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CNAS Book Discussion: *The Hardest Place: The American Military Adrift in Afghanistan's Pech Valley*

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I. Opening Remarks

Paul Scharre: Welcome, everyone. Thank you for joining. I'm Paul Scharre, Senior Fellow here at the Center for a New American Security. And I'm very excited to welcome you to today's book discussion with Wesley Morgan, author of [*The Hardest Place: The American Military Adrift in Afghanistan's Pech Valley*](#). Wesley Morgan is a military affairs reporter, who recently covered the Pentagon for two and a half years at Politico. He has previously worked as a freelance journalist in Washington, D.C., Iraq, and Afghanistan, contributing stories to *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, *The Atlantic*, and other outlets. He is the author of a fabulous new book that we're here to talk about today. Wes, welcome. And thank you for joining us.

Wesley Morgan: Thanks so much for having me.

Paul Scharre: You've written a fantastic book. Here it is. It is really quite a read. Can we get a shot up on the screen here of it? All right. So you could see folks, the cover in more detail. The book is, let me just say, it is hefty. The book is available in all formats. So, hardcover, e-book, audio book, everywhere books are sold. But if you get it in hard cover, even before you crack the cover, there's this visceral sense of the scale of the war when you're looking at the book. So this is quite an accomplishment, and congratulations on the book's release this week.

Wesley Morgan: Thanks, Paul. Yeah, it's been an exciting week. This book has been a long-time coming.

II. Book Discussion

Paul Scharre: I want to start by asking, what is "The Hardest Place?"

Wesley Morgan: Sure. So the place that the book is about is called the Pech Valley. It's a valley system in Kunar and Nuristan provinces in Northeastern Afghanistan. The Pech is a river that flows down from Nuristan into Kunar. And the Pech is this, it's a very steep valley, it's got a sort of a thin narrow valley floor with arable lands. And many of the towns are down along that arable floor. And then from the mountains, various smaller rivers flow down into the Pech, and join it as tributaries. And some of these places are more infamous than the Pech itself is. For example, the Korengal Valley is a place that for a time there, a decade ago, was almost like a shorthand for Afghanistan in popular culture. You hear "Korengal" as the stand-in for Afghanistan in video games and movies and *House of Cards*, because it was a place that, for a period of time, it was infamously deadly for U.S. troops.

Wesley Morgan: A lot of embedded reporters had gone there taking really striking footage and imagery from this place. Because something that's unusual about the Pech Valley and its environs in Kunar and Nuristan, is that it's strikingly wooded. There are big, thick forests up in this place. So the title of, "The Hardest Place," is from a quote from General David McKiernan, who was one of the four-star Commanders who oversaw the whole U.S. effort in Afghanistan over the years. And he, along with many others, would single out this part of the country as just one of the toughest places to operate in for U.S. troops for a variety of reasons - one of them being just the terrain and the vegetation. It's jagged, it's hard to land helicopters, it's hard to operate drones, weather keeps aircraft grounded.

- Wesley Morgan: And then also, in the same way that the physical terrain has magnified the difficulties for U.S. troops in Afghanistan in this place, so has what the military would call the “human terrain.” It's a complex area. People on the valley floor speak Pashto. People up in the side valleys, in some cases, speak just completely different languages that don't have a written form and are probably on their way out, but still exist, and were very, very tricky for U.S. troops to penetrate, because just finding an interpreter who speaks Korengali, or Tregami, or Kalasha-ala, some of these languages, is very, very difficult, let alone one that you can trust not to drag you into local disputes or play you in some way.
- Paul Scharre: Yeah, the terrain itself is almost like its own character in the book and is such a big part of this. So what I'm going to ask Megan to do, is maybe put up some pictures that we have while we're discussing this - people can see for themselves some photos that are from the book. I want to ask you though, Wes, there's this theme that runs through your book that I'd like to draw out, which is, why are U.S. troops in the Pech, why go to this place, that is in some ways the ends of the earth?
- Wesley Morgan: Yeah. That was actually kind of the question that motivated me to write the book in the first place. So over 10 years ago, I spent some time with an Infantry Battalion from the 101st Airborne Division that was living in the Pech. 700 guys spread out among four outposts. And the thing that was really striking to me at that time in 2010 was that we understood broadly in some sense why we were in Afghanistan—it's because of 9/11, and it has evolved into this twin counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency missions—but U.S. forces had been in that particular part of the country for so long that the origins of these little bases was almost lost in the midst of history, even though really, it had only been a few years. But because of the way that U.S. forces rotate constantly every six months or 12 months or 15 months, just the origins of these bases would get lost.
- Wesley Morgan: You'd be at a place like COP Michigan at the mouth of the Korengal Valley. And of course, it's not the business of the soldiers who are defending this place and patrolling from it to understand the history behind what brought them there - but even the company commander, even sometimes the interpreters who've been there for longer than the company commander, wouldn't really be able to tell you exactly when or why this base—this particular base—was established. So I was really interested by that, and decided I wanted to kind of pull that thread and rewind, and figure out how each of these bases had started out. And what you see happen is, U.S. forces went up to this part of the country with a very narrow mission in the spring of 2002. They were trying to figure out where Bin Laden had gone after the December 2001 Battle of Tora Bora, where he'd escaped U.S. bombing.
- Wesley Morgan: Some of the most elite secretive parts of the U.S. military, the Joint Special Operations Command, the CIA, went up there—and that's what brought you up there as a Ranger Private, as part of that effort—but very quickly, after those forces and that Task Force that you were part of kind of, moved on to bigger things—the war in Iraq for instance—other forces were left behind, other special operations forces, Green Berets, were left with some of these bases, then conventional forces inherited them. And so along the way, there are just these little increments by which the mission changes. Sometimes as a result of big decisions made in Washington and Kabul, and other times as a result of fairly small-seeming decisions at the time made by captains and majors and lieutenant colonels and colonels, but that wind up having very outsized effects as these changes accumulate and the war of rotation continues.

