

Iowa View

There are positive changes happening in Pakistan — and Americans should be a part of them

By CHUCK MONTGOMERY

Lahore, Pakistan — Pakistan is on the move. People here, particularly the young, are stirring. A wave of soulful determination and creativity is building — aimed at setting their nation right. At least that is the conclusion I reach after several days of encounters with scores of Pakistani leaders.

While the United States tries to nurture this movement, the Pakistanis are the primary actors, as they must be. U.S. credibility here is undermined by our drone strikes and aid policy. The strikes are viewed as proof of American disrespect for Pakistani lives. The aid is blamed, in part, for corruption of Pakistan's government. Pakistanis question American respect for their lives.

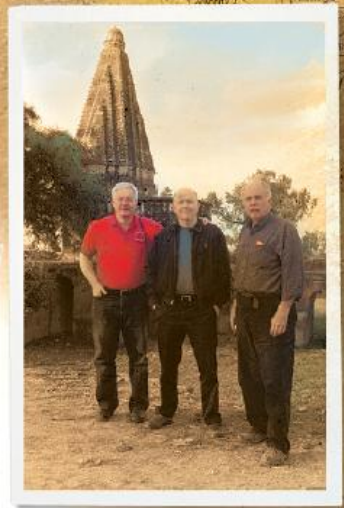
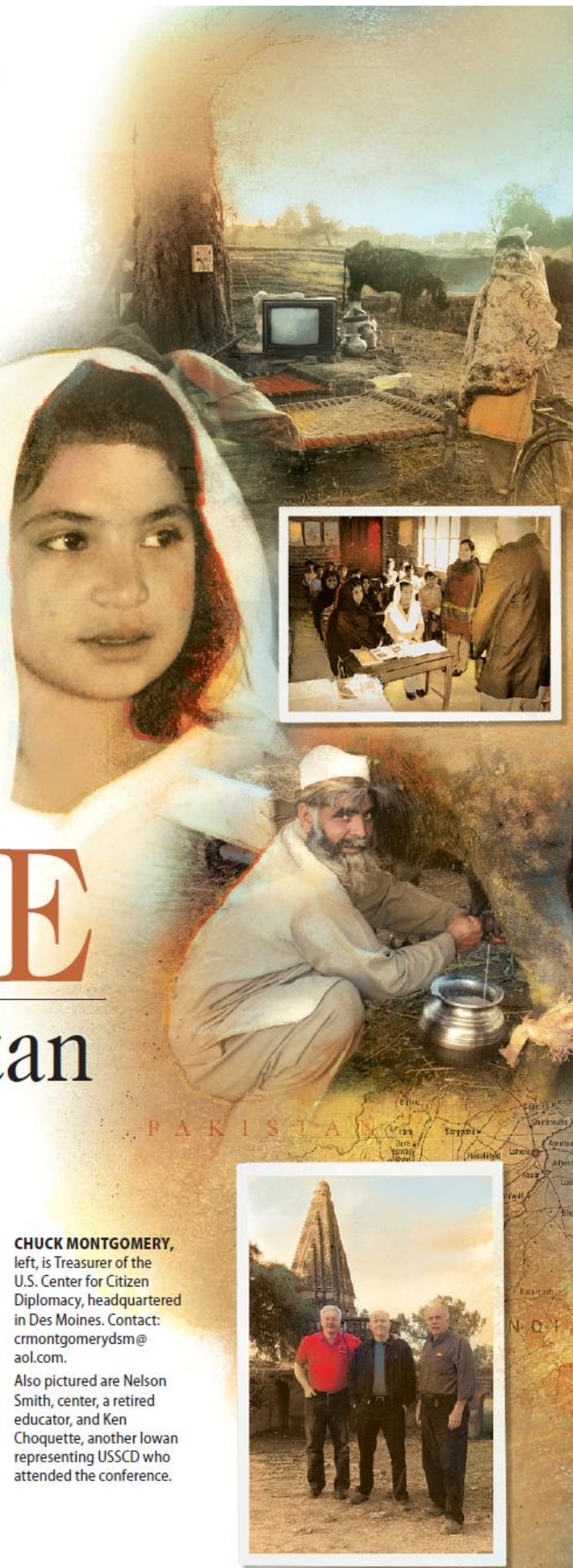
This situation, however, need not continue. The United States still has an opportunity to restore our credibility. I believe it would be in our interest to do so, and demonstrate to 1.3 billion Muslims that America seeks a world of mutual respect, even common purpose. Pakistan, the world's sixth most populated nation, nestled in a geostra-

