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LINEBACKER II, THE DECEMBER 1972 VIETNAM WAR AIR CAMPAIGN

BY

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USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

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ABSTRACT

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This paper is an objective evaluation of the December 1972 Vietnam War air campaign, Linebacker II. It describes the evolution of the strategy, examines the campaign itself, and evaluates the results. Military success is measured only to the extent objectives in support of national policy are achieved. It is the thesis of this paper that Linebacker II was a military success primarily due to clear, obtainable objectives and the proper application of and commitment to use air power to its fullest capabilities. The principles of war will be used to support this assertion and will be the framework for the evaluation. Minimal target restrictions and rules of engagement enabled military commanders to design a strategy and execute an air campaign that achieved national objectives and, though not a perfect textbook example, apply the guidelines of the principles of war in a manner to achieve military success.

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The Vietnam War was a complicated conflict with vague goals and unclear political and military objectives. It was an example of limited air power in an unconventional limited war fought for special political objectives. Initially, civilian leaders at the highest levels were ambivalent about whether the United States (US) was engaged in a counterinsurgency or a theater conventional war with North Vietnam trying to conquer South Vietnam. Only in retrospect is it obvious that Hanoi used the smokescreen of a revolutionary war to hide its true intent of reuniting Vietnam.

President Lyndon Johnson sought an independent stable non-communist South Vietnam capable of standing alone against future aggression and wished to achieve that aim without undue cost to the US. He did not want to run the risk of war with China or Russia over North Vietnam nor have North Vietnam eclipse his "Great Society" programs. On the other hand, President Richard Nixon had a notion of victory and was willing to face the wrath of Russia and China. Their national policies were executed through three major air campaigns, Rolling Thunder, Linebacker I, and Linebacker II.

This paper focuses on Linebacker II and is an objective evaluation of the campaign. It describes the evolution of the strategy, examines the campaign itself, and evaluates the results. The principles of war, generally accepted "truths" and

aspects of warfare that are universally true and relevant and apply equally to all US Armed Forces, will be used as a framework for the evaluation.[1] The principles of war also serve as a frame of reference for the analysis of planning factors and tactical considerations in order to examine military strategy and determine if the strategy serves the national interest.[2] Military success is measured only to the extent objectives in support of national policy are achieved. It is the thesis of this paper that Linebacker II was a military success primarily due to clear, obtainable objectives and the proper application of and commitment to use air power to its fullest capabilities.

BACKGROUND

The US increased its focus and attention on Southeast Asia (SEA) as early as 1954 when the Viet Minh defeated the French. The US regarded maintenance of international peace and security in SEA as vital to its national interests and world peace and based upon a policy of containment of communism, limited its involvement to financial aid, military equipment, and advisors.[3] Under President John Kennedy, the US escalated its commitment with an increase in troop strength, an air power deployment, and an authorization for troops to go into combat.

However, South Vietnam's inability to hold the line against the Viet Cong rapidly became obvious.[4] The military wanted an air campaign strategy that was consistent with traditional strategic bombardment doctrine, one of massive retaliation where forces could fly to the enemy's heartland to lay waste to its vital industrial centers and destroy the war sustaining capability to fight. President Johnson viewed the strategy as too extreme and rejected the proposal. He believed it would risk the possibility of Chinese and Soviet intervention and escalation into an international crisis.[5] Limited wars differ from traditional conventional wars and the military leaders did not necessarily understand the relationships between the political and military aspects and therefore were unable to deliver a doctrine consistent with the constraints on a war fought for

limited objectives. The lack of understanding and inability to design a strategy applicable to the unconventional war led President Johnson to keep personal control of the war.[6]

In response to the Gulf of Tonkin incident in August 1964,[7] President Johnson authorized the Navy to launch reprisal attacks from aircraft carriers against North Vietnamese naval bases and torpedo boats.[8] The punitive strikes were the first overt attacks committed and changed the posture of US involvement in SEA.

