

Linebacker Operations And U.S. Strategic Bombing At The End Of The Second Indochina War

William Head

Historian For The U.S. Air Force

Robins Air Force Base

The Easter Offensive of 1972 and Linebacker I

By 1972, Richard Nixon, who had become president amid promises to end U.S. involvement in Vietnam, seemed no closer to a settlement than his predecessor, in spite, of the diplomacy of Dr. Henry Kissinger and the withdrawal of nearly 500,000 U.S. troops. On 30 March, as he considered his next move, 120,000 communist regulars supported by artillery and 200 tanks invaded South Vietnam, threatening to overrun America's ally. The invasion violated the agreements reached between Washington and Hanoi when the LBJ had ended the Northern bombing in 1968, and while Nixon was concerned that South Vietnam might fall, he now had an excuse to discard restrictions which prevented him from fully employing U.S. air power.¹

The Easter Offensive lasted from 30 March to 16 September 1972. The enemy named it the Nguyen Hue Offensive in honor of the Vietnamese emperor who destroyed Chinese invaders in 1789. Using the rainy season to avoid U.S. air attacks, Giap, ultimately committed 14 divisions and 26 separate regiments. One division was placed in northern Laos to protect supply lines, while four others remained on the border in North Vietnam in reserve.² Enemy goals were: to erode flagging U.S. public war support during an election year, to counter South Vietnamese successes in rural areas since 1969, and to win the war before Nixon's detente policy effected

¹ Richard M. Nixon, *RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon*, 2 Vols., (NY: Warner Books, 1978), Volume 2, pp., 79, 259 [hereafter *RN*]; Richard M. Nixon, *In the Arena: A Memoir of Victory, Defeat, and Renewal* (NY: Simon & Schuster, 1990), pp. 335-337, [hereafter *In the Arena*].

² Earl H. Tilford, Jr., *Crosswinds: The Air Force's Setup in Vietnam* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 1993), p. 143, [hereafter *Crosswinds*]; Mark Clodfelter, *The Limits of Air Power: The American Bombing Campaign of North Vietnam* (NY: The Free Press, 1989), pp. 152-153, [hereafter *Limits of Air Power*]; Eduard Mark, *Air Interdiction: Air Power and Land Battle in Three American Wars* (Wash., D.C.: Center for Air Force (CAF) History, 1994), pp. 365-366, [hereafter *Aerial Interdiction*]; Robert Frank Futrell, *Ideas, Concepts, Doctrine: Basic Thinking in the United States Air Force*, Volume II (Maxwell AFB, Alabama, 1989) pp. 267-268, [hereafter *Basic Thinking*]. For an excellent study detailing the communist supply network see, Bernard C. Nalty, *Interdiction in Southern Laos* (Wash., D.C.: Office of Air Force History (AF-HO), 1988), especially pp. 234-248.

Soviet and Chinese material support of Hanoi.³ What Hanoi failed to grasp was that the audacity of the attack, "provided Nixon with the public support necessary to retaliate."⁴

American forces were not completely caught off guard, even though scheduled reductions in U.S. troops to 69,000 in May and aircraft to 375 left them reeling from the initial attack. In the Spring of 1971, the CIA had warned of a potential election-year attack, but they believed the enemy could not "launch a nationwide military offensive on anything approaching the scale of Tet 1968."⁵ Even so, 200 NVA tanks were deployed undetected to various staging areas in 1971-1972, and as one analysts later noted: "This stealthy deployment, together with the persistent perception that the enemy's logistical system was less efficient than it was, deflected American intelligence analysts from a correct understanding of Communist plans."⁶

The initial attack was launched by 50,000 troops from Laos against Quang Tri province in MR I. On day two, 160 miles south of the DMZ in the Central Highlands in MR II, 28,000 more NVA attacked Kontum province. The enemy opened a third front with 31,000 men attacking 375 miles south of the DMZ and 60 miles west of Saigon. Of the 200,000 enemy troops eventually involved, 110,000 were NVA regulars, 50,000 VC main force troops, and 40,000 VC irregular forces. Supported by tanks and artillery and protected by low-lying clouds, NVA units in MR I pushed ARVN units out of Quang Tri City by 1 May. The new ARVN commander General Ngo Quang Truong retreated south and set up a tenuous defensive line on the south bank of the My Chanh River. By 14 May, NVA units in MR II had overrun Dak To and placed Kontum City under siege, while in MR III the NVA had destroyed an entire ARVN division, taken Loc Ninh, and surrounded An Loc by 13 April.⁷

³ Troung Nhu Tang, *Vietcong Memoir* (San Diego, California: Harcourt, Brace, and Jovanovich, 1985), pp. 200-202, 210-213, [hereafter *VC Memoir*].

⁴ Henry Kissinger, *The White House Years* (Boston, Little, Brown, 1979), p. 1109, [hereafter *White House Years*]; Clodfelter, *Limits of Air Power*, 153.

⁵ Bruce Palmer, "U.S. Intelligence and Vietnam," *Studies in Intelligence*, (Special Spring Issue, 1984), p. 91, ["U.S. Intelligence and Vietnam"]; Mark, *Aerial Interdiction*, p. 368.

⁶ Capt. Charles A. Nicholson, *The USAF Response to the Spring 1972 NVN Offensive: Situation and Redeployment* (Project CHECO, 7AF/DOAC, 1972), p. 21 (quote), [hereafter *NVN Offensive*]; Tilford, *Crosswinds*, p. 143.

⁷ Capt. David Mann, *The 1972 Invasion of Military Region I: Fall of Quang Tri and Defense of Hue* (Project CHECO, 7AF/CDC, 1973), pp. 13-52; Capt. Peter A.W. Liebchen, *Kontum: Battle for the Central Highlands, 30 March-10 June 1972* (Project CHECO, 7AF/DOAC, 1972), pp. 28-44; Major Paul T. Ringenbach and Capt. Peter J. Melly, *The Battle for An Loc, 5 April-26 June 1972* (Project CHECO, 7AF/CDC, 1973), pp. 1-16.

At An Loc the 9th VC division fought the 15th and 21st ARVN. On 11 May, with the eastern part of the city under attack, one enemy POW recalled that B-52s struck about 0500. They pounded the eastern approaches to the city every hour on the hour for 25 hours, bombing several targets more than once. Whole units were wiped out. Five days later, a PAVN column supported by 20 tanks attacked an ARVN force just south of Kontum City on route 14. Three cells of B-52s attacked each enemy column and "obliterated" them. On the 26th, the enemy made one last assault on Kontum City that failed because of a tenacious ARVN defense and B-52 support.⁸

In December 1971, Nixon concerned by the abovementioned intelligence reports, had responded with Operation Proud Deep Alpha during which USAF fighters flew over 1,000 sorties against enemy staging areas just south of the 20th parallel. Additional attacks took place in February 1972, but were limited during the President's trip to China. Simultaneously, the number of U.S. aircraft in Southeast Asia increased with the dispatch of 207 USAF F-4 Phantoms from 29 December 1971 to 13 May 1972, bringing the total in theater to 374.⁹

Nixon subsequently ordered 161 additional B-52s to Andersen AFB and U-Tapao between 5 February and 23 May, creating a total force of 210 BUFFs in East Asia, over half SAC's entire strategic bomber force. This redeployment had begun under Operation Bullet Shot in February when 30 BUFFs were sent to Andersen. All totaled between 1 April and 31 July 1972, the number of USAF strike aircraft increased from 375 to 900.¹⁰

By mid-April, Marine officials had deployed 40 F-4s to DaNang and two squadrons of A-

⁸ Tilford, *Crosswinds*, p. 146; Major General Alton D. Slay, DCS Ops, 7AF, "End-of-Tour Report, August 1971-August 1972," File K717.13, pp. 51, 156, Air Force Historical Research Agency (AFHRA), Maxwell AFB, Alabama, [hereafter Slay, EOTR]; Futrell, *Basic Thinking*, p. 275. For details see, Major A.J.C. Lavalley, ed., *Air Power and the 1972 Spring Offensive*, USAF Monograph Series, Vol. 2, (Wash., D.C.: GPO, 1977), pp. 58, 98.

