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Commitment and Bolts in Patagonia

Kevin Thaw, a friend I'd met four years earlier at an international climbing meet, invited me to climb in Patagonia. I jumped at the chance. Like many aspiring alpinists I had read tales of Patagonian climbing hardships and conquests and been intrigued by this inspiring mountain paradise.

Kevin had one route in mind, the Czech Route on the West Face of Fitzroy. The route, 7000ft long, had been climbed siege style over two seasons with much fixed rope and aid climbing. Kevin's ambition was to climb it in a lightweight alpine-style push. This would be a two-man job with a rack and a rope, no sleeping bags, and no back-up. We did the route, alpine style, in February 2000 in a 25-hour single push with one cold bivvy, albeit not to the summit as we were beaten back 250m short by horrendous weather. The choice had been easy. Either we went down and lived, or tried to continue and likely die. We had no regrets about making our choice. I just didn't care that I hadn't reached the top, as I'd survived the most eye-opening climbing experience of my life. I had only been climbing for three years and had never climbed any alpine route before. The possibilities of using lightweight style in Patagonia seemed limitless. I felt I was at the start of something.

At the end of that same season Kevin had suggested returning for the ultimate alpine route, the Maestri-Egger on the East Face of Cerro Torre. It had reportedly been climbed in lightweight alpine style but no modern team had repeated the ascent. Despite over 20 known attempts by some of the foremost alpine climbers of their generations, the route had still held out. So Kevin and I had returned for the 2002 season, but as bad luck often has it, our friend Leo Houlding broke his ankle 300m up on the route and we descended for the season.

Kevin and I had both believed that the 2003 season would be the right one and so we arrived hoping to indulge ourselves in our own alpine-style heaven. We would take no sleeping bags, a little food, two ropes and a rack. These were our only requirements. However, bad weather for well over 40 days put paid to that plan. Next season may be the right one, but only time and the Patagonian weather will tell.

Patagonia in 1959 was – arguably – the time and place where the alpine-style ascent of the century occurred, with Cesare Maestri and Toni Egger climbing their route on Cerro Torre. Maestri was an Italian climber who had specialised in high-risk solos in the Dolomites and obviously knew about all-out climbing commitment. He had been to Patagonia in 1958 but

his expedition had been called off when the leader viewed the mountain for the first time and declared it impossible.

Maestri vowed to return the next year, and his partner for that trip was a formidable Austrian ice climber by the name of Toni Egger, who had a creditable list of hard ascents in the Alps and was known to be amongst the best ice climbers in Europe. On his return in 1959 Maestri opted for the line on the right-hand side of the East Face. After fixing ropes on the first 300m the two climbers opted for an all out alpine-style push on the remaining 1000m upper wall. They lacked most of the gear modern climbers now take for granted. They had no cams, no nuts, no jumars or hawser-laid ropes. Both climbers were leading and seconding carrying 50lb sacks. It took them a mere five days to climb the route and descend. They had a little food, one rope, one long-shafted ice axe each and, of course, nerves of steel. Unfortunately, on the last section of the descent, Egger was killed by falling ice which frequently sweeps down the East Face.

Forty-four years after this ascent the Maestri-Egger still strikes fear into the hearts of modern climbers. It is widely respected as perhaps technically the hardest and most objectively hazardous mountain route in Patagonia. The climbing is very intense even by modern standards. Added to that is the fierce Patagonian weather and a lack of back-up should things go wrong. Being rescued there in bad weather is not an option.

It may not be popular for me to say so, but climbing commitment in Patagonia has not advanced as much as gear. I know that modern equipment and knowledge have meant fierce technical and physical advances in the mountains. But what if we have neglected the psychological advances that should have developed alongside the technical ones? Mental breakthroughs were notably more evident in the late 1950s.

If I am wrong, then why has the Maestri-Egger not been equalled, never mind surpassed, in terms of commitment to the essence of alpine-style climbing? Could a lack of psychological development be the reason? I had the pleasure of discussing the Maestri-Egger climb with some of the most experienced practitioners of Patagonian mountaineering during my last trip. Slovenians, Spanish, Austrians, Italians, and Argentinean climbers all agreed on one thing. If the route was indeed climbed – and that is a matter of doubt among many climbers – then Maestri and Egger put up a route that goes beyond any subsequent Patagonian ascent. Four decades have passed and not one modern ascent in Patagonia has come close to it in terms of the style and the commitment they used on Cerro Torre in an era when climbers were limited to the most basic climbing equipment.

