

High Crimes: The Fate of Everest in an Age of Greed

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Prologue

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Most of the world came to know David Sharp because of how desperately late he was. I got acquainted with him because he was on time.

“Sam’s Bar at seven.” During the last days of March 2006, the words were a mantra among the group of climbers I would join on Mount Everest through the next two months. The small terrace bar in the Thamel section of Kathmandu was a warm refuge, both from our visions of the frozen mountain a hundred miles away and from the crazed, carnivalesque streets below. Most of us, wrapped up in our preparations for the climb, didn’t get to Sam’s until seven thirty or eight. But on the days that he joined us, David was there right on time, as was my wife, Carolyn, and on one occasion, me.

As we waited for the rest of our dinner crew, David said that once he knocked Everest off his list, he was probably going to give up mountaineering.

“I’m thirty-four years old. I want to go home, meet someone, settle down, and have children.

“I guess I might climb on weekends,” he said, but he sounded doubtful.

It was David’s third time on the mountain; my second. We were both more than familiar with the weeks of frigid suffering that lay before us, and I wondered how David could fire himself up for the long, cold climb with such a lukewarm attitude toward the sport he once loved.

He was six feet tall and thin, with wire-rimmed glasses, a big-toothed grin, and a barely there goatee that got scruffier on the mountain. The Guisborough, England, native had given up his job as an engineer to climb, but was starting a new career as a math teacher in the fall. He carried two books with him—a collection of Shakespeare in honor of George Mallory’s readings of King Lear and Hamlet on the mountain eighty-two years before, and, although he claimed he was an atheist, a Bible. He brought only a disposable camera to record his trip.

“I’ve got all the photos I need,” he told companions in Base Camp. “Except for the summit.”

If he didn’t make it to the top this time, he said, he wasn’t coming back. He couldn’t afford to. As it was, he had barely scraped up enough money for his current climb. He didn’t have the cash to hire any Sherpa support, and had purchased only two bottles of oxygen for a climb on which most people use five or more. Two years earlier, on his second attempt, he had tried to climb without oxygen, but carried two tanks of gas with him just in case. He became so hypoxic, he told us, that he forgot to use them when it became apparent he wouldn’t top out without them. Forced to retreat, he finally remembered the oxygen cylinders and took them out of his pack, put them down in the snow and, despite their value of nearly \$900, walked down without them. His botched summit bid cost him more than the oxygen: He lost his left big toe and part of another to frostbite. But he laughed at the memory and said that he was willing to lose more digits to make his final attempt on the peak pay off.

Still, even though he was climbing solo, he told his mother before he left England that if he got into real trouble, he could count on some help.

“On Everest you are never on your own,” she would recall his telling her. “There are climbers everywhere.”

The mountaineers I learned the ropes with would have honored David with the title “dirtbag,” for bringing only what he thought he absolutely needed to survive, and part of me admired his bare-bones approach to the climb. But though I had once put together my climbs the same way, we now had little in common. Instead of the scriptures, Shakespeare, and a cardboard camera, I had plenty of books—both for reference and entertainment—and six cameras, along with three laptops, a satellite modem and satellite phone, a DVD burner, external hard drives, two digital voice recorders, a minidisc recorder, an iPod, portable speakers, and dozens of notebooks. Carolyn brought three video cameras. All of that was on top of the ice axes, crampons, down clothes, Frankenstein-size boots, and the rest of the Everest climber’s wardrobe. I was loaded for bear, and I had been the last time we were in the Himalaya as well. In 2004, I reported live from the mountain for The Hartford Courant newspaper, covering the Connecticut Everest Expedition, a team with which I was also climbing. As I left for the Himalaya that March, I was convinced I was prepared for the endeavor ahead. But by the time I reached the mountain, I knew I was wrong. As it turned out, so was David.

