

USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

**THE STRATEGIC SIGNIFICANCE OF LINEBACKER II:  
POLITICAL, MILITARY, AND BEYOND**

by

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The views expressed in this academic research paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the U.S. Government, the Department of Defense, or any of its agencies.

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## ABSTRACT

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President Nixon enjoyed a solid reelection victory in 1972. Even so, he faced an imminent cutoff of funds for the Vietnam War, so he needed a decision strategy to end the war in a short period of time. This SRP will describe the instrument of national power he chose to fulfill that objective—the strategic bombing campaign named LINEBACKER II. The campaign illustrates the application of military power to achieve a political goal. This study describes the evolution of U.S. strategy leading up to the campaign, the strategy of the campaign, and the consequences of that strategy. Conducted 30 years ago, LINEBACKER II offers an excellent case study on how the Air Force incorporates historical experience into its air power doctrine. Two opposing interpretations of the success of LINEBACKER II have influenced Air Force Doctrine. The first, or traditional interpretation examines the operation as *the* example of how air power should have been used throughout the war. This consensus interpretation dominated the Air Force's view of LINEBACKER II until the late 1980s, when more critical or revisionist interpretations began to appear. This study assesses both the traditional and revisionist interpretations of LINEBACKER II. Finally, it examines the doctrinal implications of LINEBACKER II on current doctrine and air operations.



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## THE STRATEGIC SIGNIFICANCE OF LINEBACKER II: POLITICAL, MILITARY, AND BEYOND

The first, supreme, the most far reaching act of judgment that the statesman and commander have to make is [rightly to understand] the kind of war on which they are embarking, neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature. This is the first of all strategic questions and the most comprehensive.

—Carl Von Clausewitz

As the Korean War was drawing to a stalemate in 1953, the United States was faced with another crisis: How to prevent a Communist takeover of Southeast Asia. In French Indochina, Ho Chi Minh's Vietminh was on the verge of victory over the French colonial forces. As the French situation at Dien Bien Phu deteriorated in the first half of 1954, the Pentagon and the White House discussed the degree and nature of possible American intervention.<sup>1</sup> President Eisenhower did not want to intervene in Vietnam without the help of European allies. Despite strong U.S. material support to France, he did not take significant actions to prevent the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu. However, he began to provide advisors and financial assistance to South Vietnam starting in 1954, immediately following the French withdrawal from their former Indochina colony.

The initial command structure established in Southeast Asia was the Military Advisory Group (MAG). Through the MAG, U.S. military assistance was distributed to Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. Initially the role of U.S. advisors was limited. However, after the fall of Dien Bien Phu in 1954, the role of the MAG changed profoundly, especially after the French gave autonomy to the Vietnamese armed forces. This led to changes in the training relationship, and the United States began providing direct assistance to opponents of Ho Chi Minh. The MAG was also redesignated the Military Assistance Advisory Group, Vietnam (MAAG).<sup>2</sup>

The United States became directly involved with the organizing and training of Vietnamese military units in 1955. A tiny component of the Vietnamese military, the Vietnamese Air Force (VNAF) had to be built from the bottom up. However, it soon became apparent the VNAF could not meet all combat mission requirements. The VNAF expansion led to the activation of an advanced echelon headquarters from the USAF 2<sup>nd</sup> Air Division at Tan Son Nhut airfield on the outskirts of Saigon in November 1961.<sup>3</sup>

Soon after President Kennedy took office in 1961, he had to deal with a foreign policy crisis in Laos. The way Kennedy handled Laos established the future direction of policy in

Vietnam. He ordered a conventional military response by putting United States Military Task Force 116 on alert to prepare for a traditional war of attrition. The war in Laos was a civil war between rival families with outside participants. As the Laotian emergency diminished, the United States was already entering the war in Vietnam. The way the administration approached the situation in Laos, and supposedly resolved it, influenced the way the United States approached Vietnam.

Kennedy believed the problem in South Vietnam was political rather than military. He was advised that it could be solved by the removal of its president, Ngo Dinh Diem. Kennedy was convinced by his advisors that President Diem's policies and alleged persecutions of Buddhists made the South Vietnamese leader a liability. He approved the coup that ended in Diem's assassination in 1963.<sup>4</sup>

South Vietnam was politically instable when President Johnson took over the Presidency following Kennedy's assassination, which came only two weeks after Diem's. Johnson's main concern was to address the domestic issues of the Great Society. However, he increased troop strength from 16,000 to 550,000 during his five years in office. He did not want to jeopardize his public or congressional support for his Great Society programs nor capitulate to the communist threat in Indochina.<sup>5</sup>

President Nixon then became the fourth president to deal with Vietnam when he took office in 1969. His major foreign policy goals were to open a new relationship with the People's Republic of China and to develop a new relationship of negotiation rather than confrontation with the Soviet Union.<sup>6</sup> However, his immediate goal was to end a war where over 500,000 troops were stationed, 328 Prisoners Of War (POWs) were held, and over 1,400 casualties took place the week before his inauguration. In addition, no strategy existed for either winning or ending the war.