⁹ Nicholson, *NVN Offensive*, 38, 67; Mark, *Air Interdiction*, p. 373; 7AF Hist, 1 Jul 71-30 Jun 72, pp. 273-277; Mark Clodfelter, "Nixon and the Air Weapon," in Dennis E. Showalter and John G. Albert, ed., *An American Dilemma: Vietnam, 1964-1973* (Chicago: Imprint Publishers, 1993), p. 169 [hereafter "Air Weapon"]; Brig. Gen. James R. McCarthy and Lt. Col. George B. Allison, *Linebacker II: A View from the Rock* (Maxwell AFB, Alabama: Air War College, 1979), p. 11 [hereafter *View from the Rock*]. Also used in this article is the 1985 revised copy, Brig. Gen. James R. McCarthy and Lt. Col. George B. Allison, *Linebacker II: A View from the Rock*, USAF Southeast Asia Monograph Series, Monograph 8, Volume VI, (D.C.: AF-HO, 1985), [hereafter *View from the Rock* (Revised)].

¹⁰ The term BUFF was an unofficial nickname given the B-52s by its aircrews meaning "Big Ugly Fat Fellows or Fuckers." Another popular nickname was "Aluminum Overcast." Nicholson, *NVN Offensive*, p. 67; Mark, *Aerial Interdiction*, p. 373; Hist, "PACAF, 1 Jul 71-30 Jun 72," Vol. I, pp. 121-122; Clodfelter, "Air Weapon," p. 169; Tilford, *Crosswinds*, p. 145; Hist, "7AF History of Linebacker Operations, 10 May - 23 October 1972," 1973, pp. 3-5, File K740.04-24, AFHRA, [hereafter 7AF Hist, Linebacker].

1s to Bien Hoa. Concurrently, Nixon sent the USS *Kitty Hawk* and *Constellation* to join the *Coral Sea* and *Hancock* in the Gulf of Tonkin. By the end of April, the *Midway* had also arrived, followed on 27 June by *Oriskany*, and 3 July by the *America* which replaced the *Constellation*. By mid-July, 3 ½ months after the offensive began the U.S. had six carriers on station each with 60 strike aircraft, a total of over 350 Naval aircraft. All totaled U.S. strike aircraft in theater now totaled 1,380 up from the 495 present in March.¹¹

As Nixon himself put it he was now ready "to go for broke and bring the enemy to his knees." He was determined to resume bombing North Vietnam and mine Haiphong harbor. Having negotiated closer ties with both Moscow and Peking he now believed he could afford to be bolder with Hanoi.¹²

Even as Nixon prepared to send his foreign policy adviser back to Paris for a 2 May negotiating session with North Vietnam's lead negotiator, Le Duc Tho, he considered a three day series of B-52 raids against Hanoi to commence on 5 May. But, Kissinger fearing domestic reaction and General Creighton Abrams, Commander MACV, declaring his need for the B-52s in the South to curb the enemy offensive, convinced the President otherwise. Instead, Nixon opted for a plan from Kissinger's military assistant Maj. Gen. Alexander Haig which called for sustained bombing by tactical bombers and mining of Haiphong and other North Vietnamese harbors. Similar in design to Operation Rolling Thunder its main force was to be tactical aircraft from the carriers of Task Force 77 and from the 7AF. Only a handful of B-52s were to be used, mostly in the South. The operation, called Linebacker, began on 10 May and officially ended on 15 October 1972.¹³

Planners conceived Linebacker in four phases. The first involved an attack against railroad bridges and rolling stock in and around Hanoi and northeast toward the PRC. The second phase targeted primary storage areas and marshaling yards near the Northern capital. Phase III was aimed at storage and transshipment points created to cope with phase one and two. Planners envisioned that these targets should be attacked at the discretion of local commanders

¹¹ Nicholson, *NVN Offensive*, pp. 123-124; Mark, *Air Interdiction*, p. 373; Clodfelter, "Air Weapon," p. 169.

¹² Nixon, *RN*, p. 606; Clodfelter, "Air Weapon," p. 172; Seymour M. Hersh, *The Price of Power: Kissinger in the Nixon White House* (NY: Summit Books, 1983), p. 506, [hereafter *Price of Power*]; Melvin F. Porter, *Linebacker: Overview of the First 120 Days* (Project CHECO, 7AF/DOA, 1973), pp. 14-15, [hereafter *Linebacker Overview*].

¹³ Hersh, *Price of Power*, p. 568 (quote); Kissinger, *White House Years*, pp. 1118, 1176; Clodfelter, "Air Weapon,"

and as often as necessary to impede the shipment of supplies south. Phase IV targeted associated enemy defenses such as Ground Control Intercept (GCI) radar sites, command and control, MiG airfields, SAM and AAA sites, and their logistics depots and support facilities.¹⁴

Part two of the overall operations involved aerial mining of Northern ports and was code-named Operation Pocket Money. On 9 May at 0800 Saigon time (Monday, 8 May, 2000 hours EST) the President announced on national television that U.S. planes would begin mining ports and harbors at 0900 and that the mines would be activated on 11 May at 1800 hours. Initially, the mining achieved its goal since "from the day the mines came alive through September, no vessels are known to have entered or to have left North Vietnam's ports." At first, the enemy had ships stop 12 miles from port and unload 6,000 tons per month from these freighters. Highly effective U.S. fighter attacks kept this to night and significantly restricted the flow of materials.¹⁵

The risks were great, since Nixon was scheduled to meet with Soviet leaders at the end of May and there was fear among advisers that the public would react negatively. But the President's instincts told him that the public would accept a Soviet failure over the fall of Saigon. In the end, the summit was a success and South Vietnam was saved, but ultimately this was not, by in large, a sole result of the air campaign in the North.¹⁶

During Operation Freedom Train, April-June, U.S. forces flew 27,745 attack and support sorties with B-52s flying 1,000 of these. The U.S. lost 52 planes total, 17 to SAMs, 11 to AAA, 3 to small arms, 14 to MiGs and 7 to unknown causes. The enemy fired 777 SAMs in April, 429 in May, and 366 in June. At first, they employed ripple firing tactics, one high, one low and one in the middle, for total coverage. Early enemy successes were later offset by U.S. countermeasures including the use of chaff, especially by the B-52s. The U.S. also used IRON HAND anti-SAM operations employing F-105 *Wild Weasels* which used the enemy's SAM radar rebound signals

pp. 170-171; Mark, *Air Interdiction*, pp. 375-376; Nixon, *RN*, Vol. 2, p. 81.

¹⁴ Pacific Air Forces (PACAF), Corona Harvest (CH), *In-Country Air Strike Operations, Southeast Asia, Air Ops vs NVN, 1 Jan 65-31 Mar 68* (Washington, D.C.: Office of Air Force History (AF-HO, 1971), pp. 90-91, [hereafter *Air Ops vs NVN*]; General William W. Momyer, USAF, Ret., *Air Power in Three Wars* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office (GPO), 1978), p. 33, [hereafter *Three Wars*]; Tilford, *Crosswinds*, pp. 149-150; PACAF CH, *Command and Control (C&C)*, Book I, pp. 1-24, [hereafter *C&C*]. Specifically the report determined that Linebacker I's goal was to: "1) restrict resupply of North Vietnam from external sources; 2) destroy internal stockpiles of military supplies and equipment; and 3) restrict flow of forces and supplies to the battlefield."

¹⁵ Porter, *Linebacker Overview*, pp. 16-17; Clodfelter, "Air Weapon," p. 171.

