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What's this?



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BILL MOYERS: Welcome to the JOURNAL.

There were hands in the air in Washington this week, but it wasn't a stickup. The new Financial Crisis Inquiry Commission, appointed by Congress to find out how America got rolled, began hearings this week. These four are not the victims of one of the greatest bank heists in history - they're the perpetrators, bankers so sleek and crafty they got off with the loot in broad daylight, and then sweet talked the government into taxing us to pay it back.

Watching that scene on the opening day of the hearings, it was hard enough to believe that almost a year has passed since Barack Obama raised his hand, too -- taking the oath of office to become our 44th President. Even harder to remember what America looked like before Obama, because we've also been robbed of memory, assaulted by what the Nobel laureate Czeslaw Milosz described as a "fantastic proliferation of mass media." We live in a time "characterized by a refusal to remember." Inconvenient facts simply disappear down the memory hole, as in George Orwell's novel, "1984."

President Obama's made plenty of mistakes during his first year, and we've critiqued them frequently here on the JOURNAL, but hardly anyone talks any more about what happened in the years before. He inherited from George W. Bush the biggest financial debacle since the Great Depression, along with two unpopular and costly wars, and a dysfunctional and demoralized government.

It's important to remember those years, a time that has been characterized by the historian Thomas Frank, as "A Low, Dishonest Decade." He's here to talk about them with me. Thomas Frank is editor of the recently relaunched BAFFLER magazine, a literary journal; a contributing editor of HARPER'S; a weekly columnist for THE WALL STREET JOURNAL; and the author of ONE MARKET UNDER GOD, the bestselling WHAT'S THE MATTER WITH KANSAS? and his latest bestseller, THE WRECKING CREW, now out in paperback. Good to have you back.

THOMAS FRANK: It's my pleasure, Bill.

BILL MOYERS: How is it that the people who are responsible for the mess that Obama inherited are getting away with demonizing him when he's only had less than a year to clean it up. Let me show you just a sample of commentators railing against the President.

RUSH LIMBAUGH: President Obama and the Democrats are destroying the US economy. They are purposefully doing it, I believe.

GLENN BECK: This is a well-thought out plan to collapse the economy as we know it.

JONATHAN HOENIG: The president has, I think if you listen to what he says, a hatred for capitalism. Where do jobs come from? They don't come from the government, they come from the profit seeking self-interest, from what I hear and see, the President never misses an opportunity to smear and [no audio] slap!

RUSH LIMBAUGH: This guy is a coward. He does not have the gonads or the spine to even stand up and accept what he's doing! All of this is his doing. He cannot even probably say, you should like this -- you may not like this, but I'm telling you it's the best thing for you, it's the best thing for me. No! He knows it's a disaster, he has to slough this off, on his previous-- or his predecessor, the previous administration.

SEAN HANNITY: It's his stimulus. It's his record deficit spending. He quadrupled the debt in a year. You know, how many more are the Democrats going to say, "Well, it's George Bush's fault"? This is Obama's economy now.

BILL MOYERS: What goes through your mind as a historian when you watch that?

THOMAS FRANK: Well, that is America for you. I mean, that is the, sort of the demented logic of our politics. Is that now-- Obama's been President for a year. And he will come before the public in the fall, you know, having to defend all of these terrible things. That's how our politics works in this country.

BILL MOYERS: But you called it demented. I mean, you know, demented means crazy, mad. Mad and crazy enough to cause us to forget the world before Obama?

THOMAS FRANK: I'll give you an example what I mean. So, I was on a radio show the other day with a tea party leader, you know, one of these protest leaders. And he seemed like a good guy. But what he did say that struck me was he said he was really against monopoly, you know? And we're laboring under all these monopolies, all these concentrated powers here in America. And what we need to do is get back to free markets. And then we can do away with that. And it was mind-blowing.

Because if you look back any further than the Obama Administration, since, I mean, 1980 in this country, we have been in the grip of, you know, of this pursuit of ever-purer free markets. That's what American politics has been about. That's what has delivered this, you know, the awful circumstances that we find ourselves in today. And to think that that's what's missing, that's what we need to get back to, is--

BILL MOYERS: That's more than nostalgia. What is that?

THOMAS FRANK: Well, that's the disease of our time. You know, that sort of instant forgetting.

BILL MOYERS: But what does it do to our politics when the very spokesmen for what some people have called a decade of conservative failure. I mean, remember before Obama, they turned a budget surplus into a deficit. They took us to war on fraudulent pretenses. They borrowed money to fight it. They presided over a stalemate in Afghanistan. They trashed the Constitution. They presided over the weakest economy in decades--

THOMAS FRANK: Not weak for everybody.

BILL MOYERS: No, no.

THOMAS FRANK: Some people did really well.

BILL MOYERS: Okay, they compiled the worst track record on jobs in decades. And they ended up with the worst stock market in decades. I mean, it was a decade of conservative failure. And yet, Obama's their villain?

THOMAS FRANK: Think of all the crises and the disasters that you've described. And I would add to them things like the, what happened in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. And the Madoff scandal on Wall Street. And, you know, on and on and on. The Jack Abramoff scandal. The whole sordid career of Tom DeLay.

All of these things that we remember from the last decade. I mean, some of them that we're forgetting. Like who remembers all the scandals over earmarking, anymore? And who remembers all the scandals over Iraq reconstruction? All that, you know, disastrous, when we would hand it off to a private contractor to rebuild Iraq. And it would, you know, of course, it would fail.

