

Another kind of surge: 30,000 Greg Mortensons

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In early December, as President Obama was announcing that he was sending 30,000 more troops to Afghanistan, Greg Mortenson was releasing his book *Stones into Schools*, a followup to his 2006 best-seller *Three Cups of Tea*. Mortenson has logged more months in remote parts of Afghanistan and Pakistan than almost any other Westerner. He has forged relationships with tribal leaders in an effort to learn what they want. Often what they want is a village school.

In over 15 years of humanitarian work, Mortenson has started 131 schools. He is not given to political pronouncements, but his message to military leaders has been clear: ultimately the only way to defeat the terrorists in Pakistan and Afghanistan is to build schools, especially for girls. Improved literacy rates and education levels give villagers the prospect of a life beyond that of grinding poverty. With that hope, they are much less likely to join the Taliban and al-Qaeda. Says Mortenson: “We can drop bombs . . . build roads or put in electricity, but if we don’t educate girls, nothing will change in society.”

Mortenson’s work has become required reading for top U.S. commanders and for special forces deployed to Afghanistan. Generals David Petraeus and Stanley McChrystal are among his readers, and they seem to have grasped his point: U.S. forces won’t have lasting success in Afghanistan unless they listen to, work with and empower local leaders.

The most optimistic reading of Obama’s troop surge in Afghanistan is that it will provide the security that allows such local empowerment to happen, letting Afghanis begin to see immediate improvement in everyday life and thereby creating the momentum for them to provide their own security. Unfortunately, a realistic reading of the situation is that such a development is not likely to happen in one year or in five, with 30,000 U.S. troops or 50,000.

Obama is aiming to replicate in Afghanistan the apparent success of the troop surge in Iraq. But Afghanistan presents even greater challenges than Iraq. It is one of the poorest and most illiterate countries on the planet. It is much more rural than Iraq, and it has never had a national political structure or an effective national army. In Iraq, the U.S. was able to quell much of the violence by paying Sunni leaders to police their own insurgents, but Afghanistan has no equivalent set of leaders, which means U.S. forces must develop strong relationships with a host of disconnected fiefdoms, united only by their suspicion of outsiders and of the government in Kabul.

It is encouraging that Obama and top military leaders understand the importance of working with local leaders to create schools, clinics and economic opportunities. But armed with that knowledge, they should be launching a surge in development, not a surge in troops. Instead of deploying 30,000 more soldiers, the U.S. would be better off deploying 30,000 more Greg Mortensons.