The Effect of Civilian Treatment on the War on Terrorism

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Three Cups of Tea brings a sense of compassion and understanding to the debate on America’s global War on Terrorism that I feel has been lost in the almost decade long conflict. Greg Mortenson and David Relin offer Americans an interesting look inside some of the most dangerous and misunderstood places on Earth like the mountainous region of Pakistan or inside war torn Afghanistan. Mortenson through his overseas experiences has developed the unique ability of being able to understand multiple cultures extremely well by putting himself in the shoes of someone else. Through this he presents the case that to defeat terrorism America needs to concentrate less on bombs and soldiers and more on domestic improvements and civilians. Some call this an overly optimistic and unproven battle plan but the claims by Mortenson in Three Cups of Tea are supported by data from inside the war zones of Iraq and Afghanistan.

Greg Mortenson, in a lecture to military personal inside the Pentagon following the beginning of our occupation of Afghanistan, stated on the subject of civilians in Afghanistan “to call them ‘collateral damage’ and not even try to count the numbers of the dead. Because to ignore them is to deny they ever existed, and there is no greater insult in the Islamic world. For that, we will never be forgiven” (Mortenson & Relin, 2006, p. 294). This statement should receive its due credit, for Mortenson predicted the birth of the insurgency, the rebirth of the Taliban, and the need for a new strategy in Iraq and Afghanistan five years before the problems actually arose. In the first 20 months of the conflict in Afghanistan it is estimated that 3,000 Afghani civilians died directly from US war efforts (Herold, 2002). This number has continued to increase and as of today it is estimated, I say estimated because the US military did not keep a record of civilian casualties for the war’s early years and all civilian casualties totals are rough
estimates based on around 3,000 casualties per twelve months, around 27,000 civilians have died in Afghanistan alone (Herold, 2002). If the 100,000 civilian casualties from the Iraq conflict are also taken into account, then the global War on Terrorism has directly killed around 127,000 civilians in nine years and has injured hundreds of thousands more (Iraq Body Count, 2010 and Herold, 2002). Some American’s may argue that these 127,000 civilians deserved it because of September 11, for example, the American who had the bumper sticker Mortenson saw after 9/11 that said “Nuke ‘Em All – Let Allah Sort Them Out” (Mortenson & Relin, 2006, p. 261). Yes, we are killing a lot of our supposed enemies but just as the Nazis learned after the Battle of Britain and the United States after Operation Rolling Thunder, attacking civilians does not break the will of our adversaries, it only strengthens their resolve (Global Security.org, 2005 and Info – Poland, 2000). Like Brigadier General Bashir Baz told Mortenson after the invasion of Afghanistan “Your President Bush has done a wonderful job uniting one billion Muslims against America for the next two hundred years” (Mortenson & Relin, 2006, p. 310).

The data suggests that General Baz is correct in his assessment of the importance of understanding the civilians of the countries we are occupying (Mortenson & Relin, 2006, p. 310). As the United States continued its bombing of civilian areas, the total numbers of Coalition casualties in Afghanistan increased from lows like 69 in 2002 and 57 in 2003, to highs like 295 in 2008 and 519 in 2009 (iCasulties, 2009). The numbers in Iraq present the same result. In 2005, 2,000 Iraqis died each month and 3,000 died each month for the years 2005-2006, the peak of the civilian casualty rate. These numbers correlated with the highs of the Coalition casualties’ rate, with 906 casualties in the 2004, 897 in 2005 and 872 in 2006. However, when the United States decided that protection of civilians was important and bombing civilian populations was
counterproductive the decrease in casualties among civilians and soldiers was immense (Campbell, O’Hanlon, & Shapiro, 2009). This was thanks to:

Creation of joint security stations manned by coalition and Iraqi soldiers and police who patrolled together, erection of fortifications and checkpoints in many parts of the country to thwart easy attacks by terrorists and insurgents, and pursuit of cease-fire arrangements with Sunni tribes as well as Shia militias were all key elements of the new approach (Campbell, et al., 2009).

