

The relative influence of independent bombing and interdiction during the Linebacker campaigns of the Vietnam War

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*'I will say that there was a deadlock which was described 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 by himself...'*¹

With these words, 'Presidential Special Assistant Henry Kissinger remarked on the role of Linebacker II during a January 1973 press conference.'² The 1972 Linebacker operations have widely been accredited with ending the Vietnam War in 1973 and have subsequently been held up by air power exponents as vindication of the use of independent air power operations and 'that bombing is a substitute for actually fighting a ground war with heavy casualties.'³ This paper will dissect the two aspects of Linebacker and contextualize those operations in order to assess the relative influence of the use of independent air power in Vietnam in 1972 and in subsequent applications.

When the North Vietnamese launched their Easter Offensive on 30 March 1972, it did so in a very different manner from that of previous operations, the main difference being the scale of the operation; a three-pronged invasion using nine divisions, and 200 tanks, of the North Vietnamese Army (NVA), this was an offensive using its army in a truly conventional role.⁴ It was a direct assault upon the 'Vietnamization' policy of the Nixon Administration, which had begun in 1969; 'by January 1972, only 139,000 Americans remained in Vietnam, and the number fell to 69,000 in April'.⁵

Politically unable to witness the defeat of South Vietnam but also unwilling to reverse, or even halt, the withdrawal of ground forces without it having detrimental effect upon public opinion in the States, Nixon 'had to rely on air and naval power'.⁶ During the Johnson Administration, up to 1968, the main air operation conducted against the North was the interdiction campaign, Operation Rolling Thunder. This had been a 3½-year operation using coercion based upon the Schelling principles of raising 'the risk of civilian damage slowly, compelling the opponent to concede to avoid suffering future costs' thus holding 'ultimate ruin in abeyance'.⁷ The reasons for its failure are outside the scope of this analysis but Nixon's initial response, Operation Freedom Train, followed similar lines of graduated response, moving its targeting up towards the capital, Hanoi, and the country's principal port of Haiphong.

¹ Lavalley (1978), p. ix

² *ibid.*

³ Hone (1998), p. 518

⁴ Clodfelter (2006), p. 153

⁵ *ibid.*, p. 149

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ Pape (1996), p. 67

It aimed to send a diplomatic message to the North, its allies of China and the USSR, and also to those in Washington who were eager to see the back of the war; Kissinger later wrote, ‘if we wanted to force a diplomatic solution, we had to create an impression of implacable determination to prevail.’⁸ What it didn’t do was halt the flow of supplies to the NVA at the front nor, in using Schelling’s principles, did it convince the North, with continuing success against the South Vietnamese Army (ARVN), that a return to the negotiating table was necessary.⁹ Accordingly, Operation Linebacker was unleashed on 10 May 1972. Beginning with Operation Pocket Money, the mining of Haiphong harbour two days earlier, this was an interdiction operation aimed at blunting the edge of the NVA offensive, thus enabling the ARVN’s survival and recovery. The definition of interdiction is to ‘impede (an enemy force), especially by bombing lines of communication or supply’.¹⁰ With this operation holding true to the definition, the orders to the air forces of the USAF and USN, now hugely reinforced from their 1971 numbers, were to:

- ‘interdict land and water communications, including rail and highway bridges
- Interdict choke and transshipment (sic) points
- Destroy POL systems and storage areas
- Destroy war-supporting systems [such as military supplies, industrial plants, power systems]
- Attack air defense (sic) systems’¹¹

One obvious difference between this operation and those preceding was that it abandoned gradualism; the plethora of restrictions over targeting and routing were now significantly eased. Indeed, the only no-go area was a buffer zone along the Chinese border, whilst Hanoi’s restricted zone, within which targeting had to be approved by the Secretary of Defense, was reduced in size from thirty to ten miles.¹² The other notable operational change was the use of Precision-Guided Munitions. Their widespread use in Linebacker meant that the US could attack targets which had either been previously impervious to attack by conventional munitions, or which had been off-limits due to their proximity to sensitive areas. A prime example of the former is the Thanh Hoa bridge which, ‘during three years of Rolling Thunder, hundreds of sorties had suffered eleven losses while fruitlessly attacking...with unguided bombs’.¹³ In April 1972, during Freedom Train, the bridge was attacked with television-guided bombs, closing it to traffic; on 13 May, the bridge was again attacked, this time with 3000lb laser-guided bombs, dropping the span. PGMs also gave the advantage of aircraft being able to stand-off from the target and the enhanced accuracy provided crews with the opportunity to release ordnance from a higher altitude, above much of the anti-aircraft fire. However, ‘while guided bombs facilitated interdiction, they did not make it easy’.¹⁴