## **ROLLING THUNDER AND PREVAILING DOCTRINE**

The use of air power in Vietnam was controversial from the beginning. In February 1964, President Johnson ordered the Pentagon to prepare plans for the direct use of American military power, in particular air power. His decision prompted extreme disagreement between the military senior commanders and some of Johnson's senior civilian advisors over the scope and intensity of the proposed bombing plan. Civilian advisors advocated concentrating the use of air power to demonstrate resolve and send diplomatic signals to influence the North Vietnamese to negotiate. John T. McNaughton, Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, characterized this approach as incremental; it would put a progressive squeeze on the

enemy. However, the military had a different perspective. The Air Force Leadership, under the guidance of Chief of Staff General Curtis LeMay, relied on their experience to devise an air offensive against North Vietnam. They turned to the lessons of World War II and strategic bombing doctrine. Military planning for the campaign meshed well with Air Force strategic bombing doctrine which called for flying over the enemy's heartland and destroying the industrial centers. Strategic bombing was a very successful strategy against Germany and Japan in World War II, during which industrialized enemies supplied their own war materiel and were fighting a conventional war. Vietnam fit neither of those categories. Vietnam was an agrarian society with a small industrial base. The North was supporting an insurgency in the South and not waging a conventional war for which U.S. bombing doctrine was designed. As they advocated strategic bombing doctrine, Air Force leaders lost sight of what the war was about: a revolutionary conflict, not a struggle between industrialized powers. Observing the demands of their own doctrinal beliefs, the Air Force, with the support of the other services and in keeping with the desire of the Johnson administration to keep tight political control over the use of military power, prepared a plan for Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara in April 1964.

Their Operations Plan (OPLAN) called for a strategy of specific retaliatory air raids combined with a continuous and gradually increasing bombing campaign. This plan was modified, mostly at the prompting of the Air Force, by the JCS in May and again in November of 1964. These modifications provided for a graduated and controlled level of bombing in order to achieve the destruction of the North Vietnamese will and capabilities; theoretically, this increasing pressure would compel the Democratic Government of Vietnam to cease providing support to the insurgencies in South Vietnam and Laos.<sup>7</sup>

The OPLAN option produced after November was similar to the air offensive against Japan in WW II. It called for the concentrated and rapid destruction of 94 industrial, transportation, and infrastructure targets in North Vietnam. President Johnson, McNamara, and Secretary of State Dean Rusk rejected the plan as excessive; they feared a massive application of force might trigger intervention by the Soviets or Chinese. The abandoned "94 target plan" has long been regarded by the Air Force as a tragic "might have been." This attitude is crucial for understanding how Air Force leaders approached and then implemented the LINEBACKER II campaign. General Curtis LeMay later maintained that the Air Force "could have ended it [the war] in any ten-day period you wanted to, but they would never bomb the target list we had."<sup>8</sup>

The Johnson administration continued to debate the proper military options and the timing of their use. Johnson's belief in the viability of the "graduated" approach led him to officially order the sustained air campaign known as ROLLING THUNDER on 13 February 1965. The

campaign authorized bombing attacks limited in both scale and duration. President Johnson's approach to the air war characterized his administration's handling of the war for the remainder of his Presidency. Bombing halts and restarts were accompanied by further micromanagement from the White House. President Johnson and Secretary McNamara maintained detailed tactical control of the missions. Johnson and his advisors chose the targets from an Armed Forces' suggested list at the White House's weekly Tuesday luncheons.<sup>9</sup> President Johnson himself, on occasion, would personally inspect and approve the daily target list. For much of the campaign, high value targets were off-limits. This target selection method conformed to the administration's Rules of Engagement (ROE) throughout the campaign. The restrictive ROE reflected the administration's concern about a confrontation with the Soviet Union or China.

Under intense political pressure to reduce American involvement in Vietnam, Operation ROLLING THUNDER was gradually de-escalated and was discontinued on 31 October 1968, concluding the longest bombing campaign in the history of aerial warfare.<sup>10</sup> The campaign has been generally regarded as a failure by virtually all authorities. From the Air Force's perspective, it violated almost every tenet of air power doctrine. ROLLING THUNDER was not a concentrated offensive, it was not based upon unchallenged air superiority, and it was not directed against the critical targets that would destroy both the capability and will of the enemy to make war. The Air Force's and Navy's chief complaint focused on the political restrictions on what could be bombed. Others believe ROLLING THUNDER failed not only because the coercive campaign was poorly planned and executed, but because North Vietnam could ignore or resist conventional coercion due to the nature of revolutionary warfare.<sup>11</sup>

The ineffectiveness of the South Vietnam government and the logistical efficiency of the Viet Cong from 1965 – 1968 denied any success for a graduated air campaign. ROLLING THUNDER offered little progress toward achieving Johnson's political goal of an independent, stable, non Communist South Vietnam. The bombing did not stop the North Vietnamese from supporting the Southern insurgency. Supplies continued to flow down the Ho Chi Minh trail along the Laotian and Cambodian borders. Civilian and military leaders miscalculated the effect the campaign would have on the North. Both groups believed the North's industrial apparatus was vulnerable to air attack and that this vulnerability offered a means to end the war. Civilian leaders believed that the threat of industrial devastation would compel Hanoi to end the conflict. However, the only industrial component vital to the North was its transportation system, which did not need to operate at peak efficiency to be effective. An excess of imports and the Communist forces' limited needs rendered the remainder of the North's industrial establishment superfluous.<sup>12</sup> The only targets that would have affected the North's war-making capacity were

people and food. U.S. political and military controls prevented attacks directly on the North's population or indirectly on supporting functions such as their dike system or the Haiphong Harbor, where a great deal of supplies from Russia and China were shipped in.

### **BETWEEN ROLLING THUNDER AND THE LINEBACKER CAMPAIGNS**

President Johnson halted all bombing of the North on 31 October 1968, in exchange for Hanoi's agreement to negotiate seriously and halt particular military activities. These activities included the movement of men and supplies across the Demilitarized Zone, attacks on major cities in the South, and attacks on American reconnaissance aircraft. Johnson wrote:

Before I made my decision [to halt the bombing], I wanted to be absolutely certain that Hanoi understood our position. . . . Our negotiators reported that the North Vietnamese would give no flat guarantees; that was in keeping with their stand that the bombing had to be ended without conditions. But they had told us that if we stopped the bombing, they would 'know what to do.' [American negotiators] were confident Hanoi knew precisely what we meant and would avoid the actions that we had warned them would imperil a bombing halt.<sup>13</sup>

