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LINEBACKER II: ACHIEVING STRATEGIC SURPRISE

by

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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.

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ABSTRACT

LINEBACKER II: ACHIEVING STRATEGIC SURPRISE by Lieutenant Commander Gregory S. Clark, 21 pages

This paper examines the Linebacker II campaign conducted at the end of the Vietnam War. During an eleven-day period between 18 and 29 December, 1972, strategic airpower was used to coerce the North Vietnamese Government back to negotiations aimed at ending the war. Tailored rules of engagement and a clear objective equated to mission success and a clearly defined end state. President Nixon stated his political objective and military power provided the means to achieve his goal. The air campaign stands as a successful example of the proper use of military means to obtain a political end.

The campaign is also a classic study of achieving strategic level surprise as defined by the principles of war. Clausewitz contends that surprise is more readily attainable at the tactical level of war. Linebacker II is noteworthy for achieving surprise at the highest echelon of war despite clear indications to the enemy that attack was imminent. It was a demonstration of President Nixon's resolve triumphing in a clash of wills.

*"The purpose of surprise is to strike at a time or place or in a manner for which the enemy is unprepared. Surprise can help the commander shift the balance of combat power and thus achieve success well out of proportion to the effort expended..."*¹

Joint Publication 3.0 Doctrine for Joint Operations

Introduction

The Paris Accords were signed on 23 January, 1973 marking the end of ten years of United States involvement in the Vietnam War. This was a remarkable occurrence considering in mid-December, just six weeks prior to ratifying this agreement, the North Vietnamese government had pulled out of negotiations and the peace process was hopelessly deadlocked. In the days following the stalemate, the President of the United States unleashed one of the most concentrated and effective strategic aerial bombing campaigns in modern history with the sole aim of coercing Hanoi back into negotiations.

President Nixon's decision to correctly employ the B-52 bomber, in concert with tactical jet aircraft, in an around-the-clock air offensive during the "Christmas bombings" of December, 1972, successfully broke Hanoi's psychological will and ultimately forced North Vietnam to sign the peace agreement.²

The 11 day air campaign, codenamed Operation "Linebacker II", provides a classic example of the use of overwhelming military might to achieve political ends expeditiously.³

Linebacker II leveraged enormous success due to its skillful adaptation of classically accepted principles of war coupled with the President's clearly defined strategic objective of compelling the North Vietnamese government "back to the negotiating table to end the war through fair settlement".⁴

Of the nine widely accepted principles of war, the successful attainment of "surprise" at the strategic level merits close consideration due to its rare achievement above the tactical level of war. Carl Von Clausewitz contends, "Basically surprise is a tactical device,...Therefore in strategy, surprise becomes more feasible the closer it occurs to the tactical realm, and more difficult, the more it approaches the higher levels of policy."⁵

Operation Linebacker II attained strategic surprise and "rapid dominance" by utilizing overwhelming and unrelenting force to "shock and awe" the North Vietnamese. The air raid was sufficiently powerful, intimidating and frightening enough to convince Hanoi of President Nixon's resolve.⁶ The result was the destruction of Hanoi's material ability and psychological will to continue the fight.⁷

Background

On February 21, 1970, in a tiny house outside of Paris, Henry Kissinger, National Security Advisor to President Nixon, met secretly for the first time with Le Duc Tho, his North Vietnamese diplomatic counterpart.⁸ This clandestine meeting began a three-year marathon of dialogue aimed at negotiating peace between the United States and North Vietnam. The relentless haggling over minute details regarding an acceptable cease-fire agreement was to ultimately test Kissinger's stamina and, at the same time, foster a deep admiration for his political adversary.⁹

On December 13, 1972, two months after Kissinger prematurely proclaimed to the world at a White House press conference that "peace is at hand", Le Duc Tho terminated the Paris peace talks and abruptly returned to Hanoi for further consultations.¹⁰ Henry Kissinger

complained of the stalling tactics, "There was no intractable, substantive issue separating the two sides, but rather an apparent North Vietnamese determination not to allow the agreement to be completed."¹¹