⁸ Kissinger (2011), p. 1116

⁹ *ibid.*, p.1175

¹⁰ Soanes & Stevenson (2006), p. 740

¹¹ CHECO – 31 Dec 78, p.11

¹² Thompson (2000), p.250

¹³ *ibid.* p. 234

¹⁴ *ibid.* p. 235

The most significant policy change during Linebacker was the permission to mine Haiphong harbour. Previously Off limits, the import of goods through the harbour fell ‘from more than 250,000 tons a month to near zero’.¹⁵ Carrier-based aircraft commenced mining on 8 May, with the understanding that the mines would not become armed immediately, thus giving third-party shipping time to safely escape the combat zone. Coupled with the air interdiction of lines of communication, which ‘reduced overland imports from 160,000 tons to 30,000 tons a month’ and political overtures to China and the USSR, who were keen not to derail the new processes of *détente* and *rapprochement*, the flow of goods to North Vietnam from those key allies was halted for a period of three months and the NVA was forced to dig into its reserves.¹⁶ What made this interdiction effective was the changed nature of the North’s operations. Having evolved from an insurgency to a conventional army, the NVA’s needs were now also conventional, requiring ‘vast amounts of ammunition and oil...essential to the success of the invasion’ that made ‘the transport and storage of such goods...especially vulnerable to air attack.’¹⁷ Pape agrees; ‘Linebacker I was a pure case of interdiction bombing’.¹⁸ ‘Coercion succeeded...because...Hanoi had changed from a guerilla strategy, which was essentially immune to air power, to a conventional offensive strategy, which was highly vulnerable to air interdiction.’¹⁹ ‘Enemy communications spoke of ammunition shortages; [US] pilots reported a noticeable reduction in surface-to-air missile firings, indicating that Hanoi might be rationing its stocks.’²⁰ The ‘reduction in materials reaching the front line and the massive close support bombing did damage the North Vietnamese invasion forces enough to allow the South Vietnamese Army to regain most of the territory it had earlier lost’.²¹ The South’s rout had been halted by early June; the key city of Quang Tri had been recaptured by 15 September, by a much smaller force, and the NVA was now on the defensive. Having lost the initiative, the North agreed to return to the negotiating table; Operation Linebacker ended on 23 October 1972.

With Hanoi on the back foot, the US and North Vietnam tentatively agreed conditions for peace. Hoping to sign by the end of October, these terms were, however, unacceptable to the South and, with proposed changes to the draft wording unacceptable to Hanoi, the talks withered. In order to maintain the pressure on the North and, with a presidential election looming on 7 November, Nixon ordered B52 strikes further towards Hanoi. With Nixon’s landslide re-election, but his Republican party suffering major losses in the congressional elections, ‘it was certain that Congress would demand an end to the war when it returned in January.’²² By 12 December, the North Vietnamese informed Kissinger that they were ‘willing to continue the war rather than yield on Nixon’s new points. Kissinger realized the North Vietnamese were giving just enough to keep the talks going until Congress intervened.’²³ ‘Frustrated by Hanoi’s uncompromising demands, and fearing the US

¹⁵ Clodfelter (2006), p. 167

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁸ Pape (1996), p. 199

¹⁹ *ibid.* p. 209

²⁰ Kissinger (2011), p. 1302

²¹ Smith (1998), p. 170

²² Michell (2002), p. 44

²³ *ibid.* p. 52

Congress might soon cut off funds for the war, President Nixon was ready to use strategic air power as the key instrument of national policy'.²⁴ Thus started the second round, Operation Linebacker II on 18 December 1972.

