

SOME POLITICAL-MILITARY LESSONS OF THE VIETNAM WAR

by

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Whether the American disengagement from Vietnam is to be regarded as a military defeat or not is largely a matter of semantics. It is rather clear that the United States did not achieve its key objective, the creation of a free and independent South Vietnam. If America wants to prevent similar failures in the future, it is essential that we find out as precisely as we can why, despite the sacrifice of almost 50,000 American lives on the field of battle, the expenditure of \$112 billion, and much dedication and good will, the outcome was such a fiasco. To be sure, the final battle in 1975 was lost by the South Vietnamese, but this fact merely leads to a rephrasing of the question. The South Vietnamese armed forces (RVNAF) had been equipped and trained by the United States during 20 long years. They had been taught the American way of war. Why, then, did they collapse so ignominiously?

I

The cuts in aid imposed by a war-weary Congress in 1973 and 1974 created shortages in RVNAF military equipment and ammunition and led to a feeling of abandonment. But there is reason to conclude that internal weaknesses on the part of the RVNAF alone would have been sufficient to cause defeat. During the years of Vietnamization and again in late 1972, the United

States had provided RVNAF with large quantities of sophisticated equipment which the South Vietnamese proved as yet unable to maintain properly. There were not enough skilled managers and technicians, and technical manuals translated into Vietnamese were in short supply; the importance of routine and preventive maintenance was poorly understood. Weatherproof storage, the keeping of accurate inventories, and the distribution of repair parts were handled badly, and transportation, like the entire logistical system, suffered from bureaucratic inertia and excessive red tape. As a result, much expensive equipment was sitting around rusting or could not be used for want of repair parts buried in mountains of crates in some faraway warehouse. Planes were grounded not only because of a shortage of fuel but also because they had not been properly maintained and therefore could no longer fly. RVNAF, concluded the US Defense Attaché in Saigon in his final assessment, had not achieved "sufficient maturity, technical expertise and managerial capabilities to completely maintain, operate and logistically support their communications systems and equipment resources."

Just as equipment suffered from lack of adequate maintenance, the performance of the troops was impaired by insufficient attention to the value of training and continuous drilling in combat techniques. Training exercises by units in the field were

rare. More fundamentally, leadership in many RVNAF units was woefully inadequate. While there had been improvement in the quality of the lower-ranking ARVN officers, division and corps commanders all too often were still weak leaders. Critical combat and staff assignments were given to incapable or outright corrupt officers. To please the Americans, President Thieu occasionally would fire one of the more notorious offenders, but usually the culprit would merely be transferred to some other important post. Some of the 116 Vietnamese generals evacuated from Vietnam arrived in the United States with nothing because they had nothing, but others are able to live a life of leisure, made possible by illicitly gained wealth. Colonel Nguyen Be, a maverick figure who for a long time headed the pacification training center at Vung Tau, probably summed it up well when he told *The New York Times*' Fox Butterfield: "Under our system, the generals amassed riches for their families, but the soldiers got nothing and saw no moral sanction in their leadership. In the end they took their revenge."²

The crucial importance of leadership for the efficient functioning of an army in combat is, of course, well known. As General Matthew B. Ridgway, formerly US commander in Korea, pointed out in 1971: The building of an effective combat force requires "leadership, weapons, and training, and in that order of importance, for without leadership from the top down the other two factors will be nullified."³ In Vietnam, the significance of the abundance of equipment owned by the armed forces of Vietnam was negated by inadequate training and leadership. The German Army in World War II could survive tremendous setbacks, losses, and long retreats and remain until the end a functioning combat instrument in large measure because of the quality of its leadership. The state of Israel occupies an extremely unfavorable geographic position, surrounded on three sides by hostile neighbors, and the Arab-Israeli conflict since its inception has been highly asymmetrical in human resources and military equipment; yet such weaknesses can be compensated for by

superiority in leadership. The armed forces of the Republic of Vietnam in 1975, on the other hand, were outgunned *and* lacked effective leadership. The incompetence demonstrated by Thieu and his high command in the final days of the war, including in prominent place the ill-prepared evacuation of the central highlands and the removal of the First Airborne Division from the northern front, might have been enough to imperil the survival of even a well-disciplined and well-led army. Given the fragility of the ARVN, it is hardly surprising that these tragic mistakes proved irreversible and that they led to the quick unraveling of any remaining discipline in the officer corps and the rank-and-file.

