Hail Mary: The Effect of the 1972 “Linebacker” Bombings on the Paris Peace Accords

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Bio:

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Abstract:

During the Vietnam War, the belief that American air power was not only superior to all opposing nations but could also defeat a less organized, less advanced nation alone pervaded many of those in power in the American government. The first was proved true, but the latter failed after many unsuccessful attempts to seek peace through military victories and diplomacy. Initially, the North Vietnamese were unwilling to accept any agreement for peace short of their own victory over the South. Though the “Linebacker” bombings in 1972 likely caused the North Vietnamese to attend and accept the 1973 Paris Peace Accords, their return to hostility two years later proved that air power alone cannot defeat a motivated enemy.

“We were always lookin’ for this guy named Charlie.”
- *Forrest Gump*¹

Introduction: Springtime for Kissinger

Most Americans wanted to end their country’s involvement in South Vietnam by 1972, and their government was listening. By the beginning of the year, a little over a hundred thousand American soldiers remained “in country,” a far cry from the more than half-million that had sustained the country at the beginning of the Nixon presidency.² For two years prior, National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger had been secretly flying to Paris to attempt to negotiate a peace settlement with Le Duc Tho, the North Vietnamese negotiator. His only bargaining chip in the negotiations was the amount of suffering the United States could inflict on North Vietnam through bombing raids. In the spring of 1972, a massive North Vietnamese invasion was beaten back with U.S. airpower. Later, when the North Vietnamese left the peace talks, Nixon ordered one final massive bombing campaign to prod the North Vietnamese to accept a settlement. They complied eleven days later.³ The terms of this settlement were so deeply flawed that the North Vietnamese were able to overrun South Vietnam a mere two years after the ink on the peace treaty had dried. There is no doubt that the bombings convinced the North Vietnamese to agree to the 1973 Paris Peace Accords, but this peace was not ultimately a victory for American airpower. Airpower alone could not defeat a motivated enemy.

The Primacy of Airpower

Even before World War II was brought to a close by the awesome power of atomic weapons dropped from strategic bombers, advocates for airpower were already pushing the military establishment to expand the role of airpower in the armed forces of the United States. In 1925, the man who directed the largest air campaign of World War I, Billy Mitchell, was court-martialed after making a statement calling his superiors in the War Department “incompetent,” in

response to the crash of an Army dirigible over Ohio. He was subsequently convicted and forced to retire.⁴ Mitchell was one of the few theorists during the interwar period who believed airpower could be best employed striking strategic targets behind enemy lines. During World War II, it was believed that airpower was a decisive instrument in the conduct of the war. Indeed, airpower saved England during the Battle of Britain, but it was in response to an industrialized enemy who also employed airpower to a significant degree.

Two theories existed for the use of strategic airpower. The primary theory proposed that airpower could be used to destroy the means of production, thus bringing the industrial underpinnings needed to sustain a modern war to a grinding halt.⁵ A lesser known idea was that strategic airpower could break the will of the people. This was accomplished by the bombing of cities resulting in high casualties. This was also intended to break the will of the government by convincing it that they could not defend its people. However, even with the day and night bombing campaign carried out by the Allies beginning in 1942, the German economy continued to grow until late 1944 due to the increased efficiency of the production apparatus. It is clear that the bombing campaign of Germany affected the will of the people and German industrial capacity, but it was not decisive in ending the war. The spirit of the German people, combined with the ruthlessness of the Nazi regime, enabled Germany to fight until the bitter end.⁶

The strategic bombing campaign against Japan had the undertones of an unspoken third theory of strategic bombing: extermination. The commander of the Twenty-First Bomber Group, General Curtis LeMay, resorted to low-level incendiary attacks at night against Japanese cities. These attacks resulted in massive casualties among the Japanese civilian population. One attack in Tokyo alone produced a firestorm that destroyed sixteen square miles of the city, and killed 83,000 people.⁷ Even the nuclear attacks on Nagasaki and Hiroshima seemed to carry the

message to the Japanese government that a failure to surrender would result in further atomic strikes against the Japanese mainland.

After World War II, airpower advocates were convinced that Allied air supremacy had won the war. The U.S. government recognized this to some extent when it made the Air Force independent of the Army by way of the National Security Act of 1947. The same year, a dispute over funding between the Air Force and the Navy led to the “Revolt of the Admirals.” The Air Force argued passionately that it was the principal deterrent for America’s main enemy, the Soviet Union, and was also America’s means of striking back should a nuclear attack occur.⁸ The National Security Act of 1947 created rivalries among the branches of the armed forces. The services were constantly at odds with each other for funding, resources, and missions. However, the Air Force dominated the debate and retained the biggest share of the defense budget.