Those things have all sort of been dwarfed by the economic disaster and the wreckage on Wall Street. But I would say to you that all of these things that we're describing here are of a piece. And that they all flow from the same ideas. And those ideas are the sort of conservative attitude towards government. And conservative attitudes towards governance. Okay?

BILL MOYERS: That government is a perversion.

THOMAS FRANK: Government is-- yeah, government is a perversion. And to believe that the federal government can be operated, you know, with all of its programs, can be operated well and do things that are good for the people, is, as you say, is a perversion.

And they look at someone like Barack Obama and it makes them seethe. Because that's,

you know, that's what he's trying to do. What conservatism in this country is about is government failure. Conservatives talk about government failure all the time, constantly. And conservatives, when they're in power deliver government failure.

BILL MOYERS: Not merely from incompetence, you say, but from ideology, from philosophy, from a view of the world.

THOMAS FRANK: And sometimes from design.

BILL MOYERS: From design? What do you mean?

THOMAS FRANK: Not always from design, but often. The Department of Labor, for example, the conservatives when they in office, routinely stuff the Department of Labor full of ideological cranks. And people that don't believe in the mission.

And the result is that it doesn't-- they don't enforce anything. Towards the very end of the Bush-era, the Department of Labor had been whittled down. It was a shell of its former self. And at the very end of the Bush Administration, one of the government accountability programs did a study of the Department of Labor. And, I'm smiling, because it's kind of amusing. It was like an old spy magazine prank.

They made up these horrendous labor violations around the country and phoned them in as complaints to the Department of Labor to see what they would do, okay? They responded to one out of ten of these, you know, where they called in as like, "Well, we got, you know, kids working in a meat packing plant during school hours. You know, can you, you going to do anything about that?" "No." Or you look at something like the Securities and Exchange Commission. These guys are supposed to be regulating, you know, the investment banks, okay? Goldman Sachs, Morgan Stanley, that sort of thing. These guys were so under-funded, and not just under-funded, but you had people in charge of it who didn't believe in regulating Wall Street.

BILL MOYERS: So, they made the Securities and Exchange Commission a laughing stock, if you will. They really did.

THOMAS FRANK: Right. Well, there's these horrible stories that came out. Once Bush was out, there was a study done of the SEC, as well. These people didn't even have like their own functioning photocopiers, okay? So, we're talking about the lawyers that are supposed to be protecting us from Wall Street. And they have to go stand in line at Kinko's to do their own photocopying. And they're going up against the best paid, you know, best educated lawyers on planet Earth, who represent the investment banks. And they're supposed to be defending us.

BILL MOYERS: The curious thing about this is that you and I and my audience knows that our ancestors believed that capitalism needed to be supervised. But when the conservatives came to power, they begin to muzzle the watchdog.

THOMAS FRANK: Yeah. Well, or you know, do away with it altogether, de-fund it. Look, the beginning in the 1980s, President Reagan came to office and came to power, and you remember the kind of rhetoric that he used to use in denouncing the Federal workforce. He hated the Federal workforce. And this is an article of faith among conservatives.

There's something called the pay gap that they used to talk about a lot in Washington, D.C. Which is, back in the '50s, '60s, and up into the 1970s, Federal workers were paid a comparable amount to what people in the private sector earned. Okay? So, if you're a lawyer working for the government, you got about as much as a lawyer working in the private sector.

Not as much, because government benefits are considered to be much better. Okay. Under Reagan, you had this huge gap open up between Federal workers and the private sector. I asked around. And I found out a government attorney makes \$140,000 a year on retirement. After he's been there all his life. In the private sector law firm in Washington, you'd be making \$160,000 starting salary. That's first year. Right out of law school.

BILL MOYERS: So what's the consequence of this pay gap you described? Or, do we get inferior government because of it?

THOMAS FRANK: Absolutely. It keeps the best and the brightest out of government service, unless you're really dedicated to a cause.

But let me go one step further with this, Bill. When I say this is done by design, I'm not exaggerating. And this is one of the more surprising things that I found when I was doing the research for "The Wrecking Crew," is that there's a whole conservative literature on why you want second-rate people in government, or third-rate.

I found an interview with the head of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce from 1928, where he said-- this quote, it's mind-boggling to me. But he really said this. "The best public servant is the worst one." Okay? You want bad people in government. You want to deliberately staff government with second-rate people. Because if you have good people in government, government will work. And then the public will learn to trust government. And then they'll hand over more power to it.

And you don't want that, of course. Your Chamber of Commerce. And I thought, when I first read this, "That's a crazy idea. I can't believe that sentiment." And then I found it repeated again and again and again. Throughout the long history of the conservative movement. This is something they believe very deeply.

BILL MOYERS: It comes out of a definitive way of seeing things, right?

THOMAS FRANK: Yes. And we can summarize that very briefly. That the market is the, you know, is the universal principle of human civilization. And that government is a kind of interloper, if not a, you know, criminal gang. And getting in the way.

BILL MOYERS: But we saw with this collapse and this bailout, we saw the failure of that.

THOMAS FRANK: Of course.

BILL MOYERS: And yet there's no sense of contrition. What's amazing to me, and you wrote this, that the very people who brought us this decade of conservative failures, the party of Palin, Beck, Hannity, Abramoff, Rove, DeLay, Kristol, O'Reilly, just might stage a comeback.

THOMAS FRANK: I think they might. I think there's a very strong chance of that.