On May 14, 2006, six weeks after our last dinner together, David Sharp came upon a corpse in a cave high on Everest and sat down beside it. It’s believed, but not certain, that David had reached Everest’s summit that afternoon, climbing on the mountain’s northeast ridge in Tibet, the same route he had used to make his previous two attempts on the peak. It was quite late, in Everest climb time, and probably already dark when David, the last person out above the highest camp in the world, arrived at the tiny, jagged grotto. The dead

man he sat next to, nicknamed “Green Boots,” was an Indian climber who had resided for a decade inside the concrete-colored and crypt-shaped hole in a wall of overhanging limestone—Green Boots Cave. Orange, black, and blue oxygen tanks were strewn among the fractured stones at the entrance to the small room—scrap metal along a highway to the top of the world. David’s two bottles of oxygen were almost certainly exhausted; he had been climbing for some twenty hours straight. He’d had no partner joining him on the ascent, or at any other time during his expedition. Instead he had signed onto the permit of an “international” team—a random group of climbers from around the world brought together only by their need to save money by sharing base camp facilities. David had no radio or satellite phone to communicate with the other independent climbers sharing his permit, or the more than thirty other teams in the lower camps. He was about as alone as a person can be on what has become a very crowded mountain. Still, it’s hard to imagine that he didn’t, at some time when he was approaching the cave, believe that he was in the home stretch to the rest of his life. He was less than 1,000 vertical feet away from Camp Three, where his own tent or other climbers could have provided everything he needed to survive the night—except the will to do it.

It wasn’t until what high-altitude mountaineers call the morning, an hour or so after midnight on May 15, when some forty climbers headed up on their own summit bids, that anyone could have noted that David’s struggle had turned dire. Some reported that he was still connected to the fixed rope, so most of the two scores of climbers would have had to unclip from that lifeline to get past him. Others saw him sitting up, fiddling with his oxygen equipment, or simply sitting with his pack between his legs as if he were taking a rest while making the same trip to the summit that they were. Most reported later that in the darkness, with their hooded faces gasping for breath through oxygen masks and staring with goggled eyes into the bubble of light from their headlamps, their own senses dulled from the lack of oxygen and the extreme cold, they either mistook David for the dead body that they knew was already there or didn’t notice him at all. But on their way back down from the peak eight hours later, in the late-morning sun, it was impossible to miss him. The climbers who stopped to check on him found that his hands were wooden with frostbite. He was wearing only light liner gloves after removing his heavy mittens, hat, and oxygen mask (people suffering from hypothermia often remove clothes in the delusion that they are hot rather than cold). His feet were frozen to the knee, preventing him from standing, much less walking down the mountain on his own. The skin of his nose was already black, and his cheeks, at first bleached to a deathly white by the cold, were turning purple. The frostbite on his face kept him from speaking clearly, but when he was conscious, he at least tried to talk.

“My name is David Sharp,” he reportedly said to a Sherpa who was wearing a video camera on his helmet to film a Discovery Channel documentary. “I’m with Asian Trekking, and I just want to sleep.” Nobody else who saw him in the cave had any idea who he was. Some glanced at his clothes for identification but noted nothing except that aside from his boots, his gear was old and worn. Descending climbers who saw him early reported he was comatose, but others later found him conscious, shivering with his teeth clenched. Their own assaults on the summit had left many of the descending climbers in little better shape: Several were badly frostbitten, and one was being rescued after falling unconscious. All were exhausted and running low on oxygen. A Sherpa for a Turkish team found a bottle of oxygen in David’s pack, but it was empty. Other Sherpas rolled him into the sun to make him more comfortable. They put David’s oxygen mask back on him and hooked him up to some of their own gas. A few tried to get David on his feet, but his legs buckled under his own weight. To everyone who saw him, it was clear that anything short of carrying him back to camp—a task that would have required perhaps a dozen fresh climbers—was only prolonging the inevitable.

By the next morning, there would be two dead bodies in the cave. Within a week, the whole world would learn about the dying man whom so many climbers stepped within arm’s reach of but didn’t notice, and the forty-some pairs of boots that walked away from him twice while his life was slowly frozen out of him. Perhaps there was nothing that could have been done to save David Sharp. Nonetheless, to me and many of the other climbers following the news that trickled down the mountain and then spread around the planet, his failure to survive his descent represented the latest step in our sport’s race to the bottom. Most notable of those outraged was the man who was the first to reach the top of the mountain fifty-three years earlier. “I think the whole attitude towards climbing Mt Everest has become rather horrifying,” Sir Edmund Hillary said when he heard of David Sharp’s death. “People just want to get to the top. They don’t give a damn for anybody else who may be in distress, and it doesn’t impress me at all that they leave someone lying under a rock to die.”

Three years earlier, during the 2003 party marking the fiftieth anniversary of Hillary’s climb with Tenzing Norgay, many climbers were shocked to find that the guest of honor was less than celebratory.