Other than infrequent protective reaction strikes in response to violations of the October accord, the North was spared from American bombs from November 1968 to April 1972.<sup>14</sup>

### **LINEBACKER I**

In March 1972, the North Vietnamese launched a powerful conventional offensive against the South. The North's goal was to inflict a crushing defeat on the South Vietnamese Forces and diminish U.S. resolve to support them, or at the very least compel the Nixon Administration to make further concessions in the prolonged Paris peace talks. Dubbed the Easter Offensive by the press, it was the largest communist effort since the Tet Offensive of January 1968. Lieutenant General Tran Van Tra, deputy commander of the Communist forces in the south, stated "The aim of the 1972 offensive was to force the U.S. to sign a peace agreement."<sup>15</sup>

The North had changed the conflict to a large-unit conventional war. Nixon was not Johnson, and 1972 was not 1965 or 1968. Nixon's policy of détente gave him flexibility that his predecessor, who feared intervention by the Russians or Chinese, lacked. The President made clear that he intended to punish the enemy and to use his weapons with great determination. He did not mince words: "The bastards have never been bombed like they're going to be bombed."<sup>16</sup>

President Nixon chose to rely on strategic bombing along with close air support and naval gunfire to stem the North's offensive. He ordered massive air strikes against North Vietnam, including for the first time targets in Hanoi and Haiphong. The campaign, named LINEBACKER after Nixon's love of football, was designed to cripple the North's ability to conduct offensive operations in the South. Its objective was to destroy war-related resources such as petroleum storage facilities and power-generating plants; to reduce or restrict the importing of supplies by ships through the harbors and by rail and road from China; and to impede the flow of men and supplies by destroying the internal transportation system.<sup>17</sup> Nixon and his National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger believed that by turning back the assault and launching a massive counterblow against the enemy homeland, they could compel Hanoi to sign a favorable accord.<sup>18</sup>

After a meeting with the National Security Council (NSC) on May 8, Nixon was ready to give the execute order for LINEBACKER. On May 9, Nixon told Kissinger he wanted to "go for broke. Like the enemy, we must go to the brink and destroy the enemy's war-making capacity. Johnson had lacked the will to do so; I have the will in spades. The NSC staff must recommend action . . . which is very strong, threatening, and effective."<sup>19</sup>

The Spring Offensive provided Nixon with several opportunities. Soon to meet with the Soviets, Nixon wanted bombing stepped up while he was in Moscow. This action would appease the hawks in Congress and show his resolve to the Soviets. Press and congressional criticism was almost immediate in his announcement of the campaign. However, public support varied between 59 and 76 percent, depending on the poll. Some critics alleged political and diplomatic motives, not military objectives: "LINEBACKER was aimed less at stopping the invasion and more at pleasing his constituents, frightening the North Vietnamese and Soviets, influencing the negotiations, and diminishing Hanoi's future war-fighting capability in the struggle that lay ahead for the South Vietnamese."<sup>20</sup>

Nonetheless, LINEBACKER succeeded where other air campaigns did not for several reasons. First, President Nixon was decisive in his actions. Second, he ordered the militarily appropriate use of air power. The large scale offensive made strategic bombing a suitable weapon to defeat the enemy. Nixon also gave the military more latitude in planning the targets. Unlike ROLLING THUNDER, the targets were not predictable. The final reason was technology. During LINEBACKER, the U.S. introduced laser-guided bombs (LGB) and electro-optically guided bombs (EOGB), which completely changed the way the Air Force conducted the operation. Many targets not struck during previous campaigns because of their proximity to

populated areas were successfully attacked and destroyed with minimal collateral damage. Fewer bombs caused greater target damage because of increased accuracy.<sup>21</sup>

The Easter Offensive was a military disaster for the North. Despite attacking with 120,000 North Vietnamese regular troops and thousands of Vietcong guerrillas equipped with Soviet-supplied artillery, rockets, and tanks, they failed to defeat the South Vietnamese Army.<sup>22</sup> By resolving to win the war in a flurry reminiscent of German blitzkrieg, the North Vietnamese made itself vulnerable to American air power. This concentrated application of air power proved highly effective. Together with surprisingly staunch resistance from the South supported by U.S. tactical airlift and naval gunfire. It succeeded by early October in shutting down the North's offensive. LINEBACKER I officially ended on 22 October.

### **POLITICAL SITUATION IN LATE 1972**

Despite the staggering casualties of nearly 100,000 for the North, the 1972 offensive cracked the optimistic illusion of Vietnamization. In reality, the South Vietnamese depended largely on U.S. advisors and operational fires to ward off the enemy invasion.

Because of the failure of the Easter Offensive, the North Vietnamese decided on a compromise to break the deadlock in the peace negotiations. The North used the 1972 Presidential Election to pressure U.S. negotiators. They believed the United States would feel pressure to conclude a peace treaty at any price. They rightly understood that the U.S. electorate had tired of the war and would support a candidate who promised peace now. In order to achieve a settlement, the North Vietnamese offered a major concession: they dropped their demand that South Vietnam's President Thieu be removed before the fighting would stop. The North had demanded Thieu's overthrow since the beginning of peace talks in 1969. By making this concession, the North leaders thought they could entice the U.S. to leave South Vietnam and allow them to continue their struggle at a more favorable date. Thus the 1972 offensive laid the groundwork for an eventual political deal and an ultimately successful future offensive in 1975.<sup>23</sup>

President Nixon also believed the North wanted to have a settlement before the November election. He was leading Senator McGovern by as much as thirty points in the polls and concluded the North knew he would be reelected. Nixon also believed the North thought they would get better terms from him before the election than after it.<sup>24</sup>

The North's concessions were hammered out in secret talks during October. One major issue the North would not negotiate on was the removal of the troops from the South. The

North Vietnamese truly believed this was a civil war, so they denied a North and South Vietnam legally existed.

