

# PREFACE

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The first ascent of K2's west face earned "best climb of 2007" status from many observers around the world. It is undoubtedly the most difficult route on the world's second-highest peak, and it required remarkable effort, skill, and persistence from the large team that completed it. Yet, despite devoting several pages to the ascent in the Climbs and Expeditions section of this year's *American Alpine Journal* [p. 339], we have chosen not to highlight K2's west face as one of our featured stories.

Although the K2 ascent involved a large team and traditional siege tactics, with more than 50 ropes strung up the steepest part of the face, this is not fundamentally what drove our decision to downplay the ascent. Like all climbers, we have personal preferences for styles of climbing, and we admire certain ascents more than others. But that's not the fundamental issue either, because we believe that as long as mountaineers climb in a way that doesn't destroy a future climber's ability to experience the route in its substantially natural state, they should be free to enjoy the mountains however they want. Pull on protection or climb all free? Use oxygen or suck wind? We may not admire some choices, but when climbers are honest about what they do and don't ruin the place for everybody else, we have no objections to anyone following their own lights. The route is still there for us to climb in our preferred style.

Style choices cross the line into ethical decisions when they directly affect other people—for example, when a climber decides to permanently alter the mountain environment. The team on K2 was free to climb its route in whatever style it chose. Certainly there are some inevitable impacts, such as the occasional rappel anchor. However, we feel it was unethical to abandon thousands of feet of rope and hundreds of pounds of equipment and provisions on K2's slopes. Turning a beautiful mountain face into a private junkyard is not a fair price for its initial "conquest." A climber does not establish ownership over a route simply by being there first. In our modern era, we recognize that mountains are public places where each visitor is obligated to respect the rights of future visitors.

Ultimately, style and ethics often converge. In choosing a climbing style, we also choose our impact on the environment and on other climbers. Deciding to drill holes for a sport climb. Choosing a large team and siege tactics over a small group and an alpine-style ascent. Using siege tactics to push so close to the edge on a difficult and dangerous route that it's nearly impossible to clean the mountain before leaving it. On these issues, the *AAJ* and the world climbing community are increasingly guided by one principle: the lower a climb's impact, the higher its achievement. In this sense, and perhaps only this sense, style truly matters.