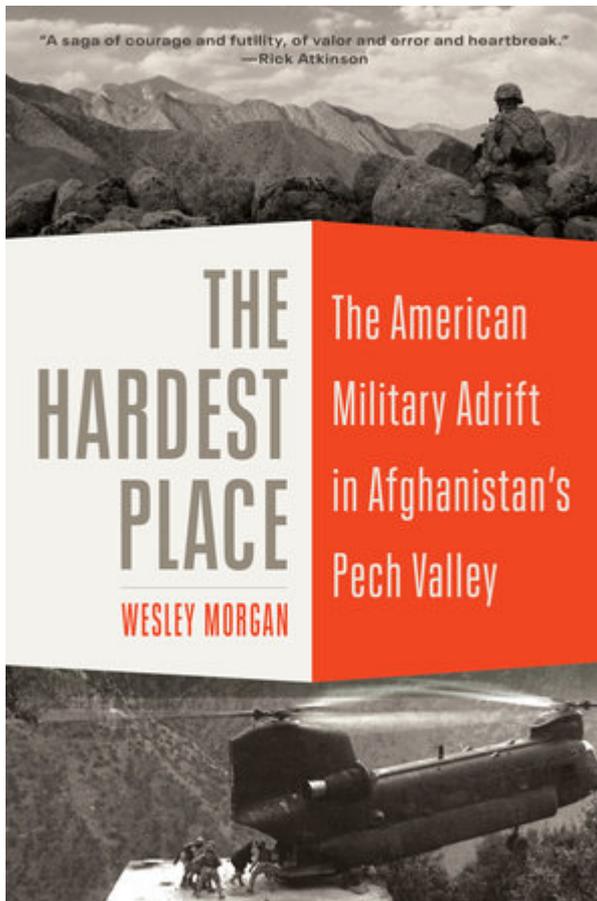


New Review from Adrian Bonenberger: “‘The Hardest Place’: Wes Morgan’s Post-Mortem on Americans in Afghanistan’s Pech Valley”

If I were to write a morality tale about America’s counterinsurgency efforts in Afghanistan—something in line with Edmund Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene* or John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, I’d make heavy use of allegory. That’s what people did in the 16th and 17th century, they named monsters for the seven deadly sins, and great heroes and ladies for the seven optimal virtues. So using that principle, I’d probably make a valley in some hard-to-reach location, and place a village of strategic necessity there, and name it Want. And the Americans would fall all over themselves trying to take and hold Want, and they wouldn’t be able to, because Want is, as everyone knows, simply the state of desiring a thing or a state or a person—it can never be fulfilled.

Well, I suppose if this were a true morality tale, the way out of Want would be Faith, or Chastity, depending on the context. That’s how those books were written back in the day.



Wesley Morgan is a journalist. His debut book, *The Hardest Place: The American Military Adrift in Afghanistan's Pech Valley* is not a morality tale, and there's no need for the type of heavy-handed writing or obvious analogies popular a few centuries ago. Morgan simply writes what he sees in interviews, documents, and research, as well as what he observed during reporting trips to the Pech, which he covered as a conflict journalist about a decade ago.

As it turns out, there *is* a valley, and the valley *does* have a village of great importance to the Americans, and the village's name *is* Want (the Americans transliterate its name from an old Soviet map to "Wanat" which could also be styled "why not?") and sure enough, filling the village with soldiers does not satisfy anyone's objectives or ambitions. Want—the place, the village—is a kind of bottomless pit, and, essentially, an allegory for itself.

Everyone, and I mean everyone who deployed to Afghanistan on a

combat mission and observed the purposeless and absurd nature of the war should read this book. There are Americans and Afghans who are thoughtful, and optimistic, and earnestly try to make things better, and Americans and Afghans and other foreigners who are cynical and egotistical and through their busy, careless actions make things exponentially worse. There aren't heroes or villains.

The Hardest Place is exhaustively researched, pulling on hundreds of interviews and many more sources and documents to paint a comprehensive portrait of the area—a hard to reach place in the northeast of Afghanistan, on the border of Pakistan. The soldiers and officers who are quoted and described offer vivid portraits of typical American servicemembers presented with a harsh and unusual challenge. Morgan doesn't limit his scope to the American or Afghan side of things—he talks wherever possible with Afghans, and Taliban, and other local residents of the area. It is often during these discussions that some crucial fact or perspective missing to Americans clicks into place, such as the significance of the lumber trade and the various families engaged in that pursuit in the Pech river valley. Morgan's familiar with the Soviet experience of the place, and he relays his own experiences, too, that cannot be fully put into words, but may be described as a mixture of awe and dread.

Reading *The Hardest Place* was hard to do and people with PTSD ought to be warned. One will see one's officer leadership in its pages—one will see one's units—one will see successes and failures, noble and wise visions to improve the place, and naked, disgraceful ambition. Morgan looks at the actions and events plainly, and without judgement. He writes about significant actions and results and the evolving context of the place.

Careful readers will note that there were places and schemas where it seemed like progress was being made, and that progress could be made. Those of us with multiple combat tours

to Afghanistan under our belt know this phenomenon well; one sees or experiences a failure of a deployment where everything becomes worse, and decides to turn things around during a subsequent deployment, to learn from the mistakes of the past. An empathetic battalion commander and a visionary brigade commander make progress in a place for a year or two. Eventually, inevitably, a dumb guy wants to see action, wants to see combat, and jumps in and shoots the place up, and everything goes to hell.

Morgan lays bare a couple of illusions: first, that the good officers or good plans would work without the bad officers and cruel plans, and second, that the military is capable of selecting good officers to do good planning—as often as not, these people seem to leave the military, and the ones who remain are (as often as not) the dumb and cruel ones.

Even those officers who are neither dumb nor cruel, like Stanley McChrystal, come in for criticism. McChrystal's impulse to do something rather than nothing when faced with doubt contributed to unnecessary catastrophes in the Kunar Province of which the Pech is a part. An entire mindset that has begun permeating the corporate world, depending on ideas like "data-driven" and "metrics-driven" and which earlier generations would have described as "results-driven," led to avoidable blunders and worse. Americans, it seems, murdered in the name of progress. This type of behavior and mentality could be seen everywhere in Afghanistan, and plays out here in the United States.

A morality tale might have worked out differently for the people described in *The Hardest Place*. Some veterans of the Pech leave the military, others are promoted to greater levels of responsibility. The U.S. was drawing down from Afghanistan under President Trump; it seems that drawdown has been placed on hold under President Biden. In a morality tale, there would be some clear lesson to be learned. The lesson—that America's business in Afghanistan concluded years ago and that we ought

not to be there today—is present, but Americans seem incapable of learning it.

But *The Hardest Place* isn't a morality tale; its protagonist is not named Christian, and nobody is trudging slowly toward the Celestial City. The book is long-form journalism at its best. Reading about America's sad and doomed involvement in the Pech, one feels that the valley acts as a kind of mirror, reflecting the essence of the people and units that enter. What those units encounter, ultimately, is themselves—bravery under fire, civilian casualties, idealistic dreams of a peaceful Afghanistan, Medals of Honor, victory, defeat. The place eventually resists every attempt to change it, defeats efforts to shift how America's enemies use it. What does that say about American culture? That America actually hoped to succeed, patrolling in a place named Want?

Morgan, Wes. *The Hardest Place* (Random House, 2021).

You can purchase '*The Hardest Place*' [here](#) or anywhere books are sold.