The failure of RVNAF morale was linked to certain weaknesses of the South Vietnamese society whose contribution to the final collapse is difficult to assess in precise terms, but which undoubtedly played a significant role. In addition to leadership and a sense of comradeship, a soldier's effectiveness and combat morale are sustained by his belief in the basic legitimacy of the society of which he is a member and for which he is asked to risk his life. The South Vietnamese soldier, in the end, did not feel that he was part of a political community worth the supreme sacrifice; he saw no reason to die for the government of South Vietnam. The country lacked political leadership that could inspire a sense of trust, purpose, and self-confidence. It remained a society divided by geographic regionalism, ethnic minorities, and religious differences, and governed by

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cliques of politicians and generals. Thieu himself assuredly was not the kind of person who, like in some ways Diem before him, could function as a widely respected leader, a symbol of national unity. His government, despite belated reforms like the Land-to-the-Tiller program, had been unable to mobilize mass support in the countryside. In a series of moves in 1972 and 1973, Thieu once again seriously weakened local self-government by abolishing authority for the election of hamlet chiefs, authorizing district chiefs to appoint members of the village and hamlet administration committees and putting local militia forces under the control of military officers instead of village chiefs. This removal of local officials from public accountability was bound to reduce the credibility of government decisions and programs and probably further weakened popular acceptance of the legitimacy of the national government in Saigon. Many members of the educated urban elite, on the other hand, looked with disdain upon Thieu and his officers who were serving as province and district chiefs, and regarded them as mere military men who did not merit their active backing and loyalty.

The inability of the Thieu regime to generate popular commitment was reinforced by the widespread corruption permeating the system. Revulsion at this corruption created a feeling on the part of the populace that the government lacked "virtue" and the "mandate of heaven" necessary in order legitimately to govern the country. As long as the Americans were there, corruption had been seen by many as tolerable, for the fat often came off Uncle Sam; now, on the other hand, it affected the dwindling income of ordinary Vietnamese and increased the unpopularity of the South Vietnamese government (GVN). In April 1974, the country was said to have 95,371 disabled veterans, 168,472 widows, and 231,808 orphans entitled to social welfare benefits,⁴ but corruption often made it difficult for these war victims to receive their meager allowances. Corruption also worked direct benefits for the Viet Cong, thus further increasing popular disgust. VC purchasing

agents could obtain supplies in the cities of South Vietnam; GVN officials and officers sold war materiel and food to the enemy; and members of the VC could buy positions as hamlet and village chiefs, as they did in Vinh Binh province for example.⁵ It was well known that VC agents had infiltrated the highest levels of government and of the armed forces, creating an atmosphere of suspicion and distrust.

In July 1974, 300 Catholic priests had organized the People's Front Against Corruption, which quickly attracted support from other political opposition elements. In response to demands from this anti-corruption movement, Thieu fired or reassigned a large number of officials accused of corruption—10 cabinet ministers, 14 generals, 151 senior province or district officials, 870 village and hamlet officials, some 1000 national policemen and 550 military officers. But people had witnessed periodic purges of corrupt officials many times before and therefore had developed a strong sense of cynicism about the real improvements that could be expected from such reshuffles. Moreover, serious charges had also been leveled against President Thieu and his family, and many agreed with the statement of a leader of the Buddhist Reconciliation Force: "If Thieu wants to eliminate corruption in the army he must fire himself first."⁶ At a time when the enemy stood at the gates and threatened the very survival of a noncommunist political order, these opposition forces hesitated to press their attack on Thieu too forcefully, but the corrosive effect of such charges, nevertheless, was undoubtedly pronounced.

The deep-seated internal weaknesses in South Vietnamese society—most of them of very long standing—had proven impregnable to repeated American proddings for reform. This leads to the first important conclusion and lesson of the Vietnam experience: Despite often-heard charges that the South Vietnamese were American puppets, in fact the United States lacked the leverage necessary to prevent its ally from making crucial mistakes. As a result of anticolonialist inhibitions and other reasons, the United States refrained

from pressing for a decisive reorganization of the South Vietnamese armed forces and for a combined command, as America had done in Korea under the mantle of a UN mandate. Similarly, in regard to pacification and matters of social policies generally, America sought to shore up a sovereign South Vietnamese government and therefore, for the most part, limited itself to an advisory and supporting role, always mindful of the saying of Lawrence of Arabia: "Better they do it imperfectly than you do it perfectly, for it is their country, their war, and your time is limited." Western aggressiveness and impatience for results, it was said, ran counter to oriental ways of thinking and doing things and merely created increased resistance to change and reform.

