

*Counterproductive  
Counterinsurgency:*

*Lessons from the Misuse of  
Airpower in the American Vietnam  
Conflict and the United States'  
Fight against ISIS*

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## ABSTRACT

America's relationship with the world drastically changed after World War II. The fear of radicalism, namely communism, drew the United States into Vietnam, a conflict with no real resolution. Far-fetched justifications, unclear rules of engagement, and a tangled bureaucracy all made the American experience in Vietnam a strategic and tactical nightmare. Stagnant, World War II-era tactics plagues American foreign actions in Southeast Asia and do now in the fight against Islamist extremists in the Middle East and Africa. The lessons learned and ignored from the American Vietnam Conflict are more relevant today than ever. As U.S. military and political strategists look to the future in another seemingly endless war, it is prudent that they also look to the past to develop a winning strategy.

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

After the United States dropped atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima on August 6, 1945, and Nagasaki just three days later, World War II ended.<sup>1</sup> At the close of the Pacific War, the United States' fondest wish for East Asia was that its countries would be peacefully independent, economically beneficial to both themselves and the West, and not dominated by any single power hostile to Western interests.<sup>2</sup> Much of Asia saw no respite from fighting after World War II. Where there was a singular enemy in World War II, the Asian wars of the late 1940's had no clear front and no clear enemy.<sup>3</sup> These wars were mostly civil or communist insurgencies, and always believed by the West to be agitated by the Russians.

America's relationship with the world drastically changed after World War II. Attempting to contain communism drew this country into seemingly endless wars with no clear victor. Far-fetched justifications for war, unclear rules of engagement, stubbornness, and a tangled bureaucracy all made the Vietnam War as a strategic nightmare. The American people were unsure of why U.S. troops were there. The U.S. military wanted more men on the ground and in the air. The communists unwaveringly persisted through it all, and the citizens of Vietnam as a whole were caught in the crossfire.

Stagnant tactics plagued American foreign actions in Southeast Asia, and do now in the fight against Islamist extremists in the Middle East and Africa. As the U.S. Department of Defense develops a new offset strategy under the newly-elected president,

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Blum, "A Political Perspective," *Major Problems in the History of the Vietnam War* (Lexington, Massachusetts: D.C. Heath & Co., 1990), 108.

<sup>2</sup> Blum, "Political," 108-109.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

it is prudent to look to the lessons learned and ignored from the Vietnam War. These lessons can be found throughout the conflict: In the justifications of war, escalation, early air campaigns, the politics and bureaucracy, early U.S. counterinsurgency tactics, and the eventual strategic changes that finally brought Hanoi to the negotiating table. The enemies in Vietnam and in the war today may look different and have opposite belief systems, but the end goal is the same. Insurgents hope to use a tired, hungry, poor minority to overthrow a corrupt majority in their attempt to assert a particular religious or political system within their borders.

Strategists eventually addressed the gap between expectation and reality in Vietnam. In LINEBACKER II, nearly a decade after the U.S. entered Vietnam, the United States Air Force successfully decimated the communists' ability to wage war. When will the U.S. have its turning point in the Middle East? With every step forward, coalition forces in Syria and Libya take a step back every time a civilian is killed. Outside forces need to recognize that at the current rate, ISIS may never be defeated. Every time a coalition bomb kills a civilian, ISIS and other militant groups win the hearts and minds of the war-tired and scared civilian population. If the current trend of indiscriminate violence continues, the coalition may soon fight a radical majority instead of a minority.

## **HO CHI MINH**

In 1920, a young Ho Chi Minh joined the French Communist Party while living in Paris, where he became acquainted with the ideas of Vladimir Lenin.<sup>4</sup> He viewed Marxism-Leninism as more than just a tool to drive the French from his home in Indochina. After Ho received training as a communist agent in Moscow, he went on to

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<sup>4</sup> William J. Duiker. *Ho Chi Minh: A Life* (New York: Hyperion Press, 2000), 124.

form the first Marxist-Leninist revolutionary league in Indochina, the Revolutionary Youth League (RYL).<sup>5</sup> A July 1925 draft program for the RYL contained a pledge for all future candidates: to take part in the struggle to overthrow imperialism and establish independence for Vietnam, which would inevitably lead to the erasure of class distinctions and a worldwide revolution.<sup>6</sup> According to Ho's ideology, "even after this political and social revolution, there will still remain oppressed people. There will still be differences between nations. It is then necessary to have a world revolution. After that the people of the four corners of the Earth will befriend one another. It will be the age of fraternity."<sup>7</sup> The Viet Minh<sup>8</sup> itself, in Ho's conception, was to be an umbrella organization representing all classes of Vietnamese Society, and act as an example for revolutionary leaders around the world for this coming worldwide revolution.

Ho hoped these communist ideas of equality and fraternity would spread around the world through revolution, not reform.<sup>9</sup> In a letter to Nguyen Thuong Huyen<sup>10</sup>, he explains why the revolution against the French in Vietnam failed, and why peaceful reform could not work in the fight for Vietnamese independence:

...Do you expect them [the French] to give us liberty to do anything, to use all means to drive them out? Do you expect them to take no action to prevent us from attacking their interests? Instead of blaming others, I think it is more reasonable to blame ourselves. We must ask ourselves, "For what reasons have the French been able to oppress us? Why are our people so stupid?"... You compare us with success stories in Egypt and India but they...have political parties with members, study groups, peasant associations, and so forth. And they all know how to love their country. So Gandhi can create a boycott. Can we do the same? Where are our parties? We still have no party,

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<sup>5</sup> William J. Duiker, "Victory by Other Means," *Why the North Won the Vietnam War* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 48.

<sup>6</sup> Duiker, *Ho Chi Minh*, 124.

<sup>7</sup> Alain Ruscio, *Ho Chi Minh: Textes de 1914-1969* (Paris: Harmattan), 76.

<sup>8</sup> Also called the Revolutionary League for the Independence of Vietnam.

<sup>9</sup> Duiker, *Ho Chi Minh*, 127.

<sup>10</sup> Nguyen Thuong Huyen was a Vietnamese scholar and revolutionary anti-colonial activist. Just like Ho, he desired a unified Vietnam free of French influence.



no propaganda, no organization, and you want us to boycott the French?...  
Are we like mice? How humiliating.<sup>11</sup>

Frustrated from the lack of cohesion of revolutionary parties in Indochina, Ho formed the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP).<sup>12</sup> From its inception in 1930, the ICP looked for foreign assistance and recognition to help free Vietnam from French imperial control and Japanese influence. Ho believed that his country could only be liberated with aid from China, Russia, or the United States.<sup>13</sup>

### **FIRST INDOCHINA WAR**

During World War II, the French grasp on their holdings in Southeast Asia loosened as they focused their efforts closer to home. Japanese forces descended on Southeast Asia in conjunction with the German conquest of France.<sup>14</sup> The Japanese ousted the French administration in Indochina in March 1945, and ruled through Bao Dai,<sup>15</sup> the last emperor of the Nguyen Dynasty of Vietnam.<sup>16</sup> The ICP resented the Japanese tidal wave that swept through Southeast Asia just as much as they did the French.<sup>17</sup> Japanese troops effectively wiped out the rice surpluses in southern Vietnam, and starving peasants flocked to the cities. Neither the French nor the Japanese took effective measures to alleviate the famine and were unable to assert authority over disgruntled subjects.<sup>18</sup> In 1945 alone, nearly two million Vietnamese died of starvation.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Nguyen Ai Quoc (Ho Chi Minh) to Nguyen Thuong Huyen, May 22, 1925, French archives, Special Collections, carton 364, no. 153.

<sup>12</sup> Duiker, *Ho Chi Minh*, 130.

<sup>13</sup> King C. Chen. *Vietnam and China* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), 62.

<sup>14</sup> Stanley Karnow. *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Penguin Books, 1983), 137.

<sup>15</sup> Born Nguyen Phuc Vinh Thuy. Sometimes referred to in literature as “Keeper of Greatness.”

<sup>16</sup> Karnow. *Vietnam*, 152.

<sup>17</sup> Duiker, *Ho Chi Minh*, 130.

<sup>18</sup> Stein Tonnesson. *Vietnam 1946: How the War Began* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2010), 292-293.

<sup>19</sup> Blake Dunnavent, Ph.D, “First Indochina War” lecture, Louisiana State University Shreveport, February 21, 2017.

Simultaneously, Viet Minh guerrillas conducted raids on Japanese granaries,<sup>20</sup> which increased their popular support among the starving peasants. Feelings of disdain for both the French and Japanese in the area grew, and groups of hungry and resentful peasants formed People's Revolutionary Committees all through the north.<sup>21</sup> The Viet Minh used these young, newly politicized peasant groups to their advantage in the coming insurrection.

When Japan surrendered to Allied powers on September 2, 1945, Bao Dai abdicated the throne and handed power to Ho's provisional government.<sup>22</sup> Upon his abdication, Dai "reinforced the Vietminh cause... For his [Dai] gesture conferred the 'mandate of heaven' on Ho, giving him the legitimacy that... had traditionally resided in the Emperor."<sup>23</sup> That same day, Ho Chi Minh declared the formation of a new independent republic, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) with himself as provisional president.<sup>24</sup>

Ho Chi Minh realized that if the wartime alliance between Moscow and Washington survived into the postwar era, the United States and China might decide to oppose European colonial powers and support the cause for Vietnamese independence.<sup>25</sup> On the other hand, Ho knew that if the relationship between the two crumbled, the United States would likely support the French colonial efforts in the region. In a letter to Charles Fenn, a U.S. military intelligence officer, Ho remarked that although "...the war is

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<sup>20</sup> Tonnesson, *Vietnam 1946*, 293.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Karnow, *Vietnam*, 152.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Duiker, "Victory," 50.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

finished, but relations between you and us will be more difficult.”<sup>26</sup> Things certainly got more difficult.

During his presidency, Franklin Roosevelt had expressed a strong desire for independence in French Indochina. In a January 24, 1944 memorandum to his Secretary of State Cordell Hull, Roosevelt explained:

...I had, for over a year, expressed the opinion that Indo-China should not go back to France...France has had the country for nearly one hundred years, and the people are worse off than they were at the beginning... The case for Indo-China is perfectly clear. France has milked it for one hundred years. The people of Indo-China are entitled to something better than that.<sup>27</sup>

Ho’s hopes that the Truman administration would hold a similar stance as Roosevelt regarding French colonialism in Indochina after World War II were dashed. As tension between Russia and the United States grew, just as Ho forecasted, Washington sided with the French on this matter in an attempt to thwart the further spread of communism in Southeast Asia and Europe in accordance with the United States’ evolving containment strategy.<sup>28</sup>

The First Indochina War erupted in 1945 and lasted until the French defeat and expulsion in 1954.<sup>29</sup> The August Revolution, launched by the Viet Minh in August 1945, initially proved fruitful. Within the first two weeks of fighting, the Viet Minh seized

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<sup>26</sup> Ho Chi Minh to Charles Fenn, *Ho Chi Minh: A Biographical Introduction* (New York: Scribner’s, 1973), 8.

<sup>27</sup> Franklin Roosevelt memorandum to Cordell Hull, January 24, 1941.

<sup>28</sup> Under President Truman, the U.S. adopted a “containment” driven foreign policy. The idea of containment originated from George Kennan, Dean Acheson, and other policy advisors (beginning under Eisenhower and Truman). This policy aimed not to fight an all-out war against communism, but to simply confine it within the USSR’s borders. Containment was based on several principals, namely: The USSR wanted world domination, new communist governments would become part of the Soviet “Empire,” and the United States was committed to stopping any new communist governments from forming and keeping already existing communist government (USSR) from expanding. Simply put, containment was “us” versus “them;” Michael O’Malley, “The Vietnam War and the Tragedy of Containment” lecture, George Mason University.

<sup>29</sup> Ellen Hammer. *The Struggle for Indochina* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1954), 51.

control of most rural villages and cities throughout Vietnam, including Hanoi.<sup>30</sup> This initial success was due largely in part to the People's Revolutionary Committees already established through the famine-stricken countryside. For twenty days, Ho's DRV ruled as the only civil government in all of Vietnam until the French overthrew Vietminh forces on September 23, 1945, partially reasserting their colonial dominance.<sup>31</sup> When Ho looked to the United States for recognition of what he considered to be a legitimate representation of his peoples' needs, he received no reply. Neither Washington nor London responded to his call for help.<sup>32</sup>

The ICP amassed their forces at Pac Bo, on the Sino-Vietnamese border, to organize and expel the French once and for all post-World War II.<sup>33</sup> In his "Letter From Abroad," Ho appealed to the Vietnamese people and called them forth to join in the struggle: "They [the French] continue to plunder us pitilessly, suck all our blood, and carry out barbarous policy of all-out terrorism and massacre."<sup>34</sup> It seemed as if Vietnamese revolutionary forces, led by Ho Chi Minh, had the perfect opportunity to assert their independence, as both the French and Japanese had other conflicts to focus on. Ho continued, "The opportunity has come for our liberation. France itself is unable to dominate our country. As for the Japanese, on the one hand they are bogged in China, on the other, they are hamstrung by the British and American forces, and certainly cannot use all their forces to contend with us. If [we] are united... we are certainly able to smash the French and Japanese forces."<sup>35</sup> In order to fully achieve independence, however, Ho

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<sup>30</sup> Hammer, *The Struggle for Indochina*, 52.

<sup>31</sup> Duiker, "Victory," 49.

<sup>32</sup> Duiker, *Ho Chi Minh*, 139.

<sup>33</sup> Duiker, "Victory," 49.

<sup>34</sup> Ho Chi Minh. "Speech on the Founding of the Doc-Lop Dong Minh Hoi," *Selected Writings* (Hanoi: 1977), 44.

<sup>35</sup> Minh, "Speech on the Founding of the Doc-Lop Dong Minh Hoi," 44.

Chi Minh knew that his party needed outside support and recognition on the world's stage.

During peace talks at Fontainebleau in 1946, French representatives rejected Ho Chi Minh's proposal for a diplomatic compromise regarding the French presence in Indochina.<sup>36</sup> These peace talks were destined to fail because the French had no intention of setting Vietnam free.<sup>37</sup> The French intentions were reflected in the composition of their delegation at Fontainebleau, where no prominent cabinet members participated and decisions were left to colonial officials, who intended to keep the situation in Indochina unsettled.<sup>38</sup> ICP General Secretary Truong Chinh referred to the Fontainebleau talks as "false negotiations," as clearly neither the French nor the Vietnamese intended to truly resolve the conflict through diplomacy.<sup>39</sup> These talks foreshadowed the inevitable forthcoming war. With further peace talks postponed until the following year, Ho seized this extra time to build up manpower, materiel, and support for his cause: Vietnamese independence.

On November 20, 1946, a French naval patrol vessel seized a Chinese ship carrying contraband into Vietnam through Haiphong Harbor. Vietnamese soldiers on land fired upon the French ship, and an armed clash immediately broke out between the two parties.<sup>40</sup> To ease the tension, France granted the Vietnamese nationalists sovereignty over Haiphong. However, French Admiral Georges d'Argenlieu saw this as a carefully orchestrated and aggressive attack by the Vietnamese army, and ordered the commander

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<sup>36</sup> Duiker, "Victory," 51.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ooi Keat Gin, *Southeast Asia: A Historical Encyclopedia from Angkor Wat to East Timor*, Volume I (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC CLIO, 2004), 600.

<sup>39</sup> Gin, *Encyclopedia*, 600.

<sup>40</sup> Hammer, *The Struggle for Indochina*, 182.

of French forces in Haiphong, Colonel Debes, to “use all means at your disposal to make yourself complete master of Haiphong.”<sup>41</sup> Debes subsequently issued an ultimatum to the Vietnamese living in Haiphong, ordering them to evacuate the French areas of the city. They refused, and the French launched an aerial and naval bombardment of the Vietnamese neighborhoods.<sup>42</sup> By November 28, Debes regained control of Haiphong.<sup>43</sup> Ho Chi Minh and his top military commander, Vo Nguyen Giap, feared Hanoi was next. At the behest of Giap, the people of Hanoi constructed barricades in the streets and skirmished with French legionnaires.<sup>44</sup> The French issued a final plea to the Viet Minh located in the city, led by Tu Ve, to completely disarm.<sup>45</sup> With no reply, the French cut the electricity to the city, which forced the Vietnamese government to flee to the countryside.<sup>46</sup> Provocations by both the Vietnamese and French led to the full-scale outbreak of guerrilla fighting of the First Indochina War on December 14, 1946.<sup>47</sup>

By 1948, it was clear to the Truman administration that the French could not possibly amass sufficient strength for a military solution in Indochina.<sup>48</sup> There were only two options here: either continue the costly colonial warfare in the area or have a communist government in charge of a strategically important Southeast Asian nation. The latter was not viable, so, in 1950, President Truman sent the first of four hundred military

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<sup>41</sup> Hammer, *The Struggle for Indochina*, 183.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> Fredrik Lovegall. *The Embers of War* (New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2013), 154.

<sup>44</sup> Hammer, *The Struggle for Indochina*, 184; Lovegall, *The Embers of War*, 154-155.