¹⁶ Nixon, *RN*, Volume 2, pp. 79-80; Clodfelter, "Air Weapon," p. 171.

to guide laser-guided bombs to the target. The U.S. also used "hunter/killer" formations with *Wild Weasels* spotting sites and F-4s dropping high-explosives and cluster bombs on them.¹⁷

The enemy was well armed with 4,000 23mm to 100mm AAA weapons, half around Hanoi and Haiphong. Air Force analysts determined that these defenses were less dangerous than those faced during Rolling Thunder because Air Force laser-guided bombs, "were dropped at a much higher, and therefore safer, altitude than unguided munitions."¹⁸ Hanoi also had over 200 MiG fighter aircraft including 70 MiG-21s. The rest were MiG-17s and MiG-19s. But, they used fewer sorties and aircraft than during Rolling Thunder, most around Hanoi and Haiphong. Only one U.S. aircraft was lost to MiGs in the North during Freedom Train, while U.S. pilots downed 9 fighters.¹⁹

As the campaign unfolded the enemy revised its tactics using ground control radar to direct MiG-21s onto the tail of a U.S. formation heavy with fuel and munitions where they fired air-to-air missiles as vulnerable U.S. planes maneuvered on their bomb runs at lower speeds. MiG-21s also attacked from the rear to force formations to take evasive maneuvers while a second wave of MiG-19s attacked from the front. By July enemy fighters had downed 26 U.S. aircraft losing 32. The U.S. reacted by using the TEABALL weapons control center in Thailand to coordinate data from airborne radars over Laos and the Gulf of Tonkin to warn U.S. aircraft of enemy aircraft locations. As a result, from 1 August to 15 October, MiG loses totaled 19, while U.S. loses dropped to 5.²⁰

In early June, PACAF's report on the air operations declared that "the enemy has 'shown no signs of response to the interdiction. . .; therefore it is estimated that only a small amount of material is entering NVN via the highway system.'"²¹ As tacair struck the North, most B-52s continued to support ground operations in the South. 7AF, still responsible for support of defenders facing Route Package (RP) I in southern North Vietnam and the DMZ, concentrated

¹⁷ Mark, *Air Interdiction*, pp. 378-379; PACAF CH, *Air Ops vs NVN*, pp. 65, 121-131; PACAF, SEA Rpt, "Air Operations Summary, April, May, and June 1972," File K717.3063, AFHRA, [hereafter Air Ops Summary].

¹⁸ PACAF CH, *Air Ops vs NVN*, p. 131.

¹⁹ Mark, *Air Interdiction*, p. 379.

²⁰ PACAF CH, *Air Ops vs NVN*, pp. 132-136; Hist., 7AF, 1 Jul 71-30 Jun 72, "Linebacker," pp. 51-52.

²¹ PACAF, "North Vietnamese Current Assessment," Vol. 7, "U.S. Air Force Operations in Defense of RVN," 1 Jun 72, CH Document Collection, File K717.03-219, AFHRA.

B-52 raids against enemy storage areas, supply transportation choke points, and enemy staging areas. As the offensive slowed their role was revised to attacks on bridges, ferries, and fords in MR I (northern South Vietnam), moving up to RPI in Phase II. In Phase III they created choke points around Dong Hai in RPI by destroying bridges on highways 101 and 1A. On average B-52s flew 30 sorties per day mostly against the bridges in RPI.²²

Officials also revised campaign priorities placing at the top attacks against Northern rail lines out of China, rail and road links between China and Hanoi/Haiphong moving south to the DMZ, oil and gas areas, power stations, and rolling stock and storage areas other than fuel storage. By late June, North Vietnamese industry, mine clearing forces, and inland waterways were added to the priority list. In spite of this emphasis on the North, 86.6% of the missions were flown against road, rail, and storage targets in MRI and RPI to interdict the flow of supplies from North Vietnam to their troops in the South. Gen. Momyer later noted that 7AF operated this way since there were too few planes to cover ARVN defenses in the South and attack all targets in the North. Once ground fighting ended in September, attacks moved north of RPI.²³

As Linebacker began, air leaders were pleased by promises to lift restrictions that had hampered Rolling Thunder. But while political restrictions such as legitimate fears of Soviet or Chinese intervention had been reduced by the cooling of east-west tensions, the U.S. still had no desire to incite either into a rash act. Nixon understood that Vietnam, while important, was only part of a much larger chess match and that detente benefitted U.S. interests more than anything short of what by now seemed to be an unlikely victory in Vietnam. Thus, while Linebacker I generally had fewer restrictions than Rolling Thunder, it was still subject to strict guidelines. Linebacker restrictions included a no-bombing-buffer area on the Sino-Vietnam border as well as Northern dams, dikes, civilian water craft, civilian population centers, and non-Vietnamese seaborne shipping. Once again all attacks had to be approved by the JCS first! Restrictions were tight from 21 May to 5 June during Nixon's trip to Moscow. In fact, four strategically critical bridges and tunnels near the Chinese border received only minimal attention.²⁴

The most effective attacks against bridges and railroads employed MK-84 laser-guided

²² Mark, *Air Interdiction*, p. 382.

²³ PACAF CH, *Air Ops vs NVN*, pp. 91-95; Momyer, *Three Wars*, pp. 174-175, 183-196.

²⁴ Mark, *Air Interdiction*, pp. 385-386; PACAF CH, *Air Ops vs NVN*, 98-103; Clodfelter, "Air Weapon," p. 172.

bombs which comprised over 90% of the laser bombs used in Southeast Asia. They were 2,000 pound general purpose bombs with a laser seeking head, small computer, spiral tail assembly, and canard control surface. One other less effective electro-guided bomb was the "Walleye" launch and leave glide bomb which was guided by a computer and TV camera. It was too often fooled by camouflage, clouds, or smoke and was, thus, used only in daylight. Its very low 6,000-foot release point proved also to be a major drawback.²⁵

In May and June, F-4s, using MK-84s, destroyed the main bridges on the Sino-Vietnamese border, including the Thanh Hoa bridge over the Song Me River. In fact, the primary rail and road lines in the Northwest remained interdicted through the end of June, while the Northeastern passages were less effectively blocked. But, nothing seemed to be very effective against less sophisticated targets such as inland water traffic. One JCS report determined that it "was the most difficult system to attack." Even mining inland streams and rivers with MK-36 mines had little effect. Only armed reconnaissance or naval gunfire had much effect. One major reason for this was that these routes had no real choke points and loading and unloading small vessels required only "a firm bank and a few planks."²⁶

While mining Northern harbors seemed to end enemy shipping, the pipelines out of China were so widely dispersed that PACAF analysts concluded they were virtually immune to serious disruption since they were "too hard to find, too hard to hit, and too easy to repair." Linebacker also failed to effectively cut highways which also proved hard targets to destroy. They were well defended targets requiring large fully escorted formations which drained U.S. resources. Night attacks were limited because of technology lags and there was never enough armed reconnaissance. On 28 June, PACAF admitted that the, "tonnage involved in shipments from China to North Vietnam could easily equate to the amounts received via North Vietnamese ports prior to U.S. mining operations."²⁷ The CIA estimated that 85% of "North Vietnam's needs could be supplied overland in the event of a blockade."²⁸

The failure of Commando Hunt to interdict NVA supplies allowed them to preposition

²⁵ Mark, *Aerial Interdiction*, pp. 386-388; PACAF CH, *Air Ops vs NVN*, pp. 103-104.

²⁶ Porter, *Linebacker Overview*, p. 25; PACAF CH, *Air Ops vs NVN*, pp. 111-117.

²⁷ PACAF CH, *Air Ops vs NVN*, pp. 109-117 (quotes).

²⁸ Palmer, "U.S. Intelligence and Vietnam," pp. 97-98.

caches of supplies much of it in South Vietnam. Thus, they had plenty of supplies during the Spring and early Summer of 1972. As a result, the most important air operations were carried out in the South in support of ARVN defenders, where many of the battles between ARVN and NVA troops were so intense that B-52s bombed within 1,000 meters of the defenders. In April-May, B-52s flew 1,682 sorties in MR II with 727 sorties flown in support of the An Loc siege defenders. The enemy air defense threats in the South were less, even though one hand-held SAM-7 did shoot down the first AC-130 gunship lost in the South. The reduced threat environment allowed the Allies to use a static-wing gunships, helicopter gunships, and other prop aircraft including those of the South Vietnamese Air Force (SVNAF), which flew nearly 3,000 ground support sorties between April and October. Flying lower and slower, at 500 feet, these aircraft proved very effective.²⁹

Concurrently, F-4s destroyed 45 bridges along the DMZ and 11 of 23 PT-76 Soviet built light tanks trying to out flank ARVN units at the My Chanh defense line near the South Vietnamese coastline. B-52s returned to RPI in July flying 1,308 sorties by September totally destroying 109 supply depots, truck parks, and fuel storage sites. All totaled during Linebacker operations U.S. aircraft of all types flew over 6,000 sorties in RPI, making it the most heavily bombed region during the Spring and Summer of 1972.