BILL MOYERS: After only 11 months out of power, because of the record. I mean--

THOMAS FRANK: Look, well, the stuff--

BILL MOYERS: --it's crazy.

THOMAS FRANK: --the stuff we've been talking about here today. The stuff in "The Wrecking Crew," that's all forgotten. The financial crisis had that effect of-- that stuff is now off the-- down the memory hole

BILL MOYERS: Do you really think they believe that unfettered capitalism, unregulated markets, will deliver an ideal democracy and prosperity for everybody?

THOMAS FRANK: No, I don't. I think that they believe that, and to some degree, they're sincere in that belief. But the conservative movement in Washington, I'm not talking about grassroots voters in Kansas here. I'm talking about the conservative movement in Washington. And the whole constellation of think tanks and lobby shops and not-for-profits. And, you know, newspapers and fundraisers and all of this stuff.

They believe this is an industry, okay? This is an industry that churns out this product. And one of the things that, I mean, it's one of the things that they're doing now is they excommunicate George W. Bush, deeply unpopular, so therefore, not a true conservative, right? So, that way they get to start over fresh. The problem with George W. Bush, the reason we're in such a deep hole is that we never went far enough.

As Tom DeLay has said, in his newspaper column, and I'm paraphrasing here. The problem with conservatism isn't that it was tried and failed. It's that it never really got-- we never really tried it in the first place. So, what we have to do -- and I've heard, conservatives have said this. "What we have to do is go back and deregulate all the way. We have to, you know, slash government. We have to tear that thing down. That's what it's all about."

And the amazing thing about this. This allows them to represent themselves as dissidents against the sort of established order in Washington. Even though they ran the established order for years and years and years and years.

BILL MOYERS: Here's something else that's bizarre to me. And I wonder what you think about it, as a historian. I mean, right after the failed terrorist threat of Christmas, Obama's critics went to work scrubbing what happened when the Bush White House was out to lunch in the weeks and days leading up to 9/11.

I mean, you know, there were terrorists sneaking into the country. There were warnings from the intelligence community about something-- an attack on an American city coming. And that's all been flushed down the memory hole. Giuliani goes on the air and says, "We

didn't have any terrorist attacks when Bush was President."

THOMAS FRANK: Yeah, and that's another-- we also forget the anthrax episode which happened right after 9/11. Look, this is not an argument that I have made. That other people have-- that all of these things need to be added to the list of government failures. And if you want to talk why does government fail? You know, there's two answers out there.

One is the conservative answer. Government fails because that's the nature of government to fail. And if you want to look a little bit deeper, you know, why does government fail? Because government has been systematically destroyed. When we, whether you're talking about the, you know, the pay gap and making-- deliberately making government an unattractive career option. Or you're talking about outsourcing.

This is another conservative strategy for dealing with the state. If you hate and despise government employees. And you understand them as, you know, unbelievable human wickedness, right? What do you do about them? Well, the answer's obvious. And at the same time, you believe in the market. You believe that private industry does everything better. You outsource the Federal workforce.

BILL MOYERS: Have we reached a stage where you make things bad enough that people despair and then you manipulate their despair into-- to your own advantage in the next election?

THOMAS FRANK: It's a cynical town, Washington, D.C. And the conservative movement tends to be deeply, deeply, deeply cynical about government. Now, it's also, I mean, deeply idealistic about the market. I mean, the market can do no wrong, almost by definition. But government they regard as a criminal gang. I mean, many, many conservatives have compared-- oh, they always do, compare government to criminals. All the time.

Taxation is a form of theft. It's as bad as a mugger in the street saying, "Give me your money." And America is pretty much unique among the nations in that our political system, half of our political system is basically dedicated to the destruction of the government from within. I don't know any other country where that's the case. But there's plenty of countries where government works really, really well. I mean, even, for God's sake, in India, you know, which we don't think of as being an advanced industrial society, their banks didn't all go bust in the latest downturn. Now, why is that?

Because their equivalent of the Federal Reserve was not, you know, deregulating, stopping enforcement. They weren't doing any of those things. They were keeping a very tight lid on it. Government can work. It works all the time.

BILL MOYERS: You wrote "What's the Matter with Kansas?" Let me ask you to broaden that canvas and ask, with the answer to the question, what's the matter with America that we tolerate all of this?

THOMAS FRANK: I think a large part of it is that-- well, it's the chronic historical forgetting, you know? We just elected Barack Obama in this-- you know, he had quite a mandate. You know, biggest majority of any President since Reagan. And now a year later, and the public is already turning on him. And that's a part of the problem.

But, you know, another part of it is that the conservative argument about government and freedom is very compelling when they say that something like, you know, the national, you know, any proposal for a national health program is a violation of our freedom. Americans don't like to hear that their freedom is being violated. That is a hot button argument. Now, the obvious-- look, there's an obvious response that Democrats could make. Which is no, this is a way of growing our freedom. This will actually expand human freedom, not limit it. They never say that.

BILL MOYERS: Why? So, part of the problem with America is the Democratic Party?

THOMAS FRANK: A huge part of the problem, because look, the conservatives have for decades now made their-- the whole point of their party is to attack government, attack the state, encourage cynicism about government. And then wreck it when they're in charge, right?

Democrats never defend the state. They never come out and say, "No, no. It's important to have, you know, government. It's important to have a Department of Labor. These are, you know, having government actually-- a good government increases your freedom. It doesn't ruin it." They never fight back consistently.

BILL MOYERS: Why?

