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THE LINEBACKER CAMPAIGNS: AN ANALYSIS

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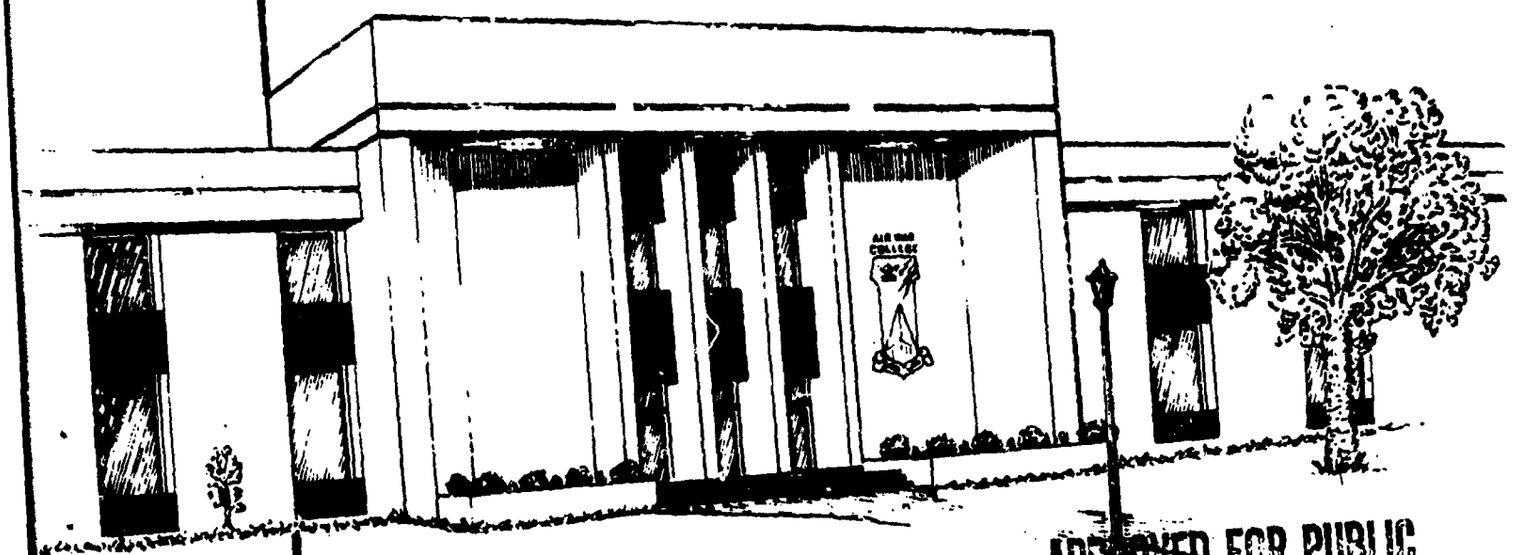
By COLONEL WARREN L. HARRIS



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THE LINEBACKER CAMPAIGNS: AN ANALYSIS

by

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Colonel, USAF

A RESEARCH REPORT SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY

IN

FULFILLMENT OF THE RESEARCH

REQUIREMENT

Thesis Advisor: Colonel William Moore

MAXWELL AIR FORCE BASE, ALABAMA

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AIR WAR COLLEGE RESEARCH REPORT ABSTRACT

TITLE: The Linebacker Campaigns: An Analysis

AUTHOR: Warren L. Harris, Colonel, USAF

This report provides a general description of some of the key events which preceeded the execution of the Linebacker bombing campaigns in the Vietnam War. The report analyzes the policy options available to President Nixon in his attempt to conclude the war. Further, the report assesses the two Linebacker operations from a political and military view, including their planning, execution, and impact on the North Vietnamese government.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Colonel Warren L. Harris (MPA, Webster University) is an information systems officer, having served in a wide variety of field and headquarters assignments. Although he did not serve in Vietnam, he became very interested in the subject through conversations with many pilots who flew during the conflict. Colonel Harris' last assignment was as Commander of the 1881st Information Systems Squadron, Hill AFB, Utah. He is a graduate of the Armed Forces Staff College, class of 1979.

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THE LINEBACKER CAMPAIGNS: AN ANALYSIS

Introduction

By 1972 the war in Vietnam had dragged on for over eight years. The war had been characterized by a gradual, but massive buildup of U.S. forces in which the U.S. had assumed responsibility for most military operations against the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese forces. Although the U.S. was actually winning the war from a military standpoint, the homefront had become increasingly critical of our involvement in what was an extremely unpopular war. Both President Johnson and President Nixon had come under tremendous pressure to end the war. To that end, the Nixon administration initiated their "Vietnamization" policy in 1970. The policy called for the gradual withdrawal of U.S. combat troops and their replacement by South Vietnamese forces. The idea was to allay widespread public dissatisfaction and protest in the U.S. and to spur possible favorable reaction by North Vietnam.[1]

In the meantime, the Nixon administration was working hard to initiate peace talks. With the North Vietnamese insisting on a unilateral withdrawal from Vietnam and many other political concessions, however, early attempts were completely unsuccessful. Eventually, secret negotiations between Kissinger and Le Duc Tho began in Paris in 1970. For the next two years the negotiations were an intermittent process with little progress made. When North Vietnam initiated a strong, conventional attack against South Vietnam in the spring of 1972, President Nixon intensified air operations with massive air strikes against North Vietnamese ground forces and supply lines under Operation Linebacker. This operation virtually destroyed the North Vietnamese ground forces and ultimately brought the North Vietnamese

back to the negotiating table. But once again, the negotiations stalled when Le Duc Tho reintroduced earlier North Vietnamese demands. Finally, on 18 Dec 1972, Nixon executed Linebacker II, a maximum bombing effort against Hanoi intended to force the North Vietnamese back to the negotiating table and a conclusion of the war.[2]

The purpose of this brief case study is to analyze the U.S. policy operations leading to both Linebacker bombing campaigns and to assess their impact on the war.