<sup>45</sup> Hammer, *The Struggle for Indochina*, 184.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 184-186.

<sup>47</sup> Peter Zinoman. “Colonial Prisons and Anti-Colonial Resistance in French Indochina,” *Modern Asia Studies*, 34:1, 57-98.

<sup>48</sup> Office of the Secretary of Defense, Vietnam Task Force, “Justification of the War, Internal Documents: The Truman Administration, 1945-1952,” *United States-Vietnam Relations 1945-1967 (The Pentagon Papers)*, Vol V.B.2b, 130.

advisors to work with the French.<sup>49</sup> By the start of the Korean War in 1951, the United States was covering nearly seventy-five percent of French military expenses for the war in Indochina, footing the bill for this costly and futile colonialist venture.<sup>50</sup>

Gradually, the rest of the world settled into the shaky “long peace” established by the pax Americana. The pax Americana initiated a state of relative international peace mediated by the United States within the western hemisphere, Western Europe, and the capitalist eastern bloc nations of Poland, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, and Yugoslavia.<sup>51</sup> The “launching of the pax Americana,” the Marshall Plan, designated aid<sup>52</sup> to Western Europe for post-World War II economic recovery and infrastructure rebuilding.<sup>53</sup> In the midst of rebuilding Europe with the Marshall Plan funds, no one was thinking about Southeast Asia. The focus of the free world was rebuilding and the USSR.

Following World War II, the Soviet Union occupied large amounts of land Eastern Europe and in ex-Japanese held territory throughout Asia.<sup>54</sup> Mindful of the Western invasions that Russia faced in the past, Joseph Stalin sought to create a buffer zone of subservient Eastern European countries, most of which the Red Army<sup>55</sup> occupied during World War II.<sup>56</sup> Within these countries, the USSR supported local communist uprisings and helped establish Soviet-allied governments.

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<sup>49</sup> Office of the Secretary of Defense, “Justification of the War: Truman,” *The Pentagon Papers* V.B2b, 134.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> Charles L. Mee, *The Marshall Plan: Launching of the Pax Americana* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1984), 12.

<sup>52</sup> Approximately \$12 billion and roughly \$120 billion today.

<sup>53</sup> Mee, *Marshall Plan*, 12.

<sup>54</sup> Raymond R. Zickel, ed. *The Soviet Union: A Country Study* (Washington, D.C.: Federal Research Division of the Library of Congress, 1989), 301.

<sup>55</sup> After 1946, the Soviet Army.

<sup>56</sup> Zickel, *The Soviet Union*, 301.



Figure 1. Eastern Bloc Area Border Changes 1938-1948.<sup>57</sup>

Short of going to war, the West could do little to stop Soviet consolidation of land and power in the Eastern Bloc nations. Until the death of President Franklin Roosevelt, Truman knew nothing of the United States nuclear capability or the Manhattan Project.<sup>58</sup> At this time the United States was the only nation that possessed the atomic bomb and the means to deliver it, but the Truman administration went back and forth on what courses should be taken concerning atomic energy.<sup>59</sup> It was unclear what exactly the Soviets intended to do with their forces in Eastern Europe. As the Russian grasp reached further and further, Washington hoped the sheer threat of action, like that taken in Japan, would be a sufficient deterrent.<sup>60</sup>

<sup>57</sup> Soviet sphere of influence in Eastern/Central Europe with border changes after WWII. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File: EasternBloc\\_BorderChange38-48.svg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:EasternBloc_BorderChange38-48.svg).

<sup>58</sup> Gary Joiner, Ph.D., *Deterrence: A Brief History and a Case Study in Cold War Practice, 1945-1953*, Strategy Alternatives Consortium, Shreveport, LA: LSU Shreveport, 12.

<sup>59</sup> Joiner, *Deterrence*, 12.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*



The United States focused on stopping the spread of Russian ideas from Eastern Europe to the West, leaving Asia on the back burner. Tensions between the West and Russia further tightened as the communist coup in Greece erupted.<sup>61</sup> Suspecting the Russians, Britain and the United States entered the conflict to keep communism from creeping into the struggling post-war Western Europe. President Harry Truman and his cabinet were left with the daunting tasks of picking up the pieces of Europe and Asia, dealing with the Soviet issue, containing communism, and determining the course of the United States nuclear program. Worldwide fears of radicalism and communism continued to grow during this post war period and the conflict in Korea. Friction between the Kremlin and worldwide leaders, especially Truman, reached a boiling point in Greece.

### **GREEK CIVIL WAR**

America and the West monitored Russia, especially Soviet influence on Western Europe, closely. Fragile nations like Greece focused on rebuilding efforts, leaving communist and nationalist sects opportunities to establish revolutionary tendencies in the struggling lower classes.<sup>62</sup> There was no time of peace in Greece after World War II. German occupiers stripped Greek agriculture and economy down to bare bones.<sup>63</sup> As the Nazis exited, the country looked to its government to rebuild from the ruins.<sup>64</sup> Reconstruction efforts by Athens, however, proved insufficient. Between the summer of 1945 and winter 1946, Greece had eight governments.<sup>65</sup> These governments failed to stamp out the radical communist factions amassing large followings within Greece's

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<sup>61</sup> Amikam Nachmani, "Civil War and Foreign Intervention in Greece," *Journal of Contemporary History*, 25:4 (Oct. 1990), 489.

<sup>62</sup> Nachmani, "Civil War," 489.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Alan Bullock, *Ernest Bevin, Foreign Secretary, 1945-1951* (London: 1983), 41.

borders, creating the backdrop against which the Greek Civil War erupted. After early defeat in direct battle with government forces, the communist National Liberation Front (EAM) and the National People's Liberation Army (ELAS) moved underground, re-emerging in December 1946 as the Greek Democratic Army (GDA).<sup>66</sup> The GDA was then completely controlled by the Greek Communist Party (KKE) and backed by the newly communist governments of Albania, Bulgaria, and Yugoslavia.<sup>67</sup> As a result of this Eastern European support for the communist uprising in Greece, the West assumed Russia was to blame.

Through the course of the following year, communist forces succeeded in avoiding direct engagements with the Greek National Army (GNA) while also conquering much of the country.<sup>68</sup> Athens simply could not protect its citizens from the elusive enemy. The fragmented government and their inability to appease the situation drove fleeing civilians right into the arms of insurgents. It was abundantly clear to both British and Greek national forces that these communists could not be contained.<sup>69</sup> By the end of 1947 the communists proclaimed their own government and sought international recognition.<sup>70</sup> This rebel government fully expected Soviet support, but the Soviet government had all but abandoned the movement in Greece to focus more on the Balkans.<sup>71</sup>

## **TRUMAN DOCTRINE**

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<sup>66</sup> Nachmani, "Civil War," 490.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Andre Gerolymatos. *Red Acropolis: The Greek Civil War and the Origins of Soviet-American Rivalry, 1943-1949* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), 188.

<sup>70</sup> Nachmani, "Civil War," 495; Gerolymatos, *Red Acropolis*, 189.

<sup>71</sup> Nachmani, "Civil War," 496.

President Truman's address to a joint session of Congress on March 12, 1947 regarding the situation in Greece changed the worldwide stance towards Communism for the remaining decades of the Cold War and through the conflict in Vietnam. In his doctrine, he called for Congress to not "turn a deaf ear to the appeal of the Greek Government" in their time of need.<sup>72</sup> To the president, immediate support and aid was not only important to the Greeks, but to the American way of life as well:

The seeds of totalitarian regimes are nurtured by misery and want. They spread and grow in the evil soil of poverty and strife. They reach their full growth when the hope of a people for a better life has died. We must keep that hope alive. The free peoples of the world look to us for support in maintaining their freedoms. If we falter in our leadership, we may endanger the peace of the world – and we shall surely endanger the welfare of our own nation.<sup>73</sup>

With the promulgation of the Truman Doctrine, Britain exited Greece and the United States entered.<sup>74</sup> After two more years of fighting, the conflict ended in 1949. Conflict within the communist camp in Greece ultimately led to its demise, namely the Tito-Stalin split.<sup>75</sup> One hundred thousand GDA fighters and sympathizers were either imprisoned or executed.<sup>76</sup>

The Greek Civil War serves as an example of the building tension between the West and communism immediately after World War II in both Europe and Asia. The Greek and Western anticommunist governments called this a victory against the Soviet

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<sup>72</sup> President Harry S. Truman address before a joint session of Congress, March 12, 1947.

<sup>73</sup> Truman address before Congress, 1947.

<sup>74</sup> Nachmani, "Civil War," 495.

<sup>75</sup> After World War II, Yugoslavia entered into several armed conflicts the Western Bloc (those countries allied with NATO), including the Greek Civil War. Josip Broz Tito (leader of the "Partisans" guerrilla movement in Yugoslavia [1941-1945,] Prime Minister [1944-1963] and President for life [1953-1980]) openly supported the communist faction during the Greek Civil War. Joseph Stalin intended to keep his distance, unsure of the practicality of fighting in all-out war against the West in the wake of World War II's massive destruction. Tito hoped to take over Albania and Greece and align them with Bulgaria, creating an Eastern Bloc of his very own, outside of Moscow's control. Tito refused to accept Stalin/Moscow as communism's supreme authority. Jeronim Perovic, "The Tito-Stalin Split: A Reassessment," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 9:2 (Spring 2007), 32.

<sup>76</sup> C.M. Woodhouse, *The Struggle for Greece, 1941-1949* (London: Hart-Davis, MacGibbon, 1976), 261.

Union, while Russia still denied any involvement. On a fervent 1951 radio report by Truman, the president continued to play into the growing worldwide paranoia concerning communism, especially that of the Russian variety: “The Communists in the Kremlin are engaged in a monstrous conspiracy to stamp out freedom all over the world. If they were to succeed, the united States would be numbered along their principal victims.”<sup>77</sup>

Intervening in Greece was the first execution of the Truman Doctrine, and it would not be the last. Both Athens and the communists received outside support during the Greek Civil War, which created a convoluted mess. Similarly complex future Cold War conflicts reflected Truman’s attitude towards the containment of Communism, and the presidents which followed used Truman and Greece as roundabout justification for diving head first into Vietnam in 1965.

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<sup>77</sup> Truman radio Report to the American people, April 11, 1951.

## CHAPTER 2

### ESCALATION

Prior to the 1954 conference at Geneva, Chinese advisors urged Ho to be flexible in his demands, while simultaneously promising to send more Chinese military assistance to Vietnam.<sup>78</sup> At Geneva, China and the USSR openly supported the Vietminh demands calling for complete withdrawal of French forces and the total independence of Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos.<sup>79</sup> Behind closed doors, the two world powers again urged Ho to consider compromise on key issues. At Chinese Foreign Minister Zhou Enlai's request, Ho reluctantly accepted the peace settlement. In return for Ho's compromise, Zhou once again promised to increase aid to the DRV and estimated that unification efforts would come to fruition in a matter of years.<sup>80</sup>

The Geneva Accords of July 1954 ended the First Indochina War, but left Vietnam divided into a noncommunist, western-backed South, and a communist north, and established Cambodia and Laos as two stand-alone neutral countries.<sup>81</sup> Although the communists violated the Geneva Agreement while the ink was still wet, leadership in northern Vietnam hoped to symbolically preserve the nature of the agreement hoping to return to a legitimate position on the world stage post-conflict. The CIA, however, determined that the communist leadership wanted to aggressively establish military and political control over Cambodia and Laos.<sup>82</sup> As the threat of communist assertion over the neighboring countries loomed, Washington first aimed to rid southern Vietnam of the

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<sup>78</sup> Norman Podhoretz. *Why We Were in Vietnam*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982.), 7.

<sup>79</sup> Duiker, "Victory," 55.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>81</sup> Vietnam was temporarily divided at the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel until formal elections could be held. Of course, democratically fair elections were never held.

<sup>82</sup> Duiker, "Victory," 56; Dr. Albert Atkins. *We Won, and Then There was LINEBACKER II* (Bloomington, IN: Author House, 2009), 3.

insurgent communist Viet Minh forces that operated within the territory, as well as repair the South's crumbling social, political, and military infrastructure.<sup>83</sup> American presence in the area expanded,<sup>84</sup> and fear of Chinese or Soviet intervention grew as the fighting inched closer to the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel.<sup>85</sup> The United States Air Force and Navy did not share this fear. Many leaders in these two military branches believed that the Vietnam War would be won by striking the north in a highly aggressive bombing campaign.

Simultaneously, belligerent actions by communist northern Vietnamese forces escalated. The very strikes aimed to muffle NVA resolve seemed to embolden their forces instead. On August 2, 1964, while performing signal intelligence patrol as part of DESOTO operations in the Gulf of Tonkin, Vietnamese torpedoes and machine gun fire attacked the USS Maddox.<sup>86</sup> One US aircraft and three Northern Vietnamese torpedo boats were damaged, but The USS Maddox suffered only one single bullet hole.<sup>87</sup> Allegedly four North Vietnamese soldiers died, with six more wounded.<sup>88</sup> The National Security Agency originally claimed that a second incident occurred in the Tonkin Gulf just two days later, on August 4, 1964. During more DESOTO patrols off the coast of North Vietnam, the USS *Maddox* and *Turner Joy* received radar, sonar, and transmissions

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<sup>83</sup> Jacob Van Staavern, *Gradual Failure: The Air War Over North Vietnam* (Washington, D.C.: Air Force History and Museums Program, United States Air Force, 2002), 3.

<sup>84</sup> In 1959, only 760 American troops were on the ground in Vietnam. By 1961 there were 3,205. In 1962, the numbers tripled to 11,300. After the Gulf of Tonkin Incident in 1964, American troop levels skyrocketed from 23, 300 (1964) to 184, 300 (1965); "The Vietnam War: Military Statistics," The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History. <https://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/seventies/resources/vietnam-war-military-statistics>

<sup>85</sup> The Geneva accords (1954) established the International Control Commission. This Commission decided that the 17<sup>th</sup> Parallel would serve as a temporary line between the western-backed south and the communist north. Plans were also put in place to have a free election in Vietnam no later than 1956. In October 1955, Ngo Dinh Diem won a heavily rigged, US-backed referendum, and established the Republic of Vietnam in the south.

<sup>86</sup> Edwin E. Moise. *Tonkin Gulf Incident and the Escalation of the Vietnam War* (Chapel Hill, NC: UNC Press, 1996), 78-82.

<sup>87</sup> Moise, *Tonkin*, 82.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

that they believed signaled another attack.<sup>89</sup> For several hours the United States Navy claimed to fire on and sink two attacking torpedo boats, but no wreckage was ever recovered.<sup>90</sup> In a 2003 interview, United States Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara (1961-1968) admitted that the August 4 incident never happened.<sup>91</sup> Despite the reality of either or both claims, these alleged acts of aggression drew the United States to directly confront the communists in Vietnam.

President Johnson addressed the American public shortly before midnight on August 4th. He described the attacks on the *Maddox* and *Turner Joy* as completely unwarranted, suggesting that this all happened in international waters. Further, in a testimony before Congress, he denied that the United States Navy had supported South Vietnamese operations in the gulf, characterizing the attack as unprovoked.<sup>92</sup> As a result of Johnson's testimony, the United States Congress approved H.J. RES 1145 (the Southeast Asia, or Tonkin Gulf Resolution), granting the president the authority to conduct military operations in Southeast Asia without a formal declaration of war.<sup>93</sup> With the Tonkin Gulf Resolution in 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson declared that the United States "determination to carry out our full commitment to the people and to the

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<sup>89</sup> Moise, *Tonkin*, 83.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>91</sup> There are many accounts in which first and secondhand sources dispute the validity of the claim that a second incident occurred on August 4<sup>th</sup>. In 1965, even President Johnson commented that, "For all I know, our Navy was shooting at whales out there." In 1967, retired naval officer John White wrote: "I maintain that president Johnson, Secretary McNamara, and the Joint Chiefs gave false information to Congress in their report about US destroyers being attacked in the Gulf of Tonkin." John White, "Letter to the Editor" of the *New Haven Register*, 1967.

US pilot Squadron Commander James Stockdale was one of the pilots providing air support over the second incident: "I had the best seat in the house to watch that event, and our destroyers were just shooting at phantom targets... there was nothing there but black water and American fire power." Jim Stockdale. *Love and War* (New York: Harper Collins, 1984.); Errol Morris, director. *The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara* (Sony Pictures Classics, 2003).

<sup>92</sup> Eugene G. Windchy. *Tonkin Gulf* (New York: Double Day, 1971), 108.

<sup>93</sup> Tonkin Gulf Resolution, 88<sup>th</sup> Congress, August 7, 1964.

government of South Vietnam will be redoubled.”<sup>94</sup> Retaliatory air strikes acted as the “redoubled determination” from that day forward in the war in Vietnam. Further, NVA forces carried out three more attacks on United States and Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN)<sup>95</sup> strongholds in southern Vietnam.

