

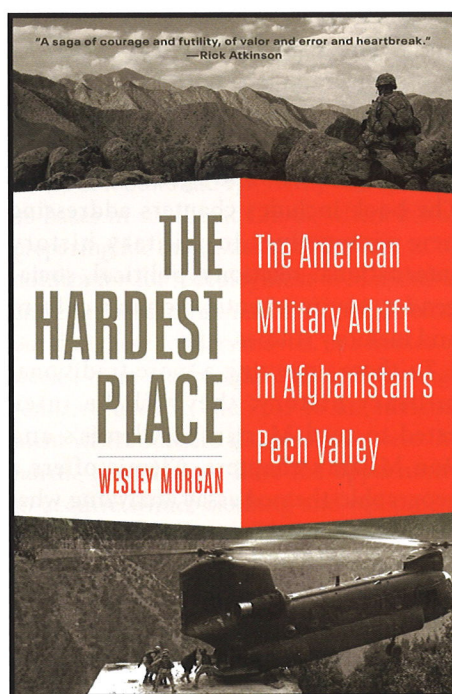
regarding the war's memory as "guilt in the 1970s, revisionist refighting of the war in the 1980s, and 'kicking' the 'Vietnam Syndrome' in the 1990s" (301). Eastman then breaks this mold with her essay on *The 'Nam* comics which ran from 1986–1993. Eastman argues the comic book demonstrated intractable debates over authenticity, and that despite the author's efforts to portray the war as it really happened, readers still contested its accuracy, showing that a consensus over the war's memory may not be possible. Next, Sarah Thelen adds what readers may find to be the most politically charged essay in her analysis of Nixon's political strategy of manipulating the symbolism of the American flag. Thelen argues that President Nixon established the American flag as not just a patriotic symbol but made it into a symbol of uncritical loyalty to the current administration and polarized what it meant to be "American" (330). Thelen observes that Nixon's stratagem began a pattern of social polarization over the American flag's meaning that we still can observe today.

The book is not without its shortcomings. The most obvious deficiency is its organization. The collection is divided into three broad sections (The Politics of War, The Combatants and Their War, and Remembering Vietnam), but several of the essays appear misplaced and easily could be moved from one section to another or defy the larger categorization altogether. Secondly, although each essay stands alone and offers an original contribution to Vietnam War historiography, there is no single overarching thrust or collective argument made by the authors. Mostly, the essays are not in conversation with each other. Rather, they are like stand-alone episodes of a TV series, as opposed to one larger story arc. For better or worse, they do not address the same debates, but rather all aim to offer a unique contribution on the margins of Vietnam War history. Lastly, the chapters on *The 'Nam* comics and the Vietnam War memorials would be far more effective if the authors included more images to support their interpretations.

These minor criticisms aside, the book is undoubtedly a valuable work that is well worth serious attention from any student of the Vietnam War. Finally, we have some new light on a divisive war beyond conventional narratives. The collection reveals

potential avenues for eager researchers to explore highly relevant debates. The book appeals to both a general audience and scholars. For those seeking some fresh topics and an escape from the proverbial "quagmire," look no further.

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THE HARDEST PLACE: THE AMERICAN MILITARY ADRIFT IN AFGHANISTAN'S PECH VALLEY

BY WESLEY MORGAN

Random House, 2021
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REVIEW BY ERIC B. SETZEKORN

The ignominious fall of Kabul in the summer of 2021 unmistakably demonstrated the strategic failure of the United States' two-decade project to build a stable, reliable government in Afghanistan. Wesley Morgan's new book, *The Hardest Place: The American Military Adrift in Afghanistan's Pech Valley*, examines the

challenges faced at the operational level from 2001 to 2020, and finds that the U.S. military, particularly the U.S. Army, made key errors that made political and economic development exceedingly difficult. In a thorough, patient, and nuanced account of two decades of warfare in eastern Afghanistan, Morgan demonstrates that, in spite of a heavy investment in lives and resources, U.S. military activity provided little progress toward achieving larger American national security goals.