Despite their lesson in style, few climbers have learned from their lesson. Most routes climbed in Patagonia have been put up using fixed ropes, bolts, and hard aid climbing, which is perhaps understandable when you look at the time-scale in which many of them were climbed. However, even now, modern teams who go to Patagonia in the 21st century still aspire to fix

ropes and use bolts. All this has happened in an era when style has supposedly advanced far beyond that of the late 1950s.

I was unsure if the use of bolts in Patagonia was still relevant. So you can imagine my surprise when I was told about an Italian expedition, led by Mauro 'Bubu' Bole, that planned to climb a new route on the South Face of Cerro Torre. Allegedly, they were planning to use 300 bolts to fix a portable sleeping box and all the belays on the route. I nearly died of shock. By anyone's reckoning, 300 bolts is excessive. It was a struggle to believe that I was hearing this about a world-class climber on one of the world's most inspirational peaks.

I questioned Bubu on his proposed use of 300 bolts on Cerro Torre. His answer? 'Safety is important and the safety and comfort of my team is important.'

'Well!' I responded. 'If it's safety and comfort you want, perhaps you should have stayed at home?'

This brought much laughter from the other British climbers around, and from Bubu himself. We then passionately debated the use of bolts for quite some time before he rather dejectedly left our company.

I personally thought siege style in Patagonia had died out long ago. Surely climbers who choose this style know they can beat mountains into submission and succeed on most objectives, given the right quantity of bolts, gear, time and fixed rope. I often wonder what climbers get in return for this approach. Is it really personal satisfaction? Or does it come down to conquest and celebrity? Whatever the reasons, surely this approach brings neither long-term satisfaction nor a decent respect for the future of mountains and mountaineering? As Messner put it, the use of bolts in the mountains is just 'the murder of the impossible'.

You might ask, what right did I or anyone else have to question Bubu on his intended use of bolts? The same right as anyone who is passionate about the mountains and the long-term implications of bolting on them – it's our future too. It's that simple. I knew he wasn't going to change his approach on the strength of some British climber's opinion, but it's important to exercise our freedom of speech!

I wonder whether Bubu's alleged use of 300 bolts to climb his route in Patagonia would have been forgotten in the frenzy of success. More to the point, if he had summited Cerro Torre by a new line, would it have mattered to others how he had got there? I know my own opinion would not have been popular if he had succeeded. Luckily the weather put paid to his proposed plan.

However, this story illustrates how in the 21st century there are climbers who don't think twice about this bolting issue – or even care. Planning to climb in Patagonia with 300 bolts and other artificial equipment surely eliminates the real essence of all-out climbing commitment. If the desire by these climbers to conquer the mountains at any cost, using all available

means, is acceptable, then the question must be asked: what point is there in looking towards the mountains for our future climbing challenges, especially if they are based on nothing more than the plethora of materials climbers have to hand? Why not just stay on local sport crags?

Bubu's plan to bolt all the belays on the South Face of Cerro Torre, which is 1500 metres high, would have removed any real value in climbing it; for it is only the style in which we climb a mountain that gives lasting satisfaction. Surely the essence of climbing in good style is for the climber to use his or her own natural skills and cunning? That surely must mean placing natural gear and not drilling protection on the lead. The natural method should be the favoured style of climbing in Patagonia, as only that approach will allow this beautiful resource to be used by future generations.

Success, safety, security – these are not the reasons that should motivate climbers to climb in Patagonia, or any other mountains for that matter. I know from experience that these aspects cannot be guaranteed. Maybe relying on overall ability more than on bolts and fixed ropes means that it will take more than one season to climb a Patagonian objective in good alpine style. However, it should be acknowledged that this is obviously not an acceptable risk for certain climbers. In which case, they shouldn't travel to Patagonia.

The style and commitment in which Kevin and I chose to attempt to climb the Maestri-Egger meant that no matter how uncomfortable and uncertain the journey and its outcome might be, we were really only interested in meeting the mountain and route on its own terms. We were good enough to have excelled there previously without bolts or fixed ropes, and we climbed well, with knowledge acquired through our combined experience. When Kevin and I return we might even find out whether our combined abilities and commitment count for more as climbing aids than just the modern hardware we have to hand.

Thus we hope to overcome the route using the above experience and of course a few of the gifts that nature bestowed upon us, these being mainly our brains and, as the Argentinians would say, our cajones. I know for a fact that these qualities are of real value in climbing in Patagonia and nothing less than all-out commitment will help overcome this 44-year-old route. This is surely the route which will ultimately define the future of Patagonian alpine-style climbing. Have Maestri and Egger defined the climbing style for future generations in Patagonia? For some they certainly have, but for others the alpine-style ascent has never even existed.