THOMAS FRANK: I think they're-- some of them do. You've got members of Congress here and there that do. But by and large, the prominent leading Democrats in our society don't do that. Why is that? Because I think that would get them in trouble with their funders. I mean, the power of money is huge in the political system. You know, despite all the efforts that have been made over the years to get money out of politics. It's still immensely powerful.

BILL MOYERS: The book is Thomas Frank, "The Wrecking Crew." The literary journal is "The Baffler." Congratulations on both of them. And thanks for being with me on the Journal.

THOMAS FRANK: It was my pleasure.

BILL MOYERS: Beyond his domestic woes, certainly the issue that has preoccupied President Obama the most since he took office is Afghanistan. The war he inherited from George W. Bush is now its ninth year and seems no closer to resolution. Almost daily, it seems, there are more stories of fighting in far off mountains, of suicide bombers killing CIA operatives, of drones raining bombs down on villages and killing innocent people. THE NEW YORK TIMES reports this week that unlike the past, when Afghanistan's brutal winters would slow the violence for awhile, "both sides seem determined to make a larger political point by continuing to fight through the snow season."

Hard sometimes to remember that this whole thing began in pursuit of Osama Bin Laden and his accomplices in the attacks of 9/11. 70,000 American troops are already in Afghanistan and another 30,000 are on the way, the decision to escalate made by the president after weeks of meetings and soul-searching.

Yet, most of us know little about the reality on the ground there. In fact, just last week, America's top military intelligence officer in the field -- Major General Michael Flynn, along with two advisors -- issued a devastating report. They said U.S. troops in Afghanistan are "starved for information" and that our intelligence officers and analysts cannot answer, quote, "fundamental questions about the environment in which we operate and the people we are trying to protect and persuade." Many say their jobs feel more like "fortune telling."

Which brings me to Greg Mortenson, a modest humanitarian who probably knows more about Afghanistan than any other American. The book he co-authored, THREE CUPS OF TEA, has become required reading for our senior military commanders and Special Forces in Afghanistan. Generals David Petraeus and Stanley McChrystal, now America's top commander in Afghanistan, have read it. Admiral Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, not only read it but enlisted Mortenson as an unofficial advisor.

THREE CUPS OF TEA has sold over 3.5 million copies in 41 countries. And now Greg Mortenson has a new bestseller that continues the saga, STONES INTO SCHOOLS: PROMOTING PEACE WITH BOOKS, NOT BOMBS, IN AFGHANISTAN AND PAKISTAN.

Both books tell Mortenson's remarkable story: how, after a failed attempt to climb K2, the second highest mountain in the world, he was befriended by villagers who helped him recuperate. Watching children use sticks to scrawl their lessons in the dirt, he promised to help them build a school. That first project has led to the construction of 131 schools in Pakistan and Afghanistan, trying to bring knowledge and possibility to more than 58,000 children, both boys and especially girls.

Along the way, Greg Mortenson has learned some invaluable lessons himself -- about patience and compassion and the customs and ways of people about whom the rest of us know too little. When I heard he was in town, I asked him over to explain if he still believes it's possible to promote peace and improve lives for people in a war-ravaged country. I wanted to find out if the bombs aren't winning over books, if the bombs aren't turning his schools back into piles of stone and how war hasn't shattered his faith and peace of mind. Welcome to the JOURNAL.

GREG MORTENSON: Thank you, Bill. So great to be with you.

BILL MOYERS: I have to ask you a personal question, all right? You said to a friend of mine that when you're gone, when you die, you want it written on your stone: "He died a happy man." And in a grim world like this, working as you do in grim places, what makes you happy?

GREG MORTENSON: Well, I was very fortunate to grow up in Tanganyika, Tanzania, for 15 years.

BILL MOYERS: In East Africa.

GREG MORTENSON: East Africa. My-- it was a very wonderful time. President Julius Nyerere was one of the visionary presidents. My father ended up starting the Kilimanjaro Christian Medical Centre, which is on the slopes of Kilimanjaro. My mother started a school. So I have it in my background. And my father always said to practice your faith through action and not through talk. And, it's about what you do. And when I was about nine years old, he brought me this fairly hard reading book called "Reverence for Life" by Dr. Albert Schweitzer, who was a medical missionary in Congo. And he made me read it. And, subsequently--

BILL MOYERS: At nine?

GREG MORTENSON: When I was nine. But what it implies is that all of life is sacred, animals, plants, humans. And we're all created and we're sacred. And we must respect life. And so, I don't know, my disposition by nature is happy. And a lot-- my wife even tells me occasionally, you know, "Wipe that smirk off your face." But I also really believe-- maybe later we can talk about it, but, there are a lot of good things happening. And I've had the fortune to meet tens of thousands of kids, good people, in the military and people here in the U.S. And I really think that, you know, fighting terrorism is based in fear. But promoting peace is based in hope. And I actually had to squabble with the publishers a bit because originally "Three Cups of Tea," the subtitle, that they wanted to be "One Man's Mission to Fight Terrorism One School at a Time," and actually had that subtitle for a year. But I kept persisting that that needs to be changed. Just a subtle change but it-- "One Man's Mission to Promote Peace...One School at a Time." And it doesn't mean we just go around the world holding hands and drinking tea and having peace. But I really do believe that there's a lot of power behind love and compassion and respecting and listening to people.

BILL MOYERS: Isn't fighting terrorism also grounded in reality? I mean, this is a cruel world.