“I am not very happy about the future of Everest,” Hillary, then eighty-three, told a press conference in Kathmandu. “At Base Camp there are 1,000 people and 500 tents, there are places for food, places for drinks and comforts that perhaps the young like these days...Just sitting around Base Camp knocking back cans of beer, I don’t particularly regard as mountaineering.”

But in David’s death, Hillary saw the worst of his fears realized.

“Human life is far more important than just getting to the top of a mountain,” he told the Otago Daily Times in New Zealand. “There have been a number of occasions when people have been neglected and left

to die.” One of those left to die was Dr. Nils Antezana. Although Nils and I were on Everest at the same time in 2004, we never met. On the mountain, I knew of him only through a message from his daughter, Fabiola, which appeared on my laptop in Advanced Base Camp (ABC), and on other computers all over the planet.

“PLEASE I NEED HELP,” she wrote, “my father is missing on Everest.”

Fabiola never found out all the details of her father’s fate. His body was never found. But she did learn that he died after begging for his life in suspicious and completely avoidable circumstances.

Despite the fact that his end was so similar to David Sharp’s, Nils Antezana couldn’t have been less of a “dirtbag.” A wealthy doctor, he had the means to put together as extravagant an expedition as he cared to—he had a guide, two Sherpas, and plenty of oxygen. And so, for his daughter, the mystery of what happened in her father’s final hours was soon matched by the mystery of how the previous months led to them. A week after I read her note, I saw Fabiola in Kathmandu during her own expedition—a journey not to the top of the world but an investigation into the underworld that has spread beneath it. But there was little I could do to help her, even though my own Everest climb had led me to pursue a similar quest.

On the day that Nils Antezana vanished on the Nepal side of Everest, I was working my way toward the summit from Tibet with the Connecticut team. It had taken three months of planning, six weeks of trudging through the Himalaya, and ten days of climbing to reach a cluster of tents just two days’ climb and 4,000 feet shy of the summit. But the high point of my ascent was the low point of my expedition. Gale-force winds blasted climbers from their feet, and the desperately thin air turned the hike up the snow-covered north ridge into a grueling slog. It was not the elements, however, that made me decide to retreat from the summit, but some of my own teammates, who, in their efforts to stand on top of the world and make money doing it, behaved more like mobsters than mountaineers. In the end, some of my climbing partners threatened me more than the mountain did.

During the expedition, more than \$10,000 worth of the tents, ropes, and bottled oxygen that my life depended on went missing, some of it turning up later, hidden amid other team members’ equipment. Some of my climbing partners openly planned to help themselves to other teams’ oxygen tanks and gear. They used the ropes and equipment other expeditions had fixed on the route but refused to contribute to the communal effort to make the climbing route safe. Sherpas hired to accompany us to the summit, whose assistance was crucial to our success and survival, extorted thousands of dollars to complete their work, then abandoned those of us who had paid them. Some mountaineers smuggled drugs across international borders and numbed themselves daily with hashish, beer, and whiskey more than 20,000 feet above sea level. Prostitutes and pimps propositioned climbers walking through Base Camp. Expedition members who tried to stand up against their teammates’ thuggish behavior were physically threatened, cut off from the team’s power supply, refused food, pelted with rocks and, in one instance, beaten. All of the members of our team survived, but looking back, I see I was little better prepared or less naïve than Nils Antezana—just lucky enough to realize the true nature of the peril I faced and turn back when he continued upward.

As Nils’s and the Connecticut climbers’ separate dramas played out, the largest of a score of film crews working on the mountain was making a feature-length movie about the 1996 Everest disaster in which eight climbers perished during a single ill-fated summit bid. Nils’s death highlighted the changes that have occurred on the mountain in the years since that tragedy. In 1996, Rob Hall, whose repeated trips to the top of the mountain had made him the world’s most respected mountain guide, perished on Everest because he refused to leave a dying client behind. In 2004, Nils Antezana died on the mountain after being abandoned by his guide, who Nils believed had climbed Everest before but was actually making his first trip to the summit.

The 1996 season exposed the peril that high-priced mountain guides and their often inexperienced clients brought to the top of the world during the 1990s. Today’s story is darker and deeper. Much of the change is due to the tremendous boom in visitors to the world’s highest mountains.

