



The Opinion Pages

OP-ED COLUMNIST

Worth a Bottle of Whiskey

By MAUREEN DOWD

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Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times

Our 3,413th day at war in Afghanistan seemed like a good day to learn about Afghanistan.



The longest stretch of war in American history has merited the shortest attention span.

I didn't go to Kabul on the secretary of defense's Doomsday plane this time. I signed up with the Pentagon for time travel, flying through history watching a remarkable seven-hour marathon of a 12-play series called "The Great Game." The plays use real and fictional characters, actual transcripts and imagined scenes, to trace the trellis of foreign involvement in Afghanistan from 1842 to the present.

"Afghanistan," one character notes, "has a very complicated relationship with time."

The Shakespeare Theatre donated space, and the British Council and Bob Woodruff Foundation underwrote costs so that the plays could have two performances here last Thursday and Friday. The Pentagon wanted to give the military and their families, including some who had served in Afghanistan and some who may, a chance to learn how that benighted territory earned the nickname "graveyard of empires."

"The question is," says an American staff officer in the play, "are we on our ninth year in Afghanistan, or are we on our first year for the ninth time?"

And a Russian commander notes: "It seems however many battles we win on the ground, we just recruit more fighters for the other side." With the surge, are we now beating the Taliban, as a U.S. commander in the Helmand Province asserted this week, or will we bargain with the Taliban and then decamp like the bowed British and Russians, confused about how the Stone Age socked modernity?

"I've been asked 'Why are you doing this? Aren't these plays going to be anti-war?' " Doug Wilson, the assistant secretary of defense for public affairs, told me at intermission on Thursday. "I don't see that at all. If most Americans had seen these, it would help them understand, warts and all, what a hugely complex place this is. It would also answer the question 'Why isn't it going to be finished next week?' "

Nicolas Kent of the Tricycle Theatre in London, co-director of "The Great Game," said the plays are not "agitprop." When he commissioned them, he felt that the allies

“absolutely” should not be in Afghanistan. “But the more I’ve gone into the history and talked to Afghans,” he said, “I personally think we should be there.”

Derek Blumke, the co-founder of Student Veterans of America who served in Afghanistan, said the play taught him a lot about the thicket of tribes, feuds and foreign invasions.

“I was at the bazaar, haggling with a local about a British bayonet with an 1842 date stamped on it,” the 30-year-old Air Force vet recalled. “I thought it was the coolest thing, but I couldn’t understand why there was a British bayonet in Afghanistan.”

Adm. Mike Mullen, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, has issued a revised military strategy looking beyond Afghanistan and Iraq to more modern fighting fields — outer space, cyberspace and the Asia-Pacific region.

Whereas Dick Cheney and the neocons once thought we could become a hyperpower, disdaining anything multilateral and stifling emerging powers, Admiral Mullen sketches a fresh strategy he calls “multinodal” for an era of shifting alliances and emerging powers.

The series begins in 1842 at the grisly scene where 16,000 British and Indian Army soldiers, wives and servants get killed as they try to retreat through the snowy mountains of Jalalabad.

“Every conflict in the world today has its origin in the imagination of British map drawers,” a character dryly notes.

The action goes from the abdication of the glamorous king and queen in 1929 through the Communist regime when Afghan women were wearing miniskirts in Kabul, through the C.I.A. financing of the mujahedeen to defeat the Soviets, through Taliban rule with the assistance of Pakistan’s intelligence agency, through America’s invasion and occupation.

James Lobb, a 36-year-old Marine captain based at Joint Forces Command in Suffolk, Va., who spent seven months in Afghanistan in 2004, read about the special performances and tracked down Nicolas Kent to score some tickets.

He called it a cautionary tale about taking care before jumping into foreign endeavors. He was struck by the comment of a C.I.A. officer to a mujahedeen in the play. “I understand the difference between you and me,” the C.I.A. guy says. “I know if you lose, I still have a home to go back to.”

Lobb said that “every day these Afghan soldiers and police are fighting for their lives. They know the Taliban knows where their families are and can kill them. I don’t know how we bolster them if every day might not only be their last but the last day of their family.”

Lobb sent Kent a bottle of whiskey to thank him for the tickets, and the history lesson.