Policy changed in November 1964 from one of reprisal raids to an air campaign strategy of gradualism. The political objective was not to win nor wage a war against Hanoi. The US wanted to signal China and Russia that US goals were limited and did not threaten the existence of their ally.[9] Civilian leadership never sought even a limited victory and had a perception Hanoi would eventually reach a point and give in.

In early 1965 President Johnson faced three choices: continue with a role limited essentially to aid and advisory actions, recognize the situation as irretrievable and cease to support, or become more deeply involved. In order to prevent risking the collapse of South Vietnam's resistance and casting other US defense commitments in doubt, President Johnson decided to begin a sustained air war. He authorized an operation that was to be a limited air action against selected military targets and lines of communications below the 19th parallel.[10] However,

the details were left vague and basically remained vague because President Johnson wished to preserve flexibility.[11] Rolling Thunder was the code name given to the first systematic air campaign of the war, a series of limited yet forceful signals coupled with diplomatic incentives to achieve a psychological and political effect.

Rolling Thunder's political objective was to convince Hanoi that South Vietnam could not be conquered. The campaign started in March 1965 as an attempt to destroy North Vietnamese transportation routes and reduce the flow of resources from North to South Vietnam.[12] The military objectives were to reduce the infiltration of men and supplies, improve South Vietnamese morale, and reduce the enemy's will to fight. It was a phased program that grew from a modest effort to an extensive air campaign designed to destroy North Vietnam's capability to function as an economic unit and support its forces in the South. During each phase, emphasis placed upon targets differed and the scope and intensity of the attacks varied as well.[13]

The first phase focused on the destruction of North Vietnam's logistical system and the capacity to infiltrate men and supplies into South Vietnam. The second phase (June 1966) involved an intense series of attacks on North Vietnam's petroleum storage facilities and ammunition dumps.[14] During the third phase (March 1967) the weight of the attacks intensified

and was directed against industrial targets and airfields in the Hanoi-Haiphong area. By the fall of 1967, the damage inflicted failed to have measurable effects on the war in South Vietnam and President Johnson decided to de-escalate. The fourth phase (April 1968) consisted of interdiction attacks limited to an area south of the 19th parallel. Hanoi eventually agreed to start negotiations if the US halted the bombing of North Vietnam. The US terminated Rolling Thunder on 31 October 1968.[15]

By the end of the campaign aircraft delivered 643,000 tons of ordnance[16] and damaged/destroyed 77% of the ammunition depots, 65% of the Petroleum, Oil, and Lubricant (POL) storage facilities, 59% of North Vietnam's power plants, 55% of the bridges, and 39% of the railroads.[17] However, Hanoi received from China and Russia four times as much economic and military aid as the US destroyed, and therefore, did not waiver in its will or ability to continue.[18] President Johnson halted the bombing 13 times during the campaign to demonstrate a willingness to negotiate but Hanoi used the bombing respites to rebuild its military strength and improve its integrated air defenses.[19]

Rolling Thunder's fundamental purpose of persuading Hanoi to quit the war or at least return to the negotiation table resulted in unclear political and military objectives. The campaign began with high hopes and after three and one half years ended as a failure. An inadequate national strategy

seriously hampered military strategy and the campaign was a major misapplication of air power that achieved nothing at all of military or political consequence. It was an attempt at developing an air power doctrine that was incompatible with the air employment required over North Vietnam and one that did not conform to the objectives of civilian leadership. Rolling Thunder demonstrated tonnage of ordnance, technologically sophisticated weapons, and applied firepower, even in lesser doses, cannot substitute for a lack of a coherent strategy, one that was flawed by lack of proper targets, political restrictions, inhibiting rules of engagement, and a reliance on gradualism. Rolling Thunder did not persuade Hanoi nor destroy its ability to prosecute the war in the South. It was not a failure of arms, but of strategy.

For the next three and one half years, negotiations floundered while Hanoi built up massive stockpiles in the South. The US shifted policy and under President Nixon's "Vietnamization" policy started reducing its involvement in the war. President Nixon also opened initiatives with China and encouraged the spirit of détente with Russia hoping to isolate North Vietnam from its two major supporters.