GREG MORTENSON: Obviously there are atrocities happening, and we witness and hear about them daily. One thing that I noticed is having met some former Taliban is even they, as children, grew up being indoctrinated. They grew up in violence. They grew up in war. They were taught to hate. They were, they grew up in very ignorant cultures where they didn't learn about the outside world. And one thing we do is hire former Taliban to teach in our schools, and it might sound a little bit controversial, but what's interesting is most of those men got out of the Taliban because their mothers said, "What you're doing is not a good thing. It's not in the name of Islam." It was their mothers who told them that. And they've become now our greatest advocates for education. They're willing to go out into the most, you know, volatile area and promote education.

BILL MOYERS: Yeah, I wanted to ask you, I mean, I saw a report from the executive director of a non-government organization in Kabul, operating in Kabul, who said that only 10 to 15 percent of the Taliban are ideologically driven. So who are the Taliban as you experienced them?

GREG MORTENSON: Well, I've worked for now 17 years in rural Pakistan and Afghanistan. And originally the Taliban were somewhat, as you mentioned, somewhat more ideological. We saw them as an ideological kind of monolithic entity. But today the Taliban have turned, become more criminal. The Taliban are getting less Saudi funding now, so they're doing more extortion, heroin trafficking, illicit lumber trafficking, kidnapping, crime. What's interesting, too, is having been on the ground for many years, I've seen a shift in where people are starting to turn against the Taliban in the last two years. As a militant entity, they had a lot of support. But they're not able to deliver healthcare, education, roads, and the things that most people want, and peace. And there's been quite a shift in the public sentiment towards the Taliban over the last two, three years.

BILL MOYERS: You were kidnapped and held for a week, right?

GREG MORTENSON: In 1996.

BILL MOYERS: Was that by Taliban?

GREG MORTENSON: By Taliban. I went into an area without asking for permission to go in the area. And in the Pashtunwali code, which is the tribal ethic, first, I should get permission to visit them. So if I came to see you in New York, I would need to talk to the tribal chief. I couldn't just wander in here and say, "Hey, Bill, I need to talk to you." I need to get permission. You would invite me. But then your obligation is to protect me with your life and give hospitality to me. When I was kidnapped, I wasn't tortured, but I wasn't--they weren't very friendly with me. I started getting really depressed for two, three days--I started envisioning getting hauled outside and, you know, just kneeling down, getting

executed. And then I realized my only way to maybe escape was to befriend my captors. So the first thing I did is I asked them to bring a holy Quran to them-- to me to read. And obviously I don't read Arabic at that time. So I said, "Do you need to bring the mullah to explain to me what your faith is about?" And that helped win them over a little bit. And then on the sixth day, I know that in their culture life's greatest event is the birth of a first-born son. So I told them my wife is seven months pregnant. Now, I didn't know, I ended up having a daughter. But that really won them over because I said I need to go home and be with the birth of my son when he's born because that's their life's greatest event. And then on the eighth day, they led me outside, blindfolded me. I thought again this was my day, and instead they took me to a clearing, and they released me and they gave me 10,000 rupees, which is about \$300 at the time in '96, to help build the next school because they found out what I was trying to do. And they said, "We're sorry that we, you know, we detained you. And we want to support your work."

BILL MOYERS: What do you think they would think if they knew they'd let you go to preside over the birth of a girl instead of a son?

GREG MORTENSON: Well, actually what-- I've been back there. When I let them know when my quote, child was born, and they said they fired off a barrage of AK-47s as a tribute when a first son is born. But, so my daughter's probably the first young girl born who's had a barrage of gunfire when she was born. Her name is Amira, which means "loud voice" in Persian.

BILL MOYERS: But this intrigues me because you've set out over these years to educate young girls primarily. I mean, you do have some boys in your schools, but primarily your goal is to educate young girls. And given the fact that the Afghani and Pakistani societies are so male dominated, that men run the families, they run the government, they run the villages, they run the Taliban, why focus on girls instead of the men who are going to, in that culture, grow up and run things?

GREG MORTENSON: Well, it's obviously the boys need education also. But as a child in Africa, I learned a proverb. And it says, "If we educate a boy, we educate an individual. But if we can educate a girl, we educate a community." And what that means is when girls grow up, become a mother, they are the ones who promote the value of education in the community. The education of girls has very powerful impacts in a society. Number one, the infant mortality's reduced. Number two, the population is reduced. The third thing is the quality of health improves. And, from my own observation, when girls learn how to read and write, they often teach their mother how to read and write. Boys, we don't seem to do that as much. They also, you'll see people, kids coming out for the marketplace, have meat or vegetables wrapped in newspaper. And then you'll see the mother very carefully unfolding a newspaper and ask her daughter to read the news to her. And it's the first time that woman is able to get information of what's going on in the outside world around--very powerful to see that. And another compelling reason is when women are educated, they're not as likely to condone or encourage their son to get into violence or into terrorism. In fact, culturally when someone goes on jihad, they should get permission from their mother first. And if they don't, it's very shameful or disgraceful. So when women are educated, as I mentioned, they are less likely to encourage their son to get into violence. And I've seen that happen, Bill, over the last decade in rural areas of Afghanistan, Pakistan. I mean, I could go on all day about this, but educating girls is very powerful.

One example is Aziza. She's from the tribal areas. She's the first educated female out of 4,000 people in her valley. It wasn't very easy. In elementary school the boys threw stones at her. In high school the teachers refused to teach her. So she graduated in 1998. She went to two years of maternal healthcare training. And in her valley, before she started working there, five to 20 women died in childbirth every single year. So she went to two years of training. It cost \$800.

