The Hardest Place: The American Military Adrift in Afghanistan's Pech Valley

Wesley Morgan (Random House, 2021), 644 pages, color illustrations, maps, bibliography, index.

Reviewed by Leslie C.

"Journalists write the first rough draft of history" is a shopworn assertion that does insufficient justice to Wesley Morgan's *The Hardest Place: The American Military Adrift in Afghanistan's Pech Valley*. Because this book is the fruit of 10 years of research, interviews, and writing, it could fairly be characterized as a stylish second draft, with a final product pending the availability of still-classified primary sources unavailable to Morgan. Given this constraint, it would have been difficult for him to produce a more complete treatment.

Reduced to its essence, the book describes what can happen when the left hand does not know what the right hand is doing—and frequently does not know what it has itself already done. Morgan shows that the actions of US special operations forces and intelligence officers were inextricably linked with those of the regular Army companies that manned the scattered and vulnerable outposts in Kunar and Nuristan Provinces in the Pech Valley region. Morgan demonstrates the consequences of fighting a conventional counterinsurgency war at cross-purposes to the secret war waged by the Special Forces "man-hunting machine" and the intelligence apparatus behind it.

Morgan presents a credible periodization of the US effort, beginning with the initial special operations and CIA presence in Kunar, based on the theory that Osama Bin Laden fled there after Tora Bora. The gradual augmentation of specialized units focused on eliminating al-Qa'ida with infantry battalions whose mission encompassed broader goals highlights a tension between counterterrorism and counterinsurgency that American leaders struggled to reconcile. This tension exposed cracks in the US presence that widened as the war continued, expanding into frequent combat and ultimately contracting as Americans disengaged and sought to turn the fight over to ill-prepared Afghan government forces. All the while, the secret war remained in the background, though it too evolved. SEAL and CIA proxy raids increasingly gave way to drone strikes, while the target deck shifted from al-Qa'ida to affiliated militants and ultimately, in the years following Bin Laden's 2011 death, to the Afghanistan-based arm of the Islamic State.

The Hardest Place is well-written and well-paced. One of Morgan's strengths is giving voice to the company and battalion commanders whose soldiers bled attempting to secure the Pech Valley, while placing their struggle in a wider context. Another strength is Morgan's assessments supporting his contentions; these, in my judgment, are the chief value of his narrative. Much of these come in the book's first quarter, suggesting the primary problems that would mar the campaign manifested themselves early.

Morgan describes Afghanistan as an "intelligence nightmare" (16) and elaborates the reasons. He regards signals intelligence as the US Intelligence Community's strong suit but argues that Afghanistan in 2002 was a poor theater for it, thus forcing a reliance on traditional human intelligence (HUMINT) against a backdrop of thorny cultural and language barriers. In Kunar and Nuristan, residents of neighboring valleys spoke differing dialects that stymied interpreters embedded with US units. Morgan shows that faulty intelligence triggered incidents that had serious consequences as US forces squandered initial goodwill and engendered mistrust.

American actions perceived as abuses, such as the 2002 death of Abdul Wali at the hands of his interrogator, or the late October 2003 airstrike on Maulawi Ghulam Rabbani's compound—which Morgan characterizes as the "original sin" of US involvement in the Pech Valley—caused far more damage than the accidental deaths of civilians during heavy fighting later. Indeed, Morgan concludes that American troops venturing into the valley following these incidents reaped the consequences and, "because of the secrecy surrounding the strike, would only know about it what the locals did, which wasn't much." (66) The standard special operations tactic of "night raids" on compounds suspected of harboring militants—which became a consistent irritant of then-Afghan President Hamid Karzai—only exacerbated the problem.

The tracking of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar—whom CIA identified as a likely fallback host for Bin Laden if the Taliban was overthrown—to remove him from the battlefield had repercussions and illustrated the limits of the US propensity to deal with local warlords and power brokers. The failure to understand the dynamics among these players, or when they and US proxies in the counterterror pursuit teams and the Afghan intelligence service (NDS) were compromised by personal vendettas and business rivalries—such as an ongoing dispute over control of valuable lumber resources in which US forces unwittingly took sides—tainted the campaign by association and hamstrung operations.