Limited War for Limited Objectives

During the 1950s, the national security doctrine pursued by the United States was called “massive retaliation.” Under this doctrine, the United States would respond to any attack with the threat of a massive nuclear counterattack. The power of nuclear weapons made it clear to many analysts that an all-out nuclear war between the superpowers would result in the destruction of the planet. Additionally, many realized that it would be inappropriate to use nuclear weapons in a small-scale conflict, such as in Korea or Hungary.⁹ As the 1950s drew to a close, retired General Maxwell D. Taylor wrote his memoirs entitled *The Uncertain Trumpet*. He advocated a defense policy known as “Flexible Response.” Under “Flexible Response,” the United States would have the forces necessary to engage in any level of conflict ranging from a low-level insurgency to a nuclear war.

Another writer whose work would be influential to the leaders who would later develop the nation's policy toward Vietnam was Robert Osgood. His 1957 classic *Limited War: The Challenge to American Strategy* emphasized the notion that political objectives would determine the practical limits of war. In other words, the more total the political objectives were, the more total the war would be. Henry Kissinger, who at this time was a lecturer at Harvard University, offered his own theory of limited war. In his view, the limited use of nuclear arms could achieve a favorable outcome without expanding the conflict toward total war. Only one scholar, Thomas Schelling, even tried to develop a framework for terminating a limited conflict without the use of nuclear arms.¹⁰

The problem with the theory of limited war was that it went against traditional American beliefs about the conduct of war. Americans viewed war as an aberration that should be resolved as quickly as possible, using the maximum amount of force possible. The American people viewed voluntary restraints on the conduct of the armed forces as an unnecessary handicap. The other problem was that limited war theorists assumed that the opposing belligerents in a limited war would be rational actors. For the belligerent fighting a war at the total end of the spectrum, human factors, such as pride or hatred, would enable him to continue fighting long after a rational actor would have concluded that all was lost.¹¹

Protracted Attrition: McNamara's Vietnam War

Robert Strange McNamara came to Washington in 1961 as Secretary of Defense, appointed by a president who wanted to surround himself with the “best and the brightest.” Prior to his appointment as Secretary of Defense, McNamara was the president of the Ford Motor Company, the first president of the company that was not a member of the Ford family. His only military experience had been as a statistical analyst with the Army Air Corps during World War

II.¹² President Kennedy allowed McNamara to appoint his own people to top positions within the Department of Defense. His principal advisors included John Connolly, Paul Nitze, and Cyrus Vance. This group of policymakers would become the driving force behind the continuity of the nation’s Vietnam policy through the Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon administrations.

Kennedy brought General Maxwell Taylor to the White House as his personal military advisor, bypassing the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Then Kennedy appointed Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Lyman Louis Lemnitzer as the commander of NATO, and appointed Taylor to fill the vacancy.¹³ This kind of leadership style dominated the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. McNamara wanted to run the Defense Department like he ran Ford.¹⁴ He tended to gravitate toward people who would defer to his judgment. In 1962, when his Secretary of the Army, Elvis J. Stahr, dismissed a timetable for the reorganization of the Army, he was sacked and replaced with Cyrus Vance. Something similar happened the next year, when the Chief of Naval Operations, George W. Andersen, was removed from the circles of power after publicly criticizing McNamara’s plan for integrating the ballistic missile systems of the Air Force and Navy.¹⁵ There was little tolerance for dissent and opposing points of view in the Defense Department, and it led to a single-minded position about what should be done.

The Kennedy administration accepted the defense doctrine proposed by Maxwell Taylor, “Flexible Response.” In Vietnam, McNamara recommended to the president a strategic doctrine that came to be known as “Graduated Escalation.”¹⁶ Under this strategy, the U.S. Army was relegated to the role of rear guard. That is to say, throughout the war, aside from the search and destroy operations of the mid-1960s, and the abortive invasions of Laos and Cambodia in 1971, the Army was continually on the strategic defensive. The Army could not go on the offensive against North Vietnam without provoking the Chinese into the conflict and risking World War

III. They could not even effectively isolate the battlefield without taking that risk. Neither Johnson nor Nixon was willing to risk a global war for South Vietnam.¹⁷ McNamara described the nation’s Vietnam policy as being akin to “holding a map with only one road on it.”¹⁸ For the U.S. Army, this was a road to a protracted war of defensive attrition that was to last for ten years.