Background

By 1968, the U.S. commitment to Vietnam had become considerable, although an exact formula for settlement or victory remained elusive. President Johnson had hoped that the Rolling Thunder air interdiction operation would stymie the enemy's capability to fight in the south and would serve as a means to coerce a settlement to the war.[3] Under the shadow of world disapproval and the possibility of Communist Chinese intervention, however, Rolling Thunder was conducted under severe constraints. To avoid the risk of major escalation, the U.S. followed a policy of gradual escalation, which, although politically prudent, imposed severe restrictions upon operational commanders. The operations were controlled from the highest levels. Targets could be validated only by the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) or higher authority. Even when validated, targets could not be struck until authorized, and such authorization often specified day, time, force structure, and weaponry. At the operational level, these restrictions hindered the achievement of the stated aims. A 30 nautical mile (NM)-radius ring around Hanoi and a 10 NM-radius ring drawn around Haiphong delineated no-strike zones and so gave these areas of war resources

sanctuary against strikes. A prohibition against mining the harbors left the major ports--Haiphong, Hon Gay, and Campha-- open to foreign shipping, and through these ports came approximately 67 percent of North Vietnam's external support.[4] Admiral Sharp, then Commander-in-Chief, Pacific Command (CINCPAC), stated to the JCS that "unless restrictions against striking at the sources were lifted and mining of ports allowed, foreign shipping would continue to resupply the system, and the U.S. air effort could harrass, but not effectively deter infiltration."[5] In effect, these constraints provided the North Vietnamese an open-ended funnel at the top, into which they could pour the supplies necessary in their attempt to obtain what they needed at the bottom--South Vietnam--regardless of U.S. interdiction efforts against the lines of communications (LOCs) in between.[6]

President Johnson came to believe that perhaps a halt in bombing might serve as the "carrot" which would coerce an accord with the enemy. Thus, he ordered the total halt of bombing over South Vietnam on 1 November 1968, signalling the end of Rolling Thunder. The operation had accomplished only one of three basic military tasks. Because of the constraints, it could not reduce external military assistance, nor could it destroy in-depth war materials. Rolling Thunder did harass, disrupt, and impede movement of men and materials through southern North Vietnam and into Laos and South Vietnam. It made the North Vietnamese effort far more costly, time-consuming, and difficult, but could only make a dent in the logistics flow.[7]

Two of the prime political aims for Rolling Thunder failed to materialize, i.e., reducing the will of the people to fight, and coercing the Hanoi government to agree to negotiations on terms acceptable to the United States. A Rand Corporation study stated that:

> The bombing had imposed severe strains which were manifested most tangibly by the massive diversion of manpower to military and other war-related unproductive activities. The country's ability to feed itself in a long war had been seriously impaired and there was evidence of urban food shortage and increasing food imports. But there was no evidence of critical or progressive deterioration or disruption of economic activity.[8]

Although the North Vietnamese indicated a willingness to negotiate after the bombing halt, they nonetheless failed to negotiate in good faith. In fact, by the time the Nixon Administration took office, Johnson's bombing halt was three months old. Although the intensity of the war in the North had been de-escalated on the strength of unacknowledged "understandings" with the North Vietnamese and on the promise of future talks, "not a single substantive negotiating session had occurred." Nevertheless, President Nixon and National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger held great hopes for reaching a negotiated settlement.[9]

Unfortunately, the 1968 bombing halts permitted an intensification of enemy activities along its LOC's to the South. Relieved of the constant necessity of rebuilding bridges, repairing road and rail cuts, and the constant hazard of armed reconnaissance overhead, the North Vietnamese began funneling men and supplies to the South. Surface-to-air missile (SAM) sites were moved down into the southernmost operational area of North Vietnam, into the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), and even into Laos. The continuing U.S. interdiction efforts in Laos did not stop the infiltration, for under cover of night, weather, and jungle canopy, the North Vietnamese constructed new roads, trails, bypasses, and truck parks. With the three and one-half year respite provided them after the cancellation of Rolling Thunder, the enemy had little difficulty in getting enough supplies through the LOCs to take care of not only their immediate combat needs, but also

to provide a massive stockpile of equipment in caches in the South.[10]