Hanoi was stalling in the hopes that Washington would cave in to peace at any cost due to pressures from a disenchanted populace in the United States, an unhappy Saigon government opposed to the proposed tenets of the cease fire agreement, and an angry Congress about to reconvene in January with termination of the unpopular war in Vietnam as their number one priority. Misinterpreting the situation, the North had made a grave error in judging President Nixon's resolve: They cornered him. Nixon was never more dangerous than when he was left with no remaining options.¹²

Convinced that Hanoi had made up its mind to continue the war, and simultaneously facing imminent Congressional legislation at home to cut funding for any further military involvement in Indochina, President Nixon felt compelled to take swift and severe military action. The objective was to force the North Vietnamese government back to the conference table to end the war "on our terms" and achieve a "peace with honor."¹³ "We had only two choices," wrote Kissinger in his memoirs, "taking a massive, shocking step to impose our will on events and end the war quickly, or letting matters drift into another round of inconclusive negotiations, prolonged warfare, bitter national divisions, and mounting casualties."¹⁴

The Commander in Chief chose the only weapon he had available to accomplish the task. In addition to its accuracy and all weather

bombing capability, the B-52 had the power to shock the mind and undermine the spirit.¹⁵

Operation Linebacker II

President Nixon presented Hanoi with an ultimatum to return to Paris for serious negotiations within seventy two hours "or else".¹⁶ Simultaneously, he ordered Admiral Thomas Moorer, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, to prepare massive air strikes targeting major infrastructure in Hanoi as well as docks and shipyards in Haiphong.¹⁷ In relaying this message to Admiral Moorer, Nixon stated, "I don't want any more of this crap about the fact that we couldn't hit this target or that one. This is your chance to use military power effectively to win this war, and if you don't, I'll consider you personally responsible."¹⁸

Plans were already on the shelf for a "winter phase" of the Linebacker I campaign that had ceased earlier in the fall of 1972. Linebacker II was born of this plan with additions to the target list and a revised, less restrictive ROE. The only real constraint was to avoid large-scale civilian casualties where possible.¹⁹ The plan was originally specified as a three-day campaign, with the possibility for extension. The aim was to exert maximum pressure above the 20th parallel. It would wind up continuing for eleven days with a one-day break in the middle for the Christmas holiday.²⁰ Seventy-two hours after North Vietnam's refusal to adhere to President Nixon's ultimatum, Operation Linebacker II commenced.

Hanoi Capitulates

On 29 December, following 729 B-52 nighttime sorties and over 1,000 mainly daylight fighter-attack sorties, Hanoi sued for immediate

resumption of the peace negotiations. "For the first time in the war, we had used our airpower in a way that influenced their will to continue the aggression."²¹ Approximately 20,237 tons of bombs had been dropped on 34 targets located mainly in Hanoi and Haiphong.²²

Bombing accuracy was nearly surgical considering the weather was clear for only one 12-hour period during the campaign. Civilian casualties were estimated by the North Vietnamese to range between 1,300 and 1,600 dead. The collateral damage to civilians combined with the extremely destructive impact of the campaign gave rise to predictable outcries of atrocities and "genocide". In reality, the civilian death toll paled in comparison to World War II campaigns.²³

Damage to infrastructure such as railways, warehouses, power plants and airfields was extensive. The decision to mine Haiphong harbor and bomb major bridges and roadways resulted in denying North Vietnam the ability to re-supply its depleted air defense system.

Most importantly, the bombing had achieved the objective of shocking Hanoi's leadership. President Nixon credits the campaign with fulfilling its purposes. "Militarily, we had shattered North Vietnam's war-making capacity. Politically, we had shattered Hanoi's will to continue the war."²⁴ One member of the U.S. delegation to the Paris peace talks stated simply: "Prior to Linebacker II, the North Vietnamese were intransigent... After Linebacker II, they were shaken, demoralized, and anxious to talk about anything."²⁵ Another analyst, Sir Robert Thompson, a noted author and expert on Asian wars, stated, "In my view, on 30 December 1972, after eleven days of those B-52 attacks on the Hanoi area, you had won the war. It was over... They and

their whole rear base at that point were at your mercy. They would have taken any terms."²⁶

U.S. Cost

Linebacker II can be dissected into three phases correlative to the number of B-52 losses. Departing from bases in Utapao Thailand and Andersen AFB on Guam, 129 bombers attacked Hanoi in three waves throughout the first night of 18 December. Operating at night would lessen the threat of MiG interceptors. The round trip to and from Guam was over 5,500 miles making these missions some of the longest raids in history.²⁷ A Russian fishing trawler, conveniently stationed off the coast of Guam, counted departing aircraft and relayed this information to Hanoi.²⁸ Air Force and Navy tactical jets provided support for the bombers during the evening and conducted strike missions during the day.