According to Clausewitz, the defensive is the strongest form of war, but a decisive victory can only be won on the offensive.¹⁹ During the Vietnam War, McNamara used airpower to achieve two main objectives. First, airpower was supposed to isolate the battlefield in South Vietnam by interdicting the flow of men and supplies down the Ho Chi Minh trail. Secondly, and more importantly, airpower was supposed to demonstrate to the North Vietnamese government that it could not possibly hope to win the war. George Herring remarked on this, citing a reporter visiting the aircraft carrier USS *Ranger* in 1965, who remarked that if they just showed the ship to the Communists it would convince them to give up.²⁰

The American people do not like to win by attrition, especially when their government deceives them about the nature of the conflict they are fighting. Americans are accustomed to the armed forces closing in on the enemy and annihilating them. American officers, among them Lieutenant Colonel Hal Moore, expressed deep frustration at not being able to pursue the enemy into ostensibly neutral countries as early as 1965. Though a static war of attrition could, in theory, be maintained in perpetuity by a country as strong as the United States, it could not be sustained by its people.²¹

The Air War 1962–1968

Aerial attacks on North Vietnam began as early as 1962. As discussed earlier, airpower was the primary offensive branch of the U.S. military in Vietnam. The air war was under the direction of the Commander and Chief of the U.S. Pacific Fleet, Admiral U.S. Grant Sharp, who

was based in Hawaii. The Commander of Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), General William Westmoreland, repeatedly petitioned his superiors in the Pentagon to give him operational control over all airpower assets in the theater, but his request was repeatedly denied by the Pentagon. In effect each branch of the armed forces was fighting its own war in Vietnam with little regard for the strategies and actions of the other services.²²

For the Air Force, the war in Vietnam was something of a spectacle. Many of these winged warriors never even set foot in the country they were trying to protect. Air Force pilots flew out of bases in Thailand, the Philippines, Guam, and several sites within South Vietnam. For the airmen at these bases, especially those outside of Vietnam, nearly every comfort of home was there. A pilot could literally fly a mission, land, and then tell stories about it over a cold beer at the officers’ club. According to researcher Robert Dorr, there were so many amenities on base that less than one man in ten was actually participating in combat.²³

Statistical control methodology, first introduced in World War II, had become institutionalized, and it became the Air Force’s preferred method for measuring the progress of the bombing campaign. Success was measured by the number of bombs dropped and the number of targets destroyed.²⁴ Precise numbers and statistics appealed to McNamara’s management style. For him, the bombing was not a means to compel the enemy to do our will, but a means of communicating with him.²⁵ This was the line of reasoning for the many bombing halts carried out throughout the Johnson presidency. It was thought that when a precise measure of pain was delivered, the North Vietnamese would realize the hopelessness of their cause and give up.

The operation for meting out controlled doses of pain in North Vietnam was dubbed “Rolling Thunder.” Over the course of the operation, nearly a million tons of bombs were dropped on North Vietnam. American pilots were flying over ten thousand sorties a month from

1965 to 1967, mainly in the F-105 *Thunderchief*.²⁶ Pilots complained about the rules of engagement that had been imposed by McNamara to avoid the widening of the war. Ships unloading war matériel at Haiphong harbor could not be attacked, nor could targets within a ten-mile radius of the Chinese border.²⁷ In addition, inaccurate targeting systems caused untold tons of bombs to miss their targets. The long nature of the campaign with its many bombing halts “...to show Hanoi how it feels ... not to be bombed for a few days”²⁸ allowed the North Vietnamese to build up their air defense system from nothing to one of the most advanced in the world, further hindering U.S. efforts.

Another obstacle to American strategists was the dogged determination displayed by the North Vietnamese people and army. Take, for example, the interdiction of supplies moving down the Ho Chi Minh trail. McNamara was against the idea of putting a physical barrier on the trail because it theoretically violated Laotian neutrality in the conflict. The North Vietnamese had no such compunctions about the neutrality of a sovereign nation. Through observation, the Vietnamese deduced the timetables for American warplanes and moved supplies at nonpeak hours. Responding to this, the Air Force dropped sensors in the area that detected movement and fed back the information to headquarters. The Vietnamese quickly learned how they worked and even used them as decoys to draw American attention away from the actual matériel moving down the trail.²⁹ Needless to say, this exercise in frustration made the American people and military clamor for a change in the way things were run.