Prelude to Linebacker I

The reason for the continued stockpiling in southern North Vietnam, the DMZ, Laos, and Cambodia (even in the face of a de-escalating war and the withdrawal of American troops) became abundantly clear on 30 March 1972. On that day, North Vietnam turned the low-key, "winding-down" conflict into a brand new war with a massive, three-pronged attack supported by armor, artillery, and surface-to-air missiles. Before the Easter weekend was over, twelve of Hanoi's thirteen regular combat divisions were carrying out military operations in South Vietnam. The 120,000-soldier force was equipped with more than 200 tanks as well as mobile radar-controlled anti-aircraft weapons and portable surface-to-air missiles. The North Vietnamese invasion was timed to exploit the adverse weather during the transition from the northeast to southwest monsoon and initiated to enable Hanoi to strengthen its political hand in the Paris peace talks.[11] If the United States and South Vietnam were not totally surprised by the attack, they had certainly not expected its timing and intensity.[12] In fact, for the first time in the long history of the war, North Vietnam failed to claim that this offensive was simply a "concerted uprising of South Vietnamese patriots trying to regain their own country from the American imperialists," since up to 12 North Vietnamese divisions were committed to South Vietnam.[13]

What is noteable is that North Vietnam had finally begun a conventional war for which the U.S. and South Vietnam forces were better equipped. Due to the nature of the offensive, which Nixon termed "a full-scale invasion,"[14] the immediate military objective was to deny the North any

gains on the battlefield and to prevent the South Vietnamese defeat. For political reasons, Nixon did not want to suffer a defeat and was willing to take the military action necessary, short of reintroducing American ground troops, to validate his Vietnamization strategy. In fact, the attack tended to strengthen Nixon's resolve to preserve South Vietnam. In his book, Nixon says:

> I viewed the North Vietnamese invasion as a sign of desperation. They clearly felt that Vietnamization was working. If it were not, they would have waited and let it fail. I felt that if we could mount a devastating attack on their home territory, while pinning down their army in the South, we would be in a very good position for the next round of negotiations.[15]

Nixon believed that halting the invasion, along with a massive counterblow against the enemy homeland, would compel Hanoi to seek an accord. Kissinger concurred with the President's assessment, telling Nixon on 3 April that the United States "would get no awards for losing with moderation." Kissinger felt that the timing of the attack revealed much about North Vietnamese intentions. With its attack timed at seven months prior to the Presidential election, Hanoi aimed at a battlefield victory, while political pressures prevented Nixon from interfering decisively. However, the unprovoked nature of the Communist assault provided Nixon with the chance to retaliate with equal force.[16]

To curtail the enemy offensive Nixon relied on air power. About 70,000 Americans still remained in South Vietnam and Nixon still wanted the withdrawal of ground forces to proceed on schedule regardless of the invasion. Accordingly, the United States rushed additional fighters and bombers to Southeast Asia. The total of F-4s in theater were increased from 185 on 30 March to 374 by 13 May. Similarly, between 4 April and 23 May, 124 B-52s arrived at Andersen, bringing the combined total of

B-52s in Guam and Thailand to 210--more than half the B-52s comprising Strategic Air Command. Noting the influx of heavy bombers swamping Andersen's taxiways, one member of the 8th Air Force planning staff at Guam observed, "We kept waiting for the northern end of the island to sink."[17]

Although the North Vietnamese army attack was nearly successful, the enemy made a key mistake--they underestimated the vulnerability of massed forces to air power, where tactical air is most efficient. Apparently, they did not believe that air power, previously deployed out of the combat arena, could respond and re-deploy back into the combat arena so rapidly. Enemy LOCs were stretched to the point where one must believe that the enemy predicated a major portion of his campaign on the assumption that his logistics flow would remain unbroken. Therefore, one has to assume that the North Vietnamese did not believe the U.S. would resume bombing over the North, much less mine the harbors.[18]

The major point in the critical early days of the battle, when the North Vietnamese forces had great momentum, was perhaps best expressed by CINCPACAF, in an interview given to Air Force Magazine:

> Initially, they overwhelmed the allied defenses. The great unsung story of this invasion is the speed with which tac air (tactical air) was able to respond. I don't think anybody can deny that the reason why the invasion was checked and the counter-offensive became possible is air power, in the form of the B-52s, tac air, the gunships, and the guided bombs.[19]

Nixon wanted air power to halt the enemy assault, but he also wanted to carry the war to the North Vietnamese heartland. Thus, on 5 April 1972 American air forces initiated Operation Freedom Train against North Vietnamese supply concentrations south of the 18th parallel. Aircraft further attacked the large number of SAM sites defending stockpiles just north of the DMZ. "Although the invasion was checked and the United States effort

was substantial," a MACV study remarked, "the flow of personnel, supplies, and material did not diminish."[20] Thus, Nixon concluded that to achieve the necessary military impact, bombing "would have to be brought to the enemy's heartland around the Hanoi-Haiphong area."[21]

Nixon believed that attacks by B-52s with their 30 ton bomb loads would prove more effective against North Vietnamese supply depots than raids by fighter-bombers. In addition, using the giant bombers was, in Kissinger's words, "a warning that things might get out of hand if the offensive did not stop."[22]

However, the North Vietnamese again refused to negotiate in good faith at a 2 May Paris meeting, with Le Duc Tho failing to respond to Nixon's peace proposals. "What the 2 May meeting revealed," Kissinger later commented, "was Hanoi's conviction that it was so close to victory that it no longer needed even the pretense of a negotiation."[23]