'Linebacker II's purpose and target set largely paralleled those of Linebacker I'.²⁵ 'Linebacker II, however, followed a quicker pace than before; in twelve days the United States flew almost half as many sorties against Hanoi, Haiphong, and the Chinese buffer zone as in the six months of Linebacker I'.²⁶ What did differ was the use of B52 aircraft and the scale by which they were employed. Illustrating the degree of commitment by Washington, roughly half of the USAF's B52 force was deployed for the Christmas Bombing.²⁷ With a short break for Christmas Day, the bombing of Hanoi and Haiphong continued until 29 December, using all-weather B52s, F111s and USN A6 aircraft at night and aircraft such as the F4 during the day, using radio-aided bombing to negate the poor weather. 729 B52 sorties attacked 34 targets, mostly on the peripheries of Hanoi and Haiphong and close enough to have a psychological impact upon the populaces, especially as, using radar and radio, poor weather was no longer a bar to bombing. Precision attacks on targets such as power-plants and railway facilities meant that 'Linebacker II caused few civilian casualties, but it did unsettle the North's urban populace'.²⁸ '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.'²⁹ On 28 December 1972, Hanoi 'indicated its willingness to resume serious talks.'³⁰ The final ceasefire, ending US involvement in the Vietnam War, was signed on 27 January 1973.

The COD describes coercion as 'persuade (an unwilling person) to do something by using force or threats'.³¹ With this in mind, Linebacker I certainly coerced North Vietnam to the negotiating table in October 1972 by setting the conditions whereby its offensive gains had been reversed and the US and South Vietnamese forces had begun to reclaim lost territory. This is not necessarily so for the success of Linebacker II, despite being, from the outset, a campaign against both the means and, more pertinently, the will of the North to wage war.³² The conditions of the peace accords signed in January 1973 were not significantly different from those presented in May 1972, at the outset of Linebacker, nor in October 1972, when North Vietnam had agreed the wording of the peace accords with the US. 'Whereas it compelled Hanoi to return to serious bargaining, Linebacker II made no substantial difference in the terms of the agreement'.³³ Tilford agrees: 'Linebacker I, not the "Eleven-Day War,"

²⁴ Teixeira (1990), p. 6

²⁵ Pape (1996), p. 201

²⁶ *ibid.*

²⁷ Smith (1998), p. 121

²⁸ Clodfelter (2006), p. 195

²⁹ Michael (2003), p. 9

³⁰ Pape, (1996), p. 204

³¹ Soanes & Stevenson (2006), p. 277

³² Clodfelter (2006), p. 177

³³ Pape, (1996), p. 204

had jeopardized Hanoi's designs on South Vietnam'.³⁴ Whilst it is true that the Christmas Bombing brought renewed desire for the North to negotiate, the success that the second operation did have was in influencing the government of the South that the US was not trying to exit the war under any circumstances but that it was prepared to act decisively and firmly against an aggressive stance from the North, thus assuring the future of South Vietnam; if the term coercion, with its 'use of force' context, can be used against an ally, then it can be said that the South were equally, if not more, coerced than the North. 'Linebacker I persuaded Hanoi to accept the terms of the Paris Accords. Linebacker II became necessary when [South Vietnam's] President Thieu delayed the signing of the agreement and the North began to backslide from its commitments. The second Linebacker campaign restored Hanoi's commitment to the accords'.³⁵ With the accords signed, Vietnam fell into an uneasy peace throughout 1973. By 1974, the North were in a position to revisit its 1972 Easter Offensive, but it was not until the Case-Church amendment, forbidding US military involvement in South-East Asia came into effect in August 1973 and after Nixon had resigned in August 1974 that North Vietnam felt confident that the US would not intervene with air power. The final attack on South Vietnam commenced in late 1974. Linebacker II had given the South breathing room; 'The bombing improved the South's chances for survival by assuring that Hanoi could not soon attempt a major military operation. It also contributed to Thieu's acceptance of the January accord'.³⁶ 'In a personal letter of 5 January, Nixon promised, "We will respond with full force should the settlement be violated by North Vietnam." Since American ground troops were all but gone, "full force" could only mean American airpower. Furthermore, "full" implied the kind of force used in Linebacker Two. Air power, marvelous in its flexibility, had succeeded in bombing a United States ally into accepting its own surrender'.³⁷