The Battle of Ia Drang consisted of two main engagements between U.S. ARVN forces and the NVA at Landing Zone (LZ) X-Ray and LZ Albany.<sup>96</sup> This battle, the first major battle between the United States and the NVA, fundamentally changed the war.<sup>97</sup> On February 6, 1965, Vietcong forces attacked the U.S. advisor compound at Pleiku leaving 8 dead and 100 wounded.<sup>98</sup> Until this point, the U.S. was still operating largely in an advisory capacity while dabbling in counterinsurgency (COIN) and covert operations, but this belligerent action forced the U.S. to widen their role in Vietnam.

By the end of these hostilities, the U.S. claimed a kill ratio of 10:1.<sup>99</sup> Further, U.S. and ARVN officials claimed victory, as the NVA never occupied the camps and retreated into Cambodia.<sup>100</sup> The importance of this battle rests in the tactics employed by both sides. This battle gave a glimpse of the war to come: The United States’ reliance on air and fire power, and the NVA resilience in the face of heavy loss. These attacks at Ia Drang, along with the Tonkin Gulf incident motivated the United States to hit the NVA

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<sup>94</sup> Lyndon B. Johnson report on the gulf of Tonkin incident, August 4, 1964.

<sup>95</sup> South, non-communist forces.

<sup>96</sup> Harold G. Moore and Joseph L. Galloway. *We Were Soldiers Once... and Young* (New York: Random House, 1992), xx; William Kinnard, “Pleiku Campaign: Combat Operations After Action Report,” 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division (Airmobile), 1966.

<sup>97</sup> Moore, *We Were Soldiers*, xx.

<sup>98</sup> Carl H. Builder, “No Time for Reflection,” *Command Concepts: A Theory Derived from the Practice of Command and Control* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1999), 89.

<sup>99</sup> Maj Gen Vinh Loc (ARVN). *Why Pleiku* (Pleiku, Vietnam: Information Printing Office, 1966), 90.

<sup>100</sup> Builder, “No Time for Reflection,” 101.



indirectly, starting with supply dumps and VC troop depots in the south and moving gradually north, towards Hanoi.<sup>101</sup>

The first limited air actions conducted in Laos promised more intense US military action if the Laotians supported insurgent communist activities in the area. The expansion of the Ho Chi Minh trail into southeastern Laos allowed North Vietnamese Army (NVA)<sup>102</sup> troops to easily funnel into southern Vietnam, essentially expanding the North's realm of operation and logistical reach.

Operation STEEL TIGER (April 3, 1965- November 11, 1968) was one such air mission carried out in secret by the USAF in order to supply conventional air power in the support of this very unconventional ground war. This operation's objective was to impede the flow of supplies and troops to the Ho Chi Minh Trail and to supplement Operation BARREL ROLL, a bombing campaign that began on 14 December 1964.<sup>103</sup> But, there was a problem. Laos declared neutrality with the Geneva Conference of 1954 and again in 1962, so both America and the Northern Vietnamese maintained the secrecy of their operations carried in the Kingdom of Laos.<sup>104</sup> During 1965, nearly 5,000 DRV troops and 300 tons of supplies infiltrated South Vietnam through southeastern Laos each month.<sup>105</sup> From April until June of 1966, the USAF launched 400 B-52 Stratofortress anti-infiltration sorties against the trail system, until the absorption of STEEL TIGER

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<sup>101</sup> Van Staaveren, *Gradual Failure*, 4.

<sup>102</sup> NVA (North Vietnamese Army - communist) and PAVN (People's Army Of Vietnam) can be used interchangeably.

<sup>103</sup> Col Perry L. Lamy. *Barrel Roll, 1968-1973: An Air Campaign in Support of National Policy* (Maxwell AFB, AL: Air University Press, 1995), 24.

<sup>104</sup> Podhoretz, *Why We Were in Vietnam*, 7.

<sup>105</sup> John Schlight, *A War Too Long* (Washington DC: Center of Air Force History, 1993), 53.

into Operation COMMANDO HUNT, later supplemented by the 1,718 B-52 ARC LIGHT strikes.<sup>106</sup>

## **OPERATION ROLLING THUNDER**

The year 1965 was a turning point in Vietnam. The United States had to choose between three unpalatable options: continue in an advisory capacity, cut-and-run, or fully commit.<sup>107</sup> Washington chose the option that seemed to straddle between advisory and full military commitment: air power. Immediately following Tonkin Gulf attacks, the Commander of the US Pacific Fleet developed a plan for a highly restricted and carefully controlled sustained air campaign designed to escalate in three stages, known as Operation ROLLING THUNDER.<sup>108</sup> This strategic bombing campaign utilized US military aircraft to attack targets in North Vietnam from March 1965 through October 1968.<sup>109</sup> The bombardment aimed to put military pressure on North Vietnam's Communist leaders and reduce their capacity to wage war against the South. Air chiefs relied on the perceived lessons from World War II as a guide for the strategic bombing of Vietnam, as commanders viewed the unrestricted campaigns against Germany and Japan as proper applications of air power.<sup>110</sup> At this plan's start, President Lyndon B. Johnson and his colleagues agreed that Saigon would not survive without further intervention and a strategic bombing campaign could dissuade this fledgling economy, still licking its wounds from the Indochina War, from supporting the insurgents in the South.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Schlight, *A War Too Long*, 53.

<sup>107</sup> Col. Dennis M. Drew, *ROLLING THUNDER 1965: Anatomy of a Failure* (Maxwell AFB: Air University Press, 1986), 36.

<sup>108</sup> Van Staaveren, *Gradual Failure*, 4.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>110</sup> Mark Clodfelter, *The Limits of Air Power: The American Bombing of North Vietnam* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2006) 73.

<sup>111</sup> Clodfelter, *Limits of Air Power*, 73.

According to USAF General and Chief of Staff Curtis LeMay, the idea was to “bomb them back to the Stone Age” by “[making] it so expensive for the North Vietnamese that they would stop their aggression against South Vietnam and Laos...they don’t want to lose everything they have.”<sup>112</sup>

Planning for ROLLING THUNDER drew upon the development of AWPD-1, the plan that guided the Army Air Force’s bombing of Germany.<sup>113</sup> Overall, ROLLING THUNDER had three main objectives. First and foremost, the bombing campaign was to act as strategic persuasion.<sup>114</sup> This concept evolved from the ever-changing deterrence theory and containment strategy of the early years of the Cold War. In short, the United States believed that at a certain point, bombing could inflict enough pain to coerce the North to abandon their efforts in Southern Vietnam. This campaign also aimed to raise the morale of military and political elites in South Vietnam by showing the ARVN that the United States fully backed their cause.<sup>115</sup> The third objective was the only tactical aspect of the entire campaign: interdiction.<sup>116</sup> Air commanders believed that targeting economic centers would disrupt not only the North’s war making capabilities, but unravel their social fabric as well. Main targets included bridges, rail yards and depots, docks, barracks, and supply caches to “reduce North Vietnamese support of communist operations in Laos and South Vietnam, limit North Vietnamese capabilities to take direct action against Laos and South Vietnam, and impair North Vietnam’s capacity to continue as an industrially viable state.”<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> LeMay, Curtis. *Mission With LeMay* (New York: Doubleday, 1965) 564.

<sup>113</sup> Clodfelter, *Limits of Air Power*, 73.

<sup>114</sup> Earl H. Tilford, *SETUP: What the Air Force Did in Vietnam and Why* (Maxwell AFB, Alabama: Air University Press, 1991), 105.

<sup>115</sup> Tilford, *SETUP*, 105.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

<sup>117</sup> Col. Dennis M. Drew, *ROLLING THUNDER 1965*, 41.

The Vietcong began attacking US air bases in the South. General William Westmoreland, Commander of the U.S. Military Assistance Command in Vietnam (COM-US MACV), demanded more US men to stave off further communist attacks.<sup>118</sup> President Johnson ordered the first official troops to South Vietnam: 3,500 Marines.<sup>119</sup> After a decade-long effort by the United States to avoid direct military contact with the “the objective in Vietnam...is a stable and independent noncommunist government,” while strategic bombing aimed “to compel the Democratic Government of [North] Vietnam to cease providing support to the insurgencies in South Vietnam and Laos.”<sup>120</sup> Vietnamese forces saw this war as colonial in nature and a continuation of the First Indochina War, whereas the United States government viewed it as an attempt to prevent a communist takeover of South Vietnam in a wider effort to globally enforce containment policy.<sup>121</sup>

The idea of a gradual, calculated, and limited escalation of air strikes eased some of the widespread concern that an all-out air campaign would tempt the Chinese or Soviets to intervene. This gradual approach insinuated that the mere threat of destruction would indeed serve as a more influential deterrent than actually carrying out the destruction.<sup>122</sup> Oppositely, newly-appointed Air Force Chief of Staff General John P. McConnell attempted to convince the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) to exchange the finite for the infinite when it came to ROLLING THUNDER. His efforts bore no change, and ROLLING THUNDER continued within the dramatic restrictions placed upon it by the

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<sup>118</sup> Kenneth W. Thompson, “The Johnson Presidency and Foreign Policy,” *Lyndon Baines Johnson and the Uses of Power*. Bernard J. Firestone and Robert Vogt, eds. (NY: Greenwood Press, 1988), 290.

<sup>119</sup> Thompson, “The Johnson Presidency,” 290.

<sup>120</sup> Joint Chiefs of Staff Memorandum, August 27, 1965. National Security Files, Johnson Library.

<sup>121</sup> Podhoretz, *Why We Were in Vietnam*, 26.

<sup>122</sup> John Morocco, *Thunder from Above: Air War, 1941–1968* (Boston: Boston Publishing Company, 1984), 24.

Joint Chiefs to avoid civilian casualties in Vietnam as well as any action that might provoke China or Russia to get involved or use any nuclear weapons.<sup>123</sup> The paranoia over the possibility of intercession on the side of the North Vietnamese paired with the disagreement over the possible effectiveness of a more robust air strategy complicated things. Washington leaders attempted to strike an impossible equilibrium: successfully terrorizing the enemy while maintaining a positive image on the world stage. A sensible air raid cannot exist on this scale. Johnson restricted weaponry, banned the deployment of nuclear weapons and restricted targets, sortie rates, and B-52 employment all to avoid aggravating the Soviets and Chinese.<sup>124</sup> To Johnson and the JCS, inflicting indirect pain on Hanoi, the source of the insurgency, would force the NVA to negotiate.

In mid-June 1965 Johnson permitted bombing raids in the South, but hesitated to send bombers across the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel for fear of provocation.<sup>125</sup> This ARC LIGHT<sup>126</sup> campaign of B-52 close air support became a regular feature of the Southern war.<sup>127</sup> When the communist leaders did not immediately crawl to the negotiating table, Washington halted strikes altogether in an attempt to convince the Hanoi regime it could not win this war and to offer a chance to broker a deal. The first bombing break, tagged MAYFLOWER, lasted five days in May 1965; the second, called MARIGOLD, lasted thirty seven days.<sup>128</sup> Both diplomatic initiatives failed and bombing resumed, initially with even tighter limitations placed on air combat and combat support sorties.

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<sup>123</sup> Thompson, "The Johnson Presidency," 290.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 291.

<sup>125</sup> Clodfelter, *Limits of Air Power*, 119.

<sup>126</sup> ARC LIGHT is the code name and general term for the use of B-52D/F/G Stratofortress as a platform to support ground tactical operations assisted by ground control radar detachments in Operation COMBAT SKY SPOT during the Vietnam War.

<sup>127</sup> Clodfelter, *Limits of Air Power*, 119.

<sup>128</sup> Van Staavern, *Gradual Failure*, 6.

The unwillingness of Washington was not the only problem the United States Air Force faced in Vietnam: By 1966, the Communist forces possessed a growing arsenal that included anti aircraft guns, automatic weapons, and Soviet-built SA-2<sup>129</sup> missiles. The majority of these SAM<sup>130</sup> sites were not hit because of their close proximity to the Hanoi-Haiphong area and the Chinese border.<sup>131</sup> By the end of 1966, communist antiaircraft missiles took down 170 United States aircraft.<sup>132</sup> As the casualty rate among US pilots and loss rates of aircraft rose, President Johnson finally authorized a more direct bombing approach on June 29, 1966, striking the principal petroleum, oil, and lubrication (POL) storage sites in North Vietnam.<sup>133</sup> Finally the USAF got the double-fisted bombing approach it had begged for since the start of United States involvement in Vietnam.

From June through October the will of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS)<sup>134</sup> seemed to match the perceived capability of the armed forces. Henceforth, B-52s dropped approximately 8,000 tons of bombs each month. In 1966 over 5,000 B-52 sorties flew night and day to support ground operations, primarily in South Vietnam, but reaching as far as the Mu Gia Pass in the North.<sup>135</sup> The American public strongly backed the initial

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<sup>129</sup> The Soviet S-75/SA-2 was designed as a strategic surface to air missile, and intended to provide an area of defense for fixed target areas against attacking enemy aircraft. In South East Asia (SEA), the Soviet S-75/SA-2 was used exclusively, with batteries deployed widely across North Vietnam from the mid 1960's. Figures vary widely, but a common figure is 50 batteries rotating between 150 fixed SAM sites. "Surface to Air Missiles in Vietnam," <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/vietnam/nva-ad-sam.htm>; Marshall L. Michell III. *Clashes: Air Combat Over North Vietnam, 1965-1972* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1997), 1-4.

<sup>130</sup> Surface to Air Missile sites

<sup>131</sup> Michell, *Clashes: Air Combat Over North Vietnam*, 1-4.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

<sup>133</sup> Van Staavern, *Gradual Failure*, 6.

<sup>134</sup> The JCS was established during World War II to advise the President, the Secretary of Defense, the National Security Council (NSC) and the Homeland Security Council, in regard to the strategic direction of the armed forces of the United States. The JCS remained intact after the war as military advisers and planners, having played a significant role in the development of national policy. Each member is appointed by the president and confirmed by the Senate.

<sup>135</sup> Tilford, *SETUP*, 107.

POL raids in Vietnam, even though Johnson failed to clarify how bombing the North would help achieve the aim of an independent, noncommunist South. At first, the strikes appeared successful, destroying tank farms near Hanoi and Haiphong.<sup>136</sup> The CIA estimated that nearly seventy percent of North Vietnam's oil facilities had been destroyed, but this artificially inflated sense of success was short lived.<sup>137</sup> Unfortunately, Hanoi had anticipated such a campaign and dispersed its POL surplus across the country, and the loss of oil storage tank farms and refineries was only a short-term inconvenience. After a few short months, the POL attacks were halted as US intelligence admitted that there was "no evidence yet of any shortages of POL in North Vietnam."<sup>138</sup> A CIA memorandum stated that, "U.S. bombing has created some difficulties in the North Vietnamese industrial sector. However, some of the problems... existed before the bombing began. The bombing of electric power plants does not appear to have seriously affected the industrial output... The transport system of North Vietnam continues to function adequately,"<sup>139</sup> And then, there was Khe Sanh. At Khe Sanh, the shining star was the success of air power as close air support (CAS).

Perhaps the most iconic battle in the entirety of the Vietnam War was at Khe Sanh.<sup>140</sup> Initially, officials in Saigon pushed aside the NVA movement in the area surrounding the Khe Sanh Combat Base (KSCB).<sup>141</sup> However, further intelligence revealed that the NVA intended to concentrate a large number of troops nearby, which

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<sup>136</sup> Tilford, *SETUP*, 107.

<sup>137</sup> Morocco, *Thunder From Above*, 27.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid; CIA, Memorandum on "The Effectiveness of the ROLLING THUNDER Program in North Vietnam," November 1966, 48.

<sup>139</sup> CIA, Memorandum on ROLLING THUNDER, 48-51.

<sup>140</sup> January 21- July 9, 1968, Quang Tri Province, South Vietnam.

<sup>141</sup> Gregg Jones. *Last Stand at Khe Sanh* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2015) xii.

sparked an immediate build-up of U.S. Marine Corps forces at the base.<sup>142</sup> At the Battle of Khe Sanh, 6,000 Marines from the U.S. III Marine Amphibious Force (III MAF) and 1st Battalion 9<sup>th</sup> Marine Regiment, along with the U.S. Army 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division relief force and air support from the 7<sup>th</sup> Air Force, held off upwards of 20,000 NVA troops over 77 days of siege in early 1968.<sup>143</sup> Air support held the stranded Marines over until a relief force finally broke through the NVA siege in April.<sup>144</sup> Three months later, the Marines blew up their fortifications at Khe Sanh and slipped away.<sup>145</sup>

U.S. success at Khe Sanh did not change the disastrous outcome of the war, but indeed marked a tactical success, especially in regard to the close air support (CAS) campaign Operation NIAGARA. This massive campaign of artillery and air strikes by the U.S. Air Force, Navy, and Marines, provided CAS to the Marines at KSCB while inhibiting the Vietcong from taking the stronghold.<sup>146</sup> During NIAGARA the U.S. Air Force dropped 14,000 tons over nearly 10,000 sorties, the Marine Corps Aviation Wing dropped 17,000 tons, and the Navy flew 5,000 sorties, dropping over 7,000 tons.<sup>147</sup> By March, the NVA began withdraw, and the overwhelming opinion considered air superiority a crucial contributor to this battle's success.<sup>148</sup> Although air power sent the NVA packing, this battle, just like the whole American experience in Vietnam, was muddled in confusion and inter-service rivalry. Westmoreland, Taylor, and Johnson

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<sup>142</sup> Jones, *Khe Sanh*, xii.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.; Martin J. Dougherty. *100 Battles: Decisive Battles that Have Shaped the World* (Bath, United Kingdom: Parragon Books, 2012), 236.