But if internal weaknesses in the South Vietnamese society and the high level of corruption were factors as important in the final collapse as the evidence seems to suggest, might a radically different approach perhaps have been indicated? Should the United States initially have accepted full responsibility for both military and political affairs, as suggested by experienced Vietnam hands like John Paul Vann, and only gradually have yielded control over the conduct of the war to a newly created corps of capable military leaders and administrators? Should America have played the role of the "good colonialist" who in this way slowly prepares a new country for viable independence? At the very least, should the United States have exerted more systematic leverage on its Vietnamese ally? The former chief of pacification, Robert W. Komer, has written that the long record of American failure to move the GVN in directions which in retrospect would clearly have been desirable, for the people of both South Vietnam and America, suggests "that we would have had little to lose and much to gain by using more vigorously the power over the GVN that our contributions gave us. We became their prisoners rather than they ours—the classic trap into which great powers have so often fallen in their relationships with weak allies."⁷

II

Yet even if the United States had succeeded in making the South Vietnamese follow our lead and counsel, would this have assured victory? Did the United States know how to fight the kind of revolutionary war it faced in Vietnam? An American officer who had commanded a brigade in Vietnam wrote in 1968 that it was one of the tragedies of Vietnam that the services refused to recognize the realities of a people's war and clung to the illusion that this was a war that troops could win. "A political revolution is something quite different from a conventional military campaign, and yet we persist in viewing Vietnam as a war which will be won when we bring enough power and force to bear."⁸ This criticism remained largely pertinent until the end of the war.

Despite much talk about "winning the hearts and minds," the United States never really learned to fight a counterinsurgency war, and used force in largely traditional ways. The military, like all bureaucracies encountering a new situation for which they are not prepared and in which they do not know what to do, did what they knew to do. That happened to be the inappropriate thing. "The Vietnamese Communist generals," Edward G. Lansdale has written, "saw their armed forces as instruments primarily to gain political goals. The American generals saw their forces primarily as instruments to defeat enemy military forces. One fought battles to influence opinions in Vietnam and in the world, the other fought battles to finish the enemy keeping tabs by body count."⁹ As it turned out, the enemy's endurance and supply of manpower proved stronger than American persistence in keeping up the struggle. Communist losses in most major engagements were far higher than those suffered by the Americans, but General Giap regarded these efforts worth the price. "His is not an army that sends coffins north," wrote a former American intelligence officer in 1968, "it is by the traffic in homebound American coffins that Giap measures his success."¹⁰

American forces, applying classic Army doctrine of aggressively seeking out the enemy and destroying his main force units, fought numerous bloody battles in the rough terrain along the DMZ and in the jungles of the highlands. A Marine Corps study in late 1967 pointed out that these engagements provided the enemy with a double bonus: They took allied forces away from the pacification effort and, in addition, involved them in combat under conditions favorable to the enemy. The NVA/VC benefitted from short supply lines and nearby havens across the border which enabled them to ambush, defend briefly, and withdraw. They also could fight under the protective cover of thick jungle, which created low visibility and weakened the effectiveness of allied airpower and other heavy support weapons.¹¹ The classic case of such a fight was the battle for Dong Ap Bia ("Hamburger Hill") in the A Shau Valley in May 1969. The Americans won most of these battles but lost the war.

Most fundamentally, the American strategy of attrition—seeking to cause the enemy more casualties than he could replace through infiltration or recruitment—ignored the crucial fact that the enemy whom it was essential to defeat was in the hamlets and not in the jungles. Without the support of the VC infrastructure in the villages, the communist main force units were blind and incapable of prolonged action—they could not obtain intelligence and food or prepare the battlefield by repositioning supplies.

In 1965 and 1966, when newly created VC main force units and North Vietnamese regulars threatened the collapse of the South Vietnamese Army, a major quasi-conventional military response was probably unavoidable. Large operations against the enemy's main force units were necessary to provide a shield behind which pacification and the struggle against the guerrillas in the villages could proceed. However, these large search and destroy operations soon became an end in themselves, and the tautology that "the destruction of the enemy would bring security to the countryside" obscured the more basic question of who and where the enemy really was. As Francis J. West, Jr., a

former Marine Corps officer and an astute analyst of American strategy and tactics in Vietnam, has written:

The rationale that ceaseless US operations in the hills could keep the enemy from the people was an operational denial of the fact that in large measure the war was a revolution which started in the hamlets and that therefore the Viet Cong were already among the people when we went to the hills. The belief that American units would provide a shield ("support for pacification") behind which the rural GVN structure could rebuild itself assumed that the hills threatened the hamlets.

West illustrates the irrelevance to pacification of much of the big-unit war by this episode:

In November of 1967 two officers from an American division visited the senior adviser to the district which abutted their division headquarters in order to be briefed on the local situation. The adviser said the situation was terrible, with the VC in control and the GVN unsure even of the district town. So bitter was the adviser that the visiting officers grumbled about his "negativism," pointing out that their division had the NVA units in the hills on the run and had killed over 500 of them in the past month

The officers returned to their headquarters for dinner and that same night a team of enemy sappers from a local force unit leveled the district headquarters and killed the adviser.