After Kissinger returned from Paris, he met with the President to decide upon a proper response to Hanoi's unwillingness to negotiate. Both men agreed that only a massive shock could deter the North Vietnamese from their goal of total victory. Ultimately, it was agreed that all North Vietnamese harbors would be mined, along with the total interdiction of the enemy's overland supply routes. Thus, on 4 May 1972, the Chairman of the JCS, Admiral Thomas Moorer, was directed to draft the orders that resulted in Operation Linebacker I.[24]

Linebacker I

Nixon announced the escalation in a television address on 8 May, the earliest date Moorer had given for the initiation of mining. The President stated:

> There are only two issues left for us in this war. First, in the face of a massive invasion do we stand by, jeopardize the lives of 60,000 Americans, and leave the South Vietnamese to a long night of terror? This will not happen. We shall do whatever is required to safeguard American lives and American honor. Second, in the face of complete intransigence at the conference table do we join with our enemy to install a Communist government in South Vietnam? This, too, will not happen. We will not cross the line from generosity to treachery.[25]

The Associated Press wires quoted the President as saying:

> President Nixon announced Monday night he has ordered entrances to North Vietnamese ports mined to keep weapons and supplies from what he called "the international outlaws." Nixon said U.S. forces have been directed to take appropriate measures to interdict supplies by sea. He said rail and other lines of supply will be cut off, while air and naval strikes continue.[26]

One of Nixon's main concerns was the reaction of the USSR to the announcement. As a result of diplomatic communications with the USSR, however, Nixon became relatively confident that Operation Linebacker would not provoke the Soviets. In fact, the public reaction of the Communist Bloc to the announcement was relatively low key. The Soviet news agency TASS naturally accused the United States of "naked aggression," as did most other Communist countries; however, there was no immediate response from the Kremlin or Peking. The North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong, in a statement issued to the press, assailed the move as would be expected, while most Southeast Asian nations praised it.[27] Accordingly, Nixon informed Kissinger that, "I intend to stop at nothing to bring the enemy to his knees." He was determined to demonstrate that the U.S. was "no longer willing to engage in inconclusive negotiations."[28] He went on to say:

> I cannot emphasize too strongly that I have determined that we should go for broke. What we have got to get across to the enemy is the impression that we are doing exactly that. Our words will help some. But our actions in the next few days will speak infin-

itely louder than our words...
What all of us must have in mind is that we must punish the enemy in ways that he will really hurt at this time...
The enemy has now gone over the brink and so have we. We have the power to destroy his war-making capacity. The only question is whether we have the will to use that power. What distinguishes me from Johnson is that I have the will in spades...

The execution order for Operation Linebacker revealed an emphasis on attacking North Vietnam's war-making capability rather than its national will. Linebacker I was more ambitious in purpose than Rolling Thunder. Its objectives were to curtail the military resupply of North Vietnam from external sources; to destroy targets throughout North Vietnam which were providing direct support to that nation's war effort in South Vietnam; and, to restrict the flow of forces and supplies to the battlefield, thereby inhibiting Hanoi's new-found dependency on advanced means of warfare. The overall objective was to reduce the North's desire to prolong the war by thwarting its ability to carry out military operations and force them to return to meaningful negotiations for a diplomatic settlement of the conflict. The Nixon administration shared President Johnson's view that U.S. national objectives in the Vietnam War were limited. Like Rolling Thunder, Linebacker I was not intended to destroy the Hanoi regime, to devastate North Vietnam, or to compel them to adopt another form of government.[30]

Clearly, the mining of North Vietnamese harbors had a very significant impact on cutting off the resupply effort and from external sources. General John W. Vogt, Jr., Deputy Commander, U.S. Military Assistance command, Vietnam (DEPCOMUSMACV) for Air and also 7th Air Force Commander, was asked "What degree of success did the mining of the harbors have?" His answer:

I would say almost a hundred percent. They were reduced to off-loading, as you know, from Chinese vessels. These were relatively small coastal steamers which didn't have too much tonnage aboard

to begin with. The lighter activity was a long and laborious thing. They could do it only at night; they had to do it when there was no Navy air around harassing them; they had to run through mine fields with their lighters because we had a lot of MK-36s (magnetic influence and anti-disturbance fuse mines) dropped in there. It took in excess of a month to unload a five or six thousand ton vessel. So, only a dribble was coming in through that area.[31]

Once the mining was complete, a variety of tactical aircraft and B-52s began pounding targets in North Vietnam. For the most part, the 200 daily sorties included attacks on storage areas and lines of communications. Perhaps even more important, far less restrictions were placed on military commanders in hitting targets. With fewer constraints, greater flexibility was permitted in planning an effective use of forces. General Vogt's comments were especially telling:

> We were not constrained. In some of the sensitive areas, for example, I was allowed to take out <u>all</u> power (major electric plants) in a very short time, with the exception of one power plant and that was the thermal power plant in Hanoi itself. But all the others we took out. The Navy came in. We sat down here with Admiral Cooper and planned the campaign. He took out those in his area and I took out those in mine, and we set a date by which we wanted to accomplish this. Then we went to work and destroyed them. The cumulative impact was crushing. Lights started failing, they started cutting off the fans and airconditioners up there, and the Embassies were getting power one day a week. Many parts of the city (Hanoi) had none at all. This in turn impacted on the repair shops and the engine rebuild facilities all around the city. The effect of it was dramatic...[32]