Those who thought Hillary’s comments or the 1996 tragedies would diminish the traffic on Everest could not have been more wrong. During 2003’s Golden Jubilee climbing season, a record 264 people reached the summit. The next year, that record was shattered, with 330 people standing on top of Everest. In 2006, at least 460 climbers stood atop the mountain, and in 2007, the number was nearly 600—six times the 98 climbers who had summited eleven years earlier. Along with that rush of visitors and the millions of dollars that they spend in a wilderness with virtually no legal oversight has come a new breed of parasitic and predatory adventurer.

Although most people recall the disaster on Everest in the spring of 1996, only the most die-hard mountaineering fans remember the exact human toll of the tragedy—twelve dead overall, with eight dying in a single storm. But the cash price the commercial clients paid to be there—\$65,000 per person—became a benchmark fixed in minds the world over. Hundreds of foreign climbers and native workers arrived on the mountain in subsequent seasons looking to collect a paycheck from the new Everest industry. The greatest interest in exploiting the mountain of money came from the government of China, which loosened restrictions and began developing infrastructure to draw mountaineers to Tibet.

On May 10, 1996, when the Indian climber now known only as Green Boots (but presumed to be Tsewang Paljor) died in the killer storm, the Chinese side of Everest was a lonelier place. Just a handful of expeditions—a fraction of the number of climbers who visited the Nepal side of the mountain—climbed on

the Northeast Ridge to the summit. Ten years later, when David Sharp joined Green Boots in his cave, the demographic had seesawed. With at least thirty organized expeditions, along with dozens of independent climbers, there were more mountaineers and more traffic jams on the north (Tibetan) side than the south. Some of the increase can be attributed to climbers avoiding the massive crevasses and collapsing ice cliffs of the Khumbu Icefall, the greatest peril on the southern route. There is no comparable objective danger on the north side. Ease of access can also account for some of the crowd: Instead of the weeklong walk to reach the Nepali Base Camp, a road runs all the way to Base Camp on the Chinese side, so visitors need only hitch a ride to get to the start of the climb. But most of the increase in climbing traffic is simply due to the fact that at between \$3,000 and \$5,000, the permit to climb the north side of the mountain costs a fraction of the one for the Nepali side. North side mountaineers pay as little as ten percent of the \$65,000 charged by the best expeditions on the south side. And that price difference has made Tibet the Everest climber's Wal-Mart.

Although the government of China does much to put a clean and noble face on the Tibetan side of Everest—garbage collectors and giant trash bins have sprung up throughout Base Camp in recent seasons—it seems more than aware of a different and more insidious mess spreading at the base of their mountain. In 2007, when Chinese climbers arrived for a dry run of the expedition that would carry the Olympic torch up the mountain in the lead-up to the 2008 Beijing games, they brought along some pieces of equipment that have rarely appeared in the mountaineering arena—firearms to guard their equipment and keep the riffraff out of their camp. Although in the last few years a number of expeditions have posted guards to prevent burglaries of their tents, the soldiers who stood sentry over the Chinese camp were the mountain's first armed security workers.

The guns were just another in a long line of unusual accessories introduced on Everest. Every year, expedition leaders further tame the world's highest peaks with satellite weather forecasts, global positioning systems, bolted anchors, ladders fixed over the most difficult sections of the mountain, and thousands of bottles of oxygen that allow attempts at the summit by an ever-increasing number of climbers with an ever-decreasing average level of experience and skill. A growing army of Sherpas does almost all of the work, all but carrying many of the commercial clients to the summit. Those resources are in turn drawing a new kind of climber to the mountain—freeloaders and outlaws who plan to make it to the summit by exploiting the equipment, supplies, and legwork of better-resourced climbers and expeditions. Many of the mountaineers putting together low-budget Everest expeditions are, either through intent or out of denial, bound to become burdens on the better equipped and better prepared. Climbers who arrive without the appropriate medications or medical equipment overwhelm doctors on well-resourced teams. One team I was on ordered its members not to mention that we had a doctor with us, to try to stem the flood of sick climbers from other camps. Some arrive without ropes, anchors, or high-altitude tents; watch hungrily as commercial operators equip the mountain; then crowd the guides and their clients from the lifelines and shelters they paid for. Oxygen tanks, stove fuel, and food vanish every year from the highest camps in the world, much of it appropriated by Western mountaineers who have shown up at the mountain with few of those resources. And when a boldly independent but woefully under-equipped climber like David Sharp gets into trouble high on the mountain, everyone within range of helping will be faced with the same wrenching dilemma: give up on the dream they have spent thousands of dollars and months of suffering to achieve, to save someone who came under-prepared—or leave him to his fate in order to stay focused on their own ambitions.