In October of 1968 I revisited that district and both the assistant district chief for security and the senior subsector adviser told me that the situation had not improved, that the VC still controlled the district, and that the division was still out in the hills bringing them security.¹²

While American large units prowled around to thwart enemy main force units, the pacification of the countryside often became a sideshow. After American troops had cleared an area of enemy main force units, Vietnamese troops, police, and pacification

cadres were supposed to move in to root out the VC infrastructure and provide permanent security and development help to the hamlets. Unfortunately, the implementation of this plan was achieved late in the war and even then only spottily.

A study of the problems faced in Vietnam commissioned by the Army Chief of Staff and completed by a group of officers after eight months' work in 1966, known as the PROVN study, suggested a substantial revision of priorities and argued that pacification should be designated unequivocally as the major US/GVN effort. "Victory" could be achieved only through bringing the individual Vietnamese, typically a rural peasant, to support willingly the GVN. The critical actions, the PROVN study argued, were those that occurred at the village, district, and provincial levels. This is where the war had to be fought and won. The military destruction of the communist regiments was not the solution to the complex challenge presented by the Vietnam conflict. "Present US military actions," PROVN maintained, "are inconsistent with that fundamental of counterinsurgency doctrine which establishes winning popular allegiance as the ultimate goal."¹³ American field commanders, for the most part, failed to heed these pleas.

The damage done to Vietnamese society by allied military operations constituted another liability. It was difficult to convince villagers that the Americans had come as their protectors if in the process of liberating them from the communists allied troops caused extensive harm to Vietnamese civilian life and property. The American command from the very beginning realized the potentially damaging effect of the great firepower of American combat forces, and it therefore issued rules of engagement governing ground and air operations that were designed to minimize the destruction of property and the loss of life among non-combatants. In addition, Westmoreland repeatedly reminded his commanders that "the utmost in discretion and judgment must be used in the application of firepower" and that noncombatant casualties resulting from

the application of air power and artillery had "an adverse effect on the rural reconstruction effort and the attainment of the GVN national goals."¹⁴ In a statement to the press handed out on 26 August 1966, Westmoreland acknowledged the special nature of the war in Vietnam, a conflict "fought among the people, many of whom are not participants in, or even closely identified with the struggle. People, more than terrain, are the objectives in this war, and we will not and cannot be callous about those people."¹⁵

And yet, these sensible ideas ran head-on against the mind-set of the conventionally trained officer, who, seeing the war in the perspective of his own expertise, concentrated on "zapping the Cong" with the weapons he had been trained to use. There also was the understandable endeavor of commanders to minimize casualties among their troops. Ever since the huge losses of life caused by the human wave assaults of World War I, the military had embraced the motto "Expend Shells not Men." Hence when American troops encountered a VC company dug into a Vietnamese hamlet or in the fighting in Saigon and Hue during the Tet Offensive of 1968, the tempting thing to do was to employ all of the powerful military instruments developed by the leading industrial, technology-conscious nation of the world—artillery, tactical air power, naval gunfire, aerial rocket artillery, helicopter gunships. "The unparalleled, lavish use of firepower as a substitute for manpower," wrote an American officer in early 1968, "is an outstanding characteristic of US military tactics in the Vietnam war."¹⁶

The practice of the VC/NVA to "clutch the people to their breast" added to the difficulty of protecting the civilian population. The enemy liked to make the villages and hamlets a battlefield because in the open valleys and coastal lowlands the villages contained much natural cover and concealment. The hamlets also offered the VC a source of labor for the building of fortifications; their spread-out arrangement afforded avenues of escape; and, lastly, the VC knew that the Americans did not like to fire on populated areas.

A few American commanders in Vietnam realized the provocative nature of these VC maneuvers and argued against using friendly weapons to accommodate the enemy. "I have witnessed the enemy's employment of this tactic for the past 10 years," wrote John Paul Vann in 1972, then senior American adviser in II Corps, a man generally acknowledged to have been one of the most experienced and effective Americans to serve in Vietnam. He continued:

His specific objective is to get our friendly forces to engage in suicidal destruction of hard-won pacification gains. Invariably, he is successful since in the heat of battle rational thinking and long term effects usually play second fiddle to short term objectives.

In the last decade, I have walked through hundreds of hamlets that have been destroyed in the course of a battle, the majority as the result of the heavier friendly fires. The overwhelming majority of hamlets thus destroyed failed to yield sufficient evidence of damage to the enemy to justify the destruction of the hamlet. Indeed, it has not been unusual to have a hamlet destroyed and find absolutely no evidence of damage to the enemy. I recall in May 1969 the destruction and burning by air strike of 900 houses in a hamlet in Chau Doc Province without evidence of a single enemy being killed The destruction of a hamlet by friendly firepower is an event that will always be remembered and practically never forgiven by those members of the population who lost their homes.

