**[Bitter after-taste](https://www.dawn.com/news/1642703/bitter-after-taste)**

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PRESIDENT Joe Biden has handed Afgh­an­istan to the Taliban on a platter. After his mismanagement of the withdrawal from Afghanistan, he has also handed the White House to his predecessor president Trump.

In 2020, many US watchers wondered whether either contestant — Biden (then 77 years old) and Trump (then 74 years old) — would live long enough to complete his term. Since then, President Biden’s performance has given cause for misgiving. He stumbles, he falters, he speaks slowly and not always with gravitas. He is the civilian commander-in-chief of the best-equipped military juggernaut in the world. Yet he appears a defeated Napoleon negotiating his retreat to Elba.

Afghanistan is a history book, written with invisible ink. More books have been written about its conflicts than about any other part of the world, yet their lessons even if read have remained unlearned. In the 1840s, the British uprooted Dost Muhammad and transplanted in his stead Shah Shuja. In the 1980s, the Russians removed Babrak Karmal and replaced him with Mohammed Najibullah, chief of KHAD (the Afghan secret police). This century, the chogha-cloaked mannequin Hamid Karzai was shifted to make way for another American clone Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai. Since 2014, Ghani has shone as the 51st star on the US flag until it was lowered at the US embassy in Kabul.

In 1842, there was no one to record the retreat of the British forces from Kabul. Later, Lady Butler painted an imaginative scene showing Dr Brydon — the only survivor out of 4,500 men, and 12,000 supporting civilians — riding his exhausted horse as it tottered towards Jalalabad fort. For the British, it became a pre-Dunkirk symbol of victory in adversity.

Biden resembles a defeated Napoleon negotiating his retreat.

The retreat of the Russian army from Afghanistan in 1988-89 compared to the shambles at Kabul airport in August 2021 seems a model of military control and precision. The Soviet troop withdrawal — spread over nine months from May 15, 1988, until Feb 15, 1989 — would have been better documented, had its Colonel-General Boris Gromov kept his temper in check. He was the last to cross the ‘Bridge of Friendship’ between Afghanistan and the then USSR. He found television crews waiting for him. Gromov “swore at them profusely when they tried to interview him”. In a cooler mood later, he explained that his rage had been against “the leadership of the country, at those who start wars while others have to clean up the mess”. A generation later, US generals in the Pentagon must be mouthing a translation of his words.

The chaotic scenes at Kabul airport are being replayed with cruel regularity on countless television channels and at least 18 billion mobile devices worldwide. It is an audience the Pentagon could well do without. Its top brass suffered Cuba. It bled in Vietnam. It has not forgotten Iraq. It must now swallow the bitter herbs of Afghanistan.

Its leadership may at a push be prepared to accept the ignominy of this defeat in Afghanistan. One wonders how many though — if Biden should die before 2024 — will stomach a woman in the White House? Kamala Harris would then well become America’s first woman commander-in-chief, its first tinted chief after Barack Obama.

Certainly, the 74,222,958 US voters who supported Trump will not. While they may wish to see Biden impeached (as their hero Trump was) they know that they cannot hope to see him removed, unless God wills.

The presidential elections are still three years away. Of more immediate significance is the rescue and absorption of Afghans who served the US, Nato and their allied governments. Australia, for example, is not a Nato member, yet it was part of the US-led coalition force. It has accommodated 1,800 Afghan nationals. In 2009, Canada announced a special scheme for Afghan collaborators and then rejected two-thirds of those who applied. It plans to admit 20,000 “vulnerable Afghans”, with preference for “women leaders, human rights workers, and reporters”. France has provided asylum to about “270 Afghan interpreters and support staff”. The UK has admitted “over 3,100 former Afghan staff and their families”. The US expects 80,000 applications for Special Immigrant Visas. Over 2,000 of them have been processed and flown out.

Austria speaks for Europe when it exhorts that the goal of such humanitarian assistance should be “to keep the majority of people in the region”, ie in the ‘stans’ bordering Afghanistan — Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Pakistan. The West’s appetite is already sickening from a surfeit of Afghans.

A 10th-century Balkh poet once wrote: “A tree with a bitter seed,/ fed with butter and sugar/ will still bear a bitter fruit.” It will take centuries for the British, Russians and 50 countries in the US led-coalition to lose the bitter after-taste of their Afghan misadventures.

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