Henry Kissinger went to Saigon on October 18 to explain the proposed peace plan to President Thieu of the South. Thieu was extremely offended that he was not consulted before the U.S. and North Vietnam approved the draft plan. Thieu also believed he had no voice in the outcome since the entire matter appeared to have been decided during the secret negotiations. Thieu's primary objections centered on failure to withdraw North Vietnamese troops from the South and the formation of a National Council of National Reconciliation and Concord. Thieu believed the Council was nothing more than a cover for a coalition government. Nixon continued to emphasize to Thieu the importance of reaching a settlement before Congress reconvened in January 1973. Democratic gains in the November election would create a congressional majority pledged to cut off funding for the war. Nixon was certain that aid to South Vietnam would be cut off. After meeting with the South Vietnamese Security Council and the ambassador to the peace talks in Paris, Kissinger reported that the South Vietnamese leaders were showing a surprising apprehension of Communist craftiness and a lack of confidence in themselves.<sup>25</sup>

The United States was negotiating with the North over Thieu's apprehensions, while continuing to confer with Thieu. Showing their astuteness, the North pursued a calculated strategy. The delegates negotiating for Hanoi agreed to all the technical points, thus creating a perfect negotiating record that, if made public, would make it appear the South was obstructing a settlement. In contrast, by press leaks, they portrayed the peace proposal as a Communist victory. Their strategy put Thieu in a precarious situation. If he rejected the agreement, popular opinion throughout the world would criticize him for rejecting an equitable plan. If he agreed, he would be attacked within the South for conceding to the Communists.<sup>26</sup>

The North Vietnamese went public about the peace agreement on October 26. Kissinger held a press conference that same day, when he announced the famous "Peace is at hand" statement. Nixon believed this seriously eroded the United States bargaining position with the North by publicly stating the U.S. expected to soon have a settlement. On November 20 both sides returned to Paris, but the North again began to stall. Talks recessed until December 4. The North Vietnamese disagreed to changes proposed by the U.S. and rejected previous agreements on key issues. The negotiations reached an impasse.

After Henry Kissinger concluded his Paris peace negotiations with the North's Le Duc Tho on 11 December, Kissinger realized Tho was stalling. Kissinger and Nixon theorized the stall was to exploit the deep and bitter dispute between the United States and South Vietnam as well

as to see if Congress would legislate the United States out of the war. Since victory was apparently handed to them by the American voters, the North had lost the incentive to negotiate. President Nixon decided to break the deadlock. He had only several weeks to produce a settlement that would bring home the POWs and enable the U.S. to withdraw with an appearance of peace with honor. His viable options were to resume bombing through a LINEBACKER I scenario or to execute an all-out strategic bombing campaign aimed at reducing the North's will. Continuing LINEBACKER I was not acceptable because attempting to destroy North Vietnam's morale by wrecking the supply system had previously failed during the ROLLING THUNDER Campaign. So the concentrated effort of air power directed at North Vietnam's will was selected.<sup>27</sup>

On December 14, President Nixon gave the North Vietnamese 72 hours to get back to negotiations or face the consequences. Nixon told Henry Kissinger, "If we renew bombing, it will have to be something new, and that means we will have to hit Hanoi and Haiphong with B-52s. Anything less will only make the enemy contemptuous."<sup>28</sup> On December 15, the Joint Chiefs of Staff told the Pacific Command to prepare for maximum effort strikes.

## **LINEBACKER II CAMPAIGN EXECUTION**

### **POLITICAL AND MILITARY OBJECTIVES**

The overall military objective of LINEBACKER I was extensive interdiction aimed at wrecking North Vietnam's war making capacity. LINEBACKER II was no interdiction campaign. Rather it was a concentrated strategic bombardment that attacked the enemy's war fighting capability and will. Although seeking to avoid civilian casualties, President Nixon ordered military leaders to structure LINEBACKER II to inflict the utmost civilian discomfort in a psychological sense by showing he would not tolerate a long delay in the peace negotiations.

Both LINEBACKER I and LINEBACKER II had the same political objective: resumption of the peace talks by pressuring the North back to the bargaining table. Some political leaders hoped the bombing would persuade the South's President Thieu to accept an agreement suitable to all parties by demonstrating American support for the South through air power whenever necessary.

### **CAMPAIGN PLAN**

The final LINEBACKER II plan was one of the most concentrated applications of air power in the history of warfare. Originally planned as a three-day air assault on the Hanoi-Haiphong

area, LINEBACKER II was expanded into an eleven-day campaign. It focused the greatest effort in minimum time against the most lucrative and valuable targets in North Vietnam.

LINEBACKER II was an American expression of determination aimed squarely at breaking the North's will to fight. The JCS called for continuous bombing. The concept of around-the-clock bombing distinguished LINEBACKER II from previous air offensives against the North Vietnamese. The daylight force was made up of Air Force F-4 and A-7 strike aircraft, supplemented by Navy strikes around the Haiphong area. Strategic Air Command (SAC) B-52s and Tactical Air Command (TAC) F-111s struck at night. B-52s from Anderson AFB, Guam and U-Tapao Royal Thai AFB attacked at night against area targets such as rail yards, storage areas, power plants, communication centers and airfields located around Hanoi. The operation sustained a massive effort to strangle the North's war fighting capability. Seventh AF and Navy fighter-bombers used "smart" bombs in precision day bombing against targets in populated areas.<sup>29</sup>

#### CAMPAIGN PHASES AND DATES

LINEBACKER II was divided into three distinct phases: Phase I, the first three days from 18 December to 20 December, was a maximum effort against the Hanoi area using waves of B-52s; Phase II, Days four to seven, 21 December to 24 December, continued pressure with a single-wave tactic, which reduced the sortie rate while targeting outside the general Hanoi complex; and during Phase III, the last four days, 26 December to 29 December, the single-wave tactic was continued with higher sortie levels, efforts were again directed against Hanoi and Haiphong targets.<sup>30</sup>