The continued interdiction of the rail lines and the mining of the harbors, forced the enemy to rely essentially on his internal supplies and, as stated by General Vogt, "...he was beginning to dry up."[33]

Every military commander interviewed was emphatic about the effectiveness of Linebacker in achieving its three stated objectives. Admiral John Seth McCain, Jr., then CINCPAC, was interviewed by <u>Air Force Magazine's</u> Senior Editor Edgar Ulsamer. He asked the question, "How effective is

Operation Linebacker?" Admiral McCain replied:

> Operation Linebacker has been very effective in striking military targets in North Vietnam and interdicting supply routes within the northern area of that country. Sophisticated weapons have knocked out numerous key rail and highway bridges, destroyed essential POL storage areas and war-making industries, and have seriously disrupted the transportation network throughout North Vietnam. This network is essential for the enemy to move supplies and equipment to the battlefields in the South. This, in conjunction with the closure of North Vietnam's harbors and the enemy consumption of supplies in South Vietnam, makes the operation even more effective. The true impact, however, may be just now being felt by the North Vietnamese Army. As their stockpiles and caches and the communication lines are disrupted, they are finding it much more difficult to effect an adequate resupply from the Hanoi-Haiphong areas to their deployed divisions in South Vietnam. As the time goes by, the overall effectiveness of Linebacker will be even more important.[34]

By early June, the North Vietnamese offensive in the South was seriously sputtering, prompting Hanoi to accept U.S. proposals for private peace talks. But unlike pricr meetings, Nixon did not curtail the bombing. The President asserted at a press conference on 29 June: "It has always been my theory that in dealing with these very pragmatic men...who lead Communist nations, that they respect strength--not belligerence but strength --and at least that is the way I am always going to approach it, and I think it is going to be successful in the end."[35]

While Nixon was responding to the North Vietnamese on the battlefield, attempts to achieve a negotiated settlement went on. The North Vietnamese had not really changed their position since the talks had begun. Their terms for settlement demanded, in Kissingers words,

> Unconditional surrender and political desertion....
> Our unilateral exit was not enough; we had to engineer a political turnover before we left, or else the war could not end, we would have no assurance of a safe withdrawal of our remaining forces, and we would not regain our prisoners. Our dilemma was that Hanoi maintained this position until October 1972.[36]

Neither Nixon nor Kissinger was ever willing to accede to Hanoi's demands of unilateral American withdrawal, particularly if it meant sacrificing the South Vietnamese government.

Throughout the summer, North Vietnam's willingness to enter productive discussions seemed to ebb and flow with the tide of battle. As the South made gains on the battlefield, Hanoi's position at the bargaining table began to accomodate the American proposals. On 15 September, the day the South Vietnamese recaptured Quang Tri, the United States position was the strongest it had been at any time. By October, Hanoi had conceded nearly every point the United States had been working for since 1968. In fact, Kissinger remembers that Hanoi's concessions were even "better than we had asked for."[37]

Accordingly, Kissinger notified Le Duc Tho that the bombing would decrease during the final phase of negotiations. On 16 October Nixon reduced the number of daily attack sorties to 150 and restricted the scope of B-52 operations. After meeting with the North Vietnamese, Kissinger flew to Saigon to obtain President Thieu's concurrence on the settlement. Thieu's opposition to certain parts of the agreement, especially the provision allowing North Vietnamese troops to remain in South Vietnam, caused Nixon to request one additional meeting between Tho and Kissinger. "As a token of good will," Nixon suspended attacks above the 20th parallel. Effectively, Linebacker I was terminated.

Results

The Linebacker I campaign differed considerably from Johnson's Rolling Thunder, particularly in terms of political and operational restrictions. Nixon's decision to mine North Vietnamese ports removed the objections of

most commanders to reinitiating an air offensive, although restraints remained on attacking targets in the 30-mile Chinese buffer zone and ten miles from the centers of Hanoi and Haiphong. Moscow's low-keyed response to the operation limited the extent of these restrictions. In mid-June raids had occurred 15 miles from the Chinese border, and prohibitions on attacks in the Hanoi-Haiphong area proved temporary. An Air Force report noted that "the prevailing authority to strike almost any valid military target during Linebacker was in sharp contrast to the extensive and vacillating restrictions in existence during Rolling Thunder Operations. In Rolling Thunder, the White House selected targets weekly, without consideration for the weather over North Vietnam. Only validated targets could be attacked during the prescribed time frame, and most targets remained validated only during the time frame prescribed. If weather prevented the attack of a validated target, the target generally was not revalidated immediately; often it would disappear from the target list for months. Nixon and the JCS approved a master target list from which air commanders designed and executed attack plans based upon pertinent intelligence, operational, and weather factors.[39]

Moreover, Linebacker I forces were not so constrained, permitting greater flexibility in planning and more effective use of forces. Targets were attacked by system. For example, Linebacker I forces were able to attack all power sources in a very short time (with the exception of the Hanoi thermal power plant, which remained off limits until Linebacker II).[40]

Similarly, if Linebacker I forces were unable to attack portions of a target system in one part of North Vietnam because of adverse weather, they would concentrate on those portions of the target system where weather

was not a factor. This operational flexibility enabled Linebacker I planners to "play" the enemy defenses. During Rolling Thunder, repetitious strikes on the targets validated for the week enabled North Vietnamese defenses to concentrate its forces to defend the target, once identified. By contrast, Linebacker I forces could attack targets in one area until the enemy adjusted its defenses, then shift its efforts to a less-defended set of targets.[41]