- Paul Scharre: Early on in the book, there's a story of these two ODAs - Green Beret A-teams - who were up in the valley. And it is, in many ways, the start of where things begin to kind of go wrong in the Pech. Can you talk about that?
- Wesley Morgan: Sure. So in the fall of 2003, the Ranger Regiment - your old unit - did a big operation up into Kunar and Nuristan trying to figure out—it was another effort to try to pick up Bin Laden's trail—and it was fruitless. It was called “Operation Winter Strike.” It didn't really turn anything up. It just was a big muscle movement for the Ranger Regiment and the Joint Special Operations Command that didn't result in much. But it left behind a base. It was named after a Second Battalion Ranger named Jay Blessing, who was killed during the operation. So there was this base that was established in the fall of 2003, just as a, essentially, as a launching point to help get helicopters and trucks and stuff into Nuristan during this operation.
- Wesley Morgan: But then once the operation was over, the base was still there. And the Green Beret Task Force in Afghanistan essentially raised its hand and volunteered and said, “We can make something out of this place. We can raise a local indigenous force here to help secure the place, while the Afghan National Army is still starting to come online in Kabul,” because there really was no Afghan National Army to speak of yet. So a Green Beret team winds up at this little base, which is called Camp Blessing, after this fallen Ranger. And it's a group of about 12 guys from the 19th Special Forces Group - so they're guys from Utah, they're actually National Guardsman. So not full time, active duty Green Berets, although many of them have done that previously before going into National Guard.
- Wesley Morgan: So they spent six months in the valley, this National Guard team, and then they're replaced by another Green Beret team, an active duty team from 3rd Special Forces Group at Fort Bragg. And what you see between these two teams is something that plays out over and over again in different ways in the story of the Pech and in the story of Afghanistan - where you've got two units that look identical on paper, they've got the same organization, the guys in the different jobs have all gone to the same schools and had similar experiences in many ways, but they actually, they take completely different approaches to how they live and work in this valley. The National Guard team, it embraces what we come to think of later as the counter-insurgency strategy—FM 3-24 population-centric counterinsurgency—basically they restrict themselves to the towns where people live, the main town called Nangalam, that Camp Blessing is located by—and they try to just build up this local force and create a sense of security in a little bubble around this town.
- Wesley Morgan: What the counterinsurgency theorists of the mid 20th century would've called an ink spot. And so that's what this little team does. It's not glamorous work, they don't get into a ton of firefights or anything like that. Then the 3rd Group Team rotates in and it's been reading all the human intelligence reports that the 19th Group Team has been collecting and sending up the chain of command. And the 3rd Group Team's perspective is - you guys haven't been going after the enemy, you've been focusing on this little bubble and allowing this cancer to grow nearby, allowing the enemy to kind of live unmolested and do their thing. They start to focus on a valley called the Korengal Valley which is one of the side valleys of the Pech.

- Wesley Morgan: And it's one where U.S. troops - essentially starting, largely starting - with this 3rd Group Team, get sucked into a timber war between the Korengalis and outside parties who are responsible for exporting their valuable cedar wood over the border to Pakistan. So the 3rd Group Team - it keeps getting reports that Korengal is where the bad guys are, that's where you got to go to find the bad guys. So they just start going in there and fighting. And there's a momentum to this, where by late 2004, when this team leaves and essentially, the Green Berets hand things over to conventional Marines, the ball was rolling. These new Marines don't know anything about what the 19th Group Team had been doing six months earlier - they just know that the Korengal is where the fight is. And that is essentially the beginning of what becomes this very emblematic struggle for U.S. forces in Afghanistan where the U.S. and the Taliban—neither of which are local parties to the Korengal conflict, both are sucked into it—and the Korengal becomes this arena in which they duke it out at great cost to both sides.
- Paul Scharre: Well, part of the tragedy, I mean, of U.S. involvement in the Pech, is that the U.S. ends up wrapped up in what you can see is this really bloody local insurgency. There are foreign fighters - the Taliban - that come later, but originally it's not about foreign fighters, it's not about Al-Qaida, it's about local Afghans. Maybe you could talk a little bit about that dynamic and kind of how that unfolds.
- Wesley Morgan: Sure. I mean, so something that's interesting about Kunar and the Pech is that it's not the southern Pashtun heartland of the Taliban. The Taliban - it controlled the provincial capital before 9/11 - but really the Taliban had a very weak hold on Kunar. It was not native to the province. Many local actors were still resisting the Taliban. So it's not like there was a kind of a built-in network of Taliban insurgents who immediately started fighting Americans when they showed up. It took several years, in fact, for the Taliban to really arrive in the province and take the reins of what had become this native insurgency of local actors fighting the United States for various reasons. And often these reasons had to do with mistakes that the United States had made.
- Wesley Morgan: U.S. forces had detained the wrong people, killed the wrong people, acted on tips that turned out to have been motivated in bad faith by people they were relying on for information who used them to settle conflicts. So it actually takes a number of years for some of the figures who become Taliban commanders in the valley. There's a guy named Mullah Dawran, who was eventually killed in a drone strike in 2013, but for years and years was kind of one of the main local commanders fighting the Americans in the valley. He had fought against the Taliban before 9/11. He had briefly dabbled in being part of the new government post-9/11, as did many strong men in the province. But by 2003, he was fighting the United States, and it wasn't, in fact, until 2010 that he formally joined forces with the Taliban. And stories like that play out throughout the province.
- Wesley Morgan: The Taliban starts coming in and taking charge more and more, providing funding, providing weapons, providing training, but really, you see a patchwork of little local resistance groups fighting the United States, who then receive this support from outside actors like the Taliban and Al-Qaida.