BILL MOYERS: As a midwife.

GREG MORTENSON: As a midwife. She came back in 2000, which is nine years ago. Since then, in the last decade, not one single woman has died in childbirth. That's just one example. These are just the first fruits of all the seeds that we planted two decades ago but it's been very inspiring to see that happen.

BILL MOYERS: You mentioned jihad. What in your experience, what from your experience did you learn about what produces a terrorist?

GREG MORTENSON: The Taliban, when they recruit, they go into areas that are impoverished. They give people \$500 to \$1,000. They-- there's a lot of pressure also that if people don't give their son up for the Taliban, the-- there's extortion or they'll start intimidating or harming the people. And the other thing is many of the despot mullahs keep the people illiterate, and they learn, these young boys, learn how to read the Quran, but they don't learn how to understand Arabic. And the key is--one thing we do in our

schools is we teach five languages by fifth grade, including Arabic and English. But we teach the kids not only how to read Arabic, but understand Arabic. And when you read the Quran, you learn that nothing in the Quran says that innocent children and women should be killed. Suicide is the worst sin in Islam. The first word of the revelation to Muhammad the prophet is the Arabic word "iqra." And "iqra" means "read." What that means is that it implores all people to have a quest for knowledge. And in the Hadith, which is a part of Islam, the teachings, it says, in Arabic, "the ink of a scholar is greater than the blood of a martyr," which means that the pen is more powerful than the sword.

This is more, a little bit more ideological, but one thing the Taliban are doing very deliberately is driving a wedge through society by destroying the relationship between the elders and the youth. And they're taking the young boys and the men out of the villages, put them in areas where there's no outside influence, and indoctrinate them. They can do it very quickly and effectively.

BILL MOYERS: Why do they want to drive a wedge between the generations?

GREG MORTENSON: Well, they want to isolate and marginalize people so they can indoctrinate them as very virulent, militant kind of ideology. Many of the suicide bombers are younger. Some of them are mentally handicapped. They've also removed them totally. They've drugged them. They've beaten them. And then they take them, they strap them in with a suicide jacket, which is sewn in. You can't actually take it off your body. And then they're given orders to go out and you know, they're, said they're going to receive a lot of benefits and their families. So--

BILL MOYERS: You mean in the hereafter. Yeah.

GREG MORTENSON: Hereafter. And it's pretty easy for, somebody--

BILL MOYERS: Well, what does the Taliban want? What is their goal?

GREG MORTENSON: Well, the Taliban want-- it's a little different than Al Qaeda. The Taliban want the imposition of Sharia law, in their version, in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The trouble is, though--

BILL MOYERS: And that is religious law.

GREG MORTENSON: Islamic law. But having spoken to some of the actual Sharia experts, Sharia law actually doesn't say that women should be hurt and harmed and marginalized. It doesn't say they should commit suicide. It doesn't, in fact-- there's very implicit laws in Sharia about the right of land ownership for women. There's implicit laws about treating children, women, with respect. So they've again used illiteracy as a way to impose their own virulent, you know, militant kind of ideology. And most people are really getting sick and tired of the Taliban.

BILL MOYERS: You really believe that? Among the people you deal with, right?

GREG MORTENSON: These are the people we deal with. And we're working in Afghanistan in quite heavily, say, Taliban areas now. We've started schools this year in five new provinces, which include Urozgan, Nuristan, and Kunar, which have a lot of Taliban. And the reason we're able to work with them is because we work so closely with the elders. And one thing we do, Bill, when we set up a school that's fairly unique is we provide the teacher training, materials, and skill labor. But the community has to provide free land, free resources, and then free manual labor--2,000 to 5,000 days of free manual labor. So--

BILL MOYERS: And why do you do that?

GREG MORTENSON: So that we get the local buy-in--

BILL MOYERS: Local buy-in?

GREG MORTENSON: Local support. I'm going to tell them you need to put in 3,000 days of free manual labor from the community and you'll see the community, if they're willing to do it, they become very invested in the school. And that's one of the reasons I think the Taliban are not, they haven't destroyed or bombed or shut down any of our schools. They have attacked just one school.

BILL MOYERS: Tell me about the men who showed up in black.

GREG MORTENSON: Well, one of our goals, Bill, was to put a girls' high school in Urozgan province in Afghanistan, which is in the south. It's the home of Mullah Omar, the leader of the Taliban--it's probably one of the last bastions who are completely opposed to girls going

to school. And so last year we kind of set a rough goal that would take us two decades, or 20 years, to set up a girls' school there. So this spring, a year later, we got contacted by the men in black, as you mentioned, these are the elders of Urozgan province. They wanted to visit one of our schools. And we said sure. And so this summer they came to Char Asiab, where we have a girls' school. And these are about 14 men. When they got to the school, these are, you know, some of them are, you know, kind of shady guys, black turbans. They're armed to the teeth, have, you know, big, long beards. And when they got there, they saw the giant playground. So they threw down their weapons. For the next hour and a half, they went on the swings and slides and had a glorious time playing. And I finally kind of had to stop them and say, "You know, let's get serious. We need to-- this is the headmaster. We need to talk to the principal." And he said, "No, no. We're totally satisfied. We want a girls' high school in Urozgan Province. But it has to have a playground. And you have to come and have tea with us." So I got up the nerve in September to visit Urozgan. And this is an area, there's no U.S. troops there. I mean, there's no nothing there. There's a lot of Taliban. We had a giant jirga. And I was pretty, you know, pale faced and kind of fearful. But it was a beautiful meeting. When they got done, they said, "We want to start this school. Of course we want the playground built first." And so in October 2009 we started breaking ground on the school, and this year, in 2010, the school will be finished this summer. And so I'm, as you mentioned at the beginning that I hope to die, or I will die a happy man, but part of it is because I'm glad that those men in black were able to discover a glorious playground and have a wonderful time and decide they want a girls' school in Urozgan Province.