Once targeting guidance was relaxed, the accurate application of the laws of war were reflected for the first time. In contrast to Rolling Thunder restrictions, which maintained the impractical political restriction of avoiding any injury to the civilian population, the JCS instructed operational commanders to exercise reasonable precautions to avoid incidental damage. This included damage to prisoner-of-war camps, shrines, hospitals, and third-country shipping, as well as incidental or collateral civilian casualties and damage to civilian property consistent with strike force security. A clear distinction was made between attacks on the civilian population per se, which is prohibited by the law of war, and incidental injury to civilians working in lawful target areas or those injured or killed while taking part in the hostilities, such as manning anti-aircraft defenses. Fixed targets in proximity to water control facilities, such as irrigation dams or dikes, required special justification for validation by the nominating authority. Strike forces were permitted to respond in self-defense to anti-aircraft artillery fire from third-country shipping.[42]

Although Linebacker I did not achieve "the honorable peace" desired by Nixon, the campaign was considered extremely successful by many. In 1972 Hanoi relied on North Vietnamese army regulars, backed by tanks and

heavy artillery, to achieve victory. These conventional forces demanded resupply, however, mining negated Hanoi's primary source of material. With no possibility of resupply by sea, the Communists turned to stockpiled goods and overland transportation. Both sources were vulnerable to air power, especially because of technological improvements in ordnance. Laser and electro-optically guided bombs wrecked the northeast and northwest rail lines, forcing the North Vietnamese to rely on an insufficient number of trucks. Because of the Linebacker operation and the mining effort, Hanoi was unable to resupply its divisions in South Vietnam. Moreover, the bombing and mining restricted all imports destined for North Vietnam, and Hanoi found its populace in danger of starving.[43]

Additionally, massive U.S. air attacks in the South were instrumental in blunting the three-fold North Vietnamese attack in South Vietnam. The 15 September recapture of Quang Tri signalled the North that its army was in danger of annihilation. In fact, while Hanoi continued to seek an accord in October, the military situation dictated that it obtain a cessation of hostilities as soon as possible. According to Robert Thompson: "For the first time in the Indochina wars the communist side was being compelled to negotiate in order to forestall the possibility of defeat."[44]

Most U.S. military chiefs believed Linebacker I was the primary factor in forcing Hanoi to make concessions at the negotiating table. General William C. Westmoreland attributed the campaign's success to its intensity. He commented: "When President Nixon decided to use our available military power in a manner that truly hurt North Vietnam, negotiations began to move in a substantive way."[45] Perhaps the military's most representative assertion concerning Linebacker's effectiveness came from General Vogt who

said "...after Linebacker I, the enemy was suing for peace. They were hurt real bad. Most of the major targets had been obliterated in the North..., and they were ready to conclude an agreement." Vogt also believed that the United States halted Linebacker prematurely:

> Kissinger and Le Duc Tho got together and then indications were that the agreement was imminent. Kissinger then informed me that he was going to order the bombing stopped in the Hanoi area as a gesture of good will to speed up the signing of the agreement. This was....in October 1972. I protested and said, "You know our history with Communists is of having to keep the heat on them in order to get them to do anything. If you take the heat off them, they may never sign."[46]

Although air operations did not cease entirely, the bombing halt above the 20 parallel provided the breathing spell badly needed by the North Vietnamese. They made the strategic decision to prolong the war in order to gain a military advantage which would lead to greater political concessions by both the U.S. and South Vietnam in the Paris negotiations. They redoubled their air defenses in and around Hanoi-Haiphong, while working to restore their war-waging capabilities. By mid-December, for example, Hanoi had repaired many rail lines to China and adjusted its supply routing to compensate for the naval mine blockade.[47]

Although Linebacker I did not produce an agreement, it did increase South Vietnam's chances for survival. The operation helped weaken North Vietnam's military capability, insuring that they would not launch another offensive soon. Equally important, Linebacker I served several military and political purposes. They disrupted the flow of war supplies supporting the North Vietnamese invasion of South Vietnam; warned Hanoi that if it persisted in its heavy fighting in South Vietnam it would face mounting raids in the north; and, demonstrated continuing U.S. support for the gov-

ernment of South Vietnam which, as in Rolling Thunder, would bolster its will to defend itself. Furthermore, these attacks were intended to persuade Moscow to use its influence to encourage a political rather than a purely military resolution of the conflict. Still, the bombing did not end the war. Nixon would gear the next round of Linebacker toward compelling the enemy to succomb to that goal.[48]

Linebacker II

During the negotiations, it quickly became evident that South Vietnamese President Thieu was unwilling to accept the terms of the proposed settlement between the U.S. and North Vietnam. Kissinger realized that Thieu objected to the very idea of a compromise. Saigon "simply did not feel ready to confront Hanoi without our direct involvement," Kissinger points out.