Observers of the Christmas Bombing are divided upon the psychological influence of this short campaign. The large use of heavy bombers, capable of delivering substantial bomb-loads, regardless of the weather was clearly a consideration when Nixon chose to escalate; 'the choice of B52s was partly for shock effect, [in choosing to concentrate around the two North Vietnamese metropolises] but also because our other aircraft had no all-weather capability'.³⁸ Clodfelter agrees with an official US report in that: 'The attacks disrupted the lives of Hanoi's inhabitants, causing between 20 and 40 percent of the city's populace to evacuate'.³⁹ 'Massive evacuations of Hanoi and Haiphong were reported, and there were indications that the people were anxious to leave cities for the first time in the war'.⁴⁰ However, Pape thinks this exaggerates the effects: 'There is no evidence that bombing disrupted the social and political fabric of North Vietnam. Civilians may have been frightened, but there was no general panic, civil disobedience, or grass-roots opposition to the Hanoi government' and that 'none of the available evidence suggests that civilian

³⁴ Tilford (2002), p. 292

³⁵ *ibid.* p. 202

³⁶ Clodfelter (2006), p.202

³⁷ Tilford (2002), p. 264

³⁸ Kissinger (2011), p. 1448

³⁹ Clodfelter (2006), p. 167

⁴⁰ CHECO – 31 Dec 78, p. 71

vulnerability contributed to the success of American coercion.⁴¹ Nevertheless, US prisoners of war in the ‘Hanoi Hilton’ largely reported that the effect upon the individual Vietnamese citizen was demonstrable, in one case a ‘POW reported he saw a guard, trembling like a leaf, drop his rifle and wet his pants.’⁴² Regardless of the true effect that the bombing had upon the populace and its consequent influence upon the rulers, the threat posed by the bombing caused a degree of anguish hitherto unseen amongst North Vietnam’s civilians, creating another layer of unease for the *politburo*.

The Schelling principles of gradualism had been used by both Johnson in Rolling Thunder and by Nixon in his initial response to the Easter Offensive. Neither worked on the North’s leadership as this was their war of national survival, with re-unification as its goal; ‘the threat of limited bombing of industrial targets did not pose the risk of sufficiently brutal civilian hardship to overwhelm Hanoi’s territorial interests.’⁴³ The Linebacker operations succeeded because, in interdicting conventional forces, the operations finally threatened the North’s ability to wage war and, therefore, its ability to defend its existence.⁴⁴ Additionally, the more limited, pragmatic objective of ‘peace with honor (sic)’ by bringing the North to the negotiating table, rather than Johnson’s aim of persuading North Vietnam ‘to turn away from its major goal of subverting South Vietnam’, meant that accommodations could be made between the adversaries.⁴⁵

The Linebacker operations have been held up by air power exponents as key examples of how the independent use of air power can win wars. ‘They believe the campaign proves strategic air power is an effective means of achieving political and national objectives’.⁴⁶ In the years before and after Linebacker, US air power doctrine evolved little, based as it was upon the work of early air power theorists such as Douhet and Mitchell, who espoused that air power alone could win wars, that the bomber would always get through and that large numbers of aircraft were required to destroy the enemy’s war-making ability and his will to fight.⁴⁷ Linebacker, when taken in isolation, could be said to fulfill all of these tenets, thus proving, rather than dispelling contemporary doctrine. Linebacker also provided an attractive model to politicians; they could see that the war had been ended by a swift, decisive action undertaken by limited numbers of combatants at relatively low cost. ‘Thus, when Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990, the perceived success of Linebacker II...strongly influenced American military and civilian planners’.⁴⁸ Compounding that success, 1999’s Kosovo campaign relied solely upon air and, despite a Schelling-like gradualist approach owing to political constraints, and in being incoherent in its prosecution of the enemy’s centre of gravity, it drew upon clear lessons inferred by Linebacker.⁴⁹ Operation Linebacker continued to influence large-scale US military operations for almost 30 years after its end, despite ignoring the reality that Linebacker did not win

⁴¹ Pape (1996), p. 209

⁴² McCarthy and Allison (1983), p. 174

⁴³ Pape (1996), p. 68

⁴⁴ Clodfelter (2006), p. 196

⁴⁵ Hone (1998), p. 518

⁴⁶ Michael (2003), p. 13

⁴⁷ *ibid.*, p. 14

⁴⁸ Michel, (2002), p. 237

⁴⁹ Michael (2003), p. 16

the war in Vietnam; Linebacker ended the United States' involvement in Vietnam, brought, for them, 'peace with honor' and, for the South, breathing space until the North's victory and re-unification on 30 April 1975.

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