Nixon’s Plan for Victory

In his 1968 campaign for the presidency, Richard Milhouse Nixon had promised to bring the Vietnam conflict to a close with a secret plan, a charge that he later denied. In any case, secret or not, Nixon’s plan allowed him to put some political distance between himself and the

Johnson administration. That left most of the blame and frustration for the state of affairs in Vietnam on his opponent, Vice President Hubert Humphrey.³⁰ Despite another halt in the bombing of North Vietnam leading to Humphrey’s improved standing with the American people, Nixon beat Humphrey by a relatively slim margin in the general election. Flushed with electoral victory, Nixon began to build his cabinet. At the Hotel Pierre in New York City, Nixon interviewed Professor Henry Kissinger for the post of National Security Advisor. He was so impressed that he hired Kissinger on the spot.³¹

Nixon and Kissinger shared the same basic idea about how to proceed in Vietnam. In his essay “The Vietnam Negotiations” published before he was installed as National Security Advisor, Kissinger outlines many of his views on the conflict. He realized that any negotiated settlement would not reflect the position of the battlefield at the end of the war, as the battlefield was highly fluid. Kissinger advocated a phased withdrawal that would prevent any ceasefire from becoming grounds for a communist coup of South Vietnam and allow the South Vietnamese military time to strengthen. He believed that should the North Vietnamese continue their demands for a negotiated “total victory,” the war must continue.³² Most importantly, Kissinger believed that “ending the war honorably is essential for the peace of the world. Any other solution may unloose forces that would complicate the international order.”³³ Kissinger and Nixon saw no end, save victory.

Upon entering office, Nixon announced his hitherto “secret” plan for winning the war in Vietnam. Dubbed “Vietnamization,” his plan involved withdrawing American combat units while simultaneously replacing them with South Vietnamese combat units. The South Vietnamese were now to defend themselves, albeit with generous technical and financial support from the United States. This plan reduced American combat casualties and placated some of

Nixon’s domestic critics.³⁴ Some remained doubtful of the plan’s effectiveness. Senator George McGovern, Nixon’s future opponent in the 1972 presidential election, said that “Vietnamization is a cruel hoax designed to screen from the American people the bankruptcy of a needless military involvement in the affairs of the Vietnamese people.”³⁵

Kissinger hoped to accomplish with diplomacy what the U.S. military had failed to accomplish since 1965. He would isolate Vietnam from its principal allies, China and the Soviet Union. Kissinger was able to take advantage of a growing rift between the Soviet Union and China over who had influence over the international communist movement. At a world meeting of the communist leadership in June 1969, speculation was rife that there were Soviet plans in place for a preemptive nuclear strike against China.³⁶ Nixon sent diplomatic signals to the Chinese indicating his support. The Chinese consequently began to move their forces away from the border with North Vietnam toward the Soviet border.

To placate the Soviets, Nixon dangled a different carrot: limitations on the construction and deployment of ballistic missiles. For the Soviets, it would be a beneficial arrangement, as it would freeze the strategic weapons buildup while the number of Soviet missiles was superior to that of the United States.³⁷ The Soviets also wanted an anti-ballistic missile treaty that would preclude the construction of defensive missile systems. After an embarrassing diplomatic “snafu” in which the Soviet proposal was leaked to the American press, both sides reached an agreement on what would become the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty on May 12, 1971.³⁸

The Easter Offensive

Aside from an auxiliary role during the Tet Offensive in 1968, the North Vietnamese Army had not undertaken a major offensive since they engaged the U.S. Army in the Ia Drang Valley in 1965. With a cooling of relationships with their principal suppliers and allies, and the

replacement of U.S. divisions with South Vietnamese divisions, the North Vietnamese thought the time for winning the war by force was at hand. The North Vietnamese General Staff believed that Saigon’s armies were quite weakened from the removal of American forces and losses from the Cambodian incursion in 1971. In June of that year the Central Military Party Committee approved a three-pronged plan for an all-out invasion of South Vietnam. The plan called for the use of four North Vietnamese Army (NVA) infantry divisions, each to invade northern South Vietnam, the Central Highlands, and the Saigon area. A full-scale South Vietnamese Army (ARVN) base was constructed for NVA units to train, and logistics networks throughout the Ho Chi Minh trail were expanded to handle the influx of troops.³⁹

At 11:00 A.M. on March 30, 1972, the invasion began. All but one of the NVA’s infantry divisions were used in the attack, which began in the Quang-Tri province, the northernmost province of South Vietnam. By the end of April, NVA forces had decimated the lone ARVN division that was holding the province, captured its capital city, and were besieging Hue to the south. In the Central Highlands, the NVA fared about as well with ARVN units opposing them, melting away under the weight of the attack. The only thing preventing a rout was the ARVN infantry division holding the town of Kontum, despite South Vietnamese President Thieu having to sack the corps commander in that region to maintain order. American B-52 strikes on NVA attack routes were decisive in the defense of the city. In the South the goal for the NVA was to capture the city of An Loc, about seventy-five miles north of Saigon for use as the capital for a Provisional Revolutionary Government representing South Vietnamese Communist fighters. The NVA again brushed aside initial resistance and laid siege to An Loc. Here the South Vietnamese were saved only by captured documents and a communist defector who laid out the plans for the