<sup>144</sup> Thomas E. Ricks, "5 Things You Didn't Know About Khe Sanh," *Foreign Policy Magazine*, June 5, 2014.

<sup>145</sup> Ricks, "5 Things."

<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

<sup>147</sup> John Prados and Ray W. Stubbe. *Valley of Decision* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1991), 297-298; Jacob Van Staaveren. *The Air Force in Southeast Asia: Toward a Bombing Halt, 1968* (Washington, D.C.: Office of Air Force History, 1970), 11.

<sup>148</sup> Ricks, "5 Things."



clashed. Westmoreland suggested using tactical nukes.<sup>149</sup> Taylor opted for retreat, and Johnson eventually sided with Westmoreland, hoping for a decisive victory.<sup>150</sup>

Regardless, the U.S. achieved its goals at Khe Sanh through the successful use of CAS.

Despite the claim of U.S. victory at Khe Sanh, by this time, civilians in the Washington administration were convinced that both ROLLING THUNDER and the ground war in South Vietnam were not working. On March 22 1968, President Johnson announced that General Westmoreland would be replaced following a meeting of the “Senior Informal Advisory Group.”<sup>151</sup> In this meeting, nine non-government men decided to de-escalate the war. The conditions and prospects in the warzones looked bleak and the bombing of North Vietnam was simply not achieving its objectives.<sup>152</sup> Continued escalation of the war, intensified bomb campaigns in the North, and sending more U.S. troops would “do no good.”<sup>153</sup> Instead, these advisors nudged Johnson to intensify efforts to seek a political solution to end Vietnam.

This realization came too late: airstrikes, whether gradual or massive, simply could not turn the tide. Their belief that an air campaign could not win the war added with the fear of a serious military confrontation with communist China, the Soviet Union, or both, left administrators at a loss of how to succeed in Vietnam. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara explained in his *In Retrospect* that he and others in the administration unwaveringly opposed the Joint Chief’s loosening of target restrictions allowing more

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<sup>149</sup> Van Staaveren. *The Air Force in Southeast Asia: Toward a Bombing Halt, 1968*, 8-13.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

<sup>151</sup> Marvin E. Gettleman, Jane Franklin, Marilyn Young, and H. Bruce Franklin. *Vietnam and America: A Documented History* (New York: Grove Press, 1995), 395-397.

<sup>152</sup> Gettleman, *Vietnam and America*, 395.

<sup>153</sup> Stuart Loory, “Hawks’ Shift Precipitated Bombing Halt,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 19, 1968.

bombing in the Hanoi-Haiphong area.<sup>154</sup> After visiting Vietnam, McNamara urged Johnson to halt the bombing, explaining, “the ROLLING THUNDER program of bombing the north has not significantly affected infiltration or crushed the morale of Hanoi – at the proper time we should consider terminating bombing in all of North Vietnam.”<sup>155</sup> All the while, military leaders insisted that ROLLING THUNDER could indeed be effective, but only if they received a free hand.<sup>156</sup>

United States civilians wanted troops to come home, unsure of why they were there in the first place. Military leaders wanted more troops deployed. Generals claimed the campaign was a great success, but demanded greater latitude in order to make the campaign succeed.<sup>157</sup> The limited goals outlined in American foreign policy and the military’s goal of total victory would never align and the definition of what constituted victory blurred. Operation ROLLING THUNDER represented a significant milestone in America’s containment policy in Southeast Asia, as it represented a major expansion of US involvement in the Vietnam War, but it ultimately failed to deter Hanoi. Further, ROLLING THUNDER proved that an air campaign designed for conventional war was ill suited for a limited conflict with a guerrilla target.

Keeping the American public and military leaders both happy was a balance no man could strike. On March 31, Lyndon B. Johnson announced in a television address that he would not seek re-election. In the same speech, Johnson went into great detail on the Tet Offensive, explaining that the communists failed to meet their political objectives:

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<sup>154</sup> Robert S. McNamara and Brian VanDeMark, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: Times Books, 1995), 212.

<sup>155</sup> Robert S. McNamara draft memorandum to Lyndon B. Johnson, October 1966.

<sup>156</sup> Clodfelter, *Limits of Air Power*, 100.

<sup>157</sup> McNamara, *In Retrospect*, 213.

“It did not collapse the elected government in South Vietnam... It did not produce a popular uprising among the people. The communists were unable to maintain control and took very heavy casualties.”<sup>158</sup> Johnson also urged Hanoi to welcome negotiations to “bring an end to this long and bloody war.”<sup>159</sup> Johnson said that he ordered U.S. aircraft and naval vessels to make no attacks on North Vietnam in an effort to substantially reduce the level of hostilities.<sup>160</sup>

ROLLING THUNDER failed on all three of its stated objectives. Firstly, the bombing failed to coerce, as Hanoi was not discouraged from supporting the Vietcong.<sup>161</sup> North Vietnam continued providing supplies and manpower to the South through the duration of the war.<sup>162</sup> Secondly, ROLLING THUNDER did not break the will of the communist leaders in the North or South, as anti-American propaganda actually thrived on this bombing campaign.<sup>163</sup> The Vietnamese people had been controlled by various colonial entities since the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE when China first exerted control over Nam Viet.<sup>164</sup> This aggression made the radical-leaning peasants of Vietnam see America as just another foreign body trying to capitalize on their lucrative natural resources and inhibit Vietnamese independence. Morale was indeed raised, but oppositely what the US expected with the bombing campaign. Lastly, military leaders failed to develop a strategy appropriate for the war at hand.<sup>165</sup> They failed to adapt. Even when they realized that the

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<sup>158</sup> President Lyndon B. Johnson, “Address to the Nation,” March 31, 1968.

<sup>159</sup> Johnson’s “Address to the Nation,” March 31, 1968.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

<sup>161</sup> Tilford, *SETUP*, 154.

<sup>162</sup> Wayne Thompson. *To Hanoi and Back: The U.S. Air Force and North Vietnam, 1966-1973* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2002), 77.

<sup>163</sup> Tilford, *SETUP*, 154.

<sup>164</sup> Dr. Blake Dunnavent, “Early Vietnam” Lecture, Louisiana State University, Shreveport, January 17, 2017.

<sup>165</sup> Tilford, *SETUP*, 155.

restrictions placed upon them by policymakers would never be fully loosened, they never devised a strategy that was reasonably applicable to the war at hand.<sup>166</sup> Many military historians place solitary blame on civilian leaders in Washington in regard to the failure of ROLLING THUNDER, but that failure was indeed a joint effort. In their pride, both civilian and military planners never even considered that North Vietnam could endure American air power.<sup>167</sup>

The Department of Defense announced that 864,000 tons of American bombs dropped on North Vietnam during ROLLING THUNDER between March 1965 and November 1968, making it the most intense air battle waged during the Cold War period.<sup>168</sup> Over these forty-four weeks, the North Vietnamese suffered 90,000 casualties, approximately 70,000 of which were civilians, while the USAF reported 145 rescued, 255 killed, 222 captured, and 123 missing.<sup>169</sup> The mission hindered the movement of supplies, but did not significantly affect the infiltration of enemy troops into the South. 830 US Aircraft were lost.<sup>170</sup> In 1966 alone, the value of aircraft lost on sorties against North Vietnam is estimated at \$480 million.<sup>171</sup> The damage done to North Vietnam was nearly \$300 million, but the total cost for the campaign cost the United States \$900 million.<sup>172</sup> The confusion in Washington, the nature of the war, and the North's anticipation of such an attack limited the operation's successfulness. Ultimately, ROLLING THUNDER's

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<sup>166</sup> Tilford, *SETUP*, 155.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>168</sup> Berger, Carl, ed., *The United States Air Force in Southeast Asia, 1961–1973* (Washington, DC: Office of Air Force History, 1977), 112.

<sup>169</sup> "[Appraisal of the Bombing of North Vietnam \(through 1 January 1968\)](#)". *Vietnam Virtual Archives*. Texas Tech University Press.

<sup>170</sup> "Appraisal of the Bombing of North Vietnam," Vietnam Virtual Archives; CIA, "Memorandum on ROLLING THUNDER," 9.

<sup>171</sup> CIA, "Memorandum on ROLLING THUNDER," 8.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*

mission began as strategic persuasion, transformed into tactical interdiction, and ended with Hanoi no closer to the negotiating table. It was simply a loser. In January 1969, just two months after Johnson called ROLLING THUNDER off, peace talks began.<sup>173</sup>

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<sup>173</sup> Tilford, *SETUP*, 153.



Figure 2. ROLLING THUNDER target map<sup>174</sup>

<sup>174</sup> Harry G. Summers, Jr. *Historical Atlas of the Vietnam War* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1995), 96.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE JOINT CHIEFS OF STAFF

The idea that the war in Vietnam was entirely America's to win or lose is a common view in post-war writings.<sup>175</sup> This stance offers a one-sided view. The political and military capability of insurgent fighters must be examined along with the clear ineffectiveness of American political and military strategists to gain a well rounded perspective on how exactly the North, a seemingly weak adversary, won against the most powerful military in the world. Yes, the United States government and military failed on many levels, namely: inter-service rivalry trumped effectiveness; military manpower was misused; the failure to recognize the limits of air power in this unique operational setting, and the overall failure of senior leadership to devise a cohesive plan of action<sup>176</sup> These misgivings are secondary to the underestimation of communist insurgent forces by both political and military strategists. Additionally, it is necessary to mention that although senior political leaders did indeed impose stringent limitations on military actions during the war, military officials failed to act successfully within these limitations imposed on the use of force.<sup>177</sup> With all off this in mind, it is easy to see how Hanoi's extraordinary will to win could trump the United States' fragmented military strategy.

There was no clearly outlined common objective through the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, and inter-service rivalries only diluted strategy efforts even further. Under President John F. Kennedy, the United States continued to expand its military advisory strength in South Vietnam in response to increased communist

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<sup>175</sup> Jeffrey Record. "How America's Own Military Performance Aided and Abetted the North's Victory," *Why The North Won the Vietnam War* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 118.

<sup>176</sup> Record, "How America's Own," 117.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid.

infiltration through Laos.<sup>178</sup> President Kennedy emphasized strategy to combat guerrilla warfare, but the JCS rejected. Although things were certainly heating up in Laos and South Vietnam during the Kennedy administration, much of the JCS' attention focused on Berlin and Cuba. From the Bay of Pigs incident forward, the JCS, factions in the Department of Defense (DOD), and Kennedy clashed. Under the subsequent Presidents, tensions between the JCS and other bodies grew, in turn complicating the conflict in Southeast Asia further.

Top military officials and Washington leaders are both to blame for the loss, as both groups underestimated the tenacity of insurgent forces and leaders. Even if the tight restrictions placed on air campaigns in Vietnam had been nonexistent, it is not self-evident that victory would have followed.<sup>179</sup> Faulty professional United States military performance inadvertently contributed to Hanoi's victory by playing into the strengths of the enemy.<sup>180</sup>

Almost immediately, historians place the blame solely on President Lyndon Johnson and his Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara, but military leaders and the JCS are as much to blame, if not more. The United States Air Force refused to adapt to the limits placed upon them, essentially allowing pride to stand in the way of a strategy that appeased all parties. The JCS failed the president and the country because, just like Johnson and McNamara, this institution did not trust the senior military leadership. The JCS were legally obligated to give the president the best possible military advice, but transcripts from the Johnson Library in Austin, TX show just how conflicting the JCS

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<sup>178</sup> Jack Schulimson. *The Joint Chiefs of Staff and the War in Vietnam, 1960-1968, Part I* (Washington, DC: Office of Joint History, 2011), ix.

<sup>179</sup> Record, "How America's Own," 119.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid.



advice could be. In a conflicting response to General Maxwell Taylor's questions regarding a settlement to the conflict in Vietnam, the JCS wrote:

The Joint Chiefs of Staff request that, in future formulation of United States policy concerning the settlement of the conflict, they be afforded an opportunity to provide you [McNamara/Taylor] with their views based upon the situation which exists at that time... A cessation of our military operations against the enemy prior to and/or during the negotiations would enhance the communist position... as the cessation of our bombing in the North is our most important negotiating asset so military operations should be continued and pressed vigorously during negotiations.<sup>181</sup>

Later in that same memorandum, the JCS quite oppositely insisted that:

The United States wants to get on with the important business of helping to build a nation in an atmosphere of peace and security... [and] as a further demonstration of its peaceful intentions and humanitarianism, the United States wishes to reaffirm our willingness to assist in economic development and to promote cooperation across the region in Southeast Asia.<sup>182</sup>

Within one single 1967 memorandum, the Joint Chiefs insinuated that bombing during negotiations should not only continue, but be even more vigorous all the while claiming that all the United States had peaceful and humanitarian intentions. Simultaneously, in February 1967, the largest US airborne operation since MARKET GARDEN was taking place in Vietnam.<sup>183</sup> This 82-day long operation resulted in a Vietcong strategic victory.<sup>184</sup> Two thousand seven hundred twenty-eight Vietcong killed.<sup>185</sup> Were these the peaceful intentions of the JCS?

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<sup>181</sup> JCSM-107-67, Memorandum from the Joint Chiefs of Staff to Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara, Washington, D.C., February 27, 1967.

<sup>182</sup> JCSM-107-67, Memorandum from the JCS to McNamara, February 27, 1967.

<sup>183</sup> William S. Turley. *The Second Indochina War: A Concise Political and Military History* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008), 3.

<sup>184</sup> Turley, *Second Indochina War*, 114.

<sup>185</sup> Maj C.C. Lorenz, Maj J.H. Millbanks, Cpt D.H. Petraeus, et al. *Operation Junction City, Vietnam 1967 Battle Book* (Leavenworth, KS: U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 1983), 28. This is an excellent source that gives a play-by-play look at Operation Junction City, including a brief history of American roots in Vietnam, and the problems US forces faced that led to tactical win but strategic loss in this operation.

In regard to Vietnam, each separate service, including the JCS, assumed that they alone held the magic secret to win the war quickly, but none successfully uncovered the true nature of the war or the source of the insurgency in South Vietnam.<sup>186</sup> The JCS were unable to provide a unified military strategy or give timely advice. The United States Air Force thought that bombing the North could stop the insurgency in the South. The United States Army thought the exact opposite of the Air Force, and the Marines wanted to hole up in enclaves along the southern coast.<sup>187</sup> The presidents of the Vietnam War and their cabinets received contradictory views on strategy throughout the conflict.

The growing commitment and losses required more optimistic progress reports of the war as the gap between expectation and reality widened.<sup>188</sup> By redefining objectives, it transformed into the war the JCS and US Military thought they should have been fighting all long: a war aimed to fill the promises made rather than a war that could be won. President Nixon inherited the baggage of grandiose war aims and inflated achievement appraisals upon his election.<sup>189</sup> These overly optimistic aims of presidents and JCS past became the United States' toughest obstacle to overcome in regards to wartime settlements in the Nixon years.<sup>190</sup> Could Nixon back down from the war aims created to support Lyndon Johnson's and his own escalation policy?

By the late 1960's America's Vietnam War was that of contradictions and distorted realities. The military physically destroyed the country they aimed to help. Instead of building democratic political structures in hamlets, they bombed villages and

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<sup>186</sup> H.R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty, Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies that Led to Vietnam* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), 262.

<sup>187</sup> McMaster, *Dereliction*, 262.

<sup>188</sup> Jonathan Schell, *The New Yorker*, February 1, 1969.

<sup>189</sup> Schell, *The New Yorker*, February 1, 1969.

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.*

killed villagers. The war outlived peoples' issues with the war- it lingered on with no new supporters or critics. The war itself was a stalemate, and conversation on the war was even staler. The American war in Vietnam “[had] lost even the pretense of a purpose and turned into a bloody playground for idealism and cruelty.”<sup>191</sup>

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<sup>191</sup> Jonathan Schell, *The New Yorker*, April 18, 1970.

## CHAPTER 4

### LINEBACKER II

1968 was a year of monumental change: The Tet Offensive, bombing halts, the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., the end of ROLLING THUNDER, and the election of President Richard M. Nixon. Since 1963, U.S. troop levels in Vietnam had skyrocketed from 15,000 to just over half a million.<sup>192</sup> American attitudes at this point in the war had grown sour and impatient, and the newly-elected Republican promised to return the United States to its former glory and security, akin to the Eisenhower era.<sup>193</sup> Despite Nixon's promise to end the war, by 1971, there was still no palpable progress with Nixon's détente-driven Vietnamization policy. His approval rating bottomed out below 50%.<sup>194</sup> Still, in 1972, Nixon cinched re-election, in large part due to his effective use of television marketing.<sup>195</sup>

In 1969, Nixon gave Operation MENU the green light. This secret bombing campaign was aimed at Northern Vietnamese and Khmer Rouge camps in neighboring Cambodia.<sup>196</sup> Later that year in May, despite the secret escalation of the war in technically-neutral Cambodia, the president proposed to withdraw all American troops from South Vietnam, so long as the North followed suit. He addressed the nation on May 14, 1969:

What kind of settlement will permit the South Vietnamese people to determine freely their own political future? Such a settlement will require the withdrawal of

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<sup>192</sup> "The Vietnam War: Military Statistics," The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History.