Paul Scharre: I mean, one of the things that's interesting reading it, is there's almost this palpable sense of like a gravitational pull that, sort of, gets under way early in the war, where the Americans are there because there are people that shoot at them and they've been trained to run to the sound of the guns—whether it's the 3rd Group Team or the Marines that followed them or others—and so they're going to go deep into valley, they're going to attack. And then the people are fighting because the Americans are there. It's just, it's like this combustible mix that kind of happens. I'd be curious of your take on how that dynamic begins to unfold.

Wesley Morgan: So some of the things to keep in mind here are one - how easy it was for U.S. troops in the early years to just get up and go do things without a whole lot of checking in with higher headquarters. The war eventually evolves into a heavily centralized structure where, just to get outside the wire within the past few years and go on a patrol, units have to submit very long PowerPoint slide decks, weigh up their chain of command to get approved by generals and so on. This wasn't the case in 2003, 2004, 2005. Teams would just get up and go. They might send a 5W's update - who, what, where, when, why - to alert their higher headquarters to what they were doing, but really it was get up and go, make a job for yourself, make yourself useful. So the bar to start something was very low. This applies even to the construction of bases and outposts. It turned out to be much, much easier to build a base than to unbuild a base. So once an outpost that gets started is just a little small encampment that nobody thinks is going to be there for very long - within a few years, it's a little fortress that's a major logistical operation to get rid of, and often one that requires the sign-off of a four-star ISAF commander or his two-star deputy. So you get bases that were built, kind of, at the drop of a hat, then become—there's a yearlong process, decision-making process—to decide whether to pull out of them and to line up the resources to do so. So there's a momentum toward expansion and toward action and toward going out and doing things that it was hard to turn off.

Paul Scharre: Well, I think the point you make about this momentum towards action, it comes out so obvious in the book, where it's like the instinct of the commanders is when in doubt - to do something. And that seems to run into a lot of challenges in the Pech, where there are situations where the best thing might be to not do things. And yet, that's their instinct is to take more action.

Wesley Morgan: Yeah, absolutely. You can understand why it is this way, right? I mean, these are infantry commanders who are brought up in a system where to not act can be disastrous. I mean, you're fighting a war, you have to act. That's how these kinds of units operate. There's a guy named David Katz, who was a Foreign Service Officer who spent a bunch of time up in Nuristan—both during the war and actually years and years ago as well, as a doctoral student in the 1970s doing his field research—but he wound up working closely with the military in some of these places. And the thing that was incredibly frustrating to him was, you can see that these societies are so complex—everything you do, it has effects. Just knocking on somebody's door, talking to somebody, sends a message about that person to other people. Nothing you do is inconsequential. It's so, so hard to predict what the consequences of your actions will be. And so as this guy, David Katz put it, sometimes the more you understand about the place, the more you realize that you just have no idea what the consequences of anything you're doing are. For military commanders who are steeped in the idea of needing to act quickly and decisively, it's a very contrary mindset. These things just don't fit well. It can be very, very difficult to, kind of, to justify just - well, I don't understand what this is going to do, so I'm not going to do it. That's not how these guys are trained to think.

- Paul Scharre: Right, nor is that really seen as an acceptable answer to their leadership.
- Wesley Morgan: Right.
- Paul Scharre: Yeah. So it's a long war, the American involvement deepened over a period of several years where there are these kinds of bases that you're describing that get incrementally built deeper and deeper into the valleys. I was wondering if you could describe how that process unfolds over time - pulling U.S. troops, in some cases, really far deep into some of these offshoots of the Pech.
- Wesley Morgan: Yeah. So every one of these little outposts that gets built has its own origin story. By the time that each of these bases has been there for a while and is just—it's like a fishbowl in the valley floor and it's being attacked every day—it's very easy for the troops at each given outpost to just think, “what kind of idiot built this base and is it just to get us killed?” But of course, that is not the case in any one of these outpost stories. I mean, they were built for a reason, good or bad, by somebody that wasn't just - I'm going to put American troops in danger.
- Wesley Morgan: And often it had to do with trying to figure out hunting enemy leaders. There's the Waygal Valley, north of the Pech, is a place where the U.S. built its most remote outpost in the region. Places that, troops rotated in later almost would find it unbelievable that there were outposts just way, way up in these incredibly remote towns—they could only be supplied by helicopter—20 guys perched on a mountain side. And in 2006, when a lot of these outposts were built after the initial ones in 2003, a lot of it had to do with a big operation that the 10th Mountain Division launched in the spring of 2006. Part of whose underlying reasoning was that if you spread out farther and go into more and more communities, you'll be able to collect more and more intelligence. And this will allow you to figure out where enemy leaders have gone, who both the military and the intelligence community - the CIA- are looking for. So that's part of the underlying logic that drove pushing out into these incredibly remote places. But as the story unfolds, there kind of isn't really follow through. These outposts don't produce intelligence in the way that was kind of imagined that they might. But once they outlive that purpose, the outpost is still there and very difficult to get rid of.
- Paul Scharre: So as the U.S. deepens its reach into these valleys, they end up with, as you described, these outposts in these really remote places, some of them inaccessible by road, only accessible by helicopter, which even—airlifts obviously are critical to U.S. operations in Afghanistan—but it has weather problems and other things. And some of these end up with just these really indefensible locations. And then there are some disasters that then unfold. I wonder if you could talk about some of these incidents that occur where some of these outposts are attacked.
- Wesley Morgan: Sure. Yeah. So this part of the country - the Afghan east in general - is where you'll see mass attacks against U.S. outposts over the course of the war. And the highest density of these attacks—these kinds of almost Vietnam-style, enemy trying to get inside the wire, overwhelm the defenses, try and drag somebody away—the bulk of these events happen in Kunar and Nuristan, including several in the Pech Valley and its tributaries.