During this period, sorties consisted mainly of interdiction efforts concentrated on Laos and Cambodia and "limited protective reaction strikes" (reconnaissance with armed

escorts) with North Vietnam being off limits except for sporadic raids.[20] These sorties revealed a renewed logistical buildup larger than the one that preceded the Tet offensive.

On 30 March 1972, North Vietnamese army divisions drove south across the demilitarized zone and east from Laos and Cambodia with a full-scale invasion into South Vietnam. When Hanoi abandoned the peace talks, President Nixon had three choices: immediate withdrawal of all US forces, continued attempts at negotiation, or decisive military action to end the war.[21] He decided to break the spirit of the communist regime and once and for all take the war to the North.

Three and one half years after President Johnson halted Rolling Thunder, President Nixon resumed full scale bombing operations in response to Hanoi's intransigence and invasion across international borders. In order to cut off the flow of supplies that permitted Hanoi to continue the war in the South, the US for the first time in the war imposed a naval blockade and mined the harbors of Haiphong and other North Vietnamese ports. The actions stood unopposed by Russia and China.[22]

This marked the beginning of Linebacker I, the second air campaign, and the renewed bombing throughout North Vietnam above the 20th parallel.[23] It was assumed only attacks above the 20th parallel would force Hanoi to realize the futility of trying to conquer the South. All of North Vietnam was cleared for attack

except for a buffer zone along the Chinese border and restricted areas around Hanoi and Haiphong.[24]

Military planners designed Linebacker I to destroy war fighting resources and supply lines. It was an interdiction campaign on the enemy's logistics network throughout SEA with three objectives: restrict the resupply of North Vietnam from external sources, destroy existing internal stockpiles of military supplies and equipment in North Vietnam, and reduce the flow of forces and supplies to the South.[25] The political objectives were to break the enemy's will and ability to continue fighting and convince Hanoi the US was not going to withdraw unilaterally and abandon its ally in the South or continue with pointless negotiations.

The immediate task of Linebacker I was to slow the invasion. This was accomplished and by mid summer the offensive was blunted and the tide turned in favor of South Vietnam. President Nixon's diplomatic initiatives with China coupled with Russia's priority on détente and low key response lessened the extent of the restrictions and allowed an increase in the attacks without fear of reprisal by the communist superpowers.[26] By fall the situation in the South had stabilized.[27]

President Nixon imposed minimum restrictions and wanted maximum results. Linebacker I was a dramatic demonstration of the effective application of conventional air power and a

sustained full scale bombing campaign that seriously disrupted the rail supply networks in the North and deprived the enemy of valuable external sources of supply. The campaign halted the enemy offensive, crippled Hanoi's ability to sustain military operations over an extended period, and influenced Hanoi to return to negotiations. It was the first time in the war an effort was made to destroy the sources of North Vietnam's logistics pipeline. President Nixon committed the US to an all out effort to save South Vietnam and inflict major damage on North Vietnam. Aircraft dropped 155,548 tons of ordnance and due to the mined harbors, coastal blockade, and destruction of its internal transportation system, North Vietnam was isolated from its sources of supply.[28]

When it seemed the peace talks were leading to an agreement, Henry Kissinger convinced President Nixon to halt the bombing. Linebacker I ended on 22 October 1972[29] and four days later, Henry Kissinger announced "we believe peace is at hand."[30] However, within two months of the bombing halt, Hanoi protracted negotiations and indicated a lack of interest in a settlement. Hanoi used the bombing respite to strengthen the air defenses around Hanoi-Haiphong, repair the damage done over the last six months to the rail lines to China, and adjust the supply routing to compensate for the naval blockade.

DESCRIPTION OF LINEBACKER II

By mid-December the situation in Hanoi was on the upswing with both the defense and war making capacity much improved. Negotiations were at an impasse and the potential for an agreement was doubtful. Hanoi walked out of the peace talks on 13 December and the next day, President Nixon sent an ultimatum to return to negotiations within 72 hours, Hanoi refused.[31] President Nixon, determined to bring about a negotiation, decided Hanoi needed to be shown negotiations would be preferable to continued hostilities and on 15 December, called for an unprecedented effort to deny the enemy the means to wage war.[32] He intended to destroy the North's will to fight, achieve maximum psychological impact, and demonstrate to South Vietnam America would remain committed to Southern independence.