<https://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/seventies/resources/vietnam-war-military-statistics>

<sup>193</sup> Theodore H. White. *The Making of the President 1968* (New York: Atheneum House, Inc., 1969), 146.

<sup>194</sup> In May 1971, Nixon's approval rating dipped to 40%.; "Presidential Job Approval," University of California, Santa Barbara, 2004.

<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/data/popularity.php?pres=37&sort=pop&direct=DESC&Submit=DISPLAY>.

<sup>195</sup> Theodore H. White. *The Making of the President 1972* (New York: Atheneum House, Inc., 1973), 221.

<sup>196</sup> Conrad Black. *Richard M. Nixon: A Life in Full* (New York: Public Affairs Books, 2007), 591.

all non-South Vietnamese forces, including our own, from South Vietnam. To implement these principles, I reaffirm now our willingness to withdraw our forces on a specified timetable. We ask only that North Vietnam withdraw its forces from South Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos on a timetable... I believe this proposal for peace is realistic, and takes account of the legitimate interests of all involved.<sup>197</sup>

On March 22, 1972, the Easter Offensive, the NVA's invasion of South Vietnam began.<sup>198</sup> In response, Nixon approved Operation FREEDOM TRAIN, or Operation LINEBACKER I.<sup>199</sup> From April through October 1972, U.S. bombing in Vietnam sought to halt the North's offensive while simultaneously crippling Hanoi's ability to wage war.<sup>200</sup> Departing from grand World War II era raid protocol, the United States Air Force successfully isolated NVA troops from their supply bases and decimated their transport system with the LINEBACKER I air campaign.<sup>201</sup> This campaign was markedly different from previous bombing campaigns because of the loosened restrictions and accuracy provided by laser-guided bombs.<sup>202</sup> Nixon's use of air power to disrupt enemy supply lines and precisely target troop hot spots stopped the offensive, pushing the communist forces back without the reintroduction of U.S. ground troops.<sup>203</sup> After initial success, Nixon called for a bombing halt in October to allow Hanoi a chance to negotiate.<sup>204</sup> Just like with previous halts, the North saw this as weakness, and their offensive continued. Peace talks collapsed, and Nixon offered an ultimatum: stop the invasion, or face the full might of the Air Force. In lieu of an answer, the North continued.

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<sup>197</sup> President Richard M. Nixon, "Address to the Nation," May 14, 1969.

<sup>198</sup> Marshall L. Michell, III. *The 11 Days of Christmas* (New York: Encounter Books, 2002), 23.

<sup>199</sup> Michell, *11 Days*, 23.

<sup>200</sup> Tilford., *SETUP*, 253.

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>202</sup> *Wings Over Vietnam*, miniseries (Silver Spring, MD: Discover Channel, 1998).

<sup>203</sup> *Wings Over Vietnam* miniseries

<sup>204</sup> Michell, *11 Days*, 25.

The newly re-elected President Richard M. Nixon faced an eminent cut-off of funds for Vietnam beginning in 1973.<sup>205</sup> Congress was set to return to session in January of 1973, so the Nixon administration needed a strategy to end the war on the United States' and Saigon's terms – and quick.<sup>206</sup> In December 1972, after the total failure of gradualist conventional methods in Vietnam, military victory seemed within Hanoi's grasp.<sup>207</sup> Pursuing peace talks was pointless to the North, as total military victory actually seemed viable. This sense of optimism started and ended within the Vietcong camps. President Nixon called upon the United States Air Force to save face with a three-day bombing campaign called Operation LINEBACKER II. Later expanded to eleven days, from December 18 through 29, 1972, over twenty thousand tons of ordinance rained down upon the Hanoi-Haiphong areas in the North.<sup>208</sup> What sets this mission apart from the previous limited interdiction-aimed air campaigns, is that LINEBACKER II intended to destroy all major target complexes, thus wiping out the North's war-making capacity, with an all-weather force of B-52s, F-111s, and Navy A-6s, day and night for eleven days straight.<sup>209</sup> Like LINEBACKER I, LINEBACKER II had the same political objective: get North Vietnam back to the negotiating table quickly by dashing Hanoi's hopes of a better peace agreement or achieving military victory.

The commanders of Strategic Air Command (SAC) and Pacific Air Command (PAC) settled on the target list: sixteen near Hanoi and thirteen in and around Haiphong.

**B-52 Targets:**

Bac Giang Trans-Shipment Point

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<sup>205</sup> Lt Col Phillip S. Michael. *The Strategic Significance of LINEBACKER II: Political, Military, and Beyond* (Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania: U.S. Army War College, 2003), iii.

<sup>206</sup> Tilford, *SETUP*, 253.

<sup>207</sup> Walter J. Boyne, "LINEBACKER II," *Air Force Magazine* (November 1997), 52.

<sup>208</sup> Michael, *Strategic Significance*, 9.

<sup>209</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

Duc Noi Railroad Yard  
 Duc Noi Storage Facility  
 Gia Thuong Storage Facility  
 Giap Nhi Railroad Yard  
 Haiphong Petroleum Products Storage  
 Haiphong Railroad Siding  
 Haiphong Transformer Station  
 Hanoi Radio Tower  
 Hanoi Railroad Yard  
 Hanoi Storage Facility / Bac Mai Airfield<sup>210</sup>  
 Hoa Lac Airfield  
 Kep Airfield  
 Kep Railroad Yard  
 Lang Dang Railroad Yard  
 Kinh No Railroad Yard  
 Phuc Yen Airfield  
 Phuc Yen SAM Support Complex  
 Quang Te Airfield  
 Thai Nguyen Railroad Yard  
 Thai Nguyen Thermal Power Plant  
 Trai Ca SAM Support Complex  
 Trung Quan Railroad Yard  
 Van Dien Vehicle Storage Facility  
 SAM Sites Targeted: VN-158, VN-234, VN-243, VN-266, VN-536, VN-549,  
 VN-563, and VN-660.<sup>211</sup>

B-52s, F-111s, and A-6s were selected to fly these sorties for three reasons,  
 according to the Air University Press publication *SETUP: What the Air Force Did in  
 Vietnam and Why*:

1. B-52s could deliver more destructive firepower than any other plane.
2. B-52s could cause maximum damage to larger areas, given their dispersal pattern.

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<sup>210</sup> The intended target was Bac Mai Airfield, however, on December 22 a string of bombs hit Bac Mai hospital instead. 28 hospital staff members died; Brig Gen James R. McCarthy. *LINEBACKER II: A View from the Rock* (Washington, D.C.: Office of Air Force History, 1985), 101-102.

<sup>211</sup> Dr. Albert Atkins. *We Won, and Then There Was LINEBACKER II: Strategic and Political Issues Surrounding the Bomb Campaign* (Bloomington, IN: Author House, 2009), 220-221; Boyne, "LINEBACKER II," 52; Lt Col Leonard D.G. Teixeira, "LINEBACKER II: A Strategic and Tactical Case Study" (Maxwell AFB, AL: Air War College, 1990), 18; and McCarthy, *LINEBACKER II*, 101-102.

3. Both B-52s and the Navy A-6s were not inhibited by bad weather, as Vietnam experienced an almost continuous drizzle<sup>212</sup> that (1972) monsoon season, which severely limited the use of precision-guided weapons.<sup>213</sup>

The U.S. Military once again hoped that by executing the war how they perceived as correct, Hanoi would at long last beg for peace. Per usual, the American press did not share this enthusiasm. Shortly after the operation, Jonathan Schell of the *New Yorker* recalled, “In the midst of Christmas shopping, we heard that our bombers had destroyed the Bac Mai hospital in Hanoi, and it came to some of us... that the most helpless people in a helpless country were dying at the hands of the worlds most powerful country using its most powerful machines.”<sup>214</sup>

Despite public opinion, Nixon decided to make one final push for victory. On December 18, 1972, LINEBACKER II got underway, in what began one of the most concentrated applications of air power in history.<sup>215</sup> The concept of round-the-clock bombing distinguished LINEBACKER II from previous limited campaigns in Vietnam,<sup>216</sup> but would it pay off? The goal was to stop the flow of weapons for the Vietcong while simultaneously inflicting maximum damage on the insurgents’ psyches.<sup>217</sup> Here, the psychological effects of a non-stop show of the full force of American firepower proved just as vital as the mission’s tactical success.<sup>218</sup> Another goal was to rescue the hundreds of U.S. men detained in POW camps in the Hanoi-Haiphong area.<sup>219</sup>

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<sup>212</sup> Harvey Smith et al. *North Vietnam: A Country Study* (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, 1967), 12.

<sup>213</sup> Tilford, *SETUP*, 253.

<sup>214</sup> Jonathan Schell, *The New Yorker*, January 6, 1973.

<sup>215</sup> Michael, *Strategic Significance*, 9.

<sup>216</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>217</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>218</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>219</sup> Michell, *11 Days*, 26.



The first night of LINEBACKER II suffered tragic losses. 3 B-52s were downed.<sup>220</sup> The tactics used on the first day, like those in ROLLING THUNDER, were too predictable. In the classic “V” formation, B-52s were sitting ducks for the SAM defenses around the capital.<sup>221</sup> These three losses, given that 121 sorties were flown the first night, represented an acceptable loss rate to SAC.<sup>222</sup> Two of the downed bombers were conveniently blamed on adverse weather conditions, bringing the loss rate below 1%.<sup>223</sup> After this rough start, the plan was adapted to fit unforeseen risks, and pilots were given additional room in formations so they could use evasive maneuvering in case of attack.<sup>224</sup> These adaptations paid off, and there were no B-52s hit the second night despite the 200 SAMS fired.<sup>225</sup>

On the third night: three more losses.<sup>226</sup> This first wave of LINEBACKER II did not surprise the NVA, but the intensity of it most certainly did.<sup>227</sup> As B-52 crews, many of whom had never seen combat, gained more experience, so did the communists. The predictable patterns of B-52 sorties gave SAM operators the upper hand. By this time, there were over 100 SAM sites in the Hanoi-Haiphong area.<sup>228</sup> The close flying formation of B-52s protected them from SAM detection, but if formation broke each plane became instantly vulnerable. This is where the F-111s and Wild Weasels (F-105) came into play.

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<sup>220</sup> *Wings Over Vietnam* miniseries.

<sup>221</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>222</sup> Tilford, *SETUP*, 255.

<sup>223</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>224</sup> Teixeira, “LINEBACKER II,” 16.

<sup>225</sup> Tilford, *SETUP*, 255.

<sup>226</sup> *Wings Over Vietnam* miniseries.

<sup>227</sup> Michael, *Strategic Significance*, 9.

<sup>228</sup> *Ibid.*

The F-111s kept the Russian MIGS at bay, while the Wild Weasels destroyed SAM sites.<sup>229</sup>

Crews, shocked by these losses, demanded tactical change.<sup>230</sup> Commanders took vulnerability into consideration, changed tactics, and reaped the rewards. This is what separates LINEBACKER II from ROLLING THUNDER and Arc Light. SAC commanders did not initially see enemy defenses as a major threat, despite the Hanoi-Haiphong area being ranked the third best air defense behind the USSR and Israel.<sup>231</sup> Phase II of LINEBACKER II incorporated several changes to tactical and operational procedures.<sup>232</sup> Crew debriefings and suggestions provided invaluable information which improved current tactics.<sup>233</sup> Most importantly, tactics, including interval rates between attacking waves were varied to prevent enemy predictability.<sup>234</sup> Target selection on the three previous days mainly focused on breaking the will of the NVA and insurgents in the South through maximum psychological impact. On this fourth day, in Phase II, the B-52 support force doubled, with SAM sites as the number one target.<sup>235</sup> Attacks were staggered in time, distance, and altitude at the recommendation of flight crews.<sup>236</sup> These tactical changes, along with preemptive navy strikes against the SAM sites successfully overwhelmed NVA defenses.<sup>237</sup> This shift to attacking defense positions achieved strategic and tactical objectives. Tactically, losing B-52s at the loss rate of the first three

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<sup>229</sup> Michael, *Strategic Significance*, 11.

<sup>230</sup> Clodfelter, *Limits of Air Power*, 193.

<sup>231</sup> Tilford, *SETUP*, 256.

<sup>232</sup> Teixeira, "LINEBACKER II," 17.

<sup>233</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>234</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>235</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>236</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>237</sup> *Ibid.*

nights would have resulted in defeat.<sup>238</sup> Strategically, taking out these SAM defenses allowed the U.S. to assert total dominance over the North, making strategic victory possible.<sup>239</sup>

On day 6, December 23, eighteen U-Tapao B52Ds and 12 Andersen B-52Ds targeted rail yards and SAM sites<sup>240</sup> near the Chinese border.<sup>241</sup> The big change on night six was the lack of preemptive SAM strikes, so the B-52 strikes caught the enemy completely off-guard.<sup>242</sup> Bomber cells split up upon target approach and after dropping ordnance, re-joined cell formation at varying altitudes.<sup>243</sup> Only five SAMs were fired with no hits, and the B-52s struck all targets.<sup>244</sup> Day 7, Christmas Eve, marked the third consecutive day with no damage reported. So far in the Vietnam War, from 1965 until Christmas Day 1972, air power had failed as a means to deter.<sup>245</sup> Nixon called for a bombing halt on Christmas Day to give the North a chance to continue with peace talks. Hanoi still wouldn't sign, as if they were holding out until Nixon inevitably ran out of money or hope.

The third and final phase began on December 26. Unfortunately for B-52 crews, the enemy took advantage of the Christmas Day halt to rebuild and resupply defenses around Hanoi.<sup>246</sup> Further tactical changes in this third phase offset Hanoi's advantage. SAC gave 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force authority to plan their own axis of attack and withdrawal

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<sup>238</sup> Tilford, *SETUP*, 259.

<sup>239</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>240</sup> A full target list can be found earlier in this chapter.

<sup>241</sup> Atkins. *We Won*, 220-221; Boyne, "LINEBACKER II," 52; Teixeira, "LINEBACKER II," 18; and McCarthy. *LINEBACKER II*, 101-102.

<sup>242</sup> Teixeira, "LINEBACKER II," 19.

<sup>243</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>244</sup> *Ibid.*, 19-20.

<sup>245</sup> Tilford, *SETUP*, 260.

<sup>246</sup> Teixeira, "LINEBACKER II," 21.

routes.<sup>247</sup> This added element of flexibility made all the difference. SAMS claimed two B-52Ds that night, but the mission dropped 9,932 bombs right on target within a 15-minute period.<sup>248</sup> The eighth day of bombing essentially “flew America out of Vietnam.”<sup>249</sup> The next morning Hanoi was ready to talk. Bombing continued three more days, but a meeting was set for January 8 in Paris.<sup>250</sup> The marvelous adaptability of LINEBACKER II paid off, and on January 27, 1973, the United States, the Republic of Vietnam, the National Liberation Front, and the People’s Democratic Republic of Vietnam signed the Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring the Peace in Vietnam.<sup>251</sup> American POWs returned, bombing ceased, and the final American troops withdrew.

In those eleven days, seven hundred twenty-nine B-52 sorties flew from Andersen Air Force Base, Guam, and U-Tapao Royal Thai Navy Airfield against thirty-four targets in North Vietnam.<sup>252</sup> <sup>253</sup> Over twenty thousand tons of ordinance dropped on power plants, NVA airfields, SAM sites, communications facilities, railroad yards, and munitions stores.<sup>254</sup> Additionally: Sixteen hundred military structures damaged or destroyed, five hundred rail interdictions, one quarter of petroleum stores destroyed, and eighty percent of the electrical infrastructure of North Vietnam reduced to nothing.<sup>255</sup> These crucial hits in this non-stop bombardment of North Vietnam reduced the logistical

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<sup>247</sup> Teixeira, “LINEBACKER II,” 21.

<sup>248</sup> Ibid., 22; Tilford, *SETUP*, 262.

<sup>249</sup> *Wings Over Vietnam* miniseries.

<sup>250</sup> Henry Kissinger. *The White House Years* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1979), 1463.

<sup>251</sup> Tilford, *SETUP*, 265.

<sup>252</sup> Teixeira, “LINEBACKER II,” 27.

<sup>253</sup> 1,041 daytime and 1,082 nighttime sorties; Teixeira, “LINEBACKER II,” 27.

<sup>254</sup> Ibid.; Michell, *11 Days*, 29.

<sup>255</sup> Tilford, *SETUP*, 260; Atkins, *We Won*, 150.

flow of materiel and manpower from 160,00 tons to 30,000 tons per month.<sup>256</sup>

LINEBACKER II ended the American war in Vietnam, but on April 30, 1975 the South Vietnam capital at Saigon fell to the NVA and Vietcong.<sup>257</sup>

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<sup>256</sup> Teixeira, "LINEBACKER II," 27.

<sup>257</sup> Tiziano Terzani, "Giai Phong! The Fall and Liberation of Saigon," *Foreign Affairs*, October 1976.