The NVA offensive slowed in May and was all but over by June. The last attack against the My Chanh line came on 25 May and was blunted by ARVN units supported by SVNAF and U.S. air components. On 8 June ARVN units began a counter offensive which eventually retook Quang Tri City on 16 September. Among the key elements in the NVA failure was their inability to fully employ their tanks largely due to constant Allied Close Air Support (CAS) and ARC LIGHT operations. Thus, the enemy suffered heavy casualties taking Quang Tri City which delayed their original time table and prevented them from moving on Hue. B-52 raids against advancing enemy units and their supply lines in the South also played a key role in creating so many casualties. In addition, the BUFFs constant attack on enemy logistics and communication lines delayed their advance at least two or three weeks expending far more of the prepositioned

²⁹ Mark, *Air Interdiction*, pp. 392-395; Hist., SAC, 1 Jul 71-30 Jun 72, pp. 461-467; PACAF SEA, Air Ops Summaries, Apr-Aug 72.

supplies than the NVA had planned.³⁰

Linebacker I and collateral air operations (5 April-23 October 1972), dropped 155,548 tons of bombs on North Vietnam or about 25% of what Rolling Thunder had expended. General Vogt declared, "more damage was done to the North Vietnamese lines of communications during Linebacker than during all our previous efforts." He says that, U.S. aircraft destroyed almost all fixed oil storage facilities and 70% of the electric power generating capacity in North Vietnam meaning that nearly all of Hanoi's portable generated power had to go to military use. In addition, the psychological effect was great since 20-40% of Hanoi residents had to be evacuated.³¹ General Bruce Palmer concludes that, "The North Vietnamese appear to have had in South Vietnam and adjacent areas of Laos supplies sufficient to see them through their defeats, which were the accomplishments of the South Vietnamese infantry, tactical close air support, and the B-52s."³²

In spite of their losses the NVA had made important gains, since they held much of the countryside in South Vietnam and were still determining the tempo of the war. In fact, the NVA had not been defeated, but delayed. They slowed the offensive to preserve their remaining Southern forces which they planned to rebuild during a new series of negotiations with the U.S. Without doubt U.S. air power played a decisive role in preventing a Southern defeat in 1972. The offensive moved ahead full speed with its prepositioned supplies until June when the lack of resupply due U.S. air raids caused the offensive to slow down. However, during the ARVN offensive to retake Quang Tri City, 6 NVA divisions (albeit under strength) were well supplied, especially with artillery shells, often an excellent indicator of logistics strength. In this case the enemy defenders expended 3,000 round per day against the three attacking ARVN divisions. As one analyst put it, "it is not likely the NVA in MRI were ever effectively interdicted."³³

In fact, America's prodigious Linebacker effort meant that Laotian interdiction ceased almost completely since Allied air forces, even after the Spring build up, were not sufficient to continue simultaneous operations against the Trail and North Vietnam. The CIA and Defense

³⁰ Mark, *Air Interdiction*, pp. 395-397.

³¹ Clodfelter, *Limits of Air Power*, 173 (quote p. 166).

³² Palmer, "U.S. Intelligence and Vietnam," pp. 98-99

³³ MACV Hist, Jan 72-Mar 73, pp. 53, 74, 79.

Intelligence Agency (DIA) reported that the enemy still had 14,000 trucks available during the offensive and that from 55,000 to 75,000 tons of supplies per month entered North Vietnam from China, effectively countering mining efforts. Their extensive use of inland waterways, the pipeline and vast numbers of trucks heavily defended by air defenses and hidden at night, meant that the enemy could, and did, weather Linebacker to wait for a better day.

Lastly, U.S. air forces could not afford even modest attrition rates which meant that the 7AF was reluctant to conduct armed reconnaissance missions in the northern route packages not because the enemy AAA/SAMs were so effective but because to do so meant risking or diverting precious resources and weapon systems. The U.S. tried to compensate, in part, by using precision-guided missiles (PGMs). These proved to be very effective against bridges, structural features, and industrial targets, but the North, unlike World War II Germany, was not totally dependent on such things.³⁴

Linebacker II: The Coup De Grace?

In July, Dr. Kissinger, encouraged by requests from the North Vietnamese for renewed talks, convinced the President to reopen negotiations in Paris. Hanoi accepted, but by now Nixon, flush with the success of his Moscow trip and a sure winner in the November elections, no longer believed that he had to have peace in Vietnam to win reelection. He believed that he could gain better terms after the election when he would have a free hand to use more air power. Kissinger did not agree fearing that the broad use of air power, especially B-52s "would cause a domestic outcry and that in any case such attacks were unnecessary." Even so, Nixon, authorized B-52 and fighter-bomber attacks against storage and communications targets along the DMZ averaging 30 sorties a day over the North through October.³⁵

In the meantime, Kissinger held talks with an apparently more conciliatory Le Duc Tho from 19 July to 14 August. But, Tho would not give in on his demand for a coalition government in the South. On 8 August, Nixon, convinced that the Communists would not settle anything before the November elections, cabled Admiral John McCain, Jr., CINCPAC telling him to "notify his subordinate commanders that Linebacker would begin to hit the North harder. . . ."

³⁴ Mark, *Air Interdiction*, pp. 399, 408.

³⁵ Clodfelter, "Air Weapon," p. 172; Clodfelter, *Limits of Air Power*, 159-160; Kissinger, *White House Years*, p.

U.S. military planners subsequently made plans for 48 sorties per day over RPV and RPVI, with the Navy focusing on VIB and the USAF on V and VIA. Periodic B-52 strikes over the North continued, but most missions were executed by tacair, using precision ordnance. One spectacular success for precision bombs came when a single flight of F-4s dropped laser-guided bombs on the Son Tay warehouse and storage area. Three buildings, 300'x260', 260'x145', and 210'x65' respectively all received direct hits that completely destroyed them.³⁶

On 25 September, 48 new all-weather F-111 swing-wing *Advarks*, capable of flying at night, at low altitude, and at supersonic speeds, arrived in Thailand. By 13 October, they made half of all Northern air strikes averaging 24 sorties per night. Often scheduled at random and without warning they were an awesome new weapon which had a growing impact on enemy planning.³⁷

As U.S. air forces upped the ante, on 15 September, Kissinger once again commenced negotiations in Paris. On 8 October, Le Duc Tho seemed to make a major concession when he dropped the requirement for a coalition government. Instead, he seemed to accept Nixon's April 1972 call for a cease-fire in-place followed by the withdrawal of the last U.S. combat troops. In retrospect, he could make such an apparent concession because 150,000-200,000 NVA troops would be left in South Vietnam by such a peace settlement. As a result, of this "break through" the President curtailed, but did not halt U.S. bombing.³⁸ As Earl Tilford notes in *Crosswinds*, "By early May it was clear that the invasion had not toppled the Saigon Government. Still, the fact that 14 new divisions of North Vietnamese troops had joined about 100,000 PAVN troops already in South Vietnam not only posed a considerable military threat but also constituted a grim political reality for the Saigon regime."³⁹

One of the greatest impediments to ending U.S. involvement, in late 1972, were the 200,000 NVA troops that Hanoi argued had entered the South prior to 31 March. While Hanoi agreed to withdraw nearly 100,000 troops they claimed had entered the South after 31 March they demanded the other 100,000 stay. Saigon demanded they leave. In the end, in order to end

1102; Hist., HQ 8AF, "History of the Eighth Air Force," Vol. I, Narrative, pp. 148-149.

³⁶ Clodfelter, *Limits of Air Power*, pp. 159-161.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 161-162.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 165; Clodfelter, "Air Weapon," p. 172; Tilford, *Crosswinds*, p. 153.

the war, Nixon opted to ignore this issue and the final peace document allowed 100,000 PAVN forces to stay.

