

How NOT to Win the Nobel Peace Prize

By

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[education](#), [Greg Mortenson](#), [Ignore the State](#), [poverty](#), [Stones into Schools](#), [Three Cups of Tea](#), [voluntaryism](#)

Enough has been said of this year's winner of the Nobel Peace Prize. I'm not going to talk about him. Instead, I want to publicly acknowledge someone who did not win but who I think deserves to be on voluntaryists' and other pro-freedom folks' radar. Ostensibly, Peace Prize nominees' names are [kept secret for 50 years](#) after they are nominated. However, we have teh Intarwebs now, and it's a little tougher to keep a lid on information like that. Word has been out for a while now that [Greg Mortenson was one of the nominees for the 2009 Nobel Peace Prize](#).

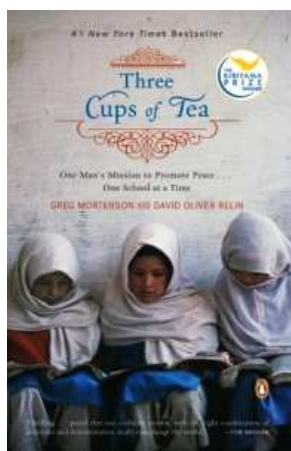


Image courtesy Central Asia Institute.

I first discovered this fellow shortly after moving in 2008. I was looking for books by Montana authors in order to start learning about my new home, and his book is probably in every bookstore in this state. Greg Mortenson is co-author of the *New York Times* bestseller [Three Cups of Tea: One Man's Mission to Promote Peace... One School at a Time](#) which I picked up in a local bookstore and highly recommend. He is also author of its sequel [Stones into Schools: Promoting Peace with Books, Not Bombs, in Afghanistan and Pakistan](#) which I have pre-ordered and look forward to reading shortly after its December 1 release date. And he is co-founder and director of the non-profit [Central Asia Institute](#) which supports his work.

After his sister Christa's death on her twenty-third birthday, avid climber Greg Mortenson set out to dedicate a climb up K2 in the Himalayas to his sister and to leave a necklace of hers along with a Tibetan prayer flag at the top. After 78 days in the mountains and 600 meters short of the summit, his plan came unraveled. He wound up lost, separated from much of his gear, and spent the night alone eight miles from the trail he should have been on with just a wool blanket for shelter from the snow and icy wind. The porter who accompanied him and was carrying his gear found him the next day, but they became separated again. Mortenson wandered his way into the remote and impoverished Pakistani village of Korphe where he was fed, sheltered, and cared for as he recuperated from his wayward adventure.

During his time in Korphe, he learned that the nearest doctor was a week's walk away, that the hair color of

many of the children was a result of malnutrition, and that one in three children in Korphe died before reaching the age of one. As he recuperated he put his training as a trauma nurse and the supplies from his medical kit to work trying to repay a debt he felt he would never be able to fulfill. He was particularly moved by the village's children and thought he might send textbooks or supplies to their school upon his return to the United States. He asked to see the school, and was taken with some reluctance to an open outdoor space where 82 children knelt on the frosty ground practicing lessons out in the open with no teacher. The town could not afford to pay the dollar-a-day a full-time teacher would have cost. Instead a teacher shared with a neighboring village taught all 82 students 3 days per week in Korphe. Mortenson explained in *Three Cups of Tea* that this motivated him to start what has since become his life's work:

"Can you imagine a fourth-grade class in America, alone, without a teacher, sitting there quietly and working on their lessons?" Mortenson asks. "I felt like my heart was being torn out. There was a fierceness in their desire to learn, despite how mightily everything was stacked against them, that reminded me of Christa. I knew I had to do something."



Greg Mortenson with Sitara "Star" Schoolchildren. Afghanistan. Image courtesy Central Asia Institute.

Upon leaving Korphe, he vowed that he would return and build a school.

Mortenson's work for nearly the last two decades has consisted largely of raising funds much of the year and spending a couple of months each year doing field work in Pakistan and Afghanistan where he helps communities, often extremely remote and poor, build schools and train teachers [among other things](#). Not only did he make Korphe's school a reality, but he has since established or helped support more than 130 schools in these countries serving upwards of 58,000 students, both boys and girls, and providing an alternative to [extremist madrassas](#) that promote hatred and war more than providing an education to their students.

And Mortenson has done his work over the years at [great risk](#) to himself and even some risk to his family:

In 1996, he survived an eight-day armed kidnapping by the Taliban in Pakistan's Northwest Frontier Province tribal areas and escaped a 2003 firefight with feuding Afghan warlords by hiding for eight hours under putrid animal hides in a truck going to a leather-tanning factory. He has overcome fatwehs from enraged Islamic mullahs, endured CIA investigations, and also received threats from fellow Americans after 9/11, for helping Muslim children with education.

I am a huge admirer of Mortenson's work not only from a humanitarian perspective, but also because it is a small example of what a voluntarist alternative to foreign policy might look like. Word of Mortenson's work has spread through the region, and he works only with communities who invite him and want to work with him. The schools are built through cooperative efforts with members of those communities. His funding is contributed by donors who voluntarily choose to support him.

