting of the Marine Corps Forces Special Operations Command (MarSOC) on May 28, 2009.³ The piece noted that the meeting was attended by Nobel Prize nominee Greg Mortenson,⁴ the author of *Stones into Schools: Promoting Peace with Books, Not Bombs, in Afghanistan and Pakistan*. Mortenson's earlier book, *Three Cups of Tea*,⁵ is required reading for MarSOC Marines, and he had been invited to speak to the Marines "about the importance of building relationships as part of an overall strategic plan in Afghanistan and Pakistan."⁶ The *Navy Times* article stated,

¹ GREG MORTENSON, STONES INTO SCHOOLS: PROMOTING PEACE WITH BOOKS, NOT BOMBS, IN AFGHANISTAN AND PAKISTAN (2009) [hereinafter STONES].

² Alice A. Booher is Counsel with the Board of Veterans' Appeals, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. She received her undergraduate degree from Butler University (1963) and her LLB and JD degrees from Indiana University (1966, 1967). A former foreign service officer, she has been an independent book reviewer and journalist for national print media for many years. She has been published in *Stars & Stripes*, *The Alliance Advocate*, *Pentagram*, *The Military Advocate*, *The OSS Society Newsletter*, *The OSS Society Journal*, *Ex-POW Bulletin*, *Proceedings*, *On Point: The Journal of Army History*, and *The Patriot*.

³ *Nobel-Winning Author Talks Afghanistan with MarSOC*, NAVY TIMES (Wash., D.C.), June 15, 2009, at 33.

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ GREG MORTENSON & DAVID OLIVER RELIN, THREE CUPS OF TEA: ONE MAN'S MISSION TO PROMOTE PEACE . . . ONE SCHOOL AT A TIME (2007) [hereinafter TEA]. The title of *Three Cups of Tea*, and the prevailing concept within this book, as well as in *Stones into Schools*, comes from a Balti (a tribal group, mostly in Shia in northeast Pakistan) proverb told to Mortenson by his friend Haji Ali: "The first time you share tea with a Balti, you are a stranger. The second time you take tea, you are an honored guest. The third time you share a cup of tea, you become family, and for our family, we are prepared to do anything, even die." *Id.* at 150. *Three Cups of Tea*, which was a number-one *New York Times* best seller and has been published in over forty-seven countries, has sold over four million copies as of July 2010. Greg Mortenson Biography as of July 2010, <http://www.threecupsoftea.com/wp-includes/documents/GMBio.pdf> (last visited Aug. 16, 2010) [hereinafter Biography].

⁶ *Nobel-Winning Author Talks Afghanistan with MarSOC*, *supra* note 3, at 33.

[I]n the past three years, the military has undergone “a huge learning curve” in Afghanistan.

“Instead of firepower, I call it brainpower,” [Mortenson] said. “I think, in many ways, the military is ahead of the State Department in setting standards to building relationships with the good people of Afghanistan. We obviously have to provide security, but also we need to prepare for the future.”⁷

As for Mortenson’s words and ideas being available to military leadership, his books are recommended reading for U.S. senior military commanders and also required reading for officers of the Norwegian War College, U.S. Special Forces deploying to Afghanistan, officers in counter-insurgency training, and Canadian Defense Ministry members.⁸ Mortenson has addressed myriad military bases and U.S. military service academies and has briefed senior officials at the Pentagon at their invitation.⁹

How this mountain climber and U.S. Army Veteran from Bozeman, Montana,¹⁰ came to have such a powerful voice, let alone perspective, is remarkable. More importantly, his message has become a mandate for civilian, military, and veteran constituencies alike. In sum, in 1993, Mortenson attempted to climb the world’s second highest mountain, K2, in the Karakoram range of northern Pakistan.¹¹ After more than seventy days on the mountain, lost, exhausted, unwell, and alone, he ended up in the small remote village of Korphe.¹² Taken in by the village chief, Haji Ali,¹³ and lovingly and generously provided with all the necessary items to recover by a village that itself had virtually

⁷ *Id.* (quoting Greg Mortenson).

⁸ Biography, *supra* note 5.

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ *Id.*; see STONES, *supra* note 1, at 113.

¹¹ TEA, *supra* note 5, at 7.

¹² *Id.* at 13, 25-26.

¹³ *Id.* at 24.

nothing, Mortenson vowed to repay the kindnesses of the villagers with what they needed most, a school.¹⁴

Mortenson returned stateside to co-found, with initial funding from Silicon Valley's Jean Hoerni and then other public sources, the Central Asia Institute (CAI),¹⁵ which, in sixteen years, built 145 schools and is still building in the most remote areas of Pakistan and Afghanistan, the breeding grounds of the Taliban.¹⁶ CAI also remains active at myriad levels of promoting community-based education, literacy programs, and other improvements.¹⁷

Mortenson's journey from the world's highest mountains and back via CAI and the remote schools is told in both the first book, *Three Cups of Tea*, and briefly recapitulated for clarity and cohesion in *Stones into Schools*. Whereas *Three Cups of Tea* primarily provides biography and explains the historic background, motivations, and rationale behind his work in Afghanistan and Pakistan, *Stones into Schools* describes his efforts and extraordinary results. Mortenson had writing assistance from various sources, and the style of writing in the two books is different. Some words flow more easily than others, and readers may find one of the volumes easier to digest than the other, but both books are entirely palatable and worth the effort, whether the reader is a schoolchild in Kansas or a military expert in Kabul.