On 19 October, Thieu read the new draft agreement for the first time and was indignant over the tenets which allowed NVA troops to remain in the South and called for the creation of a National Council of Reconciliation and Concord, with Communist representatives. He realized that this last provision was a coalition government in disguise. He defiantly made 69 revisions he deemed absolutely necessary for his support. Nixon was reluctant to act without Thieu's support and did not sign the draft agreement. But he suspended air attacks above the 20th parallel as an act of good will. While frustrated by Thieu's hesitation Nixon sympathized and assured him that no agreement would be signed without his prior knowledge and approval.⁴⁰

Northern leaders were outraged and on the 26th, in an effort to force Nixon's hand, Radio Hanoi publicly revealed the here-to-fore secret records of the negotiations. They condemned the U.S. for "going back on their word" and demanded that they sign the draft agreement immediately. Soon after, Kissinger held his first national TV news conference declaring that "peace was at hand," a declaration most Americans believed. Indeed, while Nixon's lead in the polls reached 25%, Kissinger's own popularity seemed to eclipse the President's. Many in the White House believed Kissinger was trying to take full credit for the peace a perception that Nixon could not tolerate. Thus, according to Kissinger, Nixon began to "look for ways of showing that he was in charge."⁴¹

In November, Nixon won a decisive victory over South Dakota Democratic Senator George McGovern, but the Republicans fell well short of a majority in the Congress. The President now had to rethink his peace timetable. With negotiations scheduled to resume on 20 November, Nixon had to end the war before the Democratic Congress did it for him. He did not want to end U.S. commitments to Saigon, and was willing to risk the loss of public support to guarantee continued material aid for South Vietnam once U.S. combat troops were gone. He also wanted to be sure he and not Kissinger gained history's credit for the peace. Nixon pressured Thieu to accept the best deal possible as soon as possible. He was determined that Hanoi accept

³⁹ Tilford, *Crosswinds*, p. 148.

⁴⁰ Nixon, *RN*, Vol. 2, pp. 188-193; Ted Szulc, *The Illusion of Peace: Foreign Policy in the Nixon Years* (NY: Viking Press, 1978), p. 629.

at least a few of Thieu's revisions. Concurrently, Haig was dispatched to Saigon to assure Thieu that the U.S. would retaliate swiftly if the North broke the treaty. But, Nixon was resolved to conclude a "separate agreement if Thieu delayed much past 8 December." The President now decided to use his trump card, air power.⁴²

November negotiations were characterized by Northern "foot dragging" and so by the end of the month, Nixon ordered plans for B-52 campaigns against the North. As U.S. military planners prepared for a 3 or 6 day strategic bombing campaign, Le Duc Tho continued to run hot and cold. At one point on 7 December, he seemed ready to give in on all points, then on the 13th he delayed proceedings while staff personnel made 17 changes in the final draft. At this point the President determined to turn up the heat. Some White House staff members like Al Haig wanted a repeat of Linebacker I, but Nixon decided to aim this new campaign at enemy morale.⁴³

Nixon chose to use the B-52 because it was such a powerful weapon and it would send a message of U.S. resolve to end the war to both North and South Vietnam. The psychological impact seemed to Nixon to be as important as the actual destructive power since the big bombers flew above 30,000 feet and when they attacked those on the ground neither saw nor heard them before they dropped their bomb load. After the war, Viet Cong Minister of Justice, Troung Nhu Tang described one earlier B-52 raid as follows, "it seemed, as I strained to press myself into the bunker floor, that I had been caught in the Apocalypse. The terror was complete. One lost control of bodily functions as the mind screamed incomprehensible orders to get out."⁴⁴

Nixon wanted Northern civilians to feel the sheer terror U.S. air power could illicit. The full use of the B-52s stunned the JCS. Nixon told JCS Chairman Admiral Thomas H. Moorer: "This is your chance to use military power effectively to win this war and if you don't I'll consider you personally responsible." Plans called for a 3-day, around-the-clock, all-weather campaign against Hanoi. SAC planners who had originally planned a Linebacker I style campaign, rewrote the operations plan to focus on the B-52s. The final draft was okayed in early

⁴¹ Kissinger, *White House Years*, pp. 1397, 1409-1410; Hersh, *The Price of Power*, p. 604.

⁴² Clodfelter, "Air Weapon," pp. 173-174; Nixon, *RN*, Vol. 2, pp. 222-227, 230; Kissinger, *White House Years*, p. 1411-1412, 1416; Clodfelter, *Limits of Air Power*, pp. 177-179.

⁴³ Clodfelter, *Limits of Air Power*, pp. 179-182; Clodfelter, "Air Weapon," pp. 174-177; Nixon, *RN*, Vol. 2, pp. 224-231, 234-242; Kissinger, *White House Years*, pp. 1420-1447; Hersh, *The Price of Power*, p. 619.

⁴⁴ Clodfelter, *Limits of Air Power*, pp. 182-183; Troung, *VC Memoir*, p. 168 (quote).

December and sent to SAC Commander General John C. Meyer. Admiral Moorer, on orders from Nixon warned Meyer: "I want the people of Hanoi to hear the bombs, but minimize damage to the civilian populace."⁴⁵

Planning Linebacker II

It was one thing to decide to use B-52s it was quite another matter to plan and carry out the missions. As Frank Futrell notes in Volume II of his monumental work on Air Force basic thinking, "Although B-52 strategic bombers had long been committed to single-integrated operational plan (SIOP), general war strikes against route and terminal air defenses in the Soviet Union, the problem confronting them in the Linebacker II strikes. . . was immensely more complex."⁴⁶ In short, like in horseshoes, nuclear bombs don't have to be as precise as iron bombs in order to score. As Futrell concludes,

In the case of the Soviet Union, the number of potential targets was very large, and the air defenses had to be spread over a vast area. Moreover, the Air Force were to be penetrating at low altitude and using short-range air missiles (SRAMs) to suppress SAM defenses. They were to be using nuclear weapons, so that only a single bomber would need to penetrate to destroy the target and probably much of its defenses.⁴⁷

In August, General Meyer, anticipating further B-52 actions, had ordered 8AF planners to prepare an operations plan. In November, 8AF Commander, Lt. Gen. Gerald Johnson sent the draft plan to HQ SAC for final approval. The plan called for extensive attacks against Hanoi and Haiphong employing multiple bomber formations simultaneously attacking from different directions. However, Meyer was particularly concerned with collateral bomb damage causing large numbers of civilian casualties. President Nixon had made it clear he did not want such casualties since it might be a major propaganda set back even in the U.S. For this reason Meyer

⁴⁵ Nixon, *RN*, Vol. 2, p. 242 (quote), also Clodfelter, "Air Weapon," p. 177; Clodfelter, *Limits of Air Power*, pp. 183-184 (Moorer quote); McCarthy and Allison, *View from the Rock*, p. 39; McCarthy and Allison, *View from the Rock* (Revised), pp. 39-40; Tilford, *Crosswinds*, pp. 164-166.

⁴⁶ Futrell, *Basic Thinking*, p. 296.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 296. For more details on this issue see, United States Senate, *DOD Appropriations for FY75: Hearings Before a Subcommittee of the Committee on Appropriations*, 93rd Congress, Second Session, 1974, part 1, p. 101.

did not use the 8AF plan. Instead, he detailed his staff to create a new plan.⁴⁸

With few traditional strategic bombing targets around Hanoi or Haiphong the B-52s needed to attack in concentrated groups and several times to assure target destruction. Having only 3 days to plan planners formulated a inflexible scenario which sent all 3 waves of bombers on the same route at the same altitude and at the same times for the first 3 days. To avoid civilian casualties plans determined that crews would be required to hold to the "planned course and fly in a trail formation with cells of three aircraft." Moreover, the flight was supposed to stabilize the flight four minutes prior to bomb release to avoid mid-air collisions.⁴⁹ Staffers at 8AF were alarmed by the repetitive routing and some feared casualty rates as high as 16 to 18%. Meyer, using the SIOP used for planned attacks on the USSR, estimated losses at 3%.⁵⁰

The plan aimed the attack at "rail yards, storage areas, power plants, communications centers, and airfields located on Hanoi's periphery." In support, 7AF and Navy fighters, using "smart bombs," were to strike targets in populated areas to avoid civilian casualties. The B-52s would hit targets within 10 miles of Hanoi. They would also make night raids to force the populace to seek shelter during sleeping hours, increasing the psychological discomfort and reducing the threat of MiG attacks.⁵¹

Linebacker II Begins Operations

On 18 December, 129 B-52D and G crews from U-Tapao and Andersen launched their first attack. At 1945 hours the first wave of 48 aircraft struck the Kinh No storage complex, the Yen Vien rail yard, and three air fields on Hanoi's outskirts. Supported by 39 other U.S. aircraft, the bombers flew in formation on a route west to east near the Sino-Vietnamese border turning southeast to make their bomb run. Attacking in a trail formation of three-ship cells later known as "an elephant walk" they dropped their bombs with up to ten minute's of separation between the cells. Pilots stabilized the flights four minutes before the bomb release to assure accuracy and

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*; Clodfelter, "Air Weapon," p. 178.