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tegic location with a nuclear arsenal, seems a very good place to make that demonstration. As an officer of the U.S. Center for Citizen Diplomacy (USSCD), I have been participating in the U.S.-Muslim Engagement Initiative here in Lahore. Forty American and Pakistani citizens have been exploring ways to lift the troubled relationship — using citizen exchanges and joint projects as the primary tools.

My organization welcomes this. We believe the world cries out for citizen-to-citizen engagement as a necessary complement to government-to-government diplomacy. Such contact ("citizen diplomacy") allows each participant to gauge the other, free of formal diplomacy's constraints. Citizen diplomacy works, even at times when competing national interests tempt citizens to view each other in stereotypical ways. We

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Also pictured are Nelson Smith, center, a retired educator, and Ken Choquette, another Iowan representing USSCD who attended the conference.

At top is a herdsman's camp. His TV worked, thanks to an electrical outlet box on the tree. The girl at center is a student in a private school, shown at right, run by an NGO that was created by a leading Pakistani industrialist. Pictured below her, a herdsman gathers cream for chai tea.

# PAKISTAN

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believe when citizens look beyond stereotypes it enables governments to make better long-term policy decisions.

Meeting participants here were varied and included educators, entrepreneurs, journalists, academics, think-tankers, lawyers, former diplomats/government officials, NGO leaders, farmers, philanthropists, agribusiness executives, pollsters, doctors, media executives, and university officials.



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Ken Choquette, another Iowan representing USCCD also attended the conference. A farmer, engineer and 1964-

65 Peace Corps volunteer in Pakistan, Ken worked on numerous irrigation and water projects here. Another Iowa connection: Pioneer Hybrid's country director, a Pakistani, also participated. Pioneer has been doing business in Pakistan for more than 20 years.

After frank exchanges about current U.S.-Pakistani relations, the meeting's focus shifted to cooperative efforts for building a better relationship through efforts to improve marketing of mangoes, assisting silage production, farmer exchanges, bettering agricultural extension services, sister cities, student and teacher exchanges, virtual exchanges (e.g., grade schools), six-month fellowships at American NGOs, and joint journalism.

Meeting participants have accepted assignments to advance each of these projects. Future meetings will further this

work, but also bring together experts in the areas of energy (rolling blackouts occur here daily), health, social services, media and local governance. All collaborations will be focused closer to the people, away from the central government, and accountability for funding will be ever-present. Pakistani and American participants believe decentralization and accountability are key to avoiding the contaminating corruption that plagues so much in Pakistan.

While a reservoir of good will toward the United States remains, the supply is limited. Everywhere, I have been invited to tea and conversation — by a water buffalo herder in the countryside, by bazaar book vendors, by conference participants. Pakistanis are reaching out to Americans with generosity and warmth.

We should respond in kind. Through the above-mentioned Initiative, Iowans will have opportunities to engage Pakistanis, as will those in other states. I hope many will respond, and even come to Pakistan. While some risk is involved, it is manageable and well worth the effort. We can make a difference in Pakistan and it will be rewarding and life changing. Like the "greatest generation," we can collectively bend the curve of history.

Last Sunday, I was inspired by a Pakistani college student. Over dinner she recounted her father's request that she leave Pakistan for a safer environment. With conviction she recounted her rejection of such a life, vowing to stay and help her country change. She acknowledged the risk, but chose to stay. I met many such Pakistanis this past week, of all ages. Something is happening here. We should be a part of it.

By Chuck Montgomery, *The Des Moines Sunday Register*, March 6, 2011.

Mark Marturello/Register photo illustration from photos submitted by Chuck Montgomery

<http://www.desmoinesregister.com/article/20110306/OPINION01/103060316/Guest-column-Hope-for-Pakistan>