The air tactics were repeated on the second and third nights. Nine bombers had been downed by the night of 20 December marking the end of the first phase. President Nixon was appalled at the losses. He had expected casualties, but not at this rate. He did not want the North to be able to point at the downed bombers as proof they were winning.²⁹

Phase two continued the effort with decreased sorties and modified tactics garnishing decreased B-52 loss rates. Phase three commenced following the Christmas stand down period and completed on December 29th following Hanoi's proposal to resume peace negotiations in Paris.³⁰

In the end, the United States lost 26 airplanes, including 15 B-52's. Crewmember losses numbered 92. Of these, 26 were rescued, 34

became prisoners, 28 are listed as missing in action and four died on the runway at Utapao following a crash landing.³¹

Lessons learned would point to inadequate operational level planning concerning orders issued to aviators which specified flying stereotyped ingress and egress routes. North Vietnamese gunners were able to accurately estimate B-52 tactics and exploit the big bomber's huge radar cross-section when launching Surface to Air Missiles. North Vietnamese MiGs would shadow the B-52s and report headings, airspeeds and altitudes to ground controllers facilitating accurate firings. These actions on the part of the North Vietnamese prompted a change of tactics for the U.S. aircrews marking the beginning of phase two. In addition, nonexistent Unity of Command was singled out as a shortcoming to efficient utilization of airpower. A single command agency for air resources would have improved force survivability and mission effectiveness. Aircrews at the tactical level heavily criticized non-coordination between Pacific Command, Strategic Air Command, Navy Task Force-77 and Military Advisory Command Vietnam concerning tactics, target selection, and strike package composition.³²

Nevertheless, the effect of Linebacker II on Hanoi's ability to resist was crushing. Two days before the conclusion of the campaign, all organized enemy air defense efforts ceased, as North Vietnam had exhausted its supply of Surface to Air Missiles leaving the country defenseless.³³

Strategic Level Surprise

Clausewitz wrote of the principle of surprise as being desired as more or less "basic to all operations".³⁴ Surprise becomes the means to gain superiority, but because of its psychological effect, it should

also be considered as an independent element. Clausewitz further stated, "Whenever it is achieved on a grand scale, it confuses the enemy and lowers his morale..."³⁵

How could Nixon achieve surprise with the Linebacker II campaign when the North Vietnamese were anticipating an attack? Indicators portending a military action were easy to spot. Threats by Henry Kissinger concerning the stalemated peace process were correctly interpreted as threats to bomb Hanoi if the talks did not progress. Mass evacuations out of downtown Hanoi had begun two weeks prior to the first bomb drop on the 18th of December.³⁶ President Nixon's seventy two hour ultimatum containing the phrase "or else", and the Russian fishing trawler off the coast of Guam broadcasting bomber departure times were all factors against achieving surprise. The North was also well aware of the pressure put on the President from both Congress and the American public to end the war. Finally, the most obvious element opposing surprise was the fact that the U.S. had been at war with North Vietnam for ten years.

Joint Pub 3.0 lists additional factors contributing to surprise. They include: speed in decision making, information sharing, and force movement; effective intelligence; deception; application of unexpected combat power; OPSEC and variations in tactics and methods of operation.³⁷

We have seen so far how the President expertly exploited the application of unexpected combat power and speed in decision making at the strategic level. We also see how Strategic Air Command failed to exploit information sharing at the operational and tactical levels of war.

Literally interpreting the factors required for attaining surprise, we are left with incomplete conditions for a strong probability of success in the strategic realm. Could Clausewitzian doctrine, written mostly in the early 19th Century, be no longer relevant in modern times? A former professor of strategy at the Naval War College wrote, "Strategic and operational surprise were transformed into realistic options by the Industrial Revolution"³⁸. He contends that Clausewitzian theory is timelessly correct and that the present age allows added benefits such as concentration of strength at decisive points through modern advances firepower, mobility, and technological and doctrinal surprises.³⁹ Strategic airpower exploits all of these added benefits.