The decision to resume bombing was made in order to deny Hanoi the sanctuary from which it was rebuilding its war making potential. Hanoi needed to be confronted with a total application of air power. To bring Hanoi back to negotiations, the US used the most destructive element in its arsenal, the B-52. Previously the B-52 was employed against tactical targets in South Vietnam and Laos while the fighters took on the heavily defended strategic targets in the North. The B-52 was selected as the center of the strike force due to its heavy payload, all-weather radar delivery capability, and shock effect.

Linebacker II was a short duration campaign, 18-29 December 1972, of concentrated air power with reduced operational restrictions against the heartland of North Vietnam. Virtually every target of military and economic significance was open to attack. The only real constraint was the desire to avoid civilian casualties. The strategy demonstrated the totality of strike capability with around-the-clock all-weather air strikes against point targets close to populated areas during the day with the F-4 and A-7 tactical aircraft using laser weapons and area targets on the outskirts of Hanoi and Haiphong during night with the B-52 and F-111. The political objective was to convince Hanoi it was in their best interest to return to the peace talks. The primary military objective was to strangle the war effort and shut down the massive pipeline of equipment and supplies that gave Hanoi its capability to sustain a major ground offensive in the South. Most strikes were against rail yards, power plants, communication facilities, POL stores, ammunition supply depots, and airfields. The fundamental purpose was to halt the North Vietnamese supply effort and deal such a blow that Hanoi would be forced back to negotiations.

The first warning order contained preliminary instructions for a 3-day maximum effort with an indication to prepare for an indefinite operation. Linebacker II aimed directly at Hanoi's will to fight and was designed to take out all military

installations in the Hanoi-Haiphong areas as well as other facilities that supported the war effort. The campaign replaced widespread interdiction of Linebacker I with concentrated strategic bombardment. The air forces consisted of 206 B-52s and 505 Navy, Air Force, and Marine tactical aircraft.[33]

Linebacker II was conducted in three phases. The main effort of the first phase, 18th to the 20th, was Hanoi. The first attack consisted of 129 B-52s against five targets in three waves four to five hours apart.[34] F-111s preceded the B-52s to suppress enemy fighters and reduce the ability of the Command and Control (C2) system to employ Surface-to-Air Missiles (SAM) and anti-aircraft artillery in a cohesive manner. F-4s laid chaff (metallic strips of reflective tape or aluminum) corridors to obscure the bombers from enemy radar, flew MIG combat air patrol, and bomber escort. EB-66, EA-3, and EA-6B aircraft provided electronic countermeasures (ECM) and radar jamming, and F-105 Wild Weasels flew SAM suppression. Additional support aircraft flew C2, search and rescue, refueling, surveillance, and reconnaissance missions.

The second and third night's tactics and attack plan were virtually the same as the first. The B-52s flew the same altitudes, headings, airspeed, and executed the same post target turn and egress routes. In addition, chaff corridors five miles wide and 100 miles long[35] identified the axis of attack and the

bombers were strung out in a formation 70 miles long with hours between the first and last aircraft over the target.[36] Operators determined a pattern and were able to use the first aircraft to predict flight path and altitude and then without radar guidance fired a barrage of missiles with proximity fuses set to explode at a desired altitude. US aircrews experienced Hanoi's most pronounced defensive effort on the third day and lost six B-52s to SAMs, a 6% attrition rate.[37]

President Nixon recognized the need to continue the pressure on Hanoi and extended the campaign indefinitely. During phase two (21st to 24th), because losses bordered on being unbearable, Strategic Air Command (SAC) decentralized control and the B-52s flew varied routes to prevent a pattern and deny the enemy its ability to predict. Operations were simplified and the B-52s flew in single waves with larger support packages for protection and target area exposure times were reduced with compressed time over targets. Haiphong and SAM sites were also added to the target list.