In view of the fact that the occupation of few places in Vietnam was truly essential to allied objectives, Vann argued, much the best move in a situation where all courses of conduct were unsatisfactory was to leave the enemy force in possession of the hamlet until it left again of its own accord. "While this course of action does not satisfy most natural emotions, it is a course of action which does not aid and abet the enemy in accomplishing his objectives."¹⁷ Vann's counsel was seldom followed.

If we add to the balance sheet villagers killed in free-fire zones, the misery of the large number of refugees generated by allied operations and the destruction of crops—detailed by this author in another place—we can begin to understand why the American way of war proved so counterproductive. "Modern wars are not internecine wars in which the killing of the enemy is the object," it was stated in US War Department General Order No. 160, dated 24 April 1863. "The destruction of the enemy in modern wars, and, indeed modern war itself, are means to obtain that object of the belligerent which lies beyond the war." In Vietnam, "the object . . . which lies beyond the war," the PROVN study had argued, was the allegiance of the people of South Vietnam to their government,¹⁸ yet this basic insight all too often was ignored. Military engagements were being fought without regard to their effect on the long-range political goals of the war.

There is much evidence to show that the way in which both the Americans and the South Vietnamese carried out the effort to suppress the communist insurgency alienated the population of the countryside. The record does not bear out charges of genocide or indiscriminate killings of civilians and wholesale violations of the laws of war. However, the strategy and tactics of the allied counterinsurgency, especially the lavish use of firepower, and the consequent suffering inflicted on large segments of South Vietnam's rural population during long years of high-technology warfare created a widespread feeling of resignation, war-weariness and an unwillingness to go on fighting against the resolute opponent from the North. It is also well to remember that revulsion at the fate of thousands of hapless civilians killed and maimed by the deadly arsenal of a modern army may undercut the willingness of a democratic nation to fight communist insurgents, and that reliance on high-technology weapons in an insurgency setting therefore may be counterproductive on still another level.

Another important lesson of Vietnam, therefore, is not Professor Richard A. Falk's

legally incorrect assertion that the methods of large-scale counterinsurgency warfare with high-technology weapons necessarily amount to crimes under international law,¹⁹ but that these tactics in such a setting frequently do not work. Technological superiority in such a war, in other words, is not unlawful, but it may be irrelevant to victory and indeed may play a positively negative role. The fact that the tactics employed by the allies were not forbidden by the laws of war and did not intentionally aim at inflicting casualties on the civilian population remains morally significant. Yet in any future guerrilla conflict in which the United States may become embroiled, it will be well to remember that the loss of civilian life caused by modern heavy weapons is not just legal and yet regrettable, it is largely unnecessary and self-defeating.

South Vietnam was finally defeated in an onslaught with heavy conventional weapons and not in a people's revolutionary war. But the ignominious collapse of ARVN was due not only to ARVN's inferiority in such weapons and the shortage of ammunition; in considerable measure it was also the result of lack of will and morale. Hanoi launched the 1972 and 1975 invasions, it has been suggested, because the VC had been defeated in the guerrilla phase of the war. This probably is only a half-truth, for the VC in many parts of the country were far from destroyed, and the internal weaknesses of the GVN were blatant—the losses of the VC had not been the government's gains.²⁰ It could therefore be argued with equal justice that greater allied success in the years prior to these conventional invasions, when the struggle still was for the allegiance of the people of South Vietnam, might have dissuaded Hanoi from launching these attacks. A stronger and more cohesive national community in the South thus could have brought about a different denouement to this tragic conflict. Weapons alone, after all, are never decisive. It is fighting morale, resolution, and the able leadership of an army which make possible the effective use of weapons and which win wars.

III

Many of America's military leaders argue to this day that their ability to conduct a winning strategy was hamstrung by overly restrictive rules of engagement, designed to protect civilian life and property, and by political constraints imposed on them for fear of a collision with communist China and the Soviet Union. In particular, the graduated application of air power in the bombing of North Vietnam during the years 1965-68, code-named Rolling Thunder, interrupted by frequent bombing halts, has been held up as a misuse of military assets. "Gradualism," former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Admiral Thomas H. Moorer has written, "forced airpower into an expanded and inconclusive war of attrition."²¹

This argument no doubt represents sound military logic, and the North Vietnamese themselves have acknowledged that the slow escalation of the bombing, imposed on the United States because of an unfavorable "balance of international forces," helped them to ride out the storm.²² But the decision for "gradualism" was made primarily because of fear of Chinese intervention, and whether the likelihood of such an intervention was overrated will never be known. By the spring of 1966 China had dispatched some 50,000 military personnel—engineer, railroad construction, and anti-aircraft divisions—who engaged in combat and served as living proof of the seriousness of China's commitment.²³ The threshold that US bombing could not pass without precipitating a major Chinese involvement was not known and unfortunately could not be known even within a wide margin of error. As George W. Ball put it in a memorandum for President Johnson in January 1966 which counseled extreme caution in this regard: "Unhappily we will not find out until after the catastrophe."²⁴ The miscalculation of Chinese intentions in the Korean War served as a vivid reminder that this was not an irrational and unfounded fear.