BILL MOYERS: How is your work going to be impacted by the fact that it's going on in a society where the war is being escalated?

GREG MORTENSON: Well, our work will go on whether or not the U.S. has military there or not in that we work so closely with the elders. With the deployment of troops there, I, I've got a lot of mixed feelings on it. The first thing is that when President Obama had nine meetings to ascertain or decide whether or not to deploy troops to Afghanistan, those meetings were held in secrecy, behind closed doors. There was no public debate. There was no congressional hearings. There was no media involved.

We can't run democracy in secrecy. And it doesn't matter whether it's George Bush or Obama. That was one of my main concerns is-it's a big decision. The other thing is that there was no consultation with the elders or the shura in Afghanistan. Every province has three to five dozen shura. And these are elders. They're poets. They're warriors. They're businessmen, a few women. And they're not elected, but they've kind of risen up through the ranks. And these to me are the real people with integrity and power in Afghanistan. So when this decision was made to deploy troops, none, there was no consultation with the troo-- with the elders. And they felt very marginalized by it because, you know, want to go into another country, we want to be able to at least have a part and a say in it. And it's not that difficult. You can do it at a district level, or local level, or at a national level. It's, you know, I think half of diplomacy is just showing up. You know, we've got to actually just show up and start to talk and then maybe we could get somewhere.

BILL MOYERS: Clearly the military knows you know something they don't know. And why can't they know it?

GREG MORTENSON: Well...good question, Bill. In "Three Cups of Tea" I was fairly critical of the military. And I mentioned that they're laptop warriors and there's no boots on the ground. But I can say now that they've gone through a tremendous learning curve. And I think in many ways the military really gets it. They, Admiral Mike Mullen, who's become a friend of mine, I've met him several times and we've spent time together. He says that the three most important things that our troops have to do is, number one, listen more. Number two, they have to have respect, meaning they're there to serve the good people. And, number three, that they have to build relationships. And that's built from the top-down now.

BILL MOYERS: But does it compromise your work on the ground in Afghanistan, for them to know that Admiral Mullen and General Petraeus and General McChrystal have read your books and they're asking you for insight?

GREG MORTENSON: Well, it's a good point. We make it very clear in Afghanistan that we've never received any funding, never received a dollar of federal money. And all my talks in the military, I'm not a consultant. I refuse to accept any honorarium or-I do this voluntarily. But, you know, I'm happy to meet with anybody, whether it's the Taliban or U.S. military. In tribal culture, the-- Afghanistan is different from Pakistan in that I see it somewhat as a warrior culture. And I'm not saying that--

BILL MOYERS: Afghanistan?

GREG MORTENSON: Afghanistan. For 2,000 years they've been through war. The

Ottomans, Genghis Khan, the Mongols, the Greeks, the Russians, the British, and now the Americans.

BILL MOYERS: Yeah, exactly.

GREG MORTENSON: Afghans have always won every battle. I was talking to Commandant Conway, who's a Marine Corps commander. And he very strongly, emphatically mentioned at the end of a talk that no military has ever won a battle here. And he said, "We are not going to win a battle here either. So we've got to be much more broader in our solution." I can also say, having spent quite a bit of time with Admiral Mullen and Petraeus and McChrystal, they will all tell you to your face there is no military solution in this country. And the solution has got to be a much broader solution.

BILL MOYERS: So what are our soldiers dying for there if there's not going to be a victory?

GREG MORTENSON: Well, whether we like it or not, we're there. And I think we made somewhat of a promise to the Afghan people. The first was after the Soviets withdrew and we totally abandoned them. And what happened is Osama Bin Laden came around. And then there was 9/11 and, the tragic thing that happened here in New York. And then we went into Afghanistan. But then a year and a half later, the media, the military, we all ran off to Iraq. And, again, we abandoned the Afghan people. And now we're kind of around to the third time. You know, three strikes and you're out. But I really think-the military has-it's very difficult to be in the military now because they've had to have the role of being humanitarian, diplomat, and warriors. And they have to wear three caps. And there's, there is criticism because the DOD is getting a lot more funding now. And the second-

BILL MOYERS: The Pentagon, the Department of Defense, right, yes.

GREG MORTENSON: The Pentagon. And their funding is--

BILL MOYERS: It costs us a million dollars a year to keep one soldier there. That's \$30 billion for the new 30,000 troops.

GREG MORTENSON: And ultimately--

BILL MOYERS: How many schools could you build with that?

GREG MORTENSON: Well, \$1 million we could build 30 or 40 schools. And in one generation we could have over 20,000, 30,000 kids educated. But I do think, the worst thing we can do is do nothing. And, like Vice President Joe Biden and columnist George Will, the conservative columnist, have both recommended pulling out the troops but doing more selected targeted bombings. And I can tell you, of all things that the elders say is, please, do not bomb and kill civilians. That is the number one way to antagonize people. And the other thing is, I've seen in the military a huge effort to spend time with the elders. I've helped facilitate several dozen meetings now between the elders and General McChrystal's team and many other commanders. And I got very excited to see that because finally people are starting to listen to the people who I think really understand their country and can be part of the solution.