The third phase, 26th to 29th, consisted of single waves against the Hanoi-Haiphong complex. A maximum effort with innovative tactics was launched on the 26th when 120 B-52s attacked 10 targets from different directions in a single simultaneous assault in order to overwhelm the enemy's air defense system. All bombs were dropped within 15 minutes.[38]

Aircraft flew different altitudes, departed the target area on different headings, and chaff clouds were used rather than a corridor. The time compression saturated enemy C2 defenses, increased mutual ECM protection, and simplified efforts of the tactical and support aircraft. On 26 December, President Nixon notified Hanoi the bombing would not stop until meetings resumed and acceptance would result in an end to the bombing within 36 hours. Hanoi responded with an assertive attitude to negotiate.[39]

By the 29th, North Vietnam was basically defenseless. Its SAM supply had been exhausted and assembly facility destroyed, the MIG bases were unusable, and the C2 and air defense systems were all but obliterated. US aircraft were virtually unfired upon the last three days of the campaign. There were no more legitimate targets to strike and Hanoi was unable or unwilling to repair the damage. President Nixon announced Hanoi had agreed to return to the peace table and halted bombing above the 20th parallel. Linebacker II was over.[40]

The B-52s flew 729 sorties against 34 targets north of the 20th parallel and dropped more than 15,000 tons of bombs.[41] Tactical forces flew more than 2000 sorties,[42] dropped 5,000 tons of bombs,[43] and dispensed 125 tons of chaff.[44] North Vietnam's military potential, industry, and economy lay in ruins. Linebacker II damaged/destroyed three million gallons of North

Vietnam's POL supplies (one fourth of its reserves), 1600 military structures, 383 pieces of rolling stock, 191 storage warehouses, inflicted 500 cuts in rail lines, and reduced electrical power production generating capability by 80%.[45] Logistics inputs to North Vietnam were reduced from 160,000 tons per month to 30,000 tons by January 1973.[46] The US lost a total of 30 aircraft, 15 B-52s (all to SAMs), 7 Air Force tactical aircraft, 7 Navy/Marine aircraft, and 1 HH-53 for a loss rate of 2.1% of the total force.[47] Destruction of the rail-related targets, probably the most significant achievement, completely disrupted rail traffic within 10 miles of Hanoi. However, the most important result was that Hanoi got the message and proposed negotiations resume. Paris negotiators signed a nine-point cease-fire agreement on 23 January 1973 that went into effect on 28 January 1973, exactly one month after Linebacker II ended.[48]

EVALUATION OF LINEBACKER II

OBJECTIVE

The object of this principle is to direct military operations toward a defined and attainable objective that contributes to strategic, operational, or tactical aims.[49] Rolling Thunder never had clear political or military objectives and never described how and for what forces would be used. Linebacker II's only political objective was to force Hanoi back to the negotiation table for a peace agreement to enable the US to get out of the war honorably. Linebacker I demonstrated Hanoi could be brought to the peace table through bombing. By increasing the intensity of the bombing and showing a new resolve during Linebacker II, it was reasonable to expect President Nixon's political objective to be attainable. The military objective was maximum sustained pressure on Hanoi and Haiphong. The massive air strikes of Linebacker II were unprecedented in SEA operations. The entire effort targeted Hanoi and the resolve of North Vietnam and the attacks focused on the most lucrative targets within 10 to 15 miles of the two cities.[50] For the first time in the war, the US conducted around-the-clock all-weather air attacks on the enemy's homeland. This strategy was required to fully support the stated objective.

Military commanders expertly applied this principle during Linebacker II.