Moreover, it can be stated with some assurance that even if the military had

received permission for a "sharp blow" strategy, this would not have prevented North Vietnam from sending men and supplies to the South or forced Hanoi to sue for peace. Damage initially would have been higher and American losses lower, but after a while North Vietnam most likely would have adjusted. The theory of either strategic or interdiction bombing assumed attacks on highly industrialized nations producing large quantities of military goods to sustain armies engaged in intensive warfare. The nature of North Vietnam's economy and the sporadic attacks launched by the VC/NVA in the South did not fit this model, and North Vietnam therefore was an extremely poor target for a sustained air campaign. The country was predominantly agricultural and had little industry and a rudimentary transportation system. North Vietnam's small industrial plant had been built by a poor country over many years and at considerable sacrifice, yet the assumption that destroying or threatening to destroy this industry would pressure Hanoi into abandoning its drive to take over the South proved mistaken. The bombing caused manpower dislocations but did not limit North Vietnam's ability to maintain essential services in the North and to infiltrate ever larger numbers of men into the South. In view of experience with both interdiction and strategic bombing in World War II and Korea, none of this should have come as a surprise.

During Operation Strangle in the spring of 1944, the US Air Force flew 34,000 sorties and dropped 33,000 tons of bombs on German lines of communication in northern Italy; yet while this heavy bombing caused disruption, fuel and supplies were never at a critical level, and damage caused was quickly repaired.²⁵ Results were similar in the Korean War. Between June 1950 and July 1953 the US Air Force flew 220,168 interdiction and armed reconnaissance sorties, which were reported to have destroyed 827 bridges, 869 locomotives, 14,906 railroad cars, and 74,589 vehicles.²⁶ Yet this massive damage failed to destroy the North Korean supply effort. Helped by the availability of large quantities of both lumber and laborers, roads and rail

lines were repaired faster than US planes could destroy them; supplies were secreted in caves and tunnels and then moved at night; extensive and skillful use was made of bypasses and underwater bridges; trucks, oxcarts, horse-drawn wagons, and even pack animals provided shuttle service between break points. "The rate of construction and repair of rail and highway bridges by enemy forces in Korea," wrote an American officer at the time of the air campaign, "has been little short of phenomenal."²⁷ The official history of the American air war in Korea acknowledges that by December 1951 the contest between skilled pilots with expensive aircraft and unskilled coolie laborers armed with picks and shovels had become a stalemate. Air action did delay and diminish the flow of supplies, but it did not stop them or place an intolerable burden on the supply effort.²⁸

In his testimony before the Stennis committee in 1967, Defense Secretary McNamara drew upon the failure of the interdiction campaign in Korea. He pointed out that the nature of combat in Vietnam, without established battle lines and with sporadic small-scale enemy action, reduced the volume of logistical support needed. The geography of Vietnam, too, was far less favorable to interdiction. In Korea the entire and relatively narrow neck of the peninsula had been subject to naval bombardment from either side and to air strikes across its width. The infiltration routes into South Vietnam, on the other hand, were far more complex and were protected by dense jungle and frequent cloudiness, not to mention the use of the territory of adjoining countries at least in part immune from air attack.²⁹

In the light of experience with population bombing in World War II, the failure of Rolling Thunder to demoralize the people of North Vietnam and make them rise up against their rulers who exposed them to the hardships of the American bombing also should not have come as a surprise. This is not to say that morale bombing in World War II stiffened the will to resist, as has been claimed by some critics of American policy in Vietnam. The US Strategic Bombing Survey,

a careful study of all available evidence carried out in 1945, reported that "the morale of the German people deteriorated under aerial attack." The bombing caused vast suffering among German civilians, and the "bombing appreciably affected the German will to resist. Its main psychological effects were defeatism, fear, hopelessness, fatalism, and apathy."³⁰ To be sure, while the bombing of Germany succeeded in lowering morale, its effect on actual behavior was less decisive. Workers, by and large, continued to work efficiently—out of habit, discipline, the fear of punishment by a powerful police state, and the lack of alternative courses of action. The bombing of German cities severely depressed the mood of the people, but it did not stop the war machine. That was accomplished by the precision bombing of essential industries such as oil production and transportation during the last year of the war. In short, the strategic bombing of Germany in World War II demonstrated that bombing focused on the will to resist is unable to accomplish its goal. The far more concentrated and intense bombing of Japan, culminating in the use of two atomic bombs on the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, supports this conclusion.³¹