No other sport, perhaps no other human endeavor, has as bipolar a zenith as mountaineering. The very name of the game—climbing—promotes measuring success by the height attained. But the highest mountain in the world is far from being the world's most difficult to climb. In the way it is climbed now, according to many veteran mountaineers, Everest is actually the easiest of the world's 8,000-meter peaks. So it has become something of a wild card, the ultimate trump. With ladders and fixed ropes helping to overcome technical difficulties, neophytes who can barely tie their own knots need only the genetics that allow survival at high altitude and a good amount of fitness to put one foot in front of the other all the way to the planet's high point. Although many who reach the summit have climbed only a handful of peaks in their life, they descend with the title "World Class Mountaineer." Some, who were schoolteachers, car salesmen, or contractors when they started up, descend transformed into motivational speakers, authors, television personalities, sponsored athletes, mountain guides, or "life coaches." In other cases, the summit of Everest is simply a must-have entry at the top of a life's résumé—often that of doctors, business and government leaders, or athletes from other sports who would be among the world's most accomplished people even without the planet's high point on their curriculum vitae.

These trophy hunters pay their way to the top of the world and expect bottom-line results on that investment. Many of their guides and expedition leaders see the old rules of climbing—making one's way without artificial aids, carrying one's own gear, and leaving no sign of one's passage—as obstacles to their own financial success, and do whatever it takes to increase the odds for their clients. The ladders, expansion bolts, and tangles of fixed ropes that hang like spaghetti make some climbs seem more like construction sites than mountains. But those encroachments have begun to seem small. China announced, in the summer of 2007, its plans to pave a highway with "undulating guardrails" to Everest Base Camp in preparation for the Olympic torch climb. Although the government later backpedaled from that plan, an

unpaved road to Base Camp has existed for decades. A multistory hotel has been open for a few years just an hour's walk from the camp, with soft beds, cold beer, and a telescope aimed at the summit. Nearby, a huge cellular phone tower constructed by China Telecom provided phone service all the way to the top of the mountain during much of the 2007 climbing season. And on May 5, 2005, astonished climbers reported watching a helicopter land on the summit.

It's not only climbers who are cashing in on the Everest brand. The Everest lectures, slideshows, documentaries, and reality television programs are only some of the ways that the mountain has become part of workaday life around the planet. In fact, the more people from developed nations make their way to the planet's highest mountain, the more Everest becomes part of the civilized world. The Chinese climbers' plan to carry the Olympic torch to the mountaintop for the 2008 Beijing Olympics is just one example. In 2007, the Ford Motor Company debuted its largest sport utility vehicle—the Everest—with a caravan of the trucks driving to their namesake mountain. In 2006, Disney's Animal Kingdom theme park opened Expedition Everest, a roller coaster, stalked by a Yeti on a man-made mountain that, at 200 feet tall, is the highest peak in Florida—as well as the company's most expensive and elaborate attraction. Yet even Everest's most wholesome reflections show the changes of recent years. It struck me as strangely appropriate that the greatest peril facing the tourists in Disney's fantasy of the mountain isn't getting to the top and back but a predator that attacks them while they are there.

Whether people walk to the top, cruise to Base Camp in a sport utility vehicle, land on its summit in a helicopter, or even ride a roller coaster over it in Florida, Everest is assured a continued boom of visitors and victims. And the pattern defined there is spreading to other mountains, other wildernesses, and other sports. Today thousands of sailors, climbers, paddlers, divers, and trekkers bring millions of dollars to isolated and lawless environments around the globe. That wealth and the daring lifestyle of the extreme athlete are in turn drawing a new peril to the mountains. Many adventurers are discovering that the most dangerous tests they face in the wild come not from nature but from neighboring tents, as greed and ambition conspire to draw corruption to the wilderness.

To plumb the figurative depths of the planet's high point, I have twice tried to stand on those few square feet of mountaintop by which much of the world measures all human accomplishment. In that goal, at least so far, I have failed. Nonetheless, the mountain has provided me with an excellent vantage point from which to look at the changing landscape of the world of adventure.

"I just want to get this Everest thing over with," David Sharp told me at Sam's, and I knew just how he felt. But although before I first visited Everest I had no desire to climb it, I know that my time on the mountain has infected me with the same summit fever that David had. I can only hope that the contagion I've contracted isn't as virulent as the strain that took his life.