NVA attack on the city, allowing American bombers to pinpoint airstrikes on the attack’s staging grounds, annihilating the attacking forces.⁴⁰

Linebacker I

By the beginning of May 1972, the North Vietnamese attack seemed poised to break the back of the South Vietnamese Army, which the United States had spent two years carefully building up. President Nixon believed that the only way to win the war was to attack North Vietnam from the air. Many within his own administration opposed the plan, including Defense Secretary Melvin Robert Laird, who wanted to keep American air assets confined to South Vietnam. Nixon removed many of the restrictions that had hampered previous efforts to attack the enemy. He vowed that “the bastards have never been bombed like they’re going to be bombed this time.”⁴¹ The operation was dubbed “Linebacker” due to Nixon’s well-known affinity for the sport of football. He ordered the Navy to mine the port of Haiphong and nearly every harbor and navigable river in North Vietnam. The flow of supplies coming in by sea ceased immediately. The number of planes in the area of operations nearly doubled overnight, and over the course of the next four months, American warplanes dropped over 150,000 tons of bombs on North Vietnam.⁴²

According to *The Official History of the People’s Army of Vietnam*, the central committee of the Vietnamese Communist party responded to the bombing escalation by declaring “to continue the strategic offensive in South Vietnam, to defeat the American imperialist war of destruction against North Vietnam, to firmly defend North Vietnam, and to reach, no matter what the cost, the strategic goals that we had set forward.”⁴³ So much for an airborne strategic doctrine that was supposed to convince the enemy that he could not win. The North Vietnamese scattered stockpiles of supplies and their nascent industry throughout the countryside to reduce their

vulnerability to air attack. They were even able to enlarge their army by about six divisions, four infantry and two anti-air. Although these forces had limited combat effectiveness and were withering in the face of a relentless American air assault, they did manage some meager successes. Between April and October 1972, the North Vietnamese shot down over 650 American combat aircraft, including Army and Marine Corps helicopters.⁴⁴

In South Vietnam, however, the American air campaign greatly reduced the supply of matériel that was needed to sustain North Vietnam’s conventional armies. Retired American General Phillip B. Davidson wrote of an unfortunate NVA unit caught in the open in a B-52 raid during the siege of An Loc: “[they] had simply vanished.”⁴⁵ In both central and southern South Vietnam, the NVA offensives were halted for want of supplies under massive air strikes. Although the performance of the South Vietnamese Army was highly suspect, in many cases units were essentially commandeered by the American advisors attached to them. They were able to hold off the North Vietnamese and even undertake a limited counteroffensive in August. The NVA suffered grievously over the course of the offensive; over 100,000 casualties including about half of their heavy equipment. South Vietnamese President Thieu made the most of the opportunity and put captured NVA T-54 tanks on display in Saigon. The capacity of the North Vietnamese to make conventional war was greatly diminished and it was estimated that they would not be able to undertake a major offensive for three years.⁴⁶ The use of airpower on a tactical level was decisive in preventing the fall of South Vietnam in the spring of 1972 by hammering NVA units in the field and greatly restricting the flow of supplies to them. This fact was acknowledged by South Vietnamese General Lam Quang Thi in his memoirs. He put the balance of forces in a mathematical equation where “Saigon’s Infantry + American Fire Power >

NLA (Vietcong) + NVA”.⁴⁷ Without the crucial element of American firepower, the balance of power would turn decisively against Saigon.

The Paris Peace Accords, Summer–Fall 1972

The United States had unilaterally withdrawn from the Paris Peace Accords shortly after the start of the Easter Offensive. In July 1972, with the war again in stalemate, both sides agreed to come back to the conference table to attempt to end the war on favorable terms. North Vietnam’s ploy to negotiate a settlement on the battlefield had failed, and China and the Soviet Union were now pressuring the North Vietnamese government to accept a settlement so they could pursue their own objective of a *détente* with the west. The pressure was also on for the United States to achieve a settlement. Although the Linebacker I campaign enjoyed popular domestic support, contrary to the dire predictions of Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird, Nixon’s base of support among the “silent majority” was growing increasingly tenuous.⁴⁸

Kissinger’s meetings with Le Duc Tho, beginning on July 19, 1972, had the undertones of something that needed to be done quickly while both sides still had sufficient leveraging power. At the first meetings, Tho refused to back down from North Vietnam’s traditional position, insisting on the removal of South Vietnamese President Thieu, a coalition government in South Vietnam that would include the Communists, and the removal of all American troops with NVA troops to remain in South Vietnam. By August the North Vietnamese dropped hints that they were willing to recognize Thieu as the legitimate ruler of South Vietnam, and by September, the issue of a coalition government was dropped as a point of contention. Tho was hoping to achieve a settlement before the U.S. presidential elections in November. Even though Nixon certainly seemed poised to defeat Democrat George McGovern in the general election by a wide margin, Tho reasoned that once Nixon’s second term was secured, his (Tho’s) bargaining

position would become more inflexible.⁴⁹ Kissinger seemed to realize this, too, as he thought the North Vietnamese would be more willing to offer concessions before the election.