The effects of this new approach were quite noticeable in terms of civilian fatalities. The rate of civilian deaths from war-related violence declined by 80 percent in 2008 and 90 percent in 2009, relative to the peak of 3,000 deaths a month, experienced in 2005 and 2006 (Campbell, et al., 2009). These lows in civilian casualties match the lows in Coalition casualties in Iraq as well. In 2008, 322 Coalition soldiers died, and in 2009 the Coalition casualty rate dropped to 150 Coalition deaths with no U.S. combat-related deaths and only three noncombat-related deaths in the month of December that year (CNN, 2010 and iCasulties, 2009). That means that out of the 115,000 American soldiers in Iraq in December 2009, not a single one was killed in combat that month (CNN, 2010). These numbers totally refute the claim that if we bomb them enough they will throw up a white flag and accept our occupation.

The Islamic world is not an unintelligent world; the people of the Middle East understand when America is trying to get things accomplished and when America is just inflicting pain for the sheer pleasure of revenge. The Muslim people know, just as Mortenson did when he stated “If we couldn’t do something as simple as seeing that a hero like Uzra gets her forty-dollar-a-month salary, then how could we ever hope to do the hard work it takes to win the war on terror” (Mortenson & Relin, 2006, p. 290). The Islamic world sees the cruelty and the mismanagement
of the early US military efforts in the Middle East, like the $680 million in aid promised to Afghanistan that was instead used for building runways and bulking up of supply depots in Kuwait for another US led invasion, of another sovereign Muslim nation, Iraq (p. 290). The Muslim world sees the costs of our wars and our bombs compared to our humanitarian work, work that benefits us little but helps others greatly. For example, the United States has spent so far around $900 billion on the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq since the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan (White, 2010). In comparison the United States spent $62.3 Billion for the victims of Hurricane Katrina back in 2005; victims whom are the citizens of the United States (Baker & Goldstein, 2005). America also gave only $950 million towards relief efforts in the hard hit areas of the 2004 tsunami, a disaster that killed over 275,000 people (CNN, 2005). Imagine had we spent half of our war funds on those Tsunami victims, with 200,000 of those missing or dead coming from a nation that has a 86.1 percent Muslim population, Indonesia (CNN, 2005 and CIA – World Factbook, 2010). The amount of goodwill America would of obtained through doing what was right anyhow would have been immense. Muslims around the world would of seen the United States not as the bringer of death and heartache but instead as the bringer of hope and the chance of a better life.

However, I will admit that the lowering of civilian casualties and humanitarian work will not affect a minority of Muslims who will hate us no matter what we do. To solve this problem I believe people need to follow in Greg Mortenson’s footsteps and lead a global effort against ignorance and dangerous, radical mindsets. Mortenson says it best in a speech to members of Congress where he states “I’ve learned that terror doesn’t happen because some group of people somewhere like Pakistan or Afghanistan decide to hate us. It happens because children aren’t offered a bright enough future that they have a reason to choose life over death” (Mortenson &
Relin, 2006, p. 292). In educated nations, terrorism is an after thought, before September 11th the average American did not think about the threat of a terrorist attack one minute of their day. That is because an educated nation’s minority does not wish to terrorize the majority; they wish to make a better life for themselves. According to Mortenson and Relin, 2006, p. 268 “The only way we can defeat terrorism is if people in this country where terrorists exist learn to respect and love Americans, and if we can respect and love people here. What’s the difference between them becoming a productive local citizen or a terrorist? I think the key is education.” Even those who inhabit the Middle East and are constantly surrounded by dangerous, radical ignorance see the importance of defeating ignorance and misconceptions so that America may win the War on Terror, like General Baz who states “The enemy is ignorance. The only way to defeat it is to build relationships with these people, to draw them into the modern world with education and business. Otherwise the fight will go on forever” (Mortenson & Relin, 2006, p. 310). When America experienced race riots in the 1960s, because of an angry minority that had been mistreated and abused for hundreds of years, the riots only subsided when that minority was given a chance at education, equality, and a better life. This chance did not come quickly, it took decades to repair the relationship between the majority and minority in America but we did it. America can find peace with the radical Muslims of the Middle East but education is how to do it, not bombs and not wars.

Three Cups of Tea offers an alternative to the all out war which has killed hundreds of thousands of civilians all across the Middle East. Greg Mortenson is able to do this because unlike a majority of Americans he can see outside the box and into the souls of people who come from a different culture. If America ever hopes to establish peace in the Middle East America’s
must listen to people like Greg Mortenson who have much better understanding of the region than 99 percent of people in the United States.

References


