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Why do the Taliban fear Malala Yousafzai more than American missiles? ^[1]

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After 11 years of armed conflict in Afghanistan, a growing number of Americans question the motivation for continuing the United States' engagement in the region.

The reason is Malala Yousafzai, a 14-year-old Pakistani female blogger shot twice by a gunman in the Swat Valley on October 9 because she criticized the Taliban's treatment of the population, particularly their intimidation of girls attending school.

The education of women is the most critical issue in the United States' battle against extremist Salafi ideology espoused by the Taliban, al-Qaeda, and similar terrorist organizations. According to the CIA World Factbook, female literacy is 12.6% in Afghanistan, 60.1% in Algeria, 63.5% in Egypt, 82.7% in Libya, 40.3% in Pakistan, and 46.8% in Yemen. It is shameful that in countries such as Yemen, males are nearly twice as likely than females to be literate.

Before scandal tarnished his name, *Three Cups of Tea* author Greg Mortenson made a valid point about the tribal regions of Afghanistan and Pakistan. He said if you educate a woman there you educate an entire family. Put another way, if women are not teaching their children then it's likely that extremists are. In the tribal regions of Afghanistan and Pakistan many madrassahs teach their students—males only—a curriculum heavy on intolerance and light on practical skills. The Taliban has burned down schools for girls and assaulted them with acid. The removal of Yousafzai and two of her classmates from a school bus and their subsequent shooting is yet another example of fearing female education.

Former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates realized several years ago that education is a central component for combating extremist ideologies, which is why education is now a central element of American public diplomacy and nation building in Afghanistan. Non-governmental organizations have carried the mantle for years and need continued support from governments and concerned citizens. This is also a strategic goal for the State Department, as recently emphasized by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's remarks at "Power: Women as Drivers of Growth and Social Inclusion," a conference held in Lima, Peru. Without an emphasis on education for women, Afghanistan and Pakistan will continue to be international pariahs, harboring the people who intend to do us harm.

The Taliban were right about the danger Malala Yousafzai poses to them. The cultivation of this courageous girl's mind is far more dangerous to them than any American missile. The extra boots needed on the ground in Afghanistan and Pakistan belong to teachers, not soldiers. If the State Department continues to prioritize this, as Secretary Clinton has done,

the landscape will change dramatically.

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