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Milestones in the War Against Terrorism

Dr. Gloria C. Duffy

President and C.E.O.

Last month, two milestones occurred in the war on terror and the associated challenge of dealing with Islamic extremism. The killing of Osama bin Laden was a dramatic step in diminishing the leadership of al-Qaida. But journalist Jon Krakauer's exposé of *Three Cups of Tea* humanitarian Greg Mortenson as a fraud was a sign of how difficult it is to combat the ongoing influence of the Taliban and other fundamentalists on the streets and in the villages of the Middle East, Central Asia, North Africa and elsewhere.

The elimination of Osama bin Laden was an amazingly successful operation by the U.S. military. And it was certainly justified. As terrorism expert Brian Jenkins told Commonwealth Club members in a teleconference on May 9th, bin Laden was a man who spent all his time and effort planning how to kill hundreds, thousands and even millions of Americans (the latter through seeking access to nuclear weapons).

Bin Laden's death left al-Qaida without the charismatic leader who made it a strong international network capable of executing such devastating strikes as the 9/11 attack in the U.S. It also removed a source of wealth for financing terrorism. Bin Laden used funds originally from his family's construction fortune to finance terrorist activities, and he raised funds from other wealthy Muslims for the cause. One would hope that the U.S. and allied countries are busy confiscating whatever funds belonging to bin Laden they can locate.

But the death of this one man does not mean the movement is dead. Smaller al-Qaida and other terrorist cells around the world will continue to attempt more modest attacks, along the lines of the so-called "Christmas Day" or "underwear" bomber in the U.S. in 2009. And they will continue to foment a terrorist mentality among poor, uneducated, underemployed and disaffected people throughout the Muslim world. Solutions to this problem must reach well beyond the toppling of al-Qaida's iconic leader, and even beyond further decapitating the movement through pursuit of its other leaders like Ayman Al-Zawahiri.

One of the most appealing approaches to combating terrorism at its social roots has been Greg Mortenson's effort to build secular schools in remote areas of Afghanistan and Pakistan. The secular

schools would combat the influence of the madrassahs, or religious schools, which are breeding grounds for Islamic extremism. Almost everyone is familiar with this story by now. The Bay Area-based mountain climber Mortenson wandered into a village in Pakistan after a failed ascent of K-2, and promised to build a school there. He created a program, funded mainly by individuals and foundations in the United States, to build schools throughout this region, and wrote a best-selling book, *Three Cups of Tea*, about his efforts.

Journalist Jon Krakauer, as well as "60 Minutes," recently examined Mortenson's record and found that he was not where he claimed to be when he said in his book he was there, he did not build the schools he claimed to build or they were not currently operating, he mismanaged funds, and so on. It is a distressing story of a grassroots hero with feet of clay.

I was not surprised when I heard that Mortenson's schools project had not turned out as had been hoped. Part of the reason was clearly mismanagement of the project, exaggeration and even malfeasance by Mortenson. But part of the explanation is also that, as Mortenson made clear in his book, his idea was not overly popular in the regions where his organization attempted to set up schools. The Taliban was not exactly thrilled to see secular schools – which, horrifyingly to them, teach girls – established to

compete with the madrassahs. They made every effort to sideline his projects. The schools that were used, according to Krakauer, to store spinach or hay may be so used due to pressure on local leaders by the Taliban against these schools, and not as a result of Mortenson's misdoings.

It is hard to have a positive impact on other cultures from abroad, particularly on the roots of Islamic extremism. It is easy for idealistic American projects to be swept away or perverted by pressures from local groups who want to undercut the influence of the U.S. and Western ideas at all costs.

What the United States can do more effectively to strike at the roots of Islamic extremism is to be ready when pressures within Muslim societies build to the point that change is possible. Just such developments are underway in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Jordan, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and Syria. When this happens, the United States can help with technology, investments and assistance in establishing a democratic system. Helping moderate Muslims seize this moment to remake their societies is one of the most important things the United States can do now to combat the long-term threat of terrorism. Ω

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