Referencing additional material concerning the principle of surprise, Clausewitz goes on to include, "One more observation needs to be made, which goes to the very heart of the matter. Only the commander who imposes his will can take the enemy by surprise..."⁴⁰ This intangible aspect is most intriguing. Did the Hanoi politburo underestimate President Nixon's will?

A glimpse into the mindset of President Nixon concerning his resolve to end the conflict using military force can be seen in the text of a memorandum sent to Henry Kissinger in May, 1972. Speaking of the North Vietnamese government, Kissinger wrote, "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 [former President] Johnson is I have the will in spades."⁴¹

North Vietnam misread the situation. They underestimated their opponent's will to use massive military pressure, unseen prior to this

point in the war, to achieve his political objectives. Hanoi was surprised in spite of the plethora of information it possessed concerning the American public, Congressional opinion, location of troop concentration, and knowledge of likely target location.⁴²

Conclusion

Linebacker II was a success. The operation stands as a classic example of using military means to achieve political ends. The massive B-52 aerial bombardment shocked the enemy with its unrelenting and overwhelming force causing Hanoi to capitulate in just eleven days. U.S. military leaders were ecstatic at finally being empowered to correctly employ offensive airpower as they had envisioned since the war's inception. General Momyer, who commanded the Seventh Air Force in Vietnam, contended, "For the first time, B-52's were used in large numbers to bring the full weight of airpower to bear. What airmen had long advocated as the proper employment of airpower was now the President's strategy."⁴³ At a 1978 Air Force Academy symposium addressing the Linebacker campaign, General Curtis LeMay argued that it was "politically immoral" to use less force than necessary to achieve a military objective when adequate force was available.⁴⁴

Others disagree. To claim that what seems to have worked in 1972 would have worked in 1965, thereby saving the U.S. years of anguish in Vietnam, is to ignore the strategic circumstances between the two eras.⁴⁵ The bombings cost the United States fifteen B-52's, 92 airmen, and caused a torrent of both domestic and international outrage and condemnation, driving Nixon's public approval rating down to an unprecedented 39 percent.⁴⁶ In addition, critics contend that the "peace with honor" won by the Nixon administration was a hollow

agreement. The major issue over which the war had been fought, the political future of South Vietnam, was left to be resolved later in 1975 when the North violated the peace agreement, this time with no U.S. military response, and invaded South Vietnam.⁴⁷

The detractors miss the point. We are analyzing Linebacker II as a military campaign. President Nixon clearly stated his political objective [ends]. Strategic airpower providing the [ways] of achieving this objective. Linebacker II was the plan that provided the [means] by which military power would be employed. The final [cost] was a two percent loss rate. The use of unrelenting and overwhelming force rapidly dominated the battle space producing the synergistic effects of "shock and awe" on Hanoi's psyche. With the will of the people broken, air defense systems depleted, and the government demoralized, the Paris Accords were signed.

The Shocking Effects of Surprise in the 21st Century

Not many people forget where they were or what they were doing on September 11, 2001. Everyday citizens were mesmerized by horrific images on television. Disbelieving and bewildered faces stared at twisted carnage and smoking rubble wondering how an attack could happen on U.S. soil. Officials were unable to adequately explain the failure of Government agencies to provide warning of the attack considering our extensive Intelligence network. The diabolical cleverness of a small terrorist organization brought this great Nation to a standstill. The effectiveness and achievability of surprise in the modern era had been dramatically demonstrated.

We have all experienced surprise first hand. We can all speak intelligently of the powerful effects of "shock and awe".

Osama Bin Laden demonstrated classic Clausewitzian doctrine by striking the United States at a time and place, and in a manner for which we were woefully unprepared. Bin Laden achieved success well out of proportion to the effort expended by exploiting factors of surprise like OPSEC and deception. In short, Bin Laden gave us a "wake-up call".