Anyone who has grappled with war zone staffing will recognize Morgan's critique of military personnel policies. Turnovers, whether every six, 12, or 15 months, he writes, "would prove to be the bane of American efforts not only in the Pech but in dozens of other Afghan valleys and districts where the military struggled and often failed to maintain much consistency in its approach." (69) Morgan recounts how Special Forces teams rotated out, replaced by conventional formations that were "taking over missions started by special operators, often with little preparation or understanding of the work of the units that had preceded them." (96) Likewise, "it was a rare unit in Afghanistan that had an accurate understanding of how the base it occupied had come into being, or of what had been transpiring outside the base's gates more than one rotation into the recent past." (97)

Morgan judges that the US military suffered from a form of tunnel vision by focusing on certain targets at the expense of others, a tendency militants exploited. Ahmad Shah, the primary target of Operation Red Wings, a disastrous June 2005 mission in which 19 SEALs and special operations aviation personnel died in an attempt to neutralize a low-level militant leader, is a prime example. The failure of Red Wings, which exposed the "complex parallel chains of command governing conventional and special operations," (123) also had a longer-term significance. It led to military escalation in Kunar, focused on the Korengal Valley. After Red Wings, Morgan asserts, the region was no longer the sole preserve of Special Forces teams, CIA operators, and their indigenous proxies. It became the focus—and the home of—a regular army battalion, five of which would subsequently rotate through the valley. It also became, in Morgan's estimation, a "self-licking ice cream cone" in which "American military activity was driving insurgent attacks, and insurgent attacks were driving American military activity." (95) This condition prevailed until another high casualty engagement, the July 2009 Battle of Want, which Morgan calls the regional "high water mark," forced a reassessment of the viability of a permanent presence in the Pech Valley. (249)

The decision to withdraw from the Pech occurred within the context of preparing the Afghan government to defend itself. While I tend to skepticism of facile comparisons, reference to "Vietnamization" is apt, inasmuch as it conjures the specter of building the army one is advising in one's image, complete with the same problems and the same fixations on firepower, body counts, and big-unit offensives. Morgan notes that this "fear was common among American troops who spent time advising the Afghan National Army (ANA) and other Afghan security forces." (408) The ghost of Vietnam lurks also in a thread present throughout the book, in which US commanders working in the Pech Valley sought to draw lessons from counterinsurgency efforts of the past, including Algeria, Malaya, and of course, Vietnam.

The final phase of the book covers Operation Haymaker, which was "an aerial man-hunting campaign that would use drones and other aircraft to find and strike remote al-Qa'ida targets." (418) While in one sense a return to the earlier regional focus on man-hunting, the new iteration was complicated by a history of civilian casualties. For Morgan, Haymaker illustrates the conundrum of trying to do "low-risk" counterinsurgency and counterterrorism in a place regarded as too dangerous for in-person operations. Predator and Reaper drones, which Morgan regards as "a tool of narrow usefulness," (59) also demonstrate what he assesses as "misplaced American confidence in their cameras in the sky at time when there were no longer ground troops around to maintain relationships with local people." (447) Another part of that conundrum resides in the debate over the viability of a CIA footprint in the absence of a US military presence (452–55)—a debate that will resonate today as the US military's complete withdrawal from Afghanistan looms.

Reflecting on the limits of what American power can accomplish—and at what price—in a remote and challenging environment seems poignant in the immediate wake of the announcement of the final US withdrawal from Afghanistan set for the 20th anniversary of September 11, 2001. Morgan's book is an effective companion for such reflection, for military and

intelligence practitioners alike. The author is sympathetic to his protagonists, without eliding the serious problems they encountered, and sometimes caused, and is mostly balanced in his assessments of them.

Morgan's work is based on a variety of sources, including standard works on the Afghanistan war, a slew of memoirs, and numerous interviews. In the case of the regular army, the interviewees are named. With the Special Forces, and with CIA, most are cited as anonymous intelligence officers or operators. This is problematic, given well-known limitations and source biases associated with interviews and memoirs. Similarly, his CIA sources appear to have been largely paramilitary operators, as opposed to officers mainly involved in HUMINT or other operational activity. This is not a criticism, given the book's subject; rather, it is to observe that the choice of interview subjects produces a specific narrative result, potentially at the expense of other aspects of a complex operational intelligence picture, something readers might wish to know. Morgan could hardly have done it differently, given what was available to him, and it is clear that he went to great lengths to corroborate his information. The result is both judicious and wide-ranging.

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