Tactics for the first mission on 18 December consisted of night, high altitude, radar bombing, using three B-52 waves about four to five hours apart. Each wave was made up of several three-ship cells, ten minutes apart. The aircraft of each cell of each wave attacked the same target area from the same northwest axis. No maneuvering to avoid surface to air missiles (SAMs) was allowed on the bomb run. The tactic sought to avert mid-air collisions and depended on mutual electronic counter measures (ECM) support. It also stabilized the bombing platforms for bombing accuracy to minimize collateral damage, an important political objective.<sup>31</sup>

The threat from anti aircraft (AAA) was almost non-existent at the altitudes the B-52s were flying. Since these missions were conducted at night, the MIG fighter threat was less than expected. Although all targets were struck successfully, three B-52s were lost the first night, two were severely damaged, and one F-111 was lost. Given that 121 sorties were flown the first night, the loss rate of 2.3 percent was below the three percent strategic planners

anticipated. Crew debriefings, however, revealed a strong criticism of the stereotyped tactics used by the bombers. Long bomber formations resembling a “baby elephant walk” stretched for over 70 miles through the three waves of B-52s. The bombers all used the same ingress and egress routes, flying at identical airspeeds and altitudes.<sup>32</sup>

Before Day 1 missions had completed debriefing, Day 2 missions were headed to their aircraft. Except for different targets, Day 2 was a repeat of Day 1. Crews were disturbed about similar routes being flown from the previous night. No aircraft were lost despite over 200 Surface-to-Air Missiles (SAMs) being fired. Crew debriefings again contained recommendations and suggestions about maneuvering just prior to bombs-away, as well as changes in ingress and egress routes. Crews wanted to change the pattern so the enemy could not make accurate predictions for their SAMs.<sup>33</sup>

Day 3 missions flew a composite of routes hitting targets and using tactics from the two previous days. This was a disastrous day. Enemy gunners claimed their greatest triumph as four B-52Gs and two B-52Ds were shot down. The six percent loss rate was deemed unacceptable. President Nixon was furious about the B-52s flying the same routes over the same targets. He extended the three-day operation to an indefinite campaign on 19 December. Strategic Air Command (SAC) Chief General Meyer also knew something had to change.<sup>34</sup> All the lost B-52Gs did not have an updated ECM system. Four of the losses occurred after bomb release. The first three days and Phase I of the air campaign concluded with mixed results.

Phase II, Days 4 to 7, incorporated several changes to tactical and operational procedures. Release time intervals between B-52 cells were reduced from ten to four minutes and then again to 90 seconds. SAM storage sites were designated prime targets. Routes were varied so enemy defenders could not detect a pattern and predict routes of flight or altitudes. Even so, two B-52s were lost to SAMs on Day 4.<sup>35</sup>

On Days 5 to 7, only two B-52s were lost. The Air Force was making good use of its experience and new tactics as selected targets outside the Hanoi-Haiphong area were bombed. Phase II came to an end after Day 7. The next phase resumed after a brief 36-hour Christmas break in the war.

The Americans and North Vietnamese used the break to prepare for the final phase. While the North restocked their SAM sites, U.S. planners planned the final chapter: an all-out attack on the North Vietnamese air defenses. The Air Force and the Navy went after airfields, SAM sites, and communication centers. Prior to each night's B-52 raids, F-11s struck MIG fields. On the night of 26 December, 120 B-52s hit a variety of targets within a 15 minute span. Additionally, 100 aircraft, including F-111s, F-4s, and Navy A-6s struck SAM sites and radar

sites before, during and after the B-52 raids. The last two aircraft losses of LINEBACKER II came on Day 8. LINEBACKER II ended on 29 December, leaving North Vietnam virtually defenseless, their SAM supply depleted.<sup>36</sup>

#### TARGETS AND RESULTS

Major target complexes struck by B-52s and tactical aircraft included railroad yards, storage facilities, radio communications facilities, airfields, SAMs, and bridges. In total, LINEBACKER II bombed 59 targets. Railroad yards and complexes accounted for 36 percent of the total sortie effort; next were storage facilities such as warehouse complexes (25 percent). More than 20,000 tons of ordnance was dropped. Bomb damage included 1600 military structures damaged or destroyed; 500 rail interdictions; 372 pieces of rolling stock damaged or destroyed; one-fourth of petroleum reserves destroyed; and 80 percent of electrical power production destroyed. Overall, 32 percent of targets were damaged. Based on the amount of ordnance dropped, civilian losses were minimal. Hanoi's mayor claimed 1,318 civilians killed and 1,216 injured, while Haiphong reported 305 dead.<sup>37</sup>

In LINEBACKER II, B-52's flew 729 sorties with 15 losses. Of the 92 crew members who were involved in these losses, 26 were recovered, 25 were listed as missing in action, 33 became POWs, and eight were killed in action. Other aircraft losses by the U.S. military included two F-111As, three F-4E's, two A-7s, two A-6's, one EB-66, one HH-53, and one RA-5C.<sup>38</sup>

Hanoi signaled that the North would resume peace negotiations on 29 December, and LINEBACKER II immediately ceased. The Paris Peace Accords were signed on January 27, 1973. American POWs were released, and U.S. forces slowly disengaged from Southeast Asia. By halting the bombing, the U.S. failed to destroy the North's war-sustaining capabilities at a time when Hanoi's air defenses had exhausted their stock of SAMs. The North got the cease-fire they needed and succeeded in gaining the U.S. displacement from Vietnam. North Vietnam immediately resumed their military buildup. Hanoi, realizing it no longer faced a realistic threat from the U.S., again invaded South Vietnam. The North's forces eventually entered Saigon on April 30, 1975, and unified the two Vietnams under Hanoi's totalitarian government.