The war fighter today will face challenges in unforeseen arenas. Terrorism, asymmetric attack, and the development of Weapons of Mass Destruction by non-stable governments are a reality. U.S. Forces will have to act, offensively or defensively, almost instantaneously, with unrelenting application of force. This will require an in-depth knowledge of self, adversary, and operating environment. Operations will inherently demand rapid execution and control of the situation.⁴⁸

NOTES

¹U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, Doctrine for Joint Operations. Joint Pub 3-0. (Washington: U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, 10 September 2001),A-2.

²Robert A.Pape, Bombing to Win: Air Power and Coercion in War (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press 1996),202.

³Dave Richard Palmer, Summons of the Trumpet (San Rafael, CA: Presidio Press, 1978), 259.

⁴Richard Nixon, No More Vietnams (NY: Arbor House 1985),158.

⁵Carl von Clausewitz, On War ed. by Michael Howard, Peter Paret. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984),198.

⁶Dr. Harlan K. Ullman and Wade, Dr James P, Rapid Dominance-A Force for All Seasons: Technologies and Systems for Achieving Shock and Awe: A Real Revolution in Military Affairs (London: Royal United Service Institute for Defense Studies, 1998),vii.

⁷Col Harry G. Summers,Jr, On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of The Vietnam War (NY: Dell Publishing 1982), 208.

⁸Stanley Karnow, Vietnam, A History (NY: Penguin Books, 1984), 638.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Henry A. Kissinger, White House Years (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1979), 1441. For more discussion on the negotiations for peace, including Saigon's objections, see Richard Nixon, No More Vietnams (NY: Arbor House 1985).

¹¹As quoted in Earl H. Tilford, SETUP: What the Air Force Did in Vietnam and Why (Maxwell AFB, AL: Air University Press, 1991), 252, and Henry A. Kissinger, 1444.

¹²Henry A. Kissinger, 1446.

¹³John T. Smith, The Linebacker Raids: The Bombing of North Vietnam, 1972 (London: Arms and Armour Press, 1998),118, and Richard Nixon, 157.

¹⁴Henry A. Kissinger, 1448.

¹⁵Earl H. Tilford, 254.

¹⁶Stanley Karnow, 667.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸As quoted in John T. Smith, 118.

¹⁹Earl H. Tilford, 254. A good synopsis of the entire Linebacker II campaign can be found by this author in Encyclopedia of the Vietnam War, vol. One, Linebacker II, Operations, 380.

²⁰ Lewis Sorley, A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam (NY: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1999), 355.

²¹Ulysses S. Grant Sharp, Strategy for Defeat: Vietnam in Retrospect (San Rafael, CA: Presidio Press, 1978), 255.

²²Earl H. Tilford, 263.

²³Guenter Lewy, America in Vietnam (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 412.

²⁴Richard Nixon, 158.

²⁵As quoted in Karl J Eschmann, Linebacker: The Untold Story of the AirRaids over North Vietnam (NY: Ivy Books, 1989), 213.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷John T. Smith, 122.

²⁸Ibid., 123.

²⁹Ibid., 131

³⁰Earl H. Tilford, 262.

³¹John T. Smith, 138.

³²Karl J. Eschmann, 207-208.

³³Benjamin S. Lambeth, The Transformation of American Air Power (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000), 29.

³⁴Carl Von Clausewitz, 198.

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶John T. Smith, 160.

³⁷Joint Pub 3.0, A-2.

³⁸Michael I. Handel, Masters of War: Classical Strategic Thought 3rd ed, (London: Frank Cass Publishers, 2001), 230.

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰Carl Von Clausewitz, 200.

⁴¹Henry A. Kissinger, 1199.

⁴²Col. Harry G. Summers, Jr., 213.

⁴³Ibid., 212.

⁴⁴Ronald Schaffer, Wings of Judgment: American Bombing in World War II (NY: Oxford University Press, 1985), 212.

⁴⁵Jeffrey Record, The Wrong War: Why We Lost in Vietnam (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1998), 120.

⁴⁶Ibid., 121. In his writings, Smith quotes Nixon's approval rating at 29 percent. It was actually 39 percent.

⁴⁷George C. Herring, America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam 2nd ed. (NY: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1986), 255.

⁴⁸Dr Harlan K Ullman, 1.

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