- Wesley Morgan: The first one, which nobody really remembers, is in the fall of 2004 with the second of these two Green Beret teams to live at FOB Blessing. It endured a series of very serious mass attacks against Camp Blessing—which then was a very small base—which luckily didn't result in any Americans being killed and kind of were just forgotten in the annals of the war. But they are a little bit—they're foreshadowing of what's to come as more and more of these little bases spread out.
- Wesley Morgan: There's another one, the Battle of Combat Main in the fall of 2006, where a little outpost of the 10th Mountain Division guys have built gets just absolutely slammed—everybody pinned down, all the heavy weapons out of commission, radios out of commission. And again, it's kind of by luck that no American is killed, and it doesn't make headlines, it doesn't come into the news, but eventually luck runs out. And there are a series of these events in 2007 and 2008. There's one in August of 2007, the Ranch House outpost in the town of Aranas is way, way up in the Waygal Valley. The most remote one of these outposts is attacked in a mass assault. The enemy does, in fact, get inside the wire, take control of some of the perimeter towers.
- Wesley Morgan: Again, amazingly, no American is killed, although quite a few are wounded. But this one acts as a wakeup call to start to motivate the unit that's in theater at the time, the 173rd Airborne Brigade, to start trying to close these places down. These ones that are just essentially untenable and have not lived up to the promise that they had been built for a year or two earlier. And so, it's actually in the course of this long withdrawal, because you can't just withdraw at the drop of a hat, they pull out of the Ranch House outpost. They pull out of Bella outpost next door, but they don't want to precipitously leave the valley altogether for fear of how this will be perceived - that it will look like a Taliban victory.
- Wesley Morgan: So what the unit does, is it consolidates these two bases that it's closed and tries to build a new one that will be more sustainable and more easier to reinforce in a place called Wanat. And this outpost, in its construction phase, before there's really much of it there, it gets hit really hard and nine Americans are killed in the space of an hour or two on the morning of July 13th, 2008. And U.S. forces then do pull out, and essentially the effect is the same as the one they were trying to avoid. You've pulled out of the valley and in fact you've done so—the way it looks to local people—is you've done so after having been bloodied pretty seriously. It looks like a defeat. And that's the way the Battalion Commander at the time, a guy named Colonel Bill Ostlund, who appears repeatedly through the book and through the annals of the Afghan War puts it—he says, “It was a tactical victory for us on that day. And it was a strategic defeat.”
- Paul Scharre: So I want to talk about Wanat in particular. I'll use the Americanized version, which you clarify in the book is not actually accurate, but I think people, if they've heard of it will have heard of the American version of Wanat. So the Battle of Wanat has drawn a lot of attention—it's been one... what's fascinating reading the book is that it doesn't... I mean, so your book provides this broader perspective situated in the Battle of Wanat, which has gotten a lot of attention and in the aftermath of it, and the after action reviews, and the disciplinary actions, and other things, but you said you went in, kind of, in the broader space of U.S. involvement in the Pech, and you kind of described how we get there, but what's fascinating reading it is, there doesn't... putting this outpost at Wanat does not seem any more ill-conceived than anything else that anyone's doing at the time.

- Paul Scharre: It seems like a bad idea when you're reading it, in part, because you know where this is going as a reader, but also it's like, these outposts are not a great idea at this point in time in the war, but it almost looks like that day just seemed unlucky relative to say, some of these other attacks, where there had been people inside the wire, but no Americans had been killed. I'd just be curious to hear your perspective on that battle relative to other things going on at the time.
- Wesley Morgan: Yeah. I mean, Wanat was a really tragic day and it's a situation that... So that battle earned one of the Forward Observers who was there in a little observation post—last American living at this observation post—earned him a Medal of Honor. There was another Medal of Honor awarded to another soldier in that same company for another battle where a patrol was just completely overrun. So these events, they produce tremendous numbers of valor awards, and they kind of give you the sense that when that many valor awards are coming out of a place, something has gone wrong. And that's the perspective that the 173rd Airborne Brigade guys take to it, is that yeah, I mean, the ferocity of this fighting that's producing these valor awards really suggest that we have gone too far, we've stretched out too far.
- Wesley Morgan: But so, because the Battle of Wanat—so many Americans lost their lives in it—it was a scandal. And there were investigation after investigation into it, but always on, as you say, kind of the micro events of the battle itself and the days, and at most weeks, leading up to the battle. Why was the Company Commander physically present or not physically present? Why was the Battalion Commander physically present or not physically present? Was there enough water? Did the M4s all work? Things like this. Rather than... kind of lost in this was the bigger picture of how the unit had been put into a position where it was... this was actually, it was almost... the more palatable option was, this place, Wanat, was going to be more defensible than the two outposts that it had pulled out of.
- Wesley Morgan: So yeah, I tried to place Wanat a little bit in this bigger picture of – this could have happened to any number of outposts, it almost did happen to any number of outposts. It did happen with that body count at Wanat. And so Wanat was the one that resulted in headlines and investigations and recriminations and recommendations for charges of dereliction of duty. But just by the grace of God that the Ranch House attack a year earlier hadn't ended the same way, or the Combat Main attack in 2006. A very tiny thing can sway one of these battles one way or the other.
- Paul Scharre: Yeah. The Ranch House assault in particular was harrowing reading about it. I'd certainly heard of Wanat and COP Keating and other similar incidents. I've never heard of Ranch House because in part, they've been relatively fortunate in terms of—although you said there had been a number of people who've been injured—but I mean, you have people inside the wire—a lot of these are just very, very harrowing firefights. You were talking about a lot of the heroism and bravery by the Soldiers and Marines and Special Operators in this area. And then there were also some major leadership failures by military leaders. And there's this quote that you have in the book that you kind of touched on a minute ago, but I wanted to read it because it really jumped out at me. You said, “When soldiers on the ground are put into positions where they commit acts of desperate heroism, something has gone wrong.” Can you tell us a little bit about like, what are some of those operational failures by the Army that put service members into these environments?