Kissinger and Tho need not have worried about the outcome of the elections, as Nixon knew he had victory in hand. He did not care if the peace agreement came before or after he trounced McGovern. The parties around the table in Paris would nonetheless try and deliver it beforehand. On September 15, Kissinger believed that he was making enough progress to agree to a preliminary settlement by October 15. The only stumbling block was the recalcitrance of Thieu, who rightly believed that the withdrawal of American forces would leave his country virtually helpless.⁵⁰ Despite many attempts to convince him that America would support him if the North Vietnamese attacked again, Thieu refused to be part of any agreement that let American forces leave. On October 11, more details, like the replacement of military equipment were worked out, and by October 17, all major points had been agreed upon except the disposition of American POWs. At this point, the tentative agreement left substantial portions of South Vietnam in the hands of the NVA, but Kissinger reasoned that if ten years of American military force had failed to extricate them, then their withdrawal was likely a nonnegotiable point.⁵¹

Despite his best efforts, Kissinger could not compel Thieu to accept the draft of the October agreement, and the original timetable for a settlement collapsed. As expected, Nixon won the election and was prepared to conclude the business in Vietnam so he could move on to other things. To get Thieu on board, Nixon initiated a massive transfer of military equipment to the South Vietnamese armed forces dubbed operation “Enhance Plus,” giving South Vietnam, among other things, the world’s fourth largest air force. The talks in November and December

1972 became increasingly hostile as both sides blamed each other for the scuttling of the October settlement. On December 13, the talks broke down and Kissinger flew back to Washington.⁵²

Linebacker II

Nixon was furious at the North Vietnamese, who had reneged on concessions made in October, and at Kissinger, whom he believed was trying to embarrass him so as to garner more prestige for himself. Kissinger had declared that “peace is at hand” at a press conference during the October negotiations.⁵³ Nixon decided that the impasse in the negotiations needed to be stopped as soon as possible, lest congressional Democrats come back from the winter recess and decide to legislate the war out of his hands. He ordered his generals and admirals to assemble in Southeast Asia the greatest naval and air armada seen to that time, and use it to maximum effect against North Vietnam, without restrictions.

Of the entire 450 B-52 bombers in the arsenal of the Strategic Air Command (SAC), fully half were committed to this new bombing campaign, which the Air Force dubbed “Linebacker II.”⁵⁴ B-52 pilots trained to fly solo nuclear strike missions now found themselves flying in huge World War II bombing formations dropping conventional ordnance. Formations of bombers would fly in a straight line and not take evasive action when fired upon. Because of their inexperience at formation flying, the B-52s took unnecessary losses; fifteen planes being shot down on the first two days of what the SAC came to call the “eleven-day war.”⁵⁵ Once the SAC reworked the mission profiles, ordering the bombers to attack outlying areas while fighters attacked urban targets, casualties dropped substantially. By the ninth day of the campaign, the air defense system of the North Vietnamese was in shambles. Nearly all of their Surface-to-Air (SAM) missiles had been fired, many of them blindly upwards in the first days of the campaign in the hopes of hitting something.

During the campaign, entire sections of Hanoi were bombed out of existence, and toward the end, Air Force planners had literally run out of legitimate military targets to strike. The biggest air raid of the war occurred on December 26, when 126 B-52s bombed Hanoi simultaneously from three different directions. The official North Vietnamese history of the conflict describes the air crews in these planes as “pirates.”⁵⁶ Even if the outcome of the eleven-day war could be considered a strategic victory by the North Vietnamese in light of later events, it came at a terrible price. The B-52s alone had dropped more than fifteen thousand tons of bombs during the campaign, and U.S. fighters had rendered North Vietnam essentially defenseless against further air attack.⁵⁷

Conclusions

Shortly after the air raid on December 26, the North Vietnamese government agreed to President Nixon’s terms for the resumption of negotiations. Nixon himself saw this as a “stunning” victory that had been brought about by American airpower being used effectively.⁵⁸ Indeed, the only targets in North Vietnam that were left to be destroyed were the dikes along the Red River that kept the agricultural heartland of the country from being flooded. The Linebacker II campaign was singularly successful in that the North Vietnamese came back to the conference table after the worst of the bombings. However, based on the official North Vietnamese history, which regarded the air war as a war of attrition, their will to carry on the war to a successful conclusion was clearly unaffected by the bombing.⁵⁹ The bombing certainly did not stop communist guerillas from gaining control over many rural areas in South Vietnam during Linebacker II. Though the North Vietnamese account must be taken with a healthy dose of skepticism, it does offer a glimpse into the thinking of their military hierarchy.