⁴⁹ Futrell, *Basic Thinking*, pp. 296-297.

⁵⁰ Clodfelter, "Air Weapon," p. 178. Most of this information was obtained by Colonel Clodfelter in an interview with Colonel Clyde E. Bodenheimer on 7 January 1983, his interview with members of General Meyer's staff, and an USAF interview of Lt. Gen. Gerald W. Johnson by Charles K. Hopkins, 3 April 1973, AFHRA, File K239.0512-813, pp. 6-7.

destruction. After dropping their load they turned west to avoid SAM attacks. The second wave struck at midnight and the third at 0500 hours. The results were fair. They had hit 94% of all targets, while losing 3 BUFFs to SAMs and having 2 severely damaged.⁵²

The President was exuberant, extending the operation indefinitely. Even before the bombing began, Nixon had also made overtures to Hanoi for meetings anytime after the 26th based on the November draft augmented with a few negotiated changes. Nixon hoped that his stick and carrot policy would force the North back to negotiations and demonstrate U.S. resolve to Saigon.⁵³

On the 19th, 93 B-52s struck Thai Nguyen thermal power plant and Yen Vein rail yards, employing the same tactics. Two more of the big bombers were damaged but none shot down. Now confident that the North had not made a fix on the routing scenario and realizing a change would require a long lead time, officials sent out a third strike on the 20th. The 99 B-52s attacked in the familiar three wave pattern. The targets were basically the same but this time the enemy SAMs downed six BUFFs and severely damaged another.⁵⁴

Nixon was livid and railed at senior officials that such losses would cause Linebacker II to have the opposite effect of those he desired. He "raised holy hell about the fact that [B-52s] kept going over the same targets at the same times." While Nixon later asserted that he convinced the military to alter the bombing plans, in fact, Air Force personnel, especially General Meyer recognized how unacceptable the losses were, since the B-52s were also the centerpiece of the U.S. nuclear strike force. Two more bombers went down on the 21st while most 7AF raids of the 21st were canceled by bad weather. On the 22nd, Meyer directed planners to change tactics and create plans for a new kind of raid for the 26th.⁵⁵

The Turning Point

⁵¹ Clodfelter, *Limits of Air Power*, pp. 184-185; McCarthy and Allison, *View From the Rock* (Revised), p. 41.

⁵² Tilford, *Crosswinds*, pp. 165-166; John Morocco, *Rain of Fire: Air War, 1969-1973* Volume in Robert Manning, general editor, *The Vietnam Experience* (Boston Publishing, 1986), p. 149; Clodfelter, *Limits of Air Power*, p. 186; McCarthy and Allison, *View From the Rock* (Revised), pp. 50-64; HQ SAC/HO, *Chronology of SAC Participation in Linebacker II*, (Offutt AFB, Nebraska: SAC/HO, 12 August 1973), pp. 95-96, [hereafter *SAC Chronology*].

⁵³ Nixon, *RN*, pp. 242-246 (quote p. 242).

⁵⁴ Clodfelter, "Air Weapon," p. 179; *SAC Chronology*, pp. 106, 109-111, 121, 140-143; McCarthy and Allison, *View from the Rock*, pp. 41-44, 77, 89, 96; McCarthy and Allison, *View from the Rock* (Revised), pp. 64-89.

It is also worth noting that the enemy fired large numbers of SAMs to gain their kills, expending a total of 1240 during Linebacker II. The enemy "resorted to salvoing large numbers of missiles in a shotgun pattern into the calculated path of the on-coming aircraft." It was wasteful but temporarily effective "since all portions of Linebacker II got underway more or less concurrently, [and] the Air Force had no opportunity to send tactical aircraft to wipe out . . . the numerous SA-2 missile sites that encircled both cities [Hanoi and Haiphong]."⁵⁶ At the same time, MiG interceptors were never much of a problem since Linebacker II missions were flown in darkness and the only enemy fighters to challenge B-52 formations generally flew aimlessly through the bomber formations causing little damage. In fact, B-52 tailgunners shot down two.⁵⁷

While day three proved disastrous due to the number of B-52s which went down, it also proved to be the turning point of the campaign. Upon examining aerial photos of the raid officials discovered that none of the SAM sites had spares. Gen. Meyer decided to target SAM sites and SAM supply dumps to clear the skies over North Vietnam of threats to the B-52s.⁵⁸

Meyer also turned over planning responsibility to Gen. Johnson in Guam and reduced the B-52 sortie rate to 30 per day until a new plan could be fully implemented. He made U-Tapao the sole Linebacker II base of origin since they could handle the sortie rate without B-52s from Andersen and their B-52s did not require aerial refueling. The new primary targets became SAM sites and SAM munitions storage facilities since, as noted, SAM gunners had few spares and this would reduce the lethality of the enemy defenses. The immediate tactical change would avoid Hanoi (for now) and concentrate on Haiphong.⁵⁹

From 22-24 December, B-52s escorted by Navy planes flew raids against rail yards and storage facilities, fainting attacks against Hanoi and then turning on Haiphong. Each route and altitude was different, thus, results were excellent and only one aircraft was damaged. On the 22nd, Nixon offered a new peace plan calling for renewed meetings on 3 January 1973. As a show of goodwill he initiated a 36-hour Christmas bombing pause and guaranteed that he would

⁵⁵ Clodfelter, "Air Weapon," p. 179; McCarthy and Allison, *View from the Rock*, p. 121.

⁵⁶ Berger, ed., *USAF in SEA*, pp. 166-167. For detailed numbers on the SAMs see Walter J. Boyne, "Linebacker II: A Look Back," *Air Force Magazine*, Vol. 80, No. 11, (November 1997), p. 57.

⁵⁷ Futrell, *Basic Thinking*, p. 297.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 297-298.

⁵⁹ Clodfelter, *Limits of Air Power*, p. 187; *SAC Chronology*, pp. 153-159, 185-186; McCarthy and Allison, *View*

halt bombing above the 20th parallel if the North would agree to renew negotiations. Hanoi remained silent, and while many around Nixon urged a continuation of the pause after Christmas, he determined that only renewed pressure would gain the desired effect.⁶⁰

On 26 December, 120 B-52s struck 10 different targets in 15 minutes. Four waves of 72 bombers hit four targets in Hanoi from four different directions, at the same time two other waves of 15 bombers each struck Haiphong from the east and west, and 18 B-52s raided Thai Nguyen rail yards north of Hanoi. Even though the enemy fired dozens of SAMs only 2 BUFFs were lost. In the largest effort of the campaign the U.S. had staggered the enemy and not long after Hanoi notified Washington that they would accept the Nixon's offer to return to negotiations. On the 28th, they also agreed to Nixon's demands that preliminary meetings between Le Duc Tho and Kissinger begin on 2 January and that the North agree not to argue over matters already resolved in the basic agreement. Nixon promised to end bombing above the 20th parallel once these demands were met. But, he warned that negotiations had a time limit and the clock was ticking.⁶¹

On the 27th, 60 B-52s attacked the Hanoi and Lang Dang rail yards near the Chinese border. A small scale version of the previous day's attack, the bombers again struck from various directions hitting numerous targets all at once. Again the enemy fired numerous SAMs downing two more BUFFs, bring the total losses to 15. On the 28th, 60 more bombers struck concentrating on SAM sites around Hanoi. That same day, Hanoi agreed to begin preliminary talks on 2 January and at 1900 hours the next day, the President ended Linebacker II after a final raid. As it turned out there were no enemy air defenses on the 29th and as one participant Captain John R. Allen declared in a subsequent interview with Lt. Colonel Mark Clodfelter: "By the tenth day there were no missiles, there were no MiGs, there was no AAA--there was no threat. It was easy pickings."⁶²

from the Rock (Revised), pp. 91-98.