It was estimated that Rolling Thunder caused North Vietnam about \$600 million worth of damage in terms of destroyed military facilities, loss of capital stock, and lost production. However, between 1965 and 1968 North Vietnam received over \$2 billion of foreign aid. As to the other side of the ledger, the bombing campaign cost the United States about \$6 billion in destroyed aircraft alone.³² This was a rather unfavorable financial balance sheet, to which one had to add heavy political costs. The bombing of North Vietnam strained US relations with other noncommunist nations and greatly exacerbated domestic tensions. The accusations of indiscriminate bombing of civilian targets can now be shown to have been utterly false, but during the years of the air war they were widely believed and they seriously impaired the moral authority of the United States. Instead of bringing North Vietnam to the conference table, the bombing helped erode support for the war here at

home. The intensive propaganda campaign against the bombing waged by Hanoi and her friends all over the world therefore was not necessarily a sign that the bombing really threatened the ability of the North to continue the war. Despite discomfort and dislocations, the bombing brought valuable political dividends.

The greatly intensified resumed bombing of North Vietnam in 1972, given the code names Linebacker I and II, does not disprove this negative assessment. In addition to destroying war-related resources and interdicting the movement of men and supplies to the South, Linebacker I had the aim of reducing or restricting North Vietnam's receipt of assistance from abroad. Unlike the case of Rolling Thunder, the military this time had far more tactical flexibility. Field commanders could pick targets from a validated list and strike them when they wanted. Targets in the key areas around Hanoi and Haiphong were authorized much sooner than during Rolling Thunder. By 22 October, when Linebacker I ended, ten MiG bases, six major thermal power plants, and almost all fixed POL storage facilities had been hit, which required strikes within ten miles of the center of both cities. Most importantly, a new family of "smart bombs" consisting of TV- and laser-guided bombs had become available that provided pilots with a new and unprecedented bombing accuracy.³³ Several important railroad bridges and tunnels near the Chinese border could now be struck without fear of political complications. The Thanh Hoa Bridge, which had survived numerous attacks during Rolling Thunder, was felled with several laser-guided bombs on 13 May. Aircraft losses were held down through improved electronic countermeasures.

The improved tactical ability of American planes meant that fewer sorties and less bombing tonnage, accompanied by a lower loss rate, during seven months of Linebacker I in 1972 were able to cause more serious damage to North Vietnam than had been scored during the high point of Rolling Thunder in 1967. The shipment of goods through Haiphong and other ports was

virtually eliminated, railroad traffic from China was seriously crippled, and most imports were now coming down by truck and on waterways which were under continuous attack. According to estimates, the flow of imports into North Vietnam and the movement of supplies to the South by September 1972 had been reduced to between 35 and 50 percent of what they had been in May of that year.³⁴

Linebacker II, which began on 18 December, lasted 12 days, though the weather was clear enough for visual bombing for only 12 hours. During these 12 days there were 729 B-52 sorties and about 1000 fighter-bomber attack sorties; 20,370 tons of bombs were dropped over all of Vietnam. A total of 26 planes were lost, including 15 B-52s. The bombing was concentrated on targets in the Hanoi and Haiphong complexes and included transportation terminals, rail yards, warehouses, power plants, airfields, and the like. When the bombing halted on 29 December, North Vietnam's electrical power supply was crippled, and extensive damage had been caused to all other targets as well. North Vietnamese air defenses were shattered, and during the last few days American planes roamed the skies with virtual impunity.³⁵

On 30 December 1972 the White House announced at a special press briefing that the President had called a halt in the bombing of the North Vietnamese heartland. "As soon as it was clear," the spokesman declared, "that serious negotiations could be resumed at both the technical level and between the principals, the President ordered that all bombing be discontinued above the twentieth parallel."³⁶ On New Year's Day the talks in Paris resumed, by 9 January the cease-fire agreement was essentially completed, and on 23 January 1973 it was initialed by Kissinger on behalf of the United States and by Le Duc Tho on behalf of North Vietnam. Did the intense bombing of December 1972 bring about this settlement and thus belatedly vindicate the decisiveness of airpower?

"I am convinced that Linebacker II served as a catalyst for the negotiations which resulted in the ceasefire," Admiral Moorer has stated. "Airpower, given its day in court

after almost a decade of frustration, confirmed its effectiveness as an instrument of national power—in just 9½ flying days."³⁷ Two Air Force legal officers have argued the same position: Linebacker II "was designed to coerce a negotiated settlement by threatening further weakening of the enemy's military effort to maintain and support his armed forces. It is our firm belief that this threat of continued and further destruction of military objectives produced the political settlement."³⁸