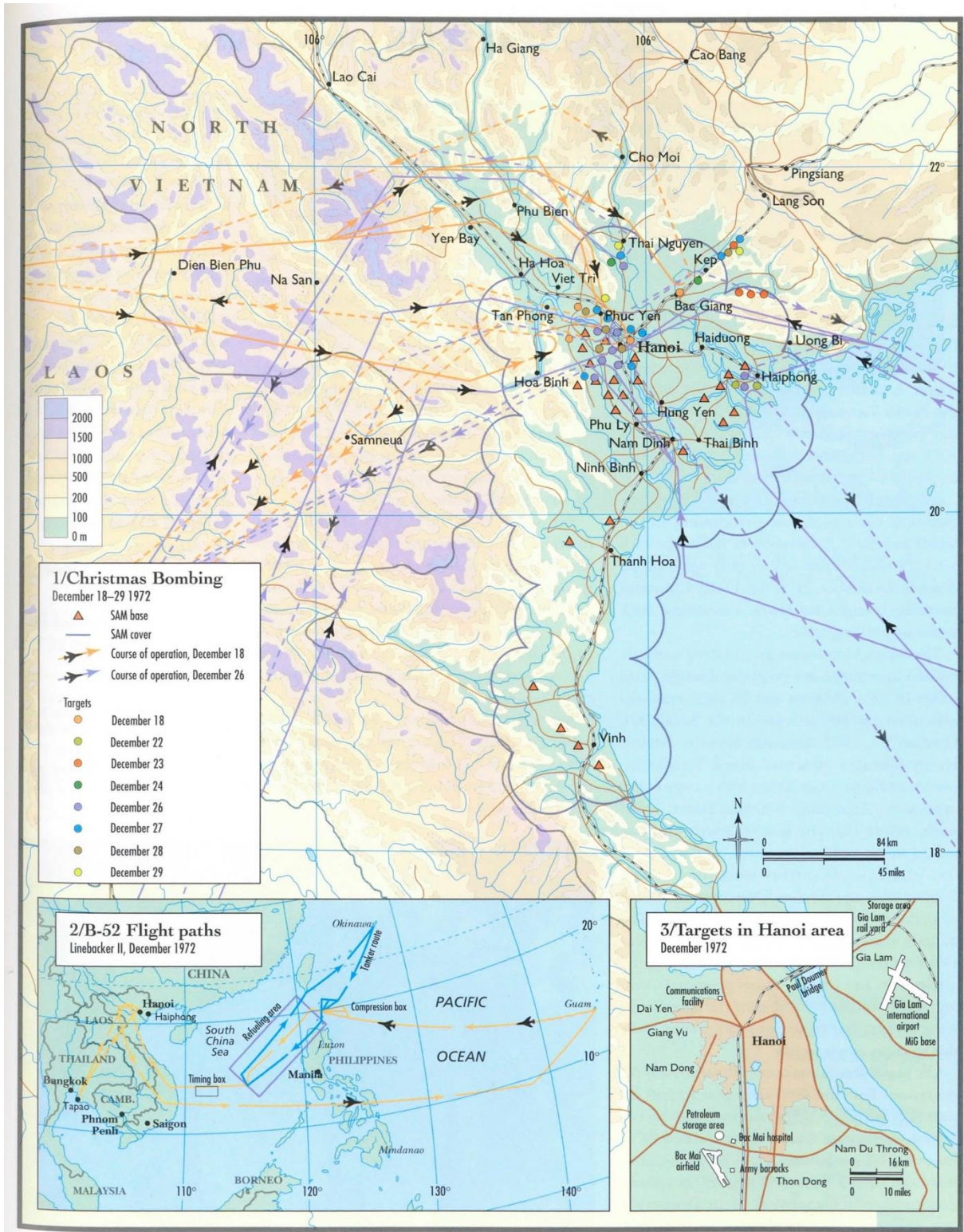


Figure 3. LINEBACKER II B52 targets map<sup>258</sup>

<sup>258</sup> Summers, Jr. *Historical Atlas of the Vietnam War*, 180.

## CHAPTER 5

### ASYMMETRY AND COUNTERINSURGENCY

Since the end of World War II, there have been 181 insurgencies worldwide.<sup>259</sup> Because many high-profile insurgencies are active today, it is important for United States strategists and the Department of Defense to recognize the growing deficit in knowledge about how these insurgencies operate. To gain a comprehensive understanding of viable defense strategies is paramount to the United States' continued global dominance. The U.S. military continues to stress aerial operations as a vital component of their counterinsurgency (COIN) doctrine.

The CIA defines an insurgency as “a protracted political-military struggle directed towards subverting or displacing the legitimacy of a constituted government or occupying power and completely or partially controlling the resources of a territory through the use of irregular military forces and illegal political organizations.”<sup>260</sup> Further, guerrilla strategies, like those used by the Vietcong, involve the use of military and political means to mobilize a local population, undermine the government's will to fight, and conduct hit and run attacks rather than face counterinsurgent or regular national troops on the battlefield.<sup>261</sup> These tactics are used by significantly weaker groups fighting against a moderate to strong central power to raise the cost (both human and monetary) to a level that makes the risk outweigh fighting for ends that do not match an opponents'

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<sup>259</sup> Seth G. Jones, *Waging Insurgent Warfare* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016) 7.

<sup>260</sup> CIA, “Guide to the Analysis of Insurgency” (Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency, 2012) 1.

<sup>261</sup> Ivan Arreguin-Toft, “How the Weak Win Wars,” *Cambridge Studies in International Relations*, 1999, 32-33.

objectives, fighting in ways that differ from an opponent's approach, and exploiting available resources to gain the upper hand.<sup>262</sup>

With the collapse of the Soviet Union in December 1991, the United States instantly became the only state with the military, economic, and political resources to act as a global hegemon.<sup>263</sup> As the unipolar global power in the post-Cold War era, the United States has been called upon to aid in Kuwait (1992), Somalia (1991-1994), Bosnia-Herzegovina (1993), Iraq (1993, 1996, 1998, 2002, 2003-present), Macedonia (1993), Zaire (1996), Haiti (1994, 2004), Croatia (1995), Liberia (1990, 1997), Sudan (1998), Afghanistan (1998, 2001-present), Yugoslavia (1999), Rwanda (1994), and Sierra Leone (1991).<sup>264</sup> In each of these instances,<sup>265</sup> the U.S. faced adversaries that employed unconventional military tactics in asymmetric conflicts. In each of these instances, each respective government ceased to effectively govern,<sup>266</sup> and in each instance, the United States struggled to cope with fragmented insurgent methods, civilian-military duality, and other tenets that accompany such conflicts. In the current climate of the conflict in the Middle East, the fragmented nature of the insurgency is discussed as if there is no precedent, but many insurgencies in the Cold War era, like that in Vietnam, experienced groups not only fighting the COIN forces, but other groups simultaneously.<sup>267</sup> If hindsight is indeed twenty-twenty, why is the most technologically advanced military in the world grasping at straws in the Middle East?

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<sup>262</sup> Clodfelter, *Limits of Air Power*, 211.

<sup>263</sup> Adam B. Lowther. *Americans and Asymmetric Conflict: Lebanon, Somalia, and Afghanistan* (Westport, CT: Praeger Securities International, 2007), 7.

<sup>264</sup> Lowther, *Americans in Asymmetric Conflict*, 7; RAND Corporation, "Other War- Lessons from Five Decades of RAND Counterinsurgency Research" (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2006), ix.

<sup>265</sup> With the exception of Rwanda and Sierra Leone, as the U.S. declined support to those two countries.

<sup>266</sup> Lowther, *Americans in Asymmetric Conflict*, 9.

<sup>267</sup> RAND, "Other War," x.



Picture the 1993 movie *Groundhog Day*. Bill Murray is forced to relive the same day – February 2 – over and over again. Political scientist Bruce Hoffman, in a research paper for the RAND Corporation, relates America’s mostly ill-fated experiences as a COIN force to Murray’s character in the movie.<sup>268</sup> America has been frustrated with its efforts to effectively prosecute the unique blend of political-military operations of insurgents in both Southeast and Southwest Asia for decades.<sup>269</sup> Fortunately for Murray, his character is able to right his path and return to the present. Unfortunately, the United States has yet to have a similar decisive epiphany with respect to America’s historical ambivalence toward counterinsurgency.<sup>270</sup>

By examining the United States’ involvement in past asymmetric conflicts, by harnessing the superior intellectual and strategic advantages the United States possesses, and by seeking asymmetric advantages that capitalize on the country’s strengths and exploit enemy weaknesses, the United States and other world powers can devise a strategy to avoid the same shortcomings felt when facing guerrilla forces in the past.<sup>271</sup> The Vietnam War serves as a reminder of what can and will go wrong when entering into an asymmetric conflict whilst employing conventional methods of destruction. Examining the lessons learned from the Vietnam War is key to devising a successful and modern counterinsurgency strategy.

Presently, warfare tends to operate within the same insurgent realm as in Vietnam. In the future, similar tactics will be even more prevalent. The Department of Defense has

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<sup>268</sup> Bruce Hoffman. *Insurgency and Counterinsurgency in Iraq* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2004), 1.

<sup>269</sup> Hoffman, *Insurgency*, 1.

<sup>270</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>271</sup> Col Dennis M. Drew, “U.S. Airpower Theory and the Insurgent Challenge,” *The Journal of Military History* 62.4, p. 809.

not effectively evolved airpower theory to match the changes in global warfare strategy, especially in the Middle East, thus creating a significant void in capability versus expectations.<sup>272</sup> There are many significant differences to consider between insurgencies and conventional tactics. In Col. Dennis M. Drew's article "U.S. Airpower Theory and the Insurgent Challenge," the author expresses that there are five major differences that make the traditional application of airpower problematic in an unconventional setting, namely: time, civilian-military duality, guerrilla tactics, logistics, and centers of power.

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For insurgents, time is a weapon.<sup>274</sup> The longer the insurgent forces can drag out the fighting, the greater the payoff both politically and militarily. As the war in Vietnam dragged on, the legitimate Vietnamese government in the south and allied forces in the country were discredited because of high civilian casualties, violence against civilians, and the North's successful propaganda. The longer the insurgency stays active, the less the government under siege appears to be in control, thus driving war-tired and hungry peasants into the minority's arms.<sup>275</sup> This strategy or asset is a complete 180 degrees away from the western world. After fifty years and two world wars, the United States' desire to make wars shorter and more decisive drove intensive development of conventional forces.<sup>276</sup> World War II especially changed the U.S. military's developmental priorities. Ever since that war, the U.S. Air Force focused on heavy force innovation equipped to fight the Soviets, not guerrilla warriors like the Vietcong.<sup>277</sup>

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<sup>272</sup> Drew, "U.S. Airpower Theory and the Insurgent Challenge," 809.

<sup>273</sup> *Ibid.*, 810.

<sup>274</sup> Drew, "U.S. Airpower Theory and the Insurgent Challenge," 810.

<sup>275</sup> Douglas Pike. *PAVN: People's Army of Vietnam* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1986), 219.

<sup>276</sup> Drew, "US Airpower Theory and the Insurgent Challenge," 810.

<sup>277</sup> *Ibid.*, 809.

Oppositely, for the thousand years before the Second Indochina War, Vietnamese nationalists had perfected the art of “melting into the jungle.”<sup>278</sup>

On that same note, just how effective is the use of air power in an asymmetric context? Al Qaeda’s devastating use of the skies on September 11, 2001 demonstrated just that.<sup>279</sup> The terrorists’ shock and awe tactics of mass destruction demonstrated their ability to powerfully use unconventional methods to inflict maximum damage. The more pertinent question in regard to the current status of the Middle East, however, is how effective is the use of air power *against* an asymmetric enemy?

According to Mark Clodfelter, author of *The Limits of Air Power*, five key variables influence air power’s success in any given asymmetric situation:

1. Nature of the enemy
2. Type of war waged by said enemy
3. Nature of the combat environment
4. Magnitude of military controls in said environment
5. Nature of the political objectives in the conflict<sup>280</sup>

Each variable and the framework of the conflict at hand must be taken into account by military strategist to gauge if certain conflicts call for air power intervention. How air power can be used relies on this framework, which ranges from simple threat of retaliation (deterrence) to humanitarian operations like the Berlin Airlift, to the B-52 strikes of LINEBACKER II. Air power is either direct or indirect, tactical or strategic.<sup>281</sup> Indirect air power refers to airlift operations, refueling, etc., while direct refers to dropping ordnance or using any sort of fire power.<sup>282</sup> The differentiation between tactical

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<sup>278</sup> Record, “How America’s Own,” 118.

<sup>279</sup> Clodfelter, *Limits of Air Power*, 211.

<sup>280</sup> *Ibid.*, 212; For a detailed description of each of these five key variables, see Clodfelter, *The Limits of Air Power*, 218-221.

<sup>281</sup> *Ibid.*, 213.

<sup>282</sup> *Ibid.*

and strategic<sup>283</sup> is where things get muddled. Distinction between the two depends entirely on how the user defines the battlefield.<sup>284</sup> The whole world is a battlefield in the fight against ISIS, thus complicating the situation even further. Since the battlefield is not a clearly defined geographical location as true in conventional wars, many new obstacles come into play, namely indiscriminate violence or inflicting collateral civilian casualties, and unclear rules of engagement.

According to a study conducted at Yale and Cornell Universities in April 2011, mass collateral civilian casualties have become more common since World War I, as conventional forces are unable to discern civilians from insurgents. Most sources tend to focus on the more controversial and high profile bombing of North Vietnam, but this study dissects the effects of the United States' strategic bombing in the south. It is estimated that 62% of the tonnage dropped in Indochina from 1965 through 1971 fell in South Vietnam.<sup>285</sup> Just as ROLLING THUNDER was unsuccessful in the North, strategic bombing in the South emboldened civilians against the Americans who were trying to liberate them from the communist grasp.

The result of this study shows that the majority of strategic bombing was counterproductive in Vietnam as a deterrent and counterinsurgency measure. The more the United States Air Force bombed, the more land and people the Vietcong controlled, as tactics that run a high risk of victimizing civilians rebounded against their users.<sup>286</sup>

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<sup>283</sup> Tactical bombing focuses on targets of immediate military value (combatants and their bases and military equipment). Strategic bombing is used in the capacity of total war, and aims to destroy the enemy's morale and ability to produce war materiel; Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms, February 2017. [http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/new\\_pubs/dictionary.pdf](http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/new_pubs/dictionary.pdf)

<sup>284</sup> Clodfelter, *The Limits of Air Power*, 213.

<sup>285</sup> Raphael Littauer and Norman Uphoff. *The Air War in Indochina*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972).

<sup>286</sup> Matthew Adam Kocher, Thomas B. Pepinsky, and Stathis N. Kalyvas. "Aerial Bombing and Counterinsurgency in the Vietnam War." *American Journal of Political Science* 55.2 (2011) 202-203.

This type of deterrence is effective only when violence is selective or heavily restricted to only target combatants. However, when civilians cannot avoid being victimized by either insurgents or counterinsurgent strikes, the probability of victimization is equal for participants and nonparticipants alike.<sup>287</sup> In short, indiscriminate violence increases civilian participation in insurgencies. This paired with the highly effective rural population recruiting tactics by communist insurgents in Vietnam negated the positive deterrence that sometimes accompanies conventional airstrikes.<sup>288</sup> Indiscriminate violence, like that employed by the United States military in Vietnam, is not only ineffective but also counterproductive as a deterrent. This lesson should be taken to heart in the conflict in the Middle East and Africa.

The main challenge guerrilla/insurgent forces face is mobilizing the population to support their cause.<sup>289</sup> In a military strategy that relies heavily on mass mobilization, controlling and recruiting civilians is key.<sup>290</sup> Once a civilian is recruited, especially in the forced conscription of ISIS today, these combatants are indistinguishable from civilians. Because insurgent strategies implicate civilians directly, counterinsurgencies tend to kill more noncombatants, as hostilities are more likely to take place in populated areas.<sup>291</sup> Frequently, insurgents do not clearly identify themselves as such, in turn making it almost impossible to discriminate the use of lethal violence, leading to high levels of collateral civilian casualties.<sup>292</sup> This challenge complicates things for COIN forces. Like the United States in Vietnam and the current war in the Middle East, it is often

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<sup>287</sup> Kocher, "Aerial," 202-203.

<sup>288</sup> Jeffrey Record, "How America's Own Military Performance Aided and Abetted the North's Victory," *Why The North Won the Vietnam War* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 118.

<sup>289</sup> Kocher, "Aerial," 201.

<sup>290</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>291</sup> *Ibid.*, 202.

<sup>292</sup> *Ibid.*

impossible to discern between friend and foe, citizen and combatant. It is of dire importance that the U.S. and their coalition forces in the Middle East learn from their mistakes (i.e. the counter productivity of indiscriminate violence in Vietnam and subsequent wars) in regard to the current challenges in the Middle East. Using conventional forces against an illusive ground enemy seems obviously ill-suited, but U.S. strategists have failed to face the new challenges in the Middle East head on. Former U.S. Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel formulated the “Third Offset Strategy” in 2014 in an attempt to do just that.