- Wesley Morgan: Yeah. So I think very often they were less big, obvious failures than kind of incremental failures to adapt to the situation. The Army's inability to, or an unwillingness to almost audit these outposts before something bad happened, and see whether these outposts still were serving the functions for which they've been sent up there, I think is one of the big failures. And the failure in 2006 of the units that went up there to foresee that these outposts would not be as easy to shut down as they had been to build. I mean, it's not an uncommon story. This was already happening in Iraq all over the place. You build an outpost, that outpost is there. So I think one of the failures is just the failure to understand the cost of acting and how difficult it will be to roll back the things that you're doing.
- Wesley Morgan: Another is the failure to learn about some tactics that just seem like they don't really work, but that often appear to work in the context of an individual unit's deployment. So one phenomenon that happens over and over again is there are battalions that will do these big helicopter-borne air assault missions up into these side valleys, almost like a little miniature versions of what we think of as Vietnam-era search-and-destroy missions. But it's several hundred guys getting into helicopters and being dumped into little landing zones up in the mountains and then going and trying to find the enemy and kill them. And this, once in a while, we'll net some firefight where you kill a bunch of enemy, maybe a lot of enemy, maybe a hundred enemy. And sometimes in the context in which it happens, it can seem like - okay, this has created some breathing room now for us to do what it is that we need to do in the valley. We've killed a lot of enemy, now attacks are down. Now we can talk to the elders more, we can build the road, things like that, but it never lasts.
- Wesley Morgan: And in fact, sometimes just by the timing of the cyclical way, the seasonal way that the fighting happens, it can be very easy to assume that your operations are having an effect that may in fact just be the effect of the enemy going home for the winter to Pakistan. So something that you see recur in the Korengal for instance, is units as they get through the winter and they get into spring and attacks don't go back up again immediately, the units think - okay, well, we really, we've turned the corner, we really have inflicted serious losses on the enemy and this fighting season isn't like last fighting season—and that's the spring. And then over the summer, a new rifle company rotates in and no sooner has the old company left and the new company arrived than the enemy starts slamming them because the enemy is just waiting it out. And it's not obvious that that's happening on the timescale that these units are rotating on. And there's not a lot of people, there are some, but there are not a lot of people who are watching on a longer timescale and trying to ensure that these kinds of lessons get captured and provided to the commanders making the decisions.
- Paul Scharre: I mean, what's astonishing, the air assault missions are almost the real stock example of this, where as a reader, you're reading, and at first, when they started doing this, you think - okay, maybe that's a tactic. It makes sense to try it. And then as the war drags on, you think to yourself like - they've tried these, they don't work, they know they don't work - we've tried for four or five years running now, why do they keep doing this? What's astonishing to me is that, as individuals, it's clear that the military leaders there and in the Pech are able to adapt - they learn, they change, and evolve over the course of the deployment. But they seem unable... the Army as an institution seems unable to learn these lessons year-to-year.

- Paul Scharre: And in fact, what's really amazing is that even when you get to the later stages of the war, you have company commanders, you have battalion staff officers who had served in the Pech as lieutenants, they know that this stuff doesn't work. And then they've got like a brigade and division staff calling for these huge air assault missions that are fruitless. I mean, what is your take on...sort of, what is the lesson here about the Army's ability to learn these lessons as an institution over time?
- Wesley Morgan: It's not good. The Army has not shown a huge amount of ability to capture lessons in Afghanistan. And often, something that I did not know before going into this book but found fascinating, is the degree to which other actors who, other than the big institutional Army, that have stepped in to try to fill that gap, to try to be the institutional knowledge reservoir. So in one example, there are guys from the Asymmetric Warfare Group, which is a unit that the Army is now disbanding, but it was a unit of special operators and contractors—typically the contractors being retired, very experienced special operations guys—who would try to go in there and they would go back to Kunar again and again and again, and they would do the same in other places like Mosul and Ramadi.
- Wesley Morgan: And they would try to help the units get through the transitions by staying with them beyond the two-week overlap period that the unit has with the guys they're replacing. And trying to... just trying to fill that void, allow more of the lessons to kind of percolate into the unit than the sort of flawed transition process was able to capture. And the Army has made a variety of efforts to try to fix this problem. They tried sending units back to the same places again, but they just... every one of these efforts really has failed, at least in the conventional Army. Special operations forces have had, I think, greater success at it, in part because they are able to kind of have the luxury of going back to the same place more reliably year after year after year.
- Wesley Morgan: You see that with the Ranger Battalions endlessly rotating through Afghanistan. But yeah, conventional units once in a while, you get a unit that goes back to the same place, but even then, it's not really the same people in the unit. In some cases it is, you've got NCOs who were there last time, you've got some company-grade officers who were there last time, but the battalion commander wasn't, his battalion staff weren't. So it's not like the same unit with the same experience from the first time is going and applying its lessons again.
- Paul Scharre: Yeah. Our decision to disband Asymmetric Warfare Group is just beyond... it makes my head want to explode. I don't know why the Army doesn't think that it needs to learn lessons in future conflicts. Like, why would that be? That's like - that's not important anymore; we're done with learning... but with tactical knowledge, on the ground, tactical knowledge is not going to be relevant in future wars. Anyway, we've got some great questions coming in. I want to encourage people to submit questions to the Q&A at the bottom of the toolbar. Let me take the first one.
- Paul Scharre: So I'm going to kind of paraphrase here and then we'll push the question out to participants so they can see the full question. But Wes, one of the things that comes out in the book is there's these two parallel wars being fought. The book is mostly about the conventional Army troops, and then there are Marines, and some Special Forces troops that kind of play a role in this is sort of... the battlespace owners, if you will. But then there's JSOC, just doing their own thing. Can you talk about that dynamic and how that unfolds throughout the course of the war?

