

In brief: Rory Stewart on what can and cannot be accomplished in Afghanistan.

November 2009

Rory Stewart is a remarkable man. At 36, he has already served as deputy governor of two provinces in Iraq (for which he was awarded the Order of the British Empire), traveled by foot across much of Central Asia, founded and managed a non-profit – the Turquoise Mountain Foundation, devoted to rebuilding the historic commercial center of Kabul – and is currently running for Parliament.

Oh, and Brad Pitt’s production company is now interested in making a movie of his life.

Mr. Stewart, at present the Director of the Carr Center for Human Rights Policy at Harvard’s Kennedy School, addressed several hundred people on the evening of November 17th at the Charles Hotel as part of Cambridge Trust’s Thought Series.SM His talk, “The Irresistible Illusion: A Perspective on What Can Be Accomplished in Afghanistan,” provided a thoughtful, illuminating, and personal glimpse into Afghan culture and was enlivened by detailed portraits of the fascinating individuals he has met during his travels and in the course of his work.

A born raconteur, Stewart used striking imagery and colorful anecdotes to introduce the many faces of Afghanistan:

- A veterinarian who spontaneously offered to accompany Stewart on a 60-mile walk from one remote village to the next
- A former jihadist who sold matches at a truck stop in Iran in order to earn enough money to afford a wife
- A young boy who could not understand Arabic but had memorized the entire Koran
- A master craftsman who sold fruit on the street for 15 years because demand for his beautiful, ornate lattice-work had vanished

With his affectionate and evocative brand of storytelling, Stewart showed that he had not only taken the time to experience life in Afghanistan as the Afghans themselves live it, but that he had also developed a strong and abiding love for this distant country and its people.

His intimate and wide-ranging knowledge of the country and its history, not to mention the many challenges it faces, has convinced him that it will take decades for Afghan society to achieve even the basic levels of modernization found elsewhere in the developing world. For this reason, Stewart advocates a strategy of “light, moderate, and sustainable” engagement that would include a much smaller military footprint (20,000 troops or fewer), and an emphasis not on state-building but on modest, local development projects.

As a model for such projects, Stewart pointed to his experience helping to rebuild the traditional



In brief: Rory Stewart... *Continued*

crafts district of Murad Khane, an effort which now employs over 500 Afghanis. The success of this enterprise has demonstrated to him the necessity of working closely with the community's formal and informal leadership as well as listening attentively to the wishes of the local people.

To illustrate the give-and-take required by such engagements, Stewart tells of agreeing to the community's request that he build an elementary school, a project which had no place in his original plan for the area. He in turn pushed the community to accept a modicum of cultural change by allowing the local girls to attend. The result was that, after allowing concerned fathers to sit in on classes for several weeks so they could see for themselves what their daughters were learning, every child in the neighborhood now has access to a basic education.

Through the eyes of Rory Stewart, attendees were afforded an image of Afghanistan that was rich, vital, and complex. This admiration for Afghan culture and desire to preserve it is a major influence of Stewart's endorsement of a policy of patient, committed investment in Afghanistan's future.

If you would like to hear Rory Stewart share his experience and insights in his own words, an audio file of his entire presentation will be available soon.

RELATED LINKS

For more information on Rory Stewart: <http://www.hks.harvard.edu/about/faculty-staff-directory/rory-stewart> ▶▶

To view a PBS interview with Rory Stewart:
<http://thelede.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/10/08/in-a-ditch-or-off-a-cliff-in-afghanistan/> ▶▶

To watch an eight-part Rory Stewart Lecture "Afghanistan: The Places in Between":
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OmrVAHaf_Sg ▶▶

To learn about The Turquoise Mountain Foundation: <http://www.turquoisemountain.org> ▶▶

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