Underlying Mortenson's premise is the inexorable necessity for building solid relationships with the people of Afghanistan and Pakistan, the quintessence of which is characterized in the centuries-old ritual of drinking tea. Reduced to the simplest common denominator, the repeated sharing of a cup of tea

¹⁴ *Id.* at 27-33.

¹⁵ Central Asia Institute: History, <http://www.ikat.org/about-cai/history> (last visited Aug. 16, 2010).

¹⁶ See Biography, *supra* note 5.

¹⁷ Three Cups of Tea: How to Help, <http://www.threecupsoftea.com/how-to-help/intro-to-central-asia-institute> (last visited Aug. 16, 2010).

equates to understanding, adapting to, and following the customs incumbent therein in this cultural and environmental context. The “tea ceremony” has long prevailed in many cultures, but herein the sharing of tea has gone from being a cognitive, conceptual metaphor within Afghanistan and Pakistan to part of the American political vernacular in the process of nation-building.¹⁸

In his foreword to *Stones into Schools*, Khalid Hosseini identifies Mortenson’s essential overall philosophy: “Afghanistan will ultimately not be won with guns and air strikes, but with books, notebooks, and pencils, the tools of socioeconomic well-being. To deprive Afghan children of education . . . is to bankrupt the future of the country, and doom any prospects of Afghanistan becoming someday a more prosperous and productive state.”¹⁹ Hosseini also explains that “[d]espite fatwas issued against [Mortenson], despite threats from the Taliban and other extremists, he has done everything he can to make sure that this does not happen.”²⁰

As further elucidated by Mortenson, “We can drop bombs, we can surge troops, we can put in electricity, we can build roads, we can put in computers. But if girls are not educated, society will never change.”²¹ He notes that educating women impacts income and sustainable population growth:

Simply put, young women are the single biggest potential agents of change in the developing

¹⁸ See, e.g., Rajiv Chandrasekaran, *A Neighborhood Watch, with Guns*, WASH. POST, Apr. 27, 2010, at A1 (noting that soldiers, in an effort to facilitate communications regarding security matters with hesitant Afghan leaders, “responded by setting out to drink endless cups of tea with the elders”).

¹⁹ Khaled Hosseini, *Forward* to GREG MORTENSON, *STONES INTO SCHOOLS: PROMOTING PEACE WITH BOOKS, NOT BOMBS, IN AFGHANISTAN AND PAKISTAN*, xxi, xxii (2009). Khaled Hosseini is an author of international best sellers, including *The Kite Runner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. *Id.* at xxiii.

²⁰ *Id.* at xxii.

²¹ Arnold R. Grahl, *Mortenson Stresses the Need to Build Relationships*, ROTARY INT’L NEWS (June 21, 2010), http://www.rotary.org/en/mediaandnews/news/pages/conv10june21_plentwo.aspx (quoting Greg Mortenson).

world—a phenomena that . . . echoes an African proverb . . . “If you teach a boy, you educate an individual; but if you teach a girl, you educate a community. . . .” In military parlance, girls’ education is a “force multiplier”—and in impoverished Muslim societies, the ripple effects of female literacy can be profound.²²

The education dilemma is perhaps even more immediate in the military context. In order to withdraw U.S. troops, and as the United States attempts to increase the size and diversity of the Afghan army to accept full responsibility for its own security, the press alerted to the “surge” as it arrived in early February 2010. According to a *Washington Post* article,

The biggest problem among recruits during their eight-week basic training course was illiteracy.

Only about 14 percent of the new recruits are literate, leaving most unable to read simple instructions for a weapon, a map or a road sign. In addition to classes in marksmanship and hand-to-hand combat, the training program includes courses in basic literacy.²³

One military spokesman further noted that the forcing of the complex puzzle of Afghan ethnic groups to work together in the effort also seems to have the impact of building trust that is “changing the culture, to become more accepting of each other.”²⁴

For Mortenson, it has not been easy; he personally experienced the frightening fatwas, an eight-day armed kidnapping by the Taliban, a fire fight between feuding warlords, and multiple

²² STONES, *supra* note 1, at 12-13.

²³ Keith B. Richburg, *U.S. Faces Myriad Challenges in Training Afghan Soldiers*, WASH. POST, Feb. 1, 2010, at A9.