#### **LINEBACKER AND BEYOND DEBATE**

The LINEBACKER II campaign has been the topic of a large number of studies due to its influence on air power doctrine. Many see the bombing of North Vietnam in December 1972 as a decisive strike. Many civilian and military leaders regard LINEBACKER II as the ideal example of a successful strategic bombing campaign. LINEBACKER II achieved air superiority

and struck the enemy at its vital power centers, severely disrupting the economic, military, and political life of the North Vietnamese. They believe the campaign proves strategic air power is an effective means of achieving political and national objectives. Henry Kissinger credited the bombing with forcing the North Vietnamese to sign a final peace agreement: "There was a deadlock . . . in the middle of December, and there was a rapid movement when negotiations resumed on January 8. These facts have to be analyzed by each person for himself."<sup>39</sup> On the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of LINEBACKER II, Walter Boyne observed:

To Air Force observers, the events of 1975 pointed up a classic case of "what might have been." To them, full application of airpower in a LINEBACKER II-type campaign in 1965, a decade earlier, would have achieved military victory, prevented the long and costly US involvement in Southeast Asia, saved South Vietnam as a nation, and allowed the US to escape the calamitous effects that the Vietnamese war has afflicted on America ever since.<sup>40</sup>

Others, however, such as Kenneth Werrell disagree. An Air Force Academy Graduate, professor of history at Radford University and a visiting associate professor (1977-78) at the Army Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas and visiting fellow (1981-83) at the Airpower Research Institute at Maxwell AFB, Alabama, Werrell offers his conclusions in "LINEBACKER II: The Decisive Use of Air Power?" Militarily, he gives LINEBACKER II credit as an outstanding feat of arms. However, he does not believe that strategic bombing achieved a decisive end to the Vietnam War. Werrell offers two justifications for his conclusion: First, there were few vital strategic targets in the North and, second, in 1972, American airmen were not prepared to carry out such intense non-nuclear operations. He believed LINEBACKER II was not, and could not have been, decisive in the Vietnam War.<sup>41</sup>

Air Force Academy History Professor Mark Clodfelter in The Limits of Air Power: The American Bombing of North Vietnam, (1989), also explains his version of why Air Force doctrine on strategic bombing did not work in a limited war like Vietnam. Clodfelter also thought LINEBACKER II was a successful military operation. However, its success was based in the campaign's limited objective of forcing the North Vietnamese to negotiate.

Clodfelter opposes General LeMay's assertion that the Vietnam War could have been won during any ten-day period. He notes the North was fighting an unconventional war until the spring of 1972. Once the North committed conventional forces to a conventional attack, American air power proved effective. Then both LINEBACKERS succeeded. Because the Air Force believed political limitations were preventing air power from gaining victory, no changes have been made to the strategic bombing doctrine. Air Force doctrine, according to Clodfelter,

remains focused on a conventional war. He cites to Air Force Manual 1-1 to stress the Air Forces' faith in unbridled air power; the manual quotes Italian Air Marshal Giulio Douhet: "The employment of land, sea, and air forces in time of war should be directed towards one single aim: VICTORY. . . . The commander[s] of the Army, Navy, and Air Force should be given the greatest freedom of action in their respective sphere."<sup>42</sup>

Veteran Air Force officer, Earl Tilford, Jr., likewise refers to the myth of LINEBACKER II. In his (1991), Setup: What the Air Force Did in Vietnam and Why Tilford argues that the strategic bombing doctrine advocated by the Air Force at the beginning of the war distorted their perception of what was needed and possible in the conflict. Air Force leaders regarded North Vietnam as an industrial nation fighting a conventional war. In effect, Tilford saw the Air Force as setting itself up for failure in Vietnam. Tilford, like Clodfelter and Werrell, agrees that LINEBACKER II compelled the North to return to negotiations. He also believes the operation, unfortunately, was important psychologically for the South, proving that American air power could enforce an agreement that otherwise threatened their existence. Tilford states: "Air power, marvelous in its flexibility, had succeeded in bombing a United States ally into accepting its own surrender. Beyond these results, LINEBACKER II did very little militarily other than rearrange the rubble that LINEBACKER I had caused."<sup>43</sup>

In "Learning from History: LINEBACKER II and U.S. Air Force Doctrine" R.W. Leonard presents a brief history of how air power doctrine was formulated up to 1972, showing how those ideas influenced LINEBACKER II. The doctrine asserted that air power alone, properly applied, could win wars. It was developed and endorsed by Giulio Douhet and Billy Mitchell. First, air superiority had to be achieved by neutralizing the enemy's ability to counter or destroy your planes. Next, large numbers of aircraft are needed to destroy the enemy's war-making ability or his will to fight. The final and most challenged of Mitchell and Douhet's tenet is their claim that the bomber will always get through to its intended target.<sup>44</sup>

Leonard agrees with many of the points that Werrell, Clodfelter, and Tilford make in their writings. However, Leonard traces Air Force doctrine through successive editions of Air Force Manual (AFM) 1-1 looking for changes in air power doctrine. The 1984 version of AFM 1-1 offered little change from its predecessor, with no change in basic doctrine. Air Force Doctrine was still based on conventional war with an industrialized nation. AFM 1-1's 1992 version, published after DESERT STORM, de-emphasized the role of strategic bombing. Leonard believes this change is because the Cold War had ended. The 1992 version also recognizes that in non-conventional conflicts, air power may play a secondary role.<sup>45</sup>

Leonard believes that a change in the interpretation of the success of LINEBACKER II began in the 1980's. He designates the original interpretation, which dominated the Air Force immediately after LINEBACKER II, as the traditional interpretation. The revisionist interpretation then challenged LINEBACKER II as a validation of traditional air power doctrine. Revisionists focused on the Air Force failures in Vietnam, rather than the reasons for failure. The revisionists emphasized that strategic air power doctrine simply did not work in Vietnam.<sup>46</sup>