It should come as no surprise to any of us when people who have nothing to lose behave as such. Governments foster such behavior when they go into a region, destroy what little the occupants have, set up new governments to run things to their own benefit with little or no regard for local residents, and then either occupy it endlessly for their own purposes or leave it taking everything they can grab on the way out leaving the place a shambles. Even if one's world view purely eschews all forms of altruism (I do not fall into this category), one must recognize that it is in all of our best interests that those among us who have the least, have at least some hope of a decent life, and certainly that we are not the reason if they do not.

In 1998, Ivan Eland wrote in a Cato Institute policy briefing entitled [Does U.S. Intervention Overseas Breed Terrorism?](#):

The large number of terrorist attacks that occurred in retaliation for an interventionist American foreign policy implicitly demonstrates that terrorism against U.S. targets could be significantly reduced if the United States adopted a policy of military restraint overseas. That policy change has become even more critical now that ostensibly "weak" terrorists—whether sponsored by states or operating independently—might have both the means and the motive to inflict enormous devastation on the U.S. homeland with weapons of mass destruction.

How tragically prescient that warning was. Yet the United States government has since dramatically escalated intervention using 9/11 as an excuse, and has made mess after mess in Afghanistan, Iraq, and now increasingly in Pakistan.

On a trip to Washington, D.C., Mortenson explained to a Congressman who was not so much interested in his work building schools as in security:

"Fighting terror is maybe seventh or eighth on my list of priorities. But working over there, I've learned a few things. I've learned that terror doesn't happen because some group of people somewhere like Pakistan or Afghanistan simply decide to hate us. It happens because children aren't being offered a bright enough future that they have a reason to choose life over death."
[from *Three Cups of Tea*]

Mortenson, during that same trip, asked military planners at the Pentagon:

"Now take the cost of one of those missiles tipped with a Raytheon guidance system, which I think is about \$840,000. For that much money, you could build dozens of schools that could provide tens of thousands of students with a balanced nonextremist education over the course of a generation. Which do you think will make us more secure?"
[from *Three Cups of Tea*]



Porters carry roof beams 18 miles to Korphe School. Pakistan. Image courtesy Central Asia Institute.

While United States foreign policy has been a huge factor in creating the conditions for terrorism to flourish, Mortenson's work does precisely the opposite. He does not just give the communities he works with something of value. Rather he helps people build something of value for themselves so not only do they have this thing of value but they are also very personally invested in it. This is reflected in the philosophy of the [Central Asia Institute](#):

The tribal communities of northern Pakistan taught Mortenson a critical lesson in our first five years of existence: sustainable and successful development can only occur when projects are entirely initiated, implemented and managed by local communities. It is also important to listen and learn from the local communities served, rather than impose external evaluations or judgment of what is best from an outsider's perspective. The philosophy to empower the local people through their own initiative is at the heart of all CAI programs.

Funds provided by the Institute must be matched with labor and resources by the communities who will benefit from them. And this empowerment and investment in their schools appears to be paying off. Consider. for

example, the case of [one community in Afghanistan](#) :

A girls' school that Mortenson helped to open south of Kabul, Afghanistan, had been attacked by the Taliban in the summer of 2007. The insurgents had also cut down fruit trees, a valuable source of income for some of the girls' families. So, the next day the school's headmaster got on his bike and pedaled 23 miles to notify a local militia commander that the school had been shut down. That particular commander is "a little shady," Mortenson says, "but he also has daughters in school, so he sent a local posse over.

"They came in, killed two Taliban, and put a dozen guards around the school." Guards remain to this day. "Their orders are that if anybody harms any child or teacher, shoot them. While that's not how we would handle the school problems," Mortenson, 51, says of the orders, the community's concern for its school "clearly shows they are invested." It is the sort of buy-in, he adds, that has yielded payoffs in often violent places.

Although Mortenson is not to my knowledge a voluntarist, it is noteworthy that the Central Asia Institute [does not accept any government funding](#) and likely never will. After his talk at the Pentagon, Mortenson was offered \$2.2 million in government funding for his work and turned it down. Again, from *Three Cups of Tea*:

Mortenson did think about it. The good that would radiate out from one hundred schools was constantly on his mind and he toyed with taking the military's money throughout much of 2002, though he knew he never could. "I realized my credibility in that part of the world depended on me not being associated with the American government," Mortenson says, "especially its military."

So there you have a little introduction of one of the people who did NOT win the Nobel Peace Prize- a guy who promotes peace via education in one of the most volatile places on earth and does so completely through voluntary means. For more information on Greg Mortenson, to follow his ongoing activities, or to find out when and where you can see him speak in person, you can find him in many places on the web:

[Greg Mortenson on Twitter](#)

[Greg Mortenson's Website](#)

[Central Asia Institute](#)

[Three Cups of Tea](#)

[Stones into Schools](#)

[Pennies for Peace](#)