²⁴ *Id.* (quoting Marine Colonel Gregory T. Breazile).

national threats, including those raised for even thinking of educating Muslim children.²⁵ As of July 2010, he had spent seventy-four months in the field in rural villages where few, if any, other foreigners had ever gone.²⁶ Mortenson characterizes *Stones into Schools* as providing more “mechanics and rhythms” of CAI and how it feels to lay the “physical and emotional foundation for girls’ education, book by book and brick by brick, in the middle of Taliban country.”²⁷

Much of the development of the CAI program came through the relationships Mortenson and his associates cultivated through tea drinking and other cultural immersions, including with *commandhan* (local militia leader) Sadhar Khan, who became committed to the efforts.²⁸ Looking at his homeland of remote eastern Badakshan, pointing to the mountains wherein there had been so much dying over the centuries, Sadhar Khan said, “Every rock, every boulder that you see before you is one of my mujahadeen, *shahids*, martyrs, who sacrificed their lives fighting the Russians and the Taliban. Now we must make their sacrifice worthwhile. . . . We must turn these stones into schools.”²⁹

CAI has utilized all those who have genuinely become committed, and the staff is a rather eclectic, extraordinary assortment of individuals, including the likes of former taxi driver Suleman Minhas, seasoned Afghan commanders, former expedition cook Abdul Razak, and a number of former Taliban members, including Mullah Mohammed, a former Taliban bookkeeper and CAI accountant for the entire Wakham region.³⁰ In addition to the stated goal of building schools, when other associated problems arise, CAI has stepped in to help from building bridges to aiding in natural disasters.³¹

²⁵ Biography, *supra* note 5.

²⁶ *Id.*

²⁷ STONES, *supra* note 1, at 20-21.

²⁸ See *id.* at 91-93, 391.

²⁹ *Id.* at 92.

³⁰ *Id.* at xvi-xviii.

³¹ *Id.* at 18, 160-61.

The concept of assisting the indigenous population and building trust during wartime is key. The immersion into the local culture and customs, as promoted by Mortenson, has also been adopted by the American military.³² Many of the close encounters enumerated are illustrative of the personal and professional relationship between CAI and the military. Perhaps one of the most poignant is the first cups of tea with American soldiers, experienced with Colonel Christopher Kolenda, now a key U.S. military strategist on Afghanistan, then the commander of Task Force Saber, at Forward Operating Base (FOB) Naray in the heart of Taliban country.³³ Kolenda had written to CAI and Mortenson in September 2007 to tell of reading *Three Cups of Tea* and asking for help in his area of influence.³⁴ Naray is on the border of Kunar and Nuristan, an area with some 190,000 residents where U.S. forces had undergone some of their most ferocious fighting against the Taliban and al Qaeda in 2007.³⁵

In support of his efforts, Mortenson found that among the proponents of the CAI approach to counterinsurgency (fostering relationships and building a sense of trust at the grassroots level with community leaders, village elders, and tribal authorities), were a number of American military officers who had perhaps initially just stumbled upon *Three Cups of Tea*, which he admits was never intended for a military audience.³⁶ Later, of course, when children joined a CAI-associated Pennies for Peace effort and the book became mandatory military reading, others were converted.³⁷ Mortenson summarizes the civilian-and-military connection stating the following:

Of the hundreds of soldiers I have spoken with
during the past six years who have been deployed

³² See C. J. Chivers, *Marines Invest in Local Afghan Projects, Hoping to Earn Trust*, N.Y. TIMES, Jan. 30, 2010, at A4.

³³ STONES, *supra* note 1, at 257-61.

³⁴ *Id.* at 257-58.

³⁵ *Id.* at 261.

³⁶ *Id.* at 253.

³⁷ *Id.* at 253-54.

to Afghanistan, almost every one of them firmly believes that the best way to augment our security is by truly being of service to the Afghan people—and moreover, that the capacity to render this service meaningfully and well is predicated upon listening, understanding and building relationships. In this respect, the goal of enhancing our own security is best achieved by enhancing theirs. And the most critical building block to accomplishing both is education.³⁸

Mortenson included in *Stones into Schools* some priceless maps of Afghanistan, Pakistan, and other environs, including the CAI schools as of approximately October 2009, the Karakoram and adjacent mountain ranges, the Hindu Kush and Pamir mountain ranges, Afghanistan provinces and federally-administered tribal areas, as well as maps demonstrating the ethnic distribution within Afghanistan and Pakistan.³⁹ He has a generous list of “Who’s Who” (without which the reader would be undoubtedly confused), an excellent index, and best of all, a thoughtful and truly essential glossary, containing terms in many languages other than English.⁴⁰

Stones into Schools, whether read with or without reading *Three Cups of Tea*, is not only the incredible story of a man and his journey, but a cogent, insightful, and time-tested plan that can and is being used as an international blueprint for turning swords into plowshares or, alternatively, promoting education as the ultimate answer for peace.

³⁸ *Id.* at 256-57.

³⁹ *Id.* at viii-xiv.

⁴⁰ *See id.* at xv-xviii, 389-97, 407-20.