> Their nightmare was not this or that clause but the fear of being left alone. For Saigon's leaders, a cease-fire meant the departure of our remaining forces; they could not believe that Hanoi would abandon its implacable quest for the domination of Indochina. In a very real sense they were being left to their own future; deep down, they were panicky at the thought and too proud to admit it. And they were not wrong.[49]

Thieu wanted total victory for South Vietnam and now that Hanoi and Washington were so close to agreement, Saigon's position could not be reconciled.

With a possible split between Washington and Saigon, the approaching presidential election, and the anti-war mood of the American Congress, Hanoi began to procrastinate. Kissinger warned President Nixon that the North Vietnamese were "playing for a clear cut victory through our split with Saigon or a negotiated settlement." Thus, U.S. courses of action became more limited.[50]

President Nixon did not ignore Thieu's concerns believing that a settlement must include at least some of Thieu's demands. "If we could not bring about a single change requested by Saigon," Kissinger observed, "it would be tantamount to wrecking the South Vietnamese government."[51]

Nixon's urging for a November settlement matched the urgency displayed by Le Duc Tho in October. The President once more relied on the combined use of diplomatic and military pressure, calling for B-52 raids in the North to force Hanoi's return to the negotiating table. Two days later the North Vietnamese agreed to meet in mid-November. Nixon believed Linebacker I was instrumental in forcing concessions, believing that more bombing would provide similar results should Hanoi again prove intransigent. In the meantime, the President notified Kissinger to suspend talks for a week if no progress occurred. If that happened, Nixon "would be prepared to authorize a massive bombing strike on North Vietnam."[52]

Negotiations resumed on 20 November with Kissinger noting his adversary was not the Le Duc Tho of late summer, relentlessly driving toward a settlement. With the obvious concerns expressed by Thieu, Tho continued to "drag his feet" and virtually no progress was made. Kissinger departed for Paris in early December to meet with the North Vietnamese delegation. Le Duc Tho played a "cat and mouse" game by granting some concessions and then raising objections to previously accepted agreements. "This was precisely where Le Duc Tho wanted us," Kissinger commented, "tantalizingly close enough to an agreement to keep us going and prevent us from using military force, but far enough away to maintain the pressure that might yet at the last moment achieve Hanoi's objectives of disintegrating the political structure in Saigon."[53]

In mid-December the negotiations in Paris came to a quick halt when the U.S. found that the North Vietnamese had included 17 changes to the completed portion of the agreement and then refused to delete them. Kissinger concluded that further talks were pointless and advised President Nixon that military pressure appeared the only option.[54] At a meeting in the Oval Office on 14 December, Kissinger saw two policy options:

> Taking a massive, shocking step to impose our will of events and end the war quickly, or....
>
> Letting matters drift into another round of inconclusive negotiations, prolonged warfare, bitter national divisions, and mounting casualties.[55]

When Nixon decided to use air power, the question of how much to employ was the main issue. The President met with Kissinger and Haig to resolve the question. Kissinger suggested a return to October's Linebacker operations, while Haig argued for large-scale B-52 strikes north of the 20th parallel. Nixon agreed with Haig, commenting that "anything less will only make the enemy contemptuous." Where Linebacker I was primarily aimed at striking lines of communications, this operation would be aimed at destroying North Vietnam's will. The President sought maximum psychological impact on the enemy to demonstrate that the United States would not stand for an indefinite delay in the negotiations.[56]

Having decided on escalation, Nixon turned to his military chief to insure that they applied a large-scale effort to the air campaign dubbed "Linebacker II." The President told Chairman of the JCS, Admiral Thomas Moorer: "This is your chance to use military power effectively to win this war and if you don't I'll consider you personally responsible."[57]

Linebacker II was initiated on 18 December and lasted for 11 days.

Although a mix of aircraft were used during Linebacker II, the B-52 was the primary workhorse. The decision to use large numbers of the less maneuverable B-52's in the face of a formidable air defensive environment was based on their all-weather bombing capability and large payload capacity. The monsoon weather also contributed to the emphasis on B-52s because of their all-weather, day or night capability and less on fighter-bombers which required day, visual conditions.[58] Moreover, the evidence in Nixon's memoirs tends to suggest that the B-52s were used as much for their heavy firepower as for their potential shock effect and to signal the intensity with which the President intended to pursue a conclusion to the war.[59]

Linebacker II targeted "the most lucrative and valuable targets in North Vietnam." Although many of these targets matched those attacked in Linebacker I, the Linebacker II operation was not an interdiction campaign. As ordered, the Air Force structured Linebacker II to avoid civilian casualties, while inflicting the utmost civilian discomfort. "I want the people of Hanoi to hear the bombs," Moorer directed Meyer, "but minimize damage to the civilian populace." B-52s would attack rail yards, storage areas, power plants, communication centers, and airfields located primarily on Hanoi's periphery. Using smart bombs, 7th Air Force fighter-bombers would strike objectives in populated areas. Most targets were within ten nautical miles of Hanoi, forcing its inhabitants to respond to each attack. B-52s would strike throughout the night to prevent the populace from sleeping.[60]

Results

From a purely military standpoint, the operation was a smashing

success. In fact, Admiral Sharp called the operation, "a testimony to the efficiency of airpower.[61] During the 11 days of bombing, over 42,000 bombs were dropped with devastating results. Most of the targets were destroyed, damaged, or rendered inoperative--severely crippling the war making capability of the North. The psychological effect that such concentrated attacks produced on the North Vietnamese people and leadership was equally important. There was simply no respite for them during 11 days of around-the-clock bombing. The shock effect must have been tremendous.