⁶⁰ McCarthy and Allison, *View from the Rock* (Revised), pp. 99-123; *SAC Chronology*, pp. 170-175, 187-190, 202-205, 223-227, 230; Clodfelter, *Limits of Air Power*, p. 188.

⁶¹ McCarthy and Allison, *View from the Rock*, pp. 121-139; McCarthy and Allison, *View from the Rock* (Revised), pp. 126-144; *SAC Chronology*, p. 122; Tilford, *Crosswinds*, pp. 168-169; Clodfelter, *Limits of Air Power*, pp. 188-189; Clodfelter, "Air Weapon," pp. 179-180.

⁶² McCarthy and Allison, *View from the Rock*, pp. 145-153; McCarthy and Allison, *View from the Rock* (Revised), pp. 155-166; *SAC Chronology*, pp. 277, 322; Clodfelter, "Air Weapon," p. 180; Clodfelter, *Limits of Air Power*, p. 189 (quote), original interview by Clodfelter with then Major John R. Allen who flew three missions, held at Osan

Linebacker II's Aftermath and Effects

During Linebacker II's eleven days, B-52s flew 729 sorties against 34 targets north of the 20th parallel and dropped 15,237 tons of bombs. Air Force and Navy fighters flew 1,216 sorties and dropped 5,000 tons. They destroyed 383 rolling stocks, made 500 rail cuts leaving rail traffic in total disarray, totally destroyed 191 warehouses around Hanoi and Haiphong, reduced electric power generation from 115,000 kilowatts to 29,000, and reduced POL capacity by 3/4th. Perhaps of equal importance is the fact that NVA troops in the South were very low on food and supplies. U.S. sources determined that civilian casualties had been relatively low, even though enemy sources claimed 1,318 killed, 1,216 wounded overall with 305 killed in Hanoi itself. Indeed, as had been the U.S. goal, enemy morale in Hanoi was hurt, while little actual damage was done to the city itself. A total of 15 B-52s were lost and nine damaged during Linebacker II all to the 24 SAM hits on the BUFFs. Of the 92 crew members, 26 were rescued, 33 bailed out and were captured, 25 were listed as missing, and 8 were killed outright.⁶³

On 27 January 1973, Secretary of State William P. Rogers signed a peace agreement with Hanoi ending America's active participation in the war. Nixon had won! But what had he won? He had won the right to disengage the enemy, but his war aims were very limited and the results were not the kind of military victory America had originally envisioned in most previous wars. Certainly it was not the kind of "victory" Americans had come to expect in the World War II sense of the word. In short, Linebacker II and the heroic efforts of U.S. air crews had forced a reluctant group of Northern leaders back to the negotiating table to finalize the peace accords, but while a major reason for the peace, bombing was not the only reason.

Indeed, "Nixon's threat of another Linebacker if the North refused to settle helped persuade the Politburo to accept terms that included some of Thieu's provisions."⁶⁴ But Hanoi was also concerned about their troops in the South. Nixon's offers of a settlement, leaving them in control of major portions of the South forced them to continue to fight a war of movement

AB, Korea, 22 September 1981.

⁶³ Clodfelter, *Limits of Air Power*, pp. 191-195; McCarthy and Allison, *View from the Rock* (Revised), pp. 171-175; HQ PACAF, *Linebacker II Air Force Bombing Survey*, p. 37; Carl Berger, ed., *The United States Air Force in Southeast Asia, 1961-1973: An Illustrated Account* (Washington, D.C.: AF-HO, 1984), p. 167 [hereafter *USAF in SEA*]. It should be noted that the 7AF alone flew 613 tactical combat sorties and 2,066 support sorties losing one aircraft to a SAM, three to AAA and two to MiGs. Moreover, the 15 B-52s downed meant that based on the 729 sorties the SAMs had a 1.7/1 kill rate and 2.06% sortie loss rate. For more see, Futrell, *Basic Thinking*, pp. 297-298.

⁶⁴ Clodfelter, "Air Weapon," p. 180. Quote in Troung, *VC Memoirs*, p. 226 and Phillip B. Davidson, *Vietnam at*

leaving them susceptible to the U.S. air attacks until a final peace could be signed. As Senior General Tran Van Tra put it years later: "Our cadres and men were fatigued, we had not had time to make up for our losses, all units were in disarray, there was a lack of manpower, and there were shortages of food and ammunition. . . . The troops were no longer capable of fighting."⁶⁵

Of equal importance was Nixon's progress toward closer relations with the PRC and USSR. While both continued to support the North they, "sacrificed support for North Vietnam to achieve warmer relations with the United States." Not only had "detente" dismissed the very real menace of direct Chinese or Soviet intercession which had tormented LBJ, but it likely prevented the North from adequately resupplying its forces at critical junctures during the summer and fall of 1972. On 17 August 1972, *Nhan Dan*, the Communist Party newspaper and mouthpiece in Hanoi, grumbled that "Nixon's detente had saved South Vietnam from defeat. The failure of China and the Soviet Union to provide North Vietnam with adequate assistance, the newspaper stated, equated to 'throwing a life-buoy to a drowning pirate. . . in order to serve one's narrow national interests.'"⁶⁶

Hanoi also knew that the Nixon's aims, unlike LBJ's, were limited by both potential Congressional constraints and U.S. public opinion. Johnson had fought the war to guarantee an independent South Vietnam. Rolling Thunder, restrained by Cold War geopolitical considerations was aimed at this long term, and as it turned out difficult goal. Johnson's use of air power grew out of his own preconceptions of history, and was deeply influenced by the advice he received from his closest advisers such as Robert McNamara, McGeorge Bundy, Dean Rusk, etc. Vietnam presented LBJ and his advisers with a conflict that their experiences and expectations had not prepared them to fight. Thus, they had no theory of victory or political redress, no Gulf War coalition, and no understanding of what Edward Rice has called "Wars of the Third Kind" from which to formulate tactics or policies.⁶⁷ It left the U.S. in a position where

War: The History, 1946-1975 (Novato, California: Presidio Press, 1988), p. 728.

⁶⁵ The original Vietnamese version of this quote can be found in Tran Van Tra, *Viet Nam: History Bulwark B-2 Theatre*, vol. 5, *Concluding the 30-Year War* (Ho Chi Minh City: Van Nghe Publishing House, 1983). The English translation was reprinted in Arlington, Virginia by Joint Publications Research Service in 1983, quote p. 33, also in Gabriel Kolko, *Anatomy of a War: Vietnam the United States, and the Modern Historical Experience* (NY: Pantheon, 1985), pp. 444-445. See also Clodfelter, *Limits of Air Power*, p. 196; Clodfelter, "Air Weapon," p. 181.

⁶⁶ Clodfelter, "Air Weapon," p. 181 (quote), original Editorial, *Nhan Dan*, 17 August 1972, also in Gareth Porter, ed., *Vietnam: The Definitive Documentary of Human Decisions*, 2 vols. (Sanfordville, NY: Earl M. Coleman, 1979), Vol. 2, p. 568.

⁶⁷ Clodfelter, *Limits of Airpower*, p. 209; Edward E. Rice, *Wars of the Third Kind: Conflict in Underdeveloped*

they knew what they wanted to achieve, but unable to formulate a plan to reach their goal. It also caused them to employ air power ineffectively. Tactical air assets, under heavy restrictions, flew most strategic missions, while B-52s flew ground support and interdiction missions which USAF leaders were loathe to support.

On the other hand, Nixon, had the limited goals of ending U.S. participation, while leaving the South in tact. What he called "peace with honor." Nixon was constrained by campaign promises of Vietnamization, and Hanoi staked final victory on their Easter invasion believing that Nixon would not recommit U.S. ground forces. Even though their effort to reunite Vietnam failed, Hanoi remained committed to the goal and with bases in the South guaranteed by the basic agreement, they had no reason not to sign the Paris Accords in January.⁶⁸

Twenty/Twenty Hind Sight

Linebacker II has become the source of much post war disagreement. Many writers have even gone so far as to blame the Air Force for the overall defeat in Vietnam. There are still others who have suggested, in hind sight, that Linebacker II proved that such a campaign, begun in 1965, could have brought the war to a successful conclusion with little commitment from U.S. ground forces. Clearly, both are spurious arguments. Obviously, erratic presidential restrictions on U.S. airpower during Rolling Thunder and the difficulty of attacking an enemy hidden by a three-canopied jungle, often with weapons not designed for the role, made the Air Force mission all but impossible. This is not to mention the lack of a single air commander to focus all Allied air assets until far to late in the conflict.