It may well be that the heavy bombing of targets in the Hanoi and Haiphong complexes, the threat of more such punishing attacks, and the unwillingness or inability of the Soviet Union and communist China to prevent these bombings induced Hanoi finally to sign a cease-fire agreement, just as the intensive bombings during Linebacker I may have contributed to the breakthrough in the negotiations in October. However, to consider this result to be conclusive proof of the decisiveness of air power, one would have to be convinced that North Vietnam, in signing the Paris agreements, put itself at a serious disadvantage, and the evidence for this assumption is lacking. The cease-fire terms—the unanimity principle adopted for the inspection machinery, which virtually guaranteed that supervision of adherence to the agreements would be ineffective, and the legitimation of the presence of NVA forces in the South—hardly represented an American victory; as subsequent events were to demonstrate, the Paris agreements did not impede North Vietnam's military drive to take over the South. Within little more than two years of the signing of the alleged "peace with honor," South Vietnam had fallen to North Vietnamese troops that had never left the South and to massive reinforcements which the meaningless inspection provisions of the Paris agreement could not prevent from entering South Vietnam.

To be sure, as Nixon assured Thieu in November 1972, the Administration believed that peace in Vietnam would depend not on the specific clauses of an agreement but on the willingness of the United States to enforce a cease-fire. The events of Watergate, which

seriously weakened the ability of the United States to react to the North Vietnamese violations of the Paris accords, could not have been foreseen. And yet the United States quite clearly had had to settle for a compromise; the Nixon Administration obviously would have preferred more advantageous terms that did not leave peace in Vietnam dependent solely on the threat of the reintroduction of American air power. Linebacker II helped bring about a cease-fire, but it failed to achieve a settlement that could be considered a victory for either South Vietnam or the United States. By December 1972 there were few military targets left in North Vietnam, and short of the complete obliteration of the country, it is likely that even a continuation of the bombing would not have induced North Vietnam to withdraw her forces from the South or to make other important concessions. In this sense, then, the argument for the decisive effectiveness of strategic air power in the Vietnam conflict—air power within the limits set by international law and Western public opinion—remains unproven.

The bombing of North Vietnam caused extensive damage to the country's war-making capacity, but at no point did it seriously hamper Hanoi's drive against the South. Neither Rolling Thunder nor Linebacker were able to wring decisive concessions from the North Vietnamese. The use of a "sharp blow" approach and less regard for civilian casualties might have reduced American losses at the beginning of the air campaign but, short of the use of nuclear weapons, seem unlikely to have led to different results.

The costs to America of the air war over North Vietnam were extremely high—both financially and politically. The bombing also helped the communist rulers of North Vietnam to organize their country on a war footing. But probably the most damaging consequence of the bombing of North Vietnam was that it diverted attention from the real hub of the Vietnam problem—the Southern battlefield—where the war was going to be won or lost. As presidential adviser John P. Roche wrote in a

memorandum for Johnson on 1 May 1967: "What has distressed me is the notion (expressed time and again by the Air Force boys) that air power would provide a *strategic* route to victory; and the parallel assumption that by bombing the North we could get a cut-rate solution in the South and escape from the problems of building a South Vietnamese army."³⁹ President Johnson finally accepted the logic of this argument and the bombing of North Vietnam was ended. The Nixon Administration belatedly began a program of Vietnamization. The bombing of the North was resumed only in response to the 1972 Easter invasion and under far more favorable international political circumstances which allowed the imposition of a blockade, a crucial complementary measure to the air war. That this bombing did not bring final victory is no reflection on the true importance of air power, only a refutation of the illusions of air power enthusiasts.

The related argument that a more aggressive ground strategy, including disregard of enemy sanctuaries beyond the borders of South Vietnam, would have assured victory, is similarly less than persuasive. Military action in Laos and Cambodia at an early stage of the war, seeking permanently to block the Ho Chi Minh Trail, would have made the North Vietnamese supply effort far more difficult, but basically an expansion of the conflict would not have eased the American task. Certainly, an invasion of North Vietnam only would have magnified the difficulties faced.

Back in 1962 President Kennedy is supposed to have called the infiltration of communist cadres from the North a built-in excuse for failure in the South. In the same way, the collapse of the South Vietnamese Army in the face of still another large-scale invasion from the North, preceded by drastic cuts in aid to South Vietnam imposed by the US Congress after the Paris Agreement of 1973, has tempted both the last leaders of South Vietnam and most of the US military to avoid facing the fundamental reasons for this defeat. The South Vietnamese, and indeed American soldiers earlier, it is argued, could have won the war had they not been

frustrated by political constraints in the United States and the collapse of the home front. There is no denying that the reductions in US aid did weaken the South Vietnamese ability to resist the well-equipped Northern divisions, and war-weariness and anti-war sentiment in America were widespread. However, the nonachievement of US goals in Vietnam had other and deeper reasons. To ignore these basic causes in favor of a facile stab-in-the-back legend will give rise to more illusions. In the long run, even more damaging to America's position in the world than the actual failure to achieve our objectives in Vietnam could be the unwillingness and inability of the military institution to understand and learn the real lessons of the Vietnam debacle.

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