General Davidson reaches a much different conclusion than the North Vietnamese about the Linebacker II campaign. He believes that the North Vietnamese were influenced by the bombings, but what really forced them to come back to the table was the fear that the Americans would further escalate their aerial campaign, causing massive casualties among the civilian population. Such a scenario is plausible, but not likely due to the hostile reaction to the bombings within the United States and its allies. The American media reported that the bombings targeted soldiers and civilians alike.⁶⁰ Members of Congress were aghast, questioning the sanity of the president. Against that kind of domestic pressure, it was unlikely that a further escalation of the war was going to pass once Congress resumed in January 1973.

An academic view of the reasoning behind the North Vietnamese decision to return to the talks in Paris is provided by Stanley Karnow, who wrote one of the first complete accounts of the war. In his view, after Hanoi realized that it could not dictate the terms of the peace, it still had several options available. First, no matter how intense the bombing became, they could return to the guerilla-style war they had fought in the 1960s, and simply wait for American war-weariness to necessitate a withdrawal. Or, they could compromise from their earlier positions temporarily, and drop their insistence on the ousting of President Thieu, thus getting American troops removed from South Vietnam as soon as possible. The compromise position was adopted before Linebacker II, and the bombings did not extract further compromises.⁶¹

Airpower advocates, such as Air Force General T. R. Milton, believed that Linebacker was a model for how an air war should be conducted, brief and intense, and that it was in fact proof that airpower had won the war. Some even believed that had Operation Rolling Thunder been conducted like Linebacker, the United States could have achieved its objectives solely through the use of airpower.⁶² This theory does not take into account that when Rolling Thunder

started, North Vietnam still enjoyed the firm support of its allies. Second, in 1972 North Vietnam relied primarily on conventional forces such as tanks and heavy artillery that are far more vulnerable to air interdiction than the guerrilla forces that it had relied on throughout the 1960s.

The problem with airpower as used in Linebacker, and to a lesser extent the entire Vietnam War, was that it was not used as part of a united combined-arms operation with a coherent plan to win the war. To a great degree, the Air Force might as well have been fighting its own war on another planet. In this light, Linebacker can be viewed as a last ditch plan to win the war through airpower, a Hail Mary pass to a far-off end zone. In his memoirs, Kissinger even lamented that Linebacker was Nixon’s “last roll of the dice.”⁶³ If anything, Linebacker proved the decisiveness of airpower on the tactical and operational levels of war. Air strikes were instrumental in saving South Vietnam during the Easter Offensive, but far from decisive in securing a long-term peace. Linebacker also showed the inadequacies of a strategy that measured progress in terms of the amount of ordnance dropped. Nearly seven million tons of explosives alone could not break the will of North Vietnam.

Hardly two weeks after the last Linebacker bomb fell, the Peace Accords agreed upon by the United States and North Vietnam were, aside from minor changes in language and translation, the same agreements Nixon axed in October. The only reason that the deal fell through was Nixon’s unwillingness to enter into a settlement without the support of the South Vietnamese. To get Thieu to accept the treaty, Nixon threatened to cut off all aid to South Vietnam.⁶⁴ The net effect of the Linebacker campaigns, in the short term, was that the North Vietnamese were compelled to negotiate seriously with the United States for fear of a further escalation of bombing. However, in the long term, airpower had failed to deliver the intended

message to North Vietnam. Their national will was not broken, and two years after the peace was signed, North Vietnam achieved the victory that they had sought for so long.

Notes

¹ *Forrest Gump*, DVD, directed by Robert Zemeckis (1994; Los Angeles, CA: Paramount Pictures, 2001).

² George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950–1975*, 4th ed., (Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press, 2002), 182.

³ *Ibid.*, 317–318.

⁴ Alfred F. Hurley, *Billy Mitchell: Crusader for Air Power*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1975), 100–108.

⁵ Adrian R. Lewis, *The American Culture of War: The History of U.S. Military Force from World War II to Operation Iraqi Freedom*, (New York: Routledge, 2007), 45–49.

⁶ Larry H. Addington, *The Patterns of War Since the Eighteenth Century*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 223–227.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 259.