## CHAPTER 6

### THIRD OFFSET STRATEGY

If experience in the past is not to be lost, if history is not to disintegrate beyond all intelligible recovery, the difficulty in pursuing lessons and results must not, consequently, stop it from being attempted. Extreme caution and an open mind can reduce some of the uncertainty. In looking to history for understanding, it is well to remember that the events which seem deep in the past were once far in the future. In looking to the future for preparation, it is well to remember that projecting the present is a far cry from predicting the future.<sup>293</sup>

The decision by the US to enter into the Vietnam conflict was the culmination of worldwide post World War II attitudes toward radical ideologies, namely communism. The views of the leadership in Washington largely reflected the philosophies and ideologies of the American people: the democratic way or the highway. The tragedy of 9/11 and other terrorist attacks sparked a similar phenomenon.

American military performance in Vietnam prompted a change in US foreign policy and strategy, as well as civilian attitudes on war in general. Why were we there in the first place? The people of America today are asking themselves the same question in regard to the conflict in the Middle East. The lessons taken from the mishaps in Vietnam can and should be applied to current US strategy. As the fight against the radical Muslim militant organization ISIS in the Middle East slowly trudges forward, it is impossible to miss the similarities between communist insurgents in Vietnam and Islamist extremists in the War on

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<sup>293</sup> BDM Corporation. *A Study of Strategic Lessons Learned in Vietnam*, vol VIII (McLean, VA: BDM Corp, 1980), EX 2.

Terror. Although their overall goal differs, their tactics raise similar concerns for US military strategist and foreign policymakers.

Just like Ho Chi Minh and Vo Nguyen Giap's communist forces in Vietnam, insurgents in the Middle East employ guerrilla tactics in their attempt to assert dominance over the fragile political situations in their respective countries. Avoiding set-piece battles was key to communist victory in Vietnam, and serves as a key strategic tenant of extremist groups in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria.<sup>294</sup> While western armies focused on evolving their technology, eastern armies continued to perfect their tactical strategy.<sup>295</sup> For thousands of years, underdeveloped nations in Asia and the Middle East have been perpetually at civil war, often with outside entities heavily involved. U.S. forces are now in a similar situation to the American Vietnam experience, but have traded the humid jungles of Vietnam for the arid terrain of the Middle East.

In Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria, Islamist extremist forces' lack of organizational structure and hierarchy makes it difficult to pin down their exact methods, thus creating a complex situation with no clear solution. To keep from playing into the guerrillas' hands, the U.S. needs to carefully assess each military action by the enemy, and then use nonmilitary measures to remove the roots of discontent.<sup>296</sup> In recent years, U.S. strategists have looked to close that gap between expectation and reality as a counterinsurgent force.

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<sup>294</sup> Robert D. Kaplan. *Soldiers of God* (New York: Vintage Books, 2001), 82.

<sup>295</sup> H. John Poole. *Tactics of the Crescent Moon* (Emerald Isle, NC: Posterity Press, 2004), xxvi.

<sup>296</sup> Poole, *Tactics of the Crescent Moon*, xxvii.



In 2014, Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel tasked Deputy Secretary Robert Work with crafting a new, game-changing offset strategy akin to Eisenhower's "New Look" of the 1950's and Secretary of Defense Harold Brown's "Offset Strategy" in the 1970's.<sup>297</sup> In the 1950's Eisenhower focused on the buildup of nuclear weapons, whereas Brown focused on advancements in information technology in the 1970's. This new Third Offset Strategy "seeks a technological advantage over [our] adversaries, a means by which to offset the enormous quantitative advantage that the Warsaw Pact enjoyed in conventional forces."<sup>298</sup>

Under Eisenhower, strategic airpower became the centerpiece of U.S. military strategy with his "New Look" policy, outlined by NSC 162/2.<sup>299300</sup> Eisenhower was elected president as the Korean conflict crept toward armistice. In the aftermath of that war, U.S. military policy saw a rise in the importance of a large air-centric nuclear deterrence force, first and foremost to counter Soviet power.<sup>301</sup> Out of paranoia in respect to the Soviets' military capabilities, the U.S. went with a game-changing strategy that forever molded the look of the U.S. military and deterrence strategy. General Hoyt S. Vandenberg, Air Force Chief of Staff (1948-1953) explained the need for a review of the U.S. military budget of 1953: "...we face an enemy [Russia] who has more modern jet fighters than we

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<sup>297</sup> Robert Martinage, "Toward a New Offset Strategy," Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2014, i.

<sup>298</sup> Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel, Speech at the National Defense University, August 5, 2014.

<sup>299</sup> Herman S. Wolk, "The New Look," *Air Force Magazine* 65:8 (August 2003), 80.

<sup>300</sup> NSC 162/2 stated that America needed a "strong military posture, with emphasis on the capability of inflicting massive retaliatory damage by offensive striking power... [the United States] will consider nuclear weapons as available for use as other munitions." NSC 162/2 (Washington, D.C., October 30, 1953), 4.

<sup>301</sup> Wolk, "The New Look," 80.

have and enough long-range bombers to attack the United States in a sudden all-out effort. Rather than reduce our efforts to attain air superiority, we should now increase those efforts.”<sup>302</sup> Eisenhower agreed. In his “Atoms for Peace” speech before the General Assembly of the United Nations on December 8, 1953, President Eisenhower discussed the world’s nuclear climate and containment policy.<sup>303</sup> Powerful language in respect to Soviet Union played into the worldwide fear of nuclear war, which in turn secured Eisenhower’s proposal to increase U.S. military spending and solidified nuclear retaliation as the only truly viable deterrent force.

Unlike other post-war periods, the president actually invested heavily in the military.<sup>304</sup> Eisenhower and his civilian and military advisors saw air power, especially SAC, as the most important element of U.S. deterrence strategy. If the Soviet Union or China attacked any country or supported any communist actions in the free world, the United States intended to strike with nuclear weapons.<sup>305</sup> During his presidency, the U.S. saw the emergence of a deeper dependence on nuclear weapons and long-range air power to deter war, especially regional conflicts like that in Korea.

Former Secretary of Defense Harold Brown had much more limited means to work with when developing the nation’s Second Offset Strategy in the 1970’s. After

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<sup>302</sup> Quote by Gen. Hoyt S. Vandenburg in Wolk, “The New Look,” *Air Force Magazine*, 81.

<sup>303</sup> President Dwight D. Eisenhower, “Address Before the General Assembly of the United Nations,” New York City, December 8, 1953. (Also known as the “Atoms for Peace” Speech).

<sup>304</sup> After reviewing the state of the U.S. armed forces, Eisenhower chose to put all of the country’s eggs in the Strategic Air Command (SAC) basket. By 1954, SAC had 11 fully functioning and equipped wings in their atomic strike force.<sup>304</sup> The bomber force included 329 B-47s and 185 B-36s, with 137 RB-136s, 500 tankers, and more than 200 fighters as support; Bowie, *Waging Peace*, 249.

<sup>305</sup> Bowie, *Waging Peace*, 249.

Vietnam, the U.S. Defense budget was majorly slashed.<sup>306</sup> To offset the monetary advantages that adversaries enjoyed during the post-war period, Brown focused on technology to restore the U.S. arsenal's capability as a major deterrence force. In his 1981 report to Congress, Secretary Brown explained:

Technology can be a force multiplier, a resource that can be used to help offset numerical advantages of an adversary. Superior technology is one very effective way to balance military capabilities other than matching an adversary tank-for-tank or soldier-for-soldier. If the United States looks for comparative advantages against a potential Soviet adversary with superior numbers of forces, one of the most obvious is the relatively lower cost of incorporating high technology into U.S. military equipment.<sup>307</sup>

The Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) was responsible for integrating Brown and Deputy Secretary Perry's new, cutting-edge military technologies. These new military technologies, especially precision-guided weapons, had the potential to revolutionize warfare.<sup>308</sup> Other technologies included Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS), the Joint Tactical Information and Distribution System (JTIDS), the F-117A stealth fighter, unmanned reconnaissance aircraft, up-to-date precision guided missiles (PGMs), enhanced reconnaissance satellites, and the Global Positioning System.<sup>309</sup> In the years that followed, making the most in periods of fiscal austerity have been possible thanks to Brown's Offset. The integration of forward-deployed presence around the globe, the integration of control, communications, electronic combat, rounded off with conventional capabilities created a stellar Second Offset.<sup>310</sup>

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<sup>306</sup> Martinage, "Toward a New Offset Strategy," 13-14.

<sup>307</sup> Secretary of Defense Harold Brown, *Department of Defense Annual Report FY1982* (Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, 1981), x.

<sup>308</sup> William Perry, Testimony to the U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee concerning research and development, 1978.

<sup>309</sup> Martinage, "Toward a New Offset Strategy," 15.

<sup>310</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

The Department of Defense's Third Offset Strategy focuses on technological advancement. It is truly a mix of the New Look and Second Offset Strategy, mixing Cold-War deterrence posture and outmaneuvering enemies with cutting-edge technology.<sup>311</sup> As with both the "New Look" and Brown's offset, near-term investments needed to be made, namely: stealthy, high altitude, long endurance unmanned air vehicles, a family of new undersea platforms and payloads, long-endurance unmanned underwater vehicles (UUVs), an array of networking, communications, and battle management systems, and stealthy land and carrier-based variants of unmanned combat air systems (UCAS).<sup>312</sup> In order to sustain U.S. military dominance, Hagel remarked that the "DoD no longer holds exclusive access to the most cutting-edge technology the way it once did... [so the DoD will] explore and develop new operational concepts, and new approaches to warfighting, war-gaming, and professional military education."<sup>313</sup> The major threat to the future of U.S. power projection, relevant to the Middle East, lies directly U.S. defense spending.<sup>314</sup> The U.S. Air Force has been unable to invest in new aircraft, so the average age of aircraft exceeds twenty-six years old.<sup>315</sup> Luckily for the U.S. Military, newly-elected Republican President Donald J. Trump hopes to increase military spending by \$54B, nearly a 10% increase.<sup>316</sup> Hopefully this massive increase in military spending will contribute to the defeat of ISIS.

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<sup>311</sup> David Ochmanek. *The Role of Maritime and Air Power in DoD's Third Offset Strategy*. (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2014), 1; Martinage, "Toward a New Offset Strategy," 2.

<sup>312</sup> Martinage, "Toward a New Offset Strategy," 20.

<sup>313</sup> Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel, "A New Era for the Defense Department," *Defense One*, November 18, 2014.

<sup>314</sup> Ochmanek, *Roles*, 2.

<sup>315</sup> Todd Harrison, "Chaos and Uncertainty: The FY2014 Budget and Beyond," Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, October 2013.

<sup>316</sup> Michael D. Sheer, "Trump to Seek \$54 Billion Increase in Military Spending," *New York Times*, February 27, 2017.

## CHAPTER 7

### THE WAR ON ISIS

Do we lack power?... Certainly not if power is measured in brute terms of economic, technological, and military capacity. By those standards, we are still the most powerful country in the world... The issue boils down in the end, then, to the question of will.<sup>317</sup>

After Vietnam, “Vietnam Syndrome,” or the general public’s antipathy for American involvement in overseas conflicts, drove foreign policy. The United States’ inability to defeat communist North Vietnam left everyone scratching their heads. Military and political officials in Washington were humiliated. The American public thought the U.S. may never recover from this humiliation, never to win a war again. Popular opinion is that the success of the First Gulf War<sup>318</sup> forever erased this Vietnam Syndrome from American minds. President George H.W. Bush ended his remarks on the success of the Gulf War at a meeting of the American Legislative Executive Council exclaiming that, “...by God, we’ve kicked the Vietnam Syndrome once and for all.”<sup>319</sup> Even being the most powerful country in the world, “in terms of economic, technological, and military capacity,”<sup>320</sup> some forty-five years after the fall of Saigon, U.S. troops are once again deeply entangled in a war with no clear outcome in sight.

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<sup>317</sup> Norman Podhoretz, “Making the World Safe for Communism,” *Commentary*, April 1, 1976.

<sup>318</sup> The First Gulf War, or Operation Desert Shield (August 2, 1990- February 28, 1991) waged by a 35-nation coalition force, the largest military alliance since World War II, was the response to Iraq’s annexation of Kuwait. The Iraqi army’s occupation of Kuwait began August 2, 1990. The UN Security Council imposed immediate economic sanctions on Iraq, and President George H.W. Bush deployed U.S. forces to Saudi Arabia as a precursor to Operation Desert Storm (January 17, 1991- February 28, 1991). Essentially, coalition forces took back Kuwait. Both Iraq and the coalition signed a peace treaty, but several attempted coups and uprisings sprang up shortly after the end of formal hostilities; Alan Munro. *Arab Storm: Politics and Diplomacy Behind the Gulf War* (London: I.B. Taurus & Co., Ltd., 2006), xiii-xvi; Micah Sifry. *The Gulf War Reader: History, Documents, Opinions* (New York: Random House, 1991), ix-xii.

<sup>319</sup> President George H.W. Bush, “Remarks to the American Legislative Exchange Council on the Gulf War,” March 1, 1991.

<sup>320</sup> Podhoretz, “Making the World Safe for Communism.”

Since August 2014, the United States and nine other countries have executed air strikes on Islamic State forces in the Middle East and Africa. President Obama explained in 2014 that “this is going to be a long-term project [defeating ISIS].”<sup>321</sup> The Islamic State<sup>322</sup> is an unrecognized state mostly active in Iraq and Syria, that follows fundamentalist Sunni doctrine known as Salafi jihadism.<sup>323</sup> As of 2009, Sunni Muslims made up nearly 90% of the world’s Muslim population, with only a very small radical minority.<sup>324</sup> It is difficult to fully gauge the success of air power in the conflicts in the Middle East. The broad goals of the U.S. military are:

1. Destroy ISIS ability to conduct global terrorism
2. Exacting retribution for terrorist attacks
3. Create the conditions necessary to foster democratic governments
4. Maintain maximum support for American actions from the rest of the world, especially the Islamic world.<sup>325</sup>

In the 2013 documentary film *Dirty Wars*, American journalist Jeremy Scahill investigated a raid in Gardez, Afghanistan that took place on February 12, 2010.<sup>326</sup> During this raid, U.S. counterterrorist forces allegedly attempted to cover up their involvement in the deaths of five non-radical Afghan civilians. The victims were two

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<sup>321</sup> Michael D. Shear, “U.S. Airstrikes on Militants in Iraq,” *New York Times*, August 10, 2014.

<sup>322</sup> Other monikers include: Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), Islamic State (IS), and Daesh/Da’esh, which is the Arabic language acronym; “The Many Names of ISIS,” *The Economist*, September 29, 2014.

<sup>323</sup> Salafism is the ultra-conservative branch of Sunnism. Salafists are proponents of Sharia Law (Islamic Law). The majority of Salafists are either non-political or peaceful activists. A very small minority of Salafists are jihadists like the members of ISIS. Salafi jihadism, part of the fundamentalist/radical Sunni doctrine that ISIS follows, is a religious philosophy based around physical jihadism that would return the Muslim world to the belief system of pure Sunni Islam; Quintan Wiktorowicz, “Anatomy of the Salafi Movement,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 29 (2006), 207-239.

<sup>324</sup> Of the 1.7B Muslims worldwide, roughly 1.5B of those are of the Sunni denomination. “Mapping the Global Muslim Population,” Pew Research Center, October 7, 2009.

<sup>325</sup> Clodfelter, *The Limits of Air Power*, 221.

<sup>326</sup> *Dirty Wars*, film, directed by Jeremy Scahill and Richard Rowley (New York: Sundance Selects, 2013).

pregnant women, a teenage girl, an Afghani police officer, and his brother.<sup>327</sup> At first, NATO denied Scahill's allegations. After Afghan investigators determined that not only did American forces kill three women, but "dug bullets out of their bodies with knives,"<sup>328</sup> NATO officially changed their stance on the Gardez raids, and shortly after sent Admiral William H. McRaven, Commander Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) back to the rural village to offer a sheep as apology.<sup>329</sup>

Through further research, Scahill and other journalists uncovered that JSOC carried out this act of violence. Covert, small-scale actions like this undo all of the positive ground gained against radical groups in the Middle East. Although small raids, like that carried out in Gardez, are indeed better-suited as COIN or counterterrorist measures than conventional methods, tactics that intentionally or unintentionally target civilians with indiscriminate violence are counterproductive. The U.S. military has indeed adopted tactics more on-par with the small-scale tactics that extremist groups use, but at what cost? Tactics in which civilians are targeted alongside combatants actually pushes moderate civilians, like the family members of those killed in Gardez, to extremism. In Scahill's film, the husband of one of the women killed, himself a government worker, said, "We call the American Special Forces the American Taliban... Our clothes were soaked in blood, and they didn't give us any water to wash it away. By the time I got home, our dead were already buried... I wanted jihad against the Americans."<sup>330</sup> So long as civilians die at the hands of U.S. and coalition forces, the

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<sup>327</sup> *Dirty Wars* film; Tucker Reals, "Afghans: U.S. Troops Covered Up Civilian Deaths," *CBS News*, April 5, 2010; and Richard A. Opiel, Jr. "U.S. Admits Role in February Killing of Afghan Women," *New York Times*, April 4, 2010.