BILL MOYERS: But then how do you explain the phenomenon of a CIA station in Afghanistan being infiltrated by a suicide bomber? What is it we don't know about Afghanistan after eight years that makes that makes that happen?

GREG MORTENSON: Well, war is, it's a horrific thing. It's something that none of us want. In order to get information or work with the people, the military has to be exposed. And the guy, this actual incident, the suicide bomber happened to be an informant. And so they were working with the people. And in the forward operating bases, which are remote bases that started two or three years ago, the U.S. military, their primary mandate now is to build relationships with the people, embed, kind of walk the beat with the cops. And the problem with that, though, is our casualties are going to go way up. There's no way around it. One thing that the military has done under pressure from our political leaders is start to pull our forward operating bases because-

BILL MOYERS: Pull them, you mean bring them back?

GREG MORTENSON: Bring them back.

BILL MOYERS: From the mountainous regions and--

GREG MORTENSON: And garrison them in compounds with big walls. But that doesn't do any good because you're just holing up troops. They're not interacting with the people. Maybe reduce the casualties a bit, but-- so if we are going to deploy more troops, I really

think they're going to have to put them out there, expose them, get them in with the people and help them out. Or otherwise, it doesn't make any sense to just put troops in a big walled castle and tell them, you know, you need to set up a McDonald's and Starbucks and, okay, so they go out and do some raids and come back. It's just, that's not a way to bring peace or anything.

BILL MOYERS: So help me get my bearings here, Greg. On the one hand, the news out of Afghanistan is consistently grim. The CIA blown up, the U.S. soldiers under attack, civilians being killed. But then I read about you, opening one school after another, some of them smack in the middle of the most lawless and dangerous areas of Afghanistan and Pakistan. I mean, should we think there's progress or should we think of things going to hell there?

GREG MORTENSON: I tend to be an optimist. So here's the good news, Bill. The first thing is the number of kids in school has gone up ten times in the last decade to 8.5 million children. There's a central banking system in Afghanistan since 2006, which has been huge. There's a road building program, about 80 percent of the roads have been built now from north to south and east to west. It's like building a road from Minneapolis to Dallas and D.C. to-- or New York to LA. Now, that's maybe 70 percent of the way done. There are 80,000 troops trained now, the Afghan Army. The goal is 180,000. And some more interesting things are if you go into the district courts, you'll see the number of women filing titles and deeds for land ownership is skyrocketing. And I think that's a real important thing to note. I think the U.S., we're-- we've been far too busy in the last two decades trying to plug in democracy in the world. And you cannot plug in democracy. We have to build democracy.

BILL MOYERS: So last question. What keeps you going back? And when you go back, what keeps you going?

GREG MORTENSON: Well, I think the real reason that drives me is I've learned from Haji Ali, who was a tribal chief. And I mentioned "Three Cups of Tea," or my father, and they all say that we need to listen more. And so I try to listen. And I ask widows and women in rural areas in Pakistan and Afghanistan what do you want? I want to help you, but what do you want? And you'd think most women would say, "I want a good husband. I want a big house. I want prosperity." But what most women tell me are just two simple things. They say, "We don't want our babies to die, and we want our children to go to school." And of anything that really drives me, those are the two things that really keep me on because I think we need to listen to those women. What they want most of all is, you know, what any mother around the world wants. And you don't want your baby to die or your child and you want your children to go to school. So that's pretty much what drives me on.

BILL MOYERS: The book is "Stones into Schools," another one by Greg Mortenson, "Promoting Peace with Books, Not Bombs, in Afghanistan and Pakistan." Greg, thank you for being with me on the Journal.

GREG MORTENSON: Thanks, Bill.

BILL MOYERS: Since the war began, more than 900 Americans have died in Afghanistan. Our casualties doubled in 2009, and according to the United Nations, civilian deaths there have spiraled upward, too, more than 2,400 in 2009, the most lethal year yet.

For the 2010 fiscal year, Congress has appropriated an estimated \$72.3 billion for Afghanistan-- and that's not including the \$33 billion the "Associated Press" reports that President Obama will be requesting to help fund his additional 30,000 troops.

The [National Priorities Project](#), a non-profit that analyzes how our tax dollars are spent, estimates that, at this rate, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq will cost Americans more than a trillion dollars in taxes. I can't add up all the zeroes it takes to get to a trillion but I do remember that Greg Mortenson said he could build 30 or 40 schools with the money it takes just to keep one American soldier in Afghanistan for a year.

To help make sense of those numbers, on that National Priorities website, there's a "[Trade Off](#)" section that breaks down the amount of taxes each state or congressional district has paid for the two wars. For instance, \$94 billion have come from taxpayers here in New York state. It then shows you what those dollars could have been used for instead. We could have hired more than a million elementary school teachers for a year, or provided more than 17 million people with a year's worth of health care or built more than half a million housing units. Indeed, with money like that, we might be able to completely rebuild Haiti, ease the misery of those made homeless by that massive earthquake, and maybe even throw in the restoration of New Orleans, Detroit, Cleveland and a dozen other American inner cities.

The people at the National Priorities Project have a "[Cost of War](#)" digital clock that includes all funding for the wars to date and we'll link you to it via our website. Go to pbs.org and

click on "Bill Moyers Journal." You'll also find there more by and about [Greg Mortenson](#), as well as [Thomas Frank](#).

That's it for the JOURNAL. I'm Bill Moyers. And I'll see you next time.

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