⁸ Rebecca Grant, “The Billy Mitchell Syndrome,” *Air Force Magazine* 89 (December 2006): 52–56.

⁹ Lewis, *The American Culture of War*, 201–205.

¹⁰ Michael W. Canton, “The Development of the American Theory of Limited War,” *Armed Forces and Society* 19 (Fall 1992): 71–104.

¹¹ Lewis, *The American Culture of War*, 207–210.

¹² Robert S. McNamara with Brian VanDerMark, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: First Vintage Books, 1996), 19–23.

¹³ H. R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, The Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies that Led to Vietnam*, (New York: HarperPerennial Books, 1997), 22.

¹⁴ McNamara, *In Retrospect*, 23.

¹⁵ McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty*, 30–31.

¹⁶ Spencer C. Tucker, *Vietnam* (Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press, 1999), 118–119.

- ¹⁷ Lewis, *The American Culture of War*, 232.
- ¹⁸ McNamara, *In Retrospect*, 108.
- ¹⁹ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* (1832) trans. Anatol Raport (London: Penguin, 1982), 245–260.
- ²⁰ McNamara, *In Retrospect*, 108.
- ²¹ Lewis, *The American Culture of War*, 226.
- ²² *Ibid.*, 242–243.
- ²³ Robert Dorr, *Air War Hanoi* (London: Blandford Press, 1988), 59.
- ²⁴ Earl H. Tilford Jr., “Setup: Why and How the U.S. Air Force Lost in Vietnam,” *Armed Forces and Society* 17 (Fall 1991): 327–322.
- ²⁵ McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty*, 62.
- ²⁶ Tucker, *Vietnam*, 120–121.
- ²⁷ Herring, *America’s Longest War*, 173–179.
- ²⁸ Dorr, *Air War Hanoi*, 28.
- ²⁹ Darrell D. Whitcomb, “Tonnage and Technology: Air Power on the Ho Chi Minh Trail,” *Air Power* 44 (Spring 1997): 6–17.
- ³⁰ James H. Wilbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam: How America Left and South Vietnam Lost its War* (Lawrence: The University of Kansas Press, 2004), 8.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, 9–10.
- ³² Henry Kissinger, *American Foreign Policy* (New York: Norton, 1974), 128–132.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, 135.
- ³⁴ Franz Schurmann, *The Foreign Politics of Richard Nixon* (Berkley: Institute of International Studies, 1987), 95–97.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, 90.
- ³⁶ Richard C. Thornton, *The Nixon Kissinger Years*, 2nd ed., (St. Paul: Paragon, 2001), 18–21.

³⁷ Ibid., 72–76.

³⁸ Ibid., 75.

³⁹ Colonel Phan Dinh, Colonel Hoang Co Quang, Colonel Nguyen Duc Thong, Colonel Ho Huu Vinh, Colonel Nguyen Quoc Dung, and Lt. General Hoang Phung, *Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People’s Army of Vietnam, 1954–1975* (1988), trans. Merle L. Pribbenow (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2002), 289–290.

⁴⁰ Lt. General Phillip B. Davidson (Ret.), *Vietnam at War: The History 1946–1975* (Novato: Presidio, 1988), 698–699.

⁴¹ Herring, *America’s Longest War*, 307.

⁴² Wilbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, 144–145.

⁴³ Pribbenow, trans., *Victory in Vietnam*, 299.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 298–302.

⁴⁵ Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 699.

⁴⁶ Tucker, *Vietnam*, 169–172.

⁴⁷ Lam Quang Tri, *The Twenty-Five Year Century: A South Vietnamese General Remembers the Indochina War to the Fall of Saigon*, (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 2001), 290.

⁴⁸ Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 714–715.

⁴⁹ Wilbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, 163–165.

⁵⁰ Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 714.

⁵¹ Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1979), 1347–1350.

⁵² Wilbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, 178–180.

⁵³ Kissinger, *White House Years*, 1399.

⁵⁴ Dorr, *Air War Hanoi*, 180.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Pribbenow, trans., *Victory in Vietnam*, 324–327.

⁵⁷ Wilbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, 181.

⁵⁸ Richard M. Nixon, RN, *The Memoirs of Richard Nixon* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1978), 740–742.

⁵⁹ Pribbenow, trans., *Victory in Vietnam*, 326–327.

⁶⁰ Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 728–729.

⁶¹ Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History*, (New York: Penguin, 1984), 647–654.

⁶² General T. R. Milton (Ret.), “USAF and the Vietnam Experience,” *Air Force Magazine* 58 (June 1975): 55–56.

⁶³ Kissinger, *White House Years*, 1499–1450.

⁶⁴ Nixon, *Memoirs*, 724–735.

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