- Wesley Morgan: Yeah. So this is something that unfolds very starkly in the Pech, because there always remained kind of a counter-terrorism interest in the Pech. So the CIA and JSOC—the Joint Special Operations Command—remained persistently interested in Kunar and Nuristan throughout the course of the war because there were these Al-Qaida figures who were known to be up there. So whereas in other parts of the country, Sangin or Zari, or somewhere in Kandahar, Helmand, you could go for a long time kind of without the counter-terrorism aspect of the war showing its head. In the Pech, the counterinsurgency and counter-terrorism, or kind of the daytime-war of the conventional units who patrol the area and try to get to know people and build up the Afghan forces—versus the nighttime-war of the Rangers and Seals who come in and do raids - it's very stark, the ways that these two threads often conflict with each other.
- Wesley Morgan: There are moments in the war when they support each other—when a JSOC Task Force Commander makes the decision, - okay, we're going to sort of bend this night raiding machine that we've developed and we're going to use it to hit the targets that the Infantry Commander on the ground wants, and we're going to coordinate with them. But those are more the exception than the rule, and it takes a long time to get to that place. And even when that's happening, even when they're going after targets that are - the targets that the Battalion Commander wants hit, the targets on the ground - when these Special Operations Forces come in and kill a bunch of people in a house, in a village—even if they've gotten the right guys—it's a mess for the conventional forces to clean up in the morning.
- Wesley Morgan: Now, in some ways you could say that's a good thing. The conventional force gets to play good cop and say - look, this wasn't us - it was the Seal trooper, the Ranger platoon that came in from Jalalabad. But it also... it can be a very difficult dynamic for these units to grapple with, who have been trying to build rapport in these communities, and then they have either perhaps a raid gone wrong, or a raid that hit the right target, but killed more people than really was necessary. They can really damage the relationship that the conventional unit has been building.
- Paul Scharre: So U.S. troops are no longer owning ground in these outposts in the Pech. Can you talk about the turning point that kind of led to this—what was ultimately, a long withdrawal—just like there was a long really deepening of U.S. involvement there and kind of what tipped the scales.
- Wesley Morgan: Yeah. So again, it was incremental. It started with the Waygal Valley in 2007, with the Ranch House Battle, and the Battle of Wanat in 2008. The Waygal was the first place that they decided to come out of because they realized we're no longer... we're not actually accomplishing the goals for these little outposts that we tried to accomplish - went there to accomplish. Next step is the Korengal. It essentially takes a year between when the U.S. military decides that it wants to come out of the Korengal and when it's able to come out of the Korengal. In large part that's motivated by outposts that previously had been able to be supplied by road are no longer able to be supplied by road. So they become that much more tenuous and that gets Commanders' attention more, the fact that you could lose a helicopter at one of these places.

- Wesley Morgan: Nevertheless, it takes a really long time to kind of pitch the idea and line up the resources to get out of there. Again, in part, because these withdrawal operations are conflicting with these big battalion air assault operations throughout the country in a competition for scarce resources, particularly helicopters. So that's another factor that kind of drags it out. So it's in the spring of 2010 they do come out of the Korengal after a year of deliberation about it. And then shortly after that, the Battalion that I wound up visiting in 2010—the visit that kind of inspired this book and that's described in the prologue of the book and then later in the book as well—this 101st Airborne Battalion is sitting in the valley.
- Wesley Morgan: They're no longer in the Waygal or the Korengal, they're just in the main valley. And essentially, the war that had been up in the tributary valleys has now come down to the main valley. And outposts that previously were kind of quiet outposts—backwater outposts—where troops could relax during a rotation away from the embattled outpost in the Korengal or Waygal - now these places are the embattled ones. And at this point, there is no security bubble or ink blot anymore. It's just—the war is in the villages, the war is on the road. And so the battalion commander who was there at the time, a guy named then-Lieutenant Colonel Joe Ryan, now a one-star general back in Kabul, I believe in his eighth Afghanistan deployment—he, fairly early in his Battalion's deployment, and I think his division commander at Bagram was reaching the same conclusion at the same time, decided the same logic that applied to coming out of the Korengal now applies to coming out of the Pech - we don't need to be there; we're the problem now.
- Wesley Morgan: The goodwill has been squandered. We're not solving anything anymore. We're creating the conflict. And again, it takes a long time, between the summer of 2010 when these 101st Airborne leaders decide they want to come out of the Pech, and March/April of 2011, when they, in fact, are able to do it—after it has been run up the flagpole to Kabul, there's been another big air assault operation to kind of bloody the enemy again, so it doesn't look like we're just leaving with our tail between our legs again at a cost in both American and Afghan lives.
- Wesley Morgan: But they do, they come out in March and April of 2011, they come out of not all four of the Pech bases, but three of them. And it's mostly withdrawal from the valley, but it's done—even though it took so long—it's kind of done without really the collaboration of the Afghan troops, the Afghan military - getting their input, see whether they want to do this thing or not. And what winds up happening is, the Afghan government says - we're staying; these bases are important to us, even if they're not to you anymore. So an Afghan Battalion is left out at FOB Blessing and essentially is just cut off, it's unable to fend for itself, and it's on the verge of collapse.
- Wesley Morgan: And this draws U.S. forces back in again later in 2011. No sooner had they left, then they have to go back in on a smaller scale and stand up, kind of, an advisory presence to get this Afghan unit back on its feet. And the way they execute that mission, you're tempted to think - well, they've been doing it this way all along, this small-scale advisory presence out at the base, helping the Afghans do things that are within the realm of possibility for the Afghans, rather than dragging them along on big air assaults up into the mountains; could this all have happened sooner? But it wasn't until this period later in the war that you were alluding to in 2011, 2012, when there were guys who had experience there. There's a Company Commander in particular named Loren Crowe, who was there in 2011 to 2012, who had previously been in Kunar and had seen the war of the big air assaults and had seen how fruitless it was.