Although Linebacker II was successful, there were some serious problems in the conduct of the operation, particularly in the area of tactics. Tactics for employment of the B-52 in the mid-1960's were based on a relatively safe environment in South Vietnam. Thus, B-52 operations turned into an "assembly line" production and tactics became very predictable. B-52s attacked targets using the same procedures and the same routes day after day. These same tactics remained relatively static during the first eight days of Linebacker II, where B-52s were forced to follow the same course, holding the same altitudes and airspeeds. As a result, North Vietnamese SAM defenses were very effective and significant losses resulted. Many B-52 crews were furious over SAC's refusal to allow changes in tactics. They considered the tactics stupid, blaming SAC's failure in properly planning the raids. Finally, however, the SAC planners developed new tactics which employed greater flexibility and surprise. On 26 December 1972, for example, 77 B-52s attacked targets over the North and only one failed to return safely.[63]

In a political sense, Linebacker II was also a remarkable success. As a result of the severe punishment meted out during the campaign, the North

Vietnamese had a dramtic change of mind. For the first time in the war the U.S. had used air power in a way that influenced the will of the North Vietnamese to continue the conflict. They had been convinced that the war was becoming too costly for them.[64] Thus, Hanoi responded to the U.S. request for renewed talks as early as 20 December and finalized the schedule within a week--on American terms--as the bombs continued to fall.[65] The comments of Sir Robert Thompson, the former head of the British Advisory Mission to Vietnam, were particularly telling:

> In my view, on Dec 30, 1972, after 11 days of B-52 attacks on Hanoi area, you had won the war. It was over! They had fired 1,242 SAM's; they had none left save for a mere trickle which would come in from China. They and their whole rear base at that point were at your mercy. They would have taken any terms. And that is why, of course, you actually got a peace agreement in January, which you had not been able to get in October.[66]

Accordingly, the cost to the U.S. seemed worth the price. During the operation the U.S. had lost a total of 26 aircraft, including 15 B-52s. Of the B-52 crew members lost, 29 are listed either MIA or KIA.[67] But as Kissinger points out, "Linebacker II cost much less than the continuation of the war, which was the other alternative."[68]

> Any other course would almost certainly have witnessed an endless repetition of the tactics of December. Faced with the prospect of an open-ended war and continued bitter divisions, considering that the weather made the usual bombing ineffective, Nixon chose the only weapon he had available. His decision speeded the end of the war; even in retrospect I can think of no other measure that would have.[69]

In operation Linebacker II, the U.S. finally took the military action consistent with the lessons of history. It employed a massive force structure with few restrictive rules of engagement in a direct, offensive strategy to overwhelm the enemy's military and industrial complex and, thus, its will to continue the war.

Despite the success of the Linebacker campaigns, several questions come to mind. For example, why did the U.S. wait so long to conduct a decisive, strategic B-52 operation against the North? The JCS argued repeatedly during the Johnson administration for a dramatic, forceful, application of air power. Instead the U.S. adopted the strategy of a "graduated" military response.[70] Similarly, one must ask why it took the U.S. eight years to conclude that the North Vietnamese simply did not respond to the "carrot" approach? Time after time the evidence suggested that halts to military operations failed to get the North Vietnamese to negotiate at the bargaining table in good faith. It became obvious that the only thing they responded to was the "stick" approach--aggressive military action. Nevertheless, we continued to employ the "carrot" strategy even after it had proven grossly ineffective.

Moreover, one must ask what the possible outcome would have been if the U.S. had continued Linebacker II for another 11 days? Clearly, the operation had brought the North Vietnamese to their knees. Their war-making capability was shattered and their economy was devastated. Almost certainly, continued bombing would have had them begging for a settlement on practically any terms. Even after the success of the Linebacker II operation, one wonders why the U.S. settled for a "peace" which was so favorable to the North Vietnamese and ultimately resulted in the communist takeover of South Vietnam?

Perhaps there are many answers to these questions. Admiral Sharp was especially critical of the U.S. civilian decision makers for their "strategy of equivocation." He concludes that the administrations seemed to naively adopt a cost-effective, humane sort of strategy in dealing with the enemy.

According to Sharp, this "no-win" strategy ultimately eroded and destroyed our national unity.[71]

Conclusion

Much has been written about the role of the Linebacker campaigns in ending the war. That anyone could even question the decisive nature of the operations seems surprising. Clearly, Linebacker I was instrumental in defeating the North Vietnamese army during their large-scale, conventional Easter offensive. Moreover, Linebacker I, along with the mining operation, achieved its objectives of severely restricting the North's overland resupply capability.

Linebacker II was even more successful. This massive, strategic bombing strike hit the nerve center of the enemy in and around Hanoi, convincing them to return to the negotiating table. Operation Linebacker II damaged or destroyed the war-fighting capability of the North Vietnamese, but more importantly, it destroyed their will to continue the war. As a result of this campaign, the North Vietnamese came to terms quickly and the U.S. was subsequently able to pull out of South Vietnam. Thus, it was a classic example of the use of a well-planned and executed military operation to achieve a political goal.

FOOTNOTES

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44. Ibid., p. 82.

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49. Kissinger, p. 1375.

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