## **AIR CAMPAIGN INFLUENCES AFTER LINEBACKER II**

### **DESERT STORM**

When Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990, the revisionist interpretation of LINEBACKER II was widely accepted by members of the Air Force community. Air Force planners did not want to repeat the mistakes of Vietnam when planning the air campaign for DESERT STORM. The concept of the DESERT STORM air campaign was based on Colonel John Warden's "five concentric ring theory." Warden reviewed the battlefield as a dartboard. First and most important is the bull's-eye. In Iraq, Saddam Hussein's command and control facilities, political headquarters, and secret police network were the bull's-eye. Outer rings, by importance, are the military and economic production capability, modes of transportation, population and its food sources, and finally in the outermost ring is the enemy's military forces. Warden reasoned the military forces existed only to protect the inner rings. Warden, a veteran of Vietnam, called the air campaign INSTANT THUNDER, playing on the ROLLING THUNDER campaign. The goal of the plan was to attack the enemy's centers of gravity (starting with the bull's-eye) and persuade Hussein to pull his troops from Kuwait without a ground war.<sup>47</sup>

Air Force Chief of Staff General Michael Dugan supported Warden and believed strategic air power would be instrumental for success in the Gulf War. Dugan reversed Clausewitz's claim that war progressed from the outside in: "Armies would clash on the periphery of each side's territory and then penetrate to the interior. This time, the Air Force would wage war from the inside out, the first truly strategic air war."<sup>48</sup>

Not everyone endorsed Warden's plan. Lt Gen Chuck Horner, the Joint Air Component Commander for Desert Storm, did not personally like Warden or his plan. General Colin Powell, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, did not like the plan because it did not call for any strikes on Iraqi ground troops that had invaded Kuwait. Navy planners referred to the plan as Distant Blunder. Distant because Warden worked at the Pentagon and Blunder because they believed attacking Baghdad at the beginning of the campaign was a miscalculation. Then Warden lost his strongest ally when General Dugan was fired. Ostensibly, he was dismissed was for giving

details about the future air campaign to members to the press. Privately, many believe he was fired because he publicly argued for air power as the primary option to win the Gulf War. The final air campaign plan for Desert Storm was basically the plan Dugan was fired for revealing. It incorporated the same principles of Warden's INSTANT THUNDER.<sup>49</sup>

#### DELIBERATE FORCE

NATO forces bombed Bosnian Serbs to curtail Serb attacks against Sarajevo and force peace negotiations in the fall of 1995. Negotiators had been trying for over three years to agree on a peace treaty. The operation was triggered when the Bosnian Serbs launched a grisly mortar attack on a Sarajevo market that left nearly 40 dead and more than 80 wounded.<sup>50</sup> Operation DELIBERATE FORCE succeeded, primarily through air power, in the bringing about a peace agreement.

#### ALLIED FORCE

Air power enthusiasts were again touting victory by air after the air only campaign in Kosovo. However, the 78 day air campaign over Kosovo is a classic example of military strategy being constrained by political considerations. In ALLIED FORCE, Lieutenant General Michael Short, The Joint Force Air Component Commander experienced this firsthand. NATO operates by consensus, so General Short had to employ a plan of gradual escalation of strikes to meet NATO's desires. This gradualism runs counter to the air power theories of Douhet and Mitchell, as well as Air Force doctrine which calls for decisive use of airpower rather than half-measures. Great Britain, in an after action report on the air operations stated: "The conduct of military, including air operations, must reflect political realities. Current doctrine should remain essentially unchanged, but its practical implication should always take account of these wider considerations."<sup>51</sup>

Critics of the bombing campaign cite inflated damage assessment bombing results and too long a campaign against a military that lacked the capability to achieve victory.

#### ANACONDA

From 2 to 10 March 2002, Coalition forces in Afghanistan participated in the most intense battle to date in the War on Terrorism. Fighting during Operation ANACONDA took place in mountainous terrain at altitudes above 10,000 Feet. Because of these conditions, U.S. Army personnel were fighting without heavy artillery and had to rely on the Air Force and precision air power for close support. Despite the Coalition victory in ANACONDA, Army personnel were critical of the Air Force's response time for close air support. The Commander in Afghanistan,

Major General Franklin Hagenbeck, complained publicly about the Air Force's responsiveness. According to General Hagenbeck, the complaint was taken out of context. However, the role and proper employment of air power is still controversial over 30 years from LINEBACKER II.

## **CONCLUSION**

The debate over LINEBACKER II and its role in Air Force strategic bombing doctrine has been ongoing for 30 years. The campaign has played a big part in Air Force doctrine and air power history. Past and future merged in both leadership and technology during LINEBACKER II. Senior Air Force leaders during Vietnam were veterans of WWII and students of early air power doctrine. Generals like Curtis LeMay were ardent supporters of Mitchell and Douhet. Their career encompassed the overwhelming but costly victories of WWII; then they witnessed a gradual decrease in the effective use of air power in Korea and Vietnam. They interpreted LINEBACKER II as a successful campaign using conventional strategic bombing doctrine. By citing only at the tactical success of LINEBACKER II, these leaders clung to past doctrine and advocated it as effective future doctrine.

Air Force senior leaders today are veterans of Vietnam. They have witnessed air power from its early failings in Vietnam to the success of LINEBACKER II toward the war's conclusion. After LINEBACKER II, they participated in DESERT STORM, Bosnia, Kosovo, and currently Afghanistan. The Air Force leaders of today have witnessed overwhelming U.S. air power dominate conflicts. Unlike their predecessors in Vietnam, today's leaders have lived their careers from failure to success. However, the Air Force must temper the value of these current successes with a more comprehensive strategic awareness.