- Wesley Morgan: And he's a guy who kind of insists on - we're going to do this on a smaller, more reasonable scale out of the Pech now that we've been drawn back out there. And so that enables them to then withdraw again after a year of helping get this Afghan unit back on its feet, back to where it had been before we pulled out.
- Paul Scharre: So another question from the participant here—so the discussion thus far has painted a fairly futile picture of these bases and U.S. involvement there. This may be in fairness, a reflection of my perspective. I don't want to put that on you, Wes, but the question to you is, were there any positive or lasting effects from U.S. involvement in the Pech? What's your take?
- Wesley Morgan: The Afghan government controls the Pech Valley today in the sense that they control the road, they control the district centers. So there is a ribbon of government control stretching out through that valley—go off of that ribbon and it's all controlled by the Taliban. And this is in a province where there really was not extensive Taliban control before 9/11. There are roads that have been built that are very beneficial for the people who live there. These roads are also... they're collapsing and falling into states of disrepair because they were built in ways that were not capable of being sustained by the Afghan government. So, I think yeah, there are tangible benefits that have been brought to... probably not really to the people in the tributary valleys—the benefits have dissolved there for the most part—but yes, that have been brought to the main Pech Valley. There are schools and clinics that weren't there before. I don't know whether any of those things will last.
- Paul Scharre: Can you think—another question from the group—can you think of any set of military tactics or a different strategy or approach here that would have resulted in a better outcome, either in the Pech or more broadly? How should we think about maybe the rest of the country?
- Wesley Morgan: Yeah, I mean, it's tempting to think that—look if everybody had kept doing what that good Green Beret team had been doing in 2004 things would've worked out. I don't think that's true. Although as I say, it's an appealing counterfactual to think - well look, if the other Green Beret team hadn't started poking the bear in the Korengal, and it had kept focusing on building the little ink blot up around Nangalam - I think maybe things would have gone better for a while. But that first Green Beret team was also, it was operating in a... it had a grace period. People were not fed up yet. When these units are out there fighting, it's war and people die including civilians, inevitably, no matter how disciplined or well-prepared or how well-meaning these American units are, they wind up killing civilians. That Green Beret team's captain kills a civilian, inadvertently—a completely good faith mistake. He shoots a dog that's coming at him and the bullet goes through the dog, ricochets off a rock, and hits a shopkeeper square in the forehead. And this is the spring of 2004. And essentially, the town forgives and forgets. They say - look this is Commander Ron, this is a good guy. We know him, we know it was a good faith mistake.
- Wesley Morgan: That kind of forgiving and forgetting is a lot easier to do with the first guy killed in a mistake than the 10th or the 15th, as more and more of these units rotate through and make their own good faith mistakes. So I do think that, if there had been a way to go out there and accomplish something quickly—get an Afghan military force on its feet quickly—I think by virtue of it being quick, perhaps it could have been more successful than this kind of... half-life that the conventional presence had there over the years. They eventually just wore out its welcome.

- Paul Scharre: One of the things that's remarkable reading the book is you bring in a lot of perspectives of the Afghans who were on the other side of... sometimes these same firefights. One, can you talk a little about the process of how you did that, and then what surprised you the most when you were getting their perspectives on the book?
- Wesley Morgan: Yeah, so the Afghan perspectives came from a variety of different ways. Interpreters were incredibly valuable resources because really, what I was trying to do was gather Afghan perspectives on the Americans that they had seen come through. So I would ask an interpreter who had worked for Colonel Cavoli and then Colonel Ostlund and then Colonel Jenkinson to kind of compare and contrast the units and their commanders and talk about differences among them that may not have been perceptible to those commanders - who I'm also interviewing, or the units themselves. Similarly, district governors, district officials who worked very closely with the Americans over the years, ANA officers who I went and visited again in the Pech after they were no longer receiving as much American support—these are guys who kind of, they had seen all these American units come and go, and they have a long view that they can talk to you about, which was incredibly valuable.
- Wesley Morgan: And then also I would—especially the last reporting trip that I did for the book where I was not able to get back up to Kunar because in part, because at that point, the Islamic state had showed up in the Pech Valley and that created a whole new wrinkle to the security situation—but I was able to talk to a lot of people, either bringing them down to Kabul to come and talk about their experiences in the places where they're still living, or just people who are coming down from Taliban-controlled areas, like the Waygal Valley, on various types of business. They come back to Kabul often on a 10-day pass from the Taliban to go visit their parliamentarian, which is an interesting dynamic that you've got. They're kind of relying on two governments at once and both governments are making accommodations to the fact that they are relying on the other government.
- Wesley Morgan: But so yeah, people who are, kind of, leaders in their communities often were the people who interface most directly with the Americans and had these kinds of perspectives they could share. I mean, very interestingly to me—often these also were older people who had dealt with the Soviets as well. So that was something that was really fascinating to me, was hearing Afghans compare and contrast their experiences with the Americans and the Soviets. There's an example early in the book of a Pech Valley elder who's talking to me about his experience with the Americans and talking about his frustrations with American troops early on - detaining the wrong people, killing the wrong people, acting on false intelligence.
- Wesley Morgan: And before launching into this critique, he puts a big caveat in front of it. He says, essentially, I know they meant well. And they weren't like the Soviets, who, his initial experience of the Soviets was - Soviet advisors being present for a bonafide massacre of a hundred plus men and boys. So he makes this comparison. He's like - look, I know the Americans were nothing like that; nevertheless, they made mistakes. And to kind of contrast that, I mean, there's another Waygal Valley elder whose voice is included at the end of the book, who makes a kind of, a less favorable comparison, which he says basically - unlike the Americans... look, the Soviets were godless and wrong about everything and we hated them. But the Soviets built stuff that lasted longer, roads in particular.