OFFENSIVE

This principle suggests that offensive action is the most effective way to pursue and obtain a clearly defined goal and all efforts must be directed toward that goal. One must act rather than react and dictate the time, place, purpose, scope, intensity, and pace of operations.[51] Rolling Thunder was far from being offensive and its strategy was based on the theory that built-in bombing halts would convince Hanoi to eventually give in from fear of what would happen next. Though the name does not suggest it, Linebacker II was a purely offensive campaign. President Nixon, an avid football fan, picked the name linebacker (a defensive position) as an outgrowth of his appreciation for the sport.[52] President Nixon had a will to win and his decision to carry the battle to the heart of North Vietnam enabled the US to take the initiative away from North Vietnam. Except for a 36-hour cease-fire over Christmas, Linebacker II applied constant pressure by intensive bombing of key targets. The around-the-clock operations and changing tactics maintained continuous pressure and did not permit a shift in the initiative. The US maintained the initiative and conducted the offensive even under intense domestic and

international criticism.[53] Linebacker II's strategy was a superb illustration of the principle of offensive.

MASS

This principle holds that combat power should be concentrated at a decisive time and place and the entire national power should be committed to the area where the threat to security interests is the greatest.[54] A center of gravity is defined as a hub of all power and movement on which everything depends and the point where all energies should be directed. Hanoi was the center of gravity of the war, the center of political leadership where military forces got their moral physical strength and will to fight. The US concentrated its greatest conventional capability and combat power during Linebacker II at the place and time it would have the most effect, Hanoi. The strategy called for a concentrated use of all forms of air power to strike at vital power centers in order to cause maximum disruption in economic, military, and political life in North Vietnam. The national intent was to bring an end to the war and the campaign required swift action of heavy bombardment on a concentrated massive scale against Hanoi's ability to make war. The plan stressed maximum effort in minimum time and for the first time, the full weight of American air power was unleashed. During Rolling Thunder, there were

restrictions on targets and mission size and the B-52s were withheld from bombing in the Hanoi delta area. The B-52s were essential to the nations nuclear capability and their employment over the enemy's heartland demonstrated President Nixon's resolve to bring an end to the war as soon as possible. In addition, by committing large numbers of B-52s to a sustained campaign against one of the most heavily defended areas in the world, the US demonstrated it was prepared to commit its full might to reach its objectives. Massive attacks were conducted against the most lucrative and valuable transportation, power, and storage facilities targets in heart of North Vietnam and other key objectives vital to North Vietnam's economy and national prestige. Political restrictions were reduced and targets previously off limits were added to the approved target list. This principle was the hallmark of the campaign.

ECONOMY OF FORCE

This principle requires the rational use of force by selecting the best mix of combat power and suggests minimal combat power should be devoted to secondary objectives to ensure overwhelming power is achieved.[55] Rolling Thunder and Linebacker I never attacked the heart and logistic arteries in the Hanoi-Haiphong areas with maximum means. The B-52, previously used mainly below the 20th parallel and never against the industrial

North in any great numbers, was now the main tool of Linebacker II's strike force and totally focused on the Hanoi-Haiphong area. All other resources that could be spared without causing a critical detriment to other emergency operations in Laos and Cambodia were used to support Linebacker II.[56] The guidelines of this principle were correctly applied.

MANEUVER

The object of this principle is to place the enemy in a position of disadvantage through concentration of all forces and the flexible application of combat power. Maneuver is the means by which the commander sets the trend of the battle.[57] Rolling Thunder never placed the enemy at a disadvantage. The gradual increase in pressure from southern North Vietnam to the Hanoi area was no longer the dominating idea. This shift was possible due to the flexible use of air power. Military commanders were given the latitude to fully exploit air powers' inherent characteristics of speed, range, and flexibility in order to maneuver to the enemy's heartland. Linebacker II attacked Hanoi with maximum means and by the end of the campaign, Hanoi was defenseless. The enemy was kept at a disadvantage and the principle of maneuver was properly applied.