As for massed B-52 raids in 1965, this ignores the fact that the B-52 was supposed to be a primary nuclear delivery system aimed at America's more dangerous Cold War enemies--China and the Soviet Union. One should recall that it wasn't until 1967 that "Big Bellies" even began to arrive in Southeast Asia.⁶⁹ Besides, one must question the potential success of such an air campaign in South Vietnam where the primary struggle was, over the long run, a guerrilla war

Countries (Berkeley, California: University of California, 1988); Colonel Dennis M. Drew, "Vietnam, 'Wars of the Third Kind' and Air Force Doctrine," unpublished paper presented at Texas Tech University Center for the Study of the Vietnam Conflict Seminar on the Vietnam War, 18-21 April 1996.

⁶⁸ Clodfelter, "Air Weapon," p. 181.

⁶⁹ The best proponent of this theory is Admiral U.S.G. Sharp, *Strategy for Defeat: Vietnam in Retrospect* (San Rafael, California: Presidio Press, 1978), reprint (Novato, California: Presidio Press, 1986).

fought mostly in rural jungles. After all, B-52 ARC LIGHT Close Air Support missions in the South had had only limited affect on VC units until the Tet Offensive of 1968.⁷⁰

Moreover, in the late 1960s, SAC officials were not willing to commit the number of B-52s which President Nixon committed in 1972 for fear of being unprepared to meet what they perceived to be their primary strategic responsibilities--to carry out nuclear strikes against Soviet targets. Once detente began to flower the strategic nuclear mission was not so pressing and the attention of strategic air war planners could turn toward Vietnam with impunity.

But even if those who argue that Linebacker II provided the U.S. an opportunity to win the war are right about the military change in momentum, the most likely follow up to continued full scale bombing would have been the recommitment of U.S. ground troops to attempt, again, to expel the 200,000 enemy forces (mostly regulars) from South Vietnam and assure Southern stability. At best that would have returned Vietnam to a stalemate much like the one that existed in the early sixties--only this time not with the VC in the South, but with enemy forces all over Southeast Asia. Nixon would not and could not return half-a-million American boys to such an uncertain future.⁷¹

As for Northern air raids, Rolling Thunder had revealed that there were few major military and industrial targets in North Vietnam. Thus, normal bombing tactics had only a limited affect--especially with chocking political constraints applied to greater or lesser degree by both Johnson and Nixon until 1972. As it was Linebacker II, at the end was often bombing rubble.

By the late 1970s, North Vietnam depended more on imported supplies from China and the Soviet Union than its own industrial production. These supplies were very difficult to interdict from the air because of the hidden and diverse nature of the infiltration routes, the 96,000 enemy workers dedicated to repairing the roads 24-hours a day, and the vast amounts of supplies being shipped in. Even internal disagreements among Soviet, Chinese, and Vietnamese leaders did not seem to affect the infiltration process very much. Only the diplomatic maneuvers of Nixon and Kissinger seemed to have any appreciable affect on the flow of supplies.

Besides, bombing the massive pipeline complexes, rail lines, etc., near the Chinese

⁷⁰ Williamson Murray, "Air Power Since World War II, Consistent with Doctrine?" found in Richard H. Shultz, Jr. and Robert L. Pfaltzgraff, Jr., eds. *The Future of Air Power in the Aftermath of the Gulf War* (Maxwell AFB, Alabama: Air University Press, 1992), p. 105

border was always fraught with potential danger of a Korean-style Chinese intervention. Of course, the option of bombing Northern dikes was available but just because you can do something doesn't make it a viable option politically or morally.

Between 1965 and 1972, the Cold War was altered by detente, making overt actions against Hanoi easier in 1972. Over the same period, the nature of the war changed from a counterinsurgency campaign, primarily against Southern guerrillas, to a lull period following the Tet Offensive of 1968, to a conventional war of unification fought mostly by NVA forces beginning with the Easter invasion of 30 March 1972. The changing domestic socio-political attitudes of the American public, as well as the fluctuating perspectives of government and military leaders, also affected the way the war unfolded and eventually came to an end. These are just a few of the factors which determined the outcome of the Second Indochina War and if they had unfolded differently might have modified collateral events resulting in a different kind of air war even if Linebacker II-style bombing had been employed earlier or differently.

There are still others who suggest that even as late as December 1972, had the U.S. had the resolve to continue the Linebacker air campaign and recommit U.S. troops, a better resolution could have been attained. Not only does this ignore the aforementioned factors, but it also ignores the parameters of "limited war," constraints which Lyndon Johnson seemed unable to grasp but which Richard Nixon clearly perceived as inviolate. Besides, does any truly reasonable person believe that President Nixon could have recommitted troops or that he even should have or that he wanted to?

To be sure, such "what if" arguments provide a means, for some, to soothe the pain of America's frustrations with the Second Indochina War by rewriting this American setback in a remote corner of the third world and either excusing their own role or by pointing fingers at others. Such arguments are full of personal and political agendas--ones which any conscientious historian realizes are ahistorical in nature and ignore a myriad of factors which were at work in Vietnam and the world, factors which in the eight years of major U.S. involvement changed totally or by degrees.

Such historic revisions fail to examine the significant effect which enemy strategy and tactics, as well as political and diplomatic manipulation had on the outcome. Ron Spector notes in a recent *New York Times* book review to simply "'pillory' American and Allied leaders is to

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 182-183.

ignore the fact that the Vietnamese Communists performed well and had a great deal to do with outcome of the war." Along the same lines, "There is a story that Confederate Civil War General George Pickett was once asked 'to what he attributed the failure of the Confederacy in the late war' 'Well,' Pickett replied, 'I kinda think the Yankees had a little something to do with it.'"⁷²

Ultimately, America did not lose in Vietnam for lack of an air effort, even though one can argue that the lack of a focused air effort over the North from 1965-1968 squandered any real possibility of a military success, and the collateral damage wrought in the South due to the air campaigns cost the Allies popular support. The facts are that between 1964-1973, U.S. aircraft dropped 8 million tons of bombs and lost over 2,000 aircraft, more than they deployed to fight Desert Storm. Between 18 June 1965 and 15 August 1973, SAC scheduled 126,663 B-52 combat sorties launching 126,615. Of these 125,479 actually reached the target and 124,532 released bombs. Over 55% of these sorties were flown in South Vietnam, 27% in Laos, 12% in Cambodia, and 6% in North Vietnam. Altogether, the USAF lost 31 B-52s, 18 to enemy fire over North Vietnam. Overall, half of the American money spent on the war, or about \$200 billion, was spent on U.S. aerial operations.⁷³

To be sure Linebacker II was a remarkably successful air campaign, but by late 1972, like the British in 1783, the U.S. public and polity were weary of the fight and no longer saw any real worth in sacrificing its youth or its wealth. Moreover, as important as Vietnam was, it was, by 1973, only part of a much larger geopolitical struggle whose main participants were rapidly becoming more concerned with events in distant lands.

Lastly, one must also remember that, at that time, the primary role of B-52s and U.S. Air Power was not to fight brushfire conflicts, but to act as a deterrent to a hot war with the USSR and, failing this, to evaporate them in a mushroom cloud. As a deterrent, eventually they succeeded, and even if they could not or were not allowed to win this bitter conflict in Vietnam, they did ultimately help the U.S. win the larger Cold War conflict. But that is another story.

⁷² Ron Spector, "Cooking Up a Quagmire, An Army scholar assesses responsibility for the Vietnam War," Review of Major H.R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies That Led to Vietnam*, *New York Times Book Reviews*, 20 July 1997.

⁷³ William Head and Lawrence E. Grinter, *Looking Back On The Vietnam War: A 1990s Perspective on the Decisions, Combat, and Legacies* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1993), p. 119; Berger, ed., *USAF in SEA*, p. 167; Tilford, *Crosswinds*, pp. 178-180; Thomas C. Thayer, *War Without Fronts: The American Experience in Vietnam* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview, 1985), pp. 26, 37.