<sup>328</sup> Opiel, "U.S. Admits Role," *New York Times*, April 4, 2010.

<sup>329</sup> *Dirty Wars* film.

<sup>330</sup> *Ibid.*

people of these war torn Middle Eastern countries will never fully back the United States in their mission to eradicate ISIS.

On September 10, 2014, Obama announced that the number of U.S. air strikes in Iraq would increase, and five hundred additional U.S. troops were deployed.<sup>331</sup> By December 19<sup>th</sup>, U.S. air strikes against the militant group numbered 1,361.<sup>332</sup> The November 13, 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris that left 130 people dead and hundreds wounded woke the world.<sup>333</sup> In light of these attacks, coalition air strikes increased. By January 2016, a report announced that over 16,000 air strikes had been carried out by the U.S.-led coalition thus far, with nearly 60% executed by the United States Air Force.<sup>334</sup> On September 26 of that same year, Obama ordered 600 more U.S. troops to Iraq.<sup>335</sup>

As the number of air strikes rose in 2016, violent attacks by ISIS and other terrorist sets increased. On January 12, a suicide bomber linked to ISIS killed ten and injured fifteen more in Istanbul's Sultanahmet Square.<sup>336</sup> That same week, another attack claimed by ISIS killed two and injured nineteen in Jakarta, Indonesia.<sup>337</sup> On March 22, three explosions at the Zaventem airport in Brussels left at least thirty dead and dozens more injured.<sup>338</sup> Again, ISIS claimed responsibility. June 12: Omar Mateen, who pledged allegiance to ISIS killed four dozen people at a Florida nightclub.<sup>339</sup> In July, ISIS took

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<sup>331</sup> "Obama Outlines Plan to Target ISIS Fighters," *Al Jazeera English*, September 11, 2014.

<sup>332</sup> *Dirty Wars* film.

<sup>333</sup> "Paris Attacks: What Happened on the Night," *BBC News*, December 9, 2015.

<sup>334</sup> *Dirty Wars* film

<sup>335</sup> Helene Cooper, "U.S. to Send 600 More Troops to Iraq to Help Retake Mosul from ISIS," *New York Times*, September 28, 2016.

<sup>336</sup> Cameron Glenn, "Timeline: Rise and Spread of the Islamic State," July 5, 2016, The Wilson Center, Washington, D.C.

<sup>337</sup> Glenn, "Timeline"

<sup>338</sup> "Brussels Explosions: What We Know," *BBC News*, April 9, 2016; and Glenn, "Timeline."

<sup>339</sup> "What Happened Inside the Orlando Nightclub," *New York Times*, June 12, 2016; and Glenn, "Timeline."



credit for an incident where a Tunisian man drove a truck through a crowd in Nice, France, killing 84.<sup>340</sup> There is a definite correlation between the rise of foreign military presence in the Middle East and terrorist-affiliated attacks in Europe, America, and Asia. As outside countries in the American-led coalition amp up the fire power against ISIS in the Middle East and Africa, the militant groups operating in those regions step up violence as well. In such a delicate situation, civilian casualties and indiscriminate violence at the hands of foreign powers fan the flame of radicalism, in turn leading even some moderate citizens of these war-torn countries into the arms of extremist groups.

The Obama administration, until 2015, held up Yemen as a model of a successful counterterrorism campaign, only to see the American-backed government there fall apart.<sup>341</sup> In March 2015, U.S. special operations forces there detonated their large equipment before evacuating to Djibouti.<sup>342</sup> The U.S. paints a picture that coalition troops only want to help these governments' orderly and peacefully build a functioning government, when in reality, as soon as these haphazardly propped-up regimes fail, ISIS or other militant groups are happy to step in and fill the power vacuum.

On September 17, 2016, the Obama administration admitted that U.S.-led air strikes killed 62 Syrian national troops and wounded one hundred more in the Deir al-Zour province in an attack aimed at ISIS.<sup>343</sup> The Syrian government insisted that this was no accident, but in fact a part of the larger U.S.-led and backed effort to help ISIS out

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<sup>340</sup> "Nice Attack: What We Know," *BBC News*, August 19, 2016.

<sup>341</sup> Mark Mazetti, "A Policy Puzzle of U.S. Goals and Alliances in the Middle East," *New York Times*, March 26, 2015.

<sup>342</sup> Mazetti, "A Policy Puzzle of U.S. Goals and Alliances in the Middle East," September 17, 2016.

<sup>343</sup> Anne Bernard and Mark Mazetti, "U.S. Admits Airstrike in Syria Meant to Hit IS Killed Syrian Troops," *New York Times*, September 17, 2016.

Syrian President Bashar al Assad.<sup>344</sup> <sup>345</sup> In a United States Central Command (CENTCOM) statement, representatives explained that, “coalition forces believed they were striking a Da’esh fighting position that they had been tracking. The coalition air strike was halted immediately when Russian officials informed the coalition forces that the personnel and vehicles were in fact part of the regular Syrian military.”<sup>346</sup> In more recent news, at least twenty<sup>347</sup> civilians, along with six IS militants were killed in U.S. coalition air strikes on a rural village just east of Raqqa, Syria on March 9, 2017.<sup>348</sup> How can coalition strategists expect smooth transitions to moderate governments when even countries’ national armies are not safe? Scenarios such as this are reminiscent of the backfiring of COIN measures in Vietnam thanks to indiscriminate violence as a result of the misuse and misapplication of air power.

According to Vietnam veteran and prisoner of war, and now Republican Senator John McCain, the fight against insurgents in the Middle East risks turning into another Vietnam. In a letter to (then) Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter, McCain recalled: “As a young military officer, I bore witness to the failed policy of gradual escalation that ultimately led to our nation’s defeat in the Vietnam War. Now, as chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, I fear this administration’s [Obama] grudging incrementalism in the war against the Islamic State (ISIL) risks another slow, grinding failure for our nation.”<sup>349</sup>

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<sup>344</sup> *Dirty Wars* film

<sup>345</sup> Bernard and Mazetti, “U.S. Admits,” September 17, 2016.

<sup>346</sup> CENTCOM Statement, September 17, 2016.

<sup>347</sup> The British-based activist group Syrian Human Rights Observatory, updated this number to thirty on March 10, 2017; “30 Killed in Coalition Airstrikes Targeted Raqqa Countryside,” *Syrian Human Rights Observatory*, March 10, 2017.

<sup>348</sup> “U.S. Airstrikes Kill Civilians in Raqqa,” *Associated Press*, March 9, 2017;

<sup>349</sup> Senator John McCain (R-AZ) to Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter concerning the U.S. and ISIS, April 5, 2015.

The main link between Vietnam and America's war in the Middle East is the simple question of "why are we there... and can we win?" In both wars, these seemingly straightforward questions remain unanswered.<sup>350</sup> In the case of Vietnam, the failure to pose these questions allowed the bloodletting to drag on at great cost and to no real victory.<sup>351</sup> Tactical successes in Vietnam such as Khe Sanh, Ia Drang, and LINEBACKER I and II never turned the tide against the fierce communist minority. The U.S. never lost a battle, but most certainly failed to win the war in Vietnam, despite their tactical successes. Was it worth it? Were 58,721 American troops, 183,528 ARVN, close to one million NVA guerrillas, 415,000 South Vietnamese citizens,<sup>352</sup> and countless citizens in the North worth the outcome of the Vietnam War?

The same goes for the American experience in the Middle East in the fight against ISIS. Major tactical successes, like the offensive in Raqqa, the retaking of Mosul, and the December 2015 airstrikes that killed three top ISIS officials,<sup>353</sup> have yet to curb terrorist activities in the Middle East and Africa. Victory over ISIS is nowhere in sight. Even with the successes of the United States and coalition forces, ISIS still has the same number of members since 2014, if not more.<sup>354</sup> Force numbers have declined in the Middle East, but grown significantly in Libya, as it is almost impossible for foreign fighters flocking to ISIS to enter into Syria.<sup>355</sup> Despite a recent defeat at the ISIS stronghold at Surt, Lybia,

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<sup>350</sup> Andrew Bacevich, "How Fighting ISIS is like Vietnam," *TIME*, April 8, 2016.

<sup>351</sup> Bacevich, "Fighting ISIS," April 8, 2016.

<sup>352</sup> "Statistical Information, Casualties of the Vietnam War," National Archives Online.  
<https://www.archives.gov/research/military/vietnam-war/casualty-statistics.html>

<sup>353</sup> Namely, ISIS finance minister Abu Saleh.

<sup>354</sup> Finding an up to date exact number of ISIS militants is impossible. *FOX News* and *CNN* claim the number has fallen by 75%, whereas foreign news agencies accuse the U.S. of inflating the number of actual ISIS casualties.

<sup>355</sup> Eric Schmitt, "ISIS Remains Threat in Libya Despite Defeat in Surt, U.S. Officials Say," *New York Times*, December 8, 2016.

Nicholas J. Rasmussen, the country's top counterterrorism official, is very concerned about the ability of the surviving members ability to exploit Libya's economic and political vacuum.<sup>356</sup> Coalition governments claim that tens of thousands<sup>357</sup> of ISIS militants have been killed in airstrikes. Even so, ISIS now uses forced conscriptions in war-torn territories to keep their numbers up.<sup>358</sup> With all of the alleged successful raids and sorties flown against Islamist extremists around the globe, how is the number or militants basically unchanged? Fighting ISIS, like fighting the Vietcong, is a perpetual game of whack-a-mole, and the lack of an adaptable, succinct strategy complicates the situation even more.

Like in Vietnam, the gaps between expectation, perception, and reality continues to grow exponentially. There are several key lessons from Vietnam that could and should be applied to the current situation in the Middle East and Africa. Most importantly, strategists need to ask themselves: Does this war make sense? Is it winnable? If not, why are we there?<sup>359</sup>

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<sup>356</sup> Eric Schmitt, "ISIS Remains Threat in Libya Despite Defeat in Surt, U.S. Officials Say," *New York Times*, December 8, 2016

<sup>357</sup> Kevin Liptak, "75% of ISIS Fighters Killed," *CNN*, December 14, 2016.

<sup>358</sup> "ISIS Declares Forced Recruitment for Raqqa Youths," *Syrian Observer*, October 10, 2015.

<sup>359</sup> Bacevich, "Fighting ISIS," April 8, 2016.

## CHAPTER 8

### LESSONS LEARNED AND IGNORED

No one starts a war – or rather, no one in his right senses ought to do so without first being clear in his mind what he intends to achieve by that war and how he intends to conduct it. –Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*<sup>360</sup>

Looking back to the Vietnam, the major deficit was adaptability. In ROLLING THUNDER, neither hawks nor doves adapted to the situation as it unfolded. As discussed earlier, the will of the JCS never met the capability of the U.S. Air Force and the Air Force failed to surmise a winning strategy amidst JCS restrictions before the leash was loosened with LINEBACKER II. Both sides were too quick to place the blame on the other, instead of putting stubbornness aside to come to a mutually-accepted strategy to defeat the communist forces. After a decade of war, and countless lives lost, adaptability finally came into play. Nixon's LINEBACKER II campaign of 1972, after taking heavy losses in the first three days, molded to fit the task at hand. The first phase strategy was not working, so USAF commanders successfully addressed core issues and provided reasonable terms needed to succeed.

The lessons learned and ignored from the American experience in Vietnam are more relevant today than ever. The U.S. is afraid of another Bac Mai or another endless war like Vietnam. America's dominance in conventional methods simply has no place in this fight. Just as Eisenhower intended with the New Look and Brown and Hagel intended in their offset strategies, the U.S. military must continue to focus on the advancement of precision technology to the point where no civilian lives are at risk.

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<sup>360</sup> Carl von Clausewitz. *On War*. Edited and Translated by Michael Howard and Peter J. Peret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 579.

Eisenhower, Brown, and Hagel each adapted to the changing world around them. Amidst the paranoia of Russian nuclear attack, Eisenhower focused on deterrence policy in the “New Look.” Brown, with a limited budget and a war-tired American public used the resources available to modernize military technology in his time as Secretary of Defense. Similarly, Secretary Hagel intended to maximize efficiency in the U.S. military while minimizing costs. Although the jury is still out on Hagel’s Third Offset Strategy, it is important to recognize the level of forward thinking and sustainability of his plan.

In early days of the Second Gulf War, air power contributed tremendously to wrecking Taliban strength.<sup>361</sup> This was largely in part due to the Taliban’s employment of conventional tactics.<sup>362</sup> Militants have adapted since then, and now utilize guerrilla tactics, like those which have plagued the American psyche since the fall of Saigon. Since the shift from conventional to asymmetric, from Taliban to ISIS, the actual impact that air power plays is unclear.<sup>363</sup> Islamist extremists in this asymmetric conflict use all means at their disposal to win over the hearts and minds of locals. Calling for jihad against the forces that just bombed the next village over is all too easy. The success of air power, whether indirect, direct, tactical, strategic, or any combination of the four, relies on how well it supports the positive political goals without risking any negative side effects like collateral civilian casualties.<sup>364</sup> Additionally, when there are no clearly defined political objectives, America can never “win.”

As discussed in the previous chapter, there are numerous instances in which the U.S. undermined its own progress by failing to adapt in the Middle East. In Gardez, Dier

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<sup>361</sup> Poole, *Tactics of the Crescent Moon*, 133.

<sup>362</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>363</sup> Clodfelter, *The Limits of Air Power*, 222.

<sup>364</sup> *Ibid.*, 223.

al-Zour, Raqqa, and many others, civilians and U.S.-allied military forces were caught in the crossfire. Indiscriminate violence not only instills feelings of fear and distrust among the local populations, but oftentimes runs them into the open arms of adversaries. Only carefully-targeted bombings can be successful in the Middle East, as learned from Vietnam. As long as civilians feel threatened, nations propped up by the West can never withstand ISIS.

What is winning? In recent years, as previously discussed, the Obama administration heralded Yemen as a counterterrorist win. This is a classic example of imperial overreach. In early 2015, Houthi rebels overthrew the American-backed government, resulting in a civil war still active today. From March 2015 to January 2017, 16,200 people have been killed as a result of the violence, 10,000 of those civilians.<sup>365</sup> This is where the conundrum lies. Any time a civilian is killed by coalition forces, the extremists win in terms of propaganda. If large-scale terrorist attacks happen, like in Orlando on June 12, 2016, the U.S. wins the propaganda war. Both action and inaction must be handled delicately, with no civilian deaths, to move towards ending the war against ISIS.

World War II-scale bombing missions with masses of conventional bombers cannot and should not be conducted today. Of the 744 B-52s built during the early years of the Cold War, only 76 remain active today. The U.S. does not have the capability due to the limited number of remaining heavy bomber platforms. Even so, if the U.S. did in fact have the capability, carpet bombing and concentrated urban bombing, like that carried out in World War II and Vietnam, are not relevant to U.S. military actions in the

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<sup>365</sup> “10,000 Civilians Killed in Yemeni Civil War,” *Associated Press*, January 16, 2017.

Middle East and Africa. The U.S. military's precision weapons have evolved to the point of unmatched accuracy to reduce civilian casualties. Moving even further in the development of programmable smarter offset weapons is vital to making any marked progress in the war against ISIS. These weapons should continue to be perfected and developed. In order to progress, raids such as that on Gardez and mismanaged air attacks like at Deir al-Zour need to end. In any instance where collateral civilian death is likely, the military should step back, reassess, and always aim for precision. Purposely or not, any action that results in civilian death has a negative effect on U.S. and coalition relations with civilian populations in these warzones.



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## APPENDIX

### ABBREVIATIONS

ARVN- Army of the Republic of Vietnam

AWACS- Airborne Warning and Control System

CAS- Close Air Support

CENTCOM- U.S. Central Command

CIA- Central Intelligence Agency

COIN- Counterinsurgency

COM-US MACV- Commander US Military Assistance Command in Vietnam

DARPA- Defense Advances Research Projects Agency

DoD- Department of Defense

DRV- Democratic Republic of Vietnam

EAM- National Liberation Front (Greek Civil War)

ELAS- National Peoples' Liberation Army (Greek Civil War)

GDA- Greek Democratic Army (Greek Civil War)

GNA- Greek National Army (Greek Civil War)

ICP- Indochinese Communist Party

IS- Islamic State

ISIL- Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant

ISIS- Islamic State of Iraq and Syria

JCS- Joint Chiefs of Staff

JSOC- Joint Special Operations Command

JTIDS- Joint Tactical Information and Distribution System

KKE- Greek Communist Party (Greek Civil War)

KSCB- Khe Sanh Combat Base

MAF- Marine Amphibious Force

NATO- North Atlantic Treaty Organization

NLF- National Liberation Front (Vietnam)

NVA-North Vietnamese Army

PAC- Pacific Air Command

PAVN- Peoples' Army of Vietnam

PGM- Precision Guided Missiles

RYL- Revolutionary Youth League (Asia/ Indochina)

SAC- Strategic Air Command

SAM- Surface to Air Missile

UCAS- Unmanned Combat Air Systems

USAF- United States Air Force

UUV- Unmanned Underwater Vehicle

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