UNITY OF COMMAND

This principle emphasizes the importance of coordinating and directing all efforts on a common goal, the political purpose of the US. Unity of command also requires concentration of effort for every objective under one responsible commander directing and coordinating all efforts toward a common objective.[58] During Linebacker II, there was one team from President Nixon to the JCS to field commanders focused on a common objective. However, the C2 structure was an organizational and operational nightmare. Unity of command is best achieved by vesting in a single commander the authority to direct all air forces. Even though almost all available air power in SEA supported Linebacker II, no unified commander existed for air operations. Military commanders were never able to fully exploit the full range of weapon systems and all-weather precision capabilities. No single air commander existed to allocate resources optimally, integrate forces and ordnance, and capitalize on target and weather opportunities. The lack of a single authority for targets and timing also resulted in less than optimal mixes of aircraft and weapons, poor integration of support forces, and limited damage to some targets and unnecessary reattacks and dual targeting of others. The fighter aircraft came under the Commander-in-Chief (CINC) Pacific (CINCPAC) with the Air Force assets subordinated to CINC Pacific

Air Forces and Navy assets subordinated to CINC Pacific Fleet. The Air Force maintained control of the B-52s because of their nuclear mission for general war and believed that in an emergency valuable time would be lost in debate over pulling forces back to SAC. Because the air forces answered to different commanders, extensive coordination between the Navy, Air Force, and SAC was required to accomplish the strikes in North Vietnam. Theoretically, CINCPAC ran air operations outside South Vietnam from headquarters in Hawaii and the in country effort was controlled by Military Assistance Command Vietnam headquarters in South Vietnam. In reality, commanders coordinated three separate air efforts and the air wars over Laos, Cambodia, North and South Vietnam were treated as separate entities.[59] Unity of command was never properly applied during Linebacker II. The lack of one responsible commander directing and coordinating all air assets resulted in limited effectiveness and inefficient use of resources.

SECURITY

This principle states friendly forces and their operations should be protected from enemy actions that could provide the enemy with unexpected advantage. Security also enhances freedom of action by reducing friendly vulnerability to hostile acts.[60] Movement toward détente with Russia and China significantly

reduced the threat of the Vietnam War escalating outside its borders and with 75% of the B-52s on Guam outside of enemy capabilities, the threat to the center of Linebacker II's strike force was minimal. Most strategists and tacticians agree the first priority in an air offensive should be given to destruction of an enemy's threat to one's force, the anti-air capability. Based on B-52 experiences earlier in the war, SAC had little regard for the SAMs around Hanoi-Haiphong and operational planners initially gave little thought to the SAM threat and placed priority on strategic targets. Though the B-52 strike force was protected by large support packages with ECM and SAM suppression capabilities, losses in the first phase bordered on being unacceptable. SAM sites, storage facilities, and assembly areas were eventually attacked in phase two. SAC also enforced strict guidelines and controls essential to its primary function as a nuclear deterrent force. The resultant stereotyped operations allowed SAM operators to fire missiles without radar guidance thus neutralizing the effect of ECM and the Wild Weasel SAM suppression effort. SAC's inflexibility to change tactics resulted in unnecessary exposure to enemy defenses and the needless loss of lives and aircraft. Security of the strike force improved steadily and by the end of the campaign forces were virtually unfired upon.

SURPRISE

Surprise results from attacking at a time or place or in a manner for which the enemy is not prepared.[61] Prior to Linebacker II, the enemy knew everything: when, where, and under what conditions strikes would occur. Self-imposed restrictions, constraints, and prohibitive rules of engagement were public knowledge and "safe areas" that provided sanctuaries for operational SAM sites and airfields enabled the enemy to adjust its air defenses accordingly. President Nixon's decision to implement Linebacker II caught Hanoi totally off guard. North Vietnam's leaders did not expect the B-52 high altitude attacks and had no idea until the first bombs exploded. The first B-52 aircraft exploited the surprise factor as indicated by the lack of response from enemy air defenses. But, the element of surprise diminished after the first night due mostly to the lack of flexibility and stereotyped operations. The desire to avoid civilian casualties forced aircraft to follow specific routes thus exposing the aircraft much longer than necessary to enemy air defenses. These tactics allowed SAM operators to predict aircraft flight paths and barrage fire missiles at maximum effectiveness. Only when aircraft losses bordered on being unacceptable did SAC give operational commanders the authority to vary tactics. Even though a Russian intelligence trawler positioned off the coast of Guam provided Hanoi information on

the B-52 launches, limited surprise was maintained throughout the campaign. This principle was properly applied at the strategic and operational level and innovative and varied tactics compensated for initial weaknesses at the tactical level.