The debate over proper air power doctrine should continue. Air Force Doctrine Document 1 (AFDD-1) replaced AFM 1-1 in 1997. The new document more accurately addresses the kind of conflicts the U.S. may fight. Sections about Military Operations Other Than War (MOOTW) and joint operations align Air Force capabilities with national policy. Lessons learned from past conflicts emphasize the need for centralized control and decentralized execution of air campaigns. Yet, past criticism of the Air Force adhering strictly to Mitchell and Douhet's theories are not evident in current official doctrine.

Combined, the forces of the U.S. military provide an asymmetric advantage in any conflict. Air power is just another instrument of military power. The desire and advocacy to use it should reside in the political will and needs of the nation's civilian leadership. A Rand Corporation study on the assessment of the air campaign in Kosovo validates Clausewitz's claim that war is an extension of politics by other means:

The most remarkable thing about Operation Allied Force is not that it defeated Milosevic in the end, but rather air power prevailed despite a NATO leadership that was unwilling to take major risks and an alliance that held together only with often paralyzing drag. . . . After years of false promises by its outspoken prophets air power has become an unprecedentedly capable instrument of force employment in joint warfare. Even in the best of circumstances, however, it can never be more effective than the strategy it is intended to support.<sup>52</sup>

Current debate over the use of air power concerns itself more with the coordination of air power rather than its capabilities. Operation ANACONDA exemplifies this.

Air power clearly cannot win all our nation's wars. Politicians and the military must not conduct future wars on the basis of such selected campaigns as DESERT STORM, ALLIED FORCE, and LINEBACKER II. The next war will be different from the last, and the nation must prepare accordingly. History gives us an objective study of the past. LINEBACKER II offers an intriguing case study for developing effective modern air power doctrine.

WORD COUNT=7,606

## ENDNOTES

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- <sup>3</sup> Ibid., 65-66.
- <sup>4</sup> Richard M. Nixon, No More Vietnams (New York: Arbor House, 1985), 99.
- <sup>5</sup> Ibid., 100
- <sup>6</sup> Ibid., 98
- <sup>7</sup> Momyer, 10.
- <sup>8</sup> Curtis LeMay, "Strategic Air Warfare: An Interview with Generals Curtis E. LeMay, Leon Johnson, David A. Burchinal, and Jack J. Catton," Office of Air Force History, 1988.
- <sup>9</sup> Robert Pape, Bombing to Win: Air Power and Coercion in War (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 200.
- <sup>10</sup> Harry G. Summers, Historical Atlas of the Vietnam War (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1995), 297-298.
- <sup>11</sup> Pape, 200.
- <sup>12</sup> Mark Clodfelter, The Limits of Airpower: The American Bombing of North Vietnam (New York: The Free Press, MacMillan, Inc., 1989), 140.
- <sup>13</sup> Lyndon Baines Johnson, The Vantage Point: Perspectives of the Presidency 1963-1969 (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1971), 518.
- <sup>14</sup> Clodfelter, 147.
- <sup>15</sup> Arnold R. Isaacs, Without Honor, (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), 18.
- <sup>16</sup> Seymour Hersh, The Price of Power: Kissinger in the Nixon White House (New York: Summit Books, 1983), 506.
- <sup>17</sup> Tilford, 234.
- <sup>18</sup> Clodfelter, 153.
- <sup>19</sup> Jeffrey Kimball, Nixon's Vietnam War (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1998), 315.
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid., 316.

- <sup>21</sup> Earl H. Tilford, Jr, Crosswinds (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1993), 154.
- <sup>22</sup> Stanley Karnow, Vietnam: A History, (New York: The Viking Press, 1983), 640.
- <sup>23</sup> Van Tien Dung, Our Great Spring Victory, (New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1977), 19.
- <sup>24</sup> Nixon, 151.
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>27</sup> Phillip B. Davidson, Totus Porcus, in Vietnam at War, (California: Presido Press, 1988), 726.
- <sup>28</sup> Charles N. Brown, "The B-52 And LINEBACKER II," Friends Journal (December 1999): 9.
- <sup>29</sup> James R. McCarthy and George B. Allison, LINEBACKER II: A view From the Rock, (Maxwell AFB, Alabama: Airpower Research Institute, 1979), 41.
- <sup>30</sup> Herman L. Gilster, LINEBACKER II: USAF Bombing Survey, in The Air War in Southeast Asia: Case Studies of Selected Campaigns (Maxwell AFB, Alabama: Air University Press, 1993), 75.
- <sup>31</sup> McCarthy and Allison, 46-47.
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.
- <sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.
- <sup>34</sup> Clodfelter, 187.
- <sup>35</sup> McCarthy and Allison, 91-99.
- <sup>36</sup> Tilford, Crosswinds, 261-262.
- <sup>37</sup> Clodfelter, 194-195.
- <sup>38</sup> Walter J. Boyne, "LINEBACKER II." Air Force Magazine (Nov 1997): 75.
- <sup>39</sup> McCarthy and Allison, 173.
- <sup>40</sup> Boyne, 76.
- <sup>41</sup> Kenneth P. Werrell, "LINEBACKER II: The Decisive Use of Air Power," Air University Review (January – March 1987): 38.
- <sup>42</sup> Clodfelter, 208-209.

<sup>43</sup> Tilford, Setup, 292.

<sup>44</sup> Raymond Leonard, "Learning From History: LINEBACKER II and U.S. Air Force Doctrine," The Journal of Military History (April 1994): 267.

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<sup>47</sup> Michael R. Gordon and General Bernard E. Trainor, The Generals' War, (Boston, NY, and London: Little Brown and Company, 1995), 78-79.

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 92-104.

<sup>50</sup> John D. Morrocco, "Bombing Compels Serb Withdrawal," Aviation Week & Space Technology, 15 September 1995, 36.

<sup>51</sup> Alan Boyer, "Leadership and the Kosovo Air Campaign," Canadian Military Journal (Autumn 2002): 46.

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