**Strip the shroud**

BY F. S. A I J A Z U D D I N 2021-07-15

STRIP the shroud off Afghanistan. You will not find the bodies of 14,500 Soviet soldiers who died during their government`s obsessive nine-year occupation (1979-1989) of that war-savaged country.

Nor will you see the body-bags containing the remains of 2,442 US troops killed, nor over 3,800 US private security contractors (`The Pentagon does not track their deaths`).

Do not expect to see the corpses of 1,144 personnel from the 36-nation Nato coalition that supported the US retaliation for 9/11, nor a memorial to 72 journalists and 444 aid workers. These collateral casualties were shipped home for a dignified burial.

They died so that 70,000 Afghan troops could sacrifice their lives defending a US-backed regime. They died so that 47,000plus Afghan civilians could become grist to the Pentagon`s iron treadmill. They died so that over three million would be forced to escape into Pakistan and 2m more into Iran and Europe. They died so that another 4m Afghans could be displaced from their insubstantial homes. To date, which means up to the date of the US`s precipitate, ignominious departure, the US has expended over $2.26 trillion in a stillborn attempt to modernise Afghanistan`s archaic tribal society. It leaves behind 5,000 troops as `caretakers`in a war cemetery without tombstones.

Despite an almost 200-year-long, unequal association between Afghanistan and Great Britain, Afghanistan escaped becoming a British colony and therefore a member of the Commonwealth. It cannot benefit therefore from the assiduous attention of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, whose mission is to `honour and care for the men and women of the Commonwealth forces who died in the First and Second World Wars`. The CWGC maintains 23,000 graveyards of World War casualties across the globe, including one at Rawalpindi. It was deemed important enough to be visited in 1991 by Diana, Princess of Wales.

Since the conflict in Afghanistan began, the country has endured four US presidents, three Afghan presidential puppets, and three heads of the `Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan`. It has survived Pakistan`s gratuitous appropriation (for its own security purposes) of inhospitable territory under the doctrine of `strategic depth`. If its history is any measure, Afghanistan will remain sovereign without a sovereign, a state but no nation, unstable, never free, never at peace.

Afghanistan will never experience the post-war renaissance that post-1945 Germany and Japan did. It will not become the post1975 tourist haunt that Vietnam is, nor can it aspire to become another Lebanese phoenix.

The West has left it to scavenge for its future amongst its ruins, just as ragged Iraq, Libyaand Yemen are being forced to do.

Days after its troops fled their showpiece airbase at Bagram, the US government, in an act of posthumous generosity, delivered 1.4m Johnson & Johnson Covid-19 vaccines under the Covax Facility`s dose-sharing scheme. Another 1.9m doses are in transit.

How a rump Afghani government, besieged within its beleaguered capital Kabul, will vaccinate so many Afghans across the country no one knows, or cares.

Covid-19 is a scourge of biblical proportions. It has ravaged mankind, disturbed social orders, wrecked economies, and exposed luxurious vanities such as wedding extravaganzas and the Olympic Games.

One can understand why, in 1964, the Japanese were keen on hosting the Summer Olympic Games. They wanted to demonstrate that, within 20 years of being defeated in the Second World War, they had `arrived`, were at par with the victors. The same ambition motivated the Chinese to host the Summer Olympic Games in 2008. (Being an underdogcan be a powerful, painful spur.) The Chinese are now determined to repeat their summer success at Beijing in 2008 by hosting the 2022 Winter Olympics.

The Chinese should anticipate a boycott.In 1980, a sanctimonious US and 65 of its acolytes boycotted the Summer Olympics in Moscow. They condemned the Soviets for invading guess where? Afghanistan.

The Japanese are determined to hold the belated 2020 Olympics, whatever the Covid19 cost. They have spent a decade planning it, expended $15.4 billion already, but must expect only the ignominy of empty stadiums, the sulk of disappointed ticket-holders, and the chagrin of toned athletes who see years of training reduced to a virtual spectator-less spectacle.

Fortunately, Covid-19 bypassed Wimbledon 2021. A mask-less crowd watched the Gentleman`s Finals on Sunday, July 11 between the seasoned Serb Novak Djokovic and a younger Italian Matteo Berrettini.

Wimbledon is known for its genteel sobriety. This year`s crowd, though, behaved like the raucous overflow from the Euro Soccer Cup 2021, where the Italians vanquished England on penalty shoot-outs. Shouldn`t wars be fought the same way? In ancient days, one champion represented each side.

More than 38m harried Afghanis would have welcomed such life-saving simplicity. The writer is an author.

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