Morgan centers his narrative on the Pech Valley, which runs through Kunar and Nuristan Provinces in eastern Afghanistan and the rugged, steep mountains that dominate it. Before 2001, the Taliban did not have a presence in the Pech Valley, or its tributary branches, the Korengal and Waygal Valleys. Despite being only 110 miles east of Kabul and 45 miles from Jalalabad, the harsh terrain had sheltered the region from broader political and social currents. Morgan divides his story of the Pech Valley into four parts, arranged chronologically. From 2002 through 2005, U.S. military forces, primarily Green Berets, and Central Intelligence Agency personnel had an extremely limited role in the Pech Valley, seeking information on critical terrorist targets, but without the resources or intent to maintain a widespread presence. In 2006, U.S. Army conventional infantry units began establishing a network of bases in the Pech Valley, and later pushed into the adjoining Korengal and Waygal Valleys. This effort led to intense fighting, and Taliban attacks on vulnerable outposts inflicted heavy casualties among U.S. forces. Part three examines the slow drawdown of U.S. forces from 2010–2013, with the security mission in the Pech Valley frantically handed off to Afghan forces. The last section, 2011–2017, covers what Morgan calls "the new counterterrorism," (411) approach based on a small U.S. special operations presence and frequent drone strikes on priority targets. A brief epilogue examines the period from 2018–2020, but the book was written before the summer 2021 Taliban offensive.

The key strength of the book is the deep knowledge and impartial approach that Morgan brings to the campaign in the Pech Valley. Through extended periods embedded with U.S. military forces and dozens of interviews, he is able to develop

a narrative that allows the reader to examine fully the often-difficult choices that military commanders must make. By focusing on the actions of field grade officers as they seek to use their battalions and brigades, the book highlights how high-level policy set in Kabul or Washington had to be adapted to the facts on the ground in Kunar Province. Although several battles related to the Pech Valley campaign or adjacent valleys have been previously studied or even made into movies, such as *Lone Survivor* (2013) and *The Outpost* (2020), Morgan's focus on the operational level provides unique insights into the thought process and goals of American military efforts.

Despite the clear rapport Morgan developed with military personnel and the deep respect he shows for their sacrifices, the flawed emphasis on combat operations by American military commanders is not overlooked. In particular, officers who over-promised what they could do and over committed their limited forces directed the decision of the 10th Mountain Division to establish a network of vulnerable outposts. Rather than collect intelligence and conduct aggressive patrols, these small, isolated outposts, surrounded by imposing mountains quickly attracted Taliban attacks. Moreover, these tiny installations relied heavily on helicopters for support and supplies, but aviation assets in Kunar Province were an expensive and limited resource. It not only made the outposts more vulnerable but also made them expensive to maintain. When in doubt about their operational decisions,

or eager to show results, the repeated tactic of U.S. military officers was to launch an aerial assault, in the hopes of flushing out Taliban fighters hidden in the mountains. The book does get a bit too bogged down in describing the seemingly endless operations and raids, which generally produced no lasting results. A few American officers recognized their one-sided approach, with one later admitting to Morgan that he had been "drinking my own Kool-Aid" (218) by overselling progress in military operations, but the majority of the American officers maintained a religious certitude in their dogmatic approach.

In civil affairs and support to the Afghan government, U.S. military leaders were often equally myopic in their focus on specific military goals rather than larger security policy, particularly in assessing economic interests. In one case, a U.S. Army unit occupied a sawmill because it was the most convenient place to park their vehicles, which meant that the mill, the major employer in the area, was now closed and the workers unemployed. In another case, a corrupt Afghan government official who extorted bribes from residents falsely reported that a recalcitrant local business was in fact a member of the Taliban, leading to a U.S. military raid on the hapless local resident. In effect, the Kabul-appointed officials used the U.S. military as de facto enforcers of what many residents saw as an unrepresentative government with unjust policies. Residents subsequently turned to the Taliban for weapons, financial support, and training, and in contrast to a virtu-

ally nonexistent Taliban presence in the Pech Valley in 2001, by 2010 the area was aligned firmly with the Taliban.

The highly detailed and insightful narrative developed by Morgan has broad appeal to readers interested in military affairs, history, political science, and international relations. The even-handed approach displayed throughout the book is especially important, and the reader can understand and, in many cases, sympathize with the decisions made by military leaders in the book, while still maintaining an objective view of the campaign. It is a difficult balancing act and a testament to Morgan's skills as a writer. *The Hardest Place* has received widespread praise from a range of renowned scholars and former military leaders, and it fully deserves to be recognized and occupy a prominent place in the growing literature on the two-decade Afghan conflict.

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