- Wesley Morgan: Now, I can't vouch for whether that's something that's true, or this is sort of the way he perceives it - just seeing a lot of recent American road projects fall by the wayside, promises unfulfilled, roads washed out by the rain, but that was his perception, was he - although he had sort of loathed the Soviets in a way that he did not dislike the Americans - Americans had made more promises that they had not followed through on.
- Paul Scharre: That's fascinating. So there's kind of a surprise ending to the book that I wasn't expecting, where there's this twist about U.S. involvement in the Pech at the end. Maybe could you talk about what has U.S. involvement looked like there over the last year or two?
- Wesley Morgan: Yeah. So over the last couple of years, during the Trump administration... so in 2017, the Trump administration committed more forces back to Afghanistan. Part of this was, a part of this miniature surge in forces - we started sending small numbers of advisers back up to Kunar - not to live there, but to do visits of a few days or a few weeks to help the Afghan government with artillery and air support and things like that as it's going about its offensives in Kunar. But what we're actually helping them do in these defensives in 2018, 2019, into 2020 was not fighting the Taliban, but fighting the Islamic state. That's who the Afghan government was fighting at that point, going into valleys like the Korengal, the Shiriak, where Americans used to fight the Taliban, and now it's the Afghan government trying to root out the Islamic State.
- Wesley Morgan: And interestingly, the Taliban is also fighting the Islamic state in these same places. So there is this alliance of convenience that is created between the Afghan government and the Taliban in Kunar, even as they are at each other's throats waging an unbelievably bloody war against each other everywhere else in the country. In Kunar, they are cooperating with each other against the Islamic state. And the United States kind of, gets in on this cooperation in a subtle way—if you can call... you can never call airstrikes subtle—but the Special Operations Task Force out of Bagram, for a period in 2019 and into 2020, leading up to the Doha talks, was actually using its same old intelligence tools that it has always used to listen in on the Taliban and understand the Taliban and target the Taliban - it was using those same tools in this specific area of Kunar to figure out what the Taliban needed in its day-to-day fight against the Islamic state. To figure out, for instance - okay, the Taliban, they're crossing the line in X Valley at X time tomorrow morning, and it'll help them if we take out Y Islamic State machine gun nest.
- Wesley Morgan: Which is, I mean, it's not like you got JSOC guys talking to the Taliban, and they may wind up then targeting that same Taliban commander who they've been helping, they may wind up targeting him two days later after he's cleaned the Islamic State out of the village. But yeah, it's certainly a strange twist that I think a lot of U.S. veterans of the area can come away with queasy feelings about.
- Paul Scharre: Yeah. I had heard some rumblings about this, but hearing it... seeing it all unfold is quite remarkable - the Taliban air force, they refer to themselves sort of-
- Wesley Morgan: Yeah. That was the joke within a particular cell in the Task Force was that they called this team that was doing this targeting—they call them, they joked, but they called them the Taliban air force.

Paul Scharre: Yeah. Well, glad people are able to have a sense of humor. It's a fascinating, interesting kind of twist. It's interesting reading this, and you kind of alluded - I'd spent a sliver of time, really early in the war before things really gotten bad in this. But for those of us who spent time in the Pech or the surrounding regions or in Afghanistan more broadly, it's not just a book about a war, it's a book about our war. And it was really quite an experience reading it. I'd be curious, what are some of the reactions of the service members that you interviewed about it after the fact, as they reflected on their time? Because the war's now been so long for many of them - they've had some time to have some distance, really, from their deployments.

Wesley Morgan: Yeah. I mean, some of the most interesting perspectives to me were guys who were still in, and who have continued to go back over and over again. And because I was working on this book for such a long time, I kind of had the luxury of being able to talk to current officers as they have moved up the ranks and gone back over and over again, whether that's in the Ranger Regiment or in conventional units, and in some cases, gone back to the same parts of the country over and over again. And you would see people's perspectives change. You would see guys who, when they came back in 2011 from their deployment kind of thought about it in one way, thought they had accomplished X, Y, and Z, maybe two more deployments later kind of thinking - okay, well that was pretty fleeting, what we accomplished.

Wesley Morgan: There's a guy who appears in the book named Dan Kearney, who's now an Army colonel, but was a captain in the Korengal Valley in 2007. And he describes... the way he puts it is that he was drinking his own Kool-Aid. He was, sort of, touting the progress that the unit was making to his own men to keep their morale up, so they didn't think that they were doing something pointless. And he believed it. I mean, he believed that they were making this progress. But talk to him a few years later, after a few more Afghanistan rotations, and the way he put it was, there wasn't a security bubble - we were talking a big game about the security bubble, but we were not even able to protect what was under our own noses. We could not even protect as far as our eyes could see.

III. Closing Remarks

Paul Scharre: Well, thank you. It's painful. We are unfortunately out of time, but it is a fabulous book about heroism and heartbreak. Thank you all for joining us today. Please check out the book, *The Hardest Place*. It's available on Amazon, Barnes & Noble, everywhere you can find books. I'd encourage you to check it out. And thank you, Wes, for joining us today. Thank you for writing this exceptional book.

Wesley Morgan: Thanks so much, Paul. It's awesome to talk to you and I really appreciate your taking the time both to chat with me and to read the book.

Paul Scharre: Thank you. Thank you all and take care.