SIMPLICITY

This principle calls for the avoidance of unnecessary complexity in preparing, organizing, planning and conducting military operations. Simplicity suggests orders should be as simple and direct as attainment of the objective will allow. In addition, political and military objectives and operations must be presented in clear, concise, and understandable terms.[62] President Nixon's intent was extremely clear and simple in JCS directives to field commanders, a 3-day maximum effort of B-52 and tactical air strikes around-the-clock in the Hanoi-Haiphong areas. The objective, maximum destruction of military targets, was just as clear and with the relaxation of the rules of engagement and target restrictions military commanders had the flexibility needed to achieve that objective. The strike plans required extensive coordination and incredibly complicated and precisely timed operations. However, this complexity was required to maintain the elements of surprise and security. Linebacker II properly applied the guidelines of this principle.

CONCLUSIONS

Rolling Thunder concentrated on severing Hanoi's direction and support to the Viet Cong and air power was used inflexibly and its application was disastrous. The campaign was a failure from the start, it did not fit the mold of a guerilla war and President Johnson's goals could not be achieved through bombing. The ability of Hanoi to amass the forces required for the Tet offensive underscores the ineffectiveness of the campaign.

Linebacker I was an interdiction effort against the North Vietnamese supply system. It had a specific purpose the military could understand and support. The campaign was employed in support of limited objectives and applied air power only to guarantee America's continued withdrawal and assure South Vietnam it did not face imminent collapse. Political ends were mated with military means and air power was used as a military rather than political tool. The damage inflicted during Linebacker I persuaded Hanoi to abandon a goal of an immediate takeover of South Vietnam and contributed to the willingness of Hanoi to negotiate peace. However, it did not produce a cease-fire agreement, one of President Nixon's goals.

Linebacker II differed from Rolling Thunder and Linebacker I in objectives, intensity, and political commitment. President Nixon had a notion of victory and initiated the campaign purely for political reasons, aimed directly at the North's will to

obtain maximum psychological impact and send a message to Hanoi to return to the peace table to negotiate a settlement. The campaign allowed pilots to launch the kind of strategic bombing blitz that had been asked for since 1965, the one believed would destroy Hanoi's will and ability to continue the war. It was an all out effort against the heartland of North Vietnam that employed the B-52 in its designed role, extended strategic bombardment operations against an enemy's war making capacity.

Air power's biggest assets are shock effect and the ability to create panic. There was no surprise during Rolling Thunder. By the time the raids reached Hanoi the civilian population was conditioned and ready. Linebacker II succeeded where gradualism failed. The concentrated application of air power produced disruption, shock, and disorganization at the enemy's heartland.

Linebacker II provided unprecedented evidence of the capability and effectiveness of air power as an instrument of power to achieve national and political objectives. The shock was there, commitment was there, and the enemy's will was broken. The threat of continued and further destruction of military targets and Hanoi's capability to maintain and sustain its armed forces produced a settlement that satisfied the political goals of withdrawal and a cease-fire agreement that was not achieved with Linebacker I.

Linebacker II exemplified the principles of objective, offensive, mass, economy of force, maneuver, and simplicity. The unity of command principle was never properly applied and therefore the synergies gained by having diverse air forces work together as a team under one commander were never realized. However, military commanders did compensate for the weaknesses in security and surprise through innovative tactics.

Linebacker II was a military success and the most effective use of air power during the Vietnam War. Minimal operational restrictions allowed military commanders to design an air campaign strategy that achieved national objectives. The military was given a clear, simple, and obtainable objective and the latitude and flexibility needed to conduct a successful air campaign. It was a purely offensive campaign that concentrated the full power of US air forces on the heart of North Vietnam and for the first time employed the B-52s in large numbers to bring the full weight of air power to bear. The heavy bombing, the threat of more, and the unwillingness or inability of Russia and China to prevent the attacks induced Hanoi to sign a cease-fire. Linebacker II achieved President Nixon's goals, validated national interests, and brought the prisoners of war home.

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