

Airpower in the Vietnam War

The Vietnam war was a humiliating, exceptionally expensive, and probably unnecessary American defeat. By any statistical measure, the United States “could not lose” in Vietnam. But, as Napoléon said, there is more to war than what can be counted. The failure in Vietnam was a bitter experience for the entire American military. The war was lost not at the tactical level or the operational level but at the strategic level.

Carl von Clausewitz asserted that the first strategic question which must be answered is, “What kind of war is to be fought?” America failed to establish the kind of war on which it was embarking. Thus, no matter how well Americans might perform in Vietnam, it would all be for naught if the strategy were flawed. US forces gained tactical victories throughout the war but ultimately suffered strategic defeat.¹

The cost to the American people has also been enormous. All can count, in Robert S. McNamara fashion, the dead: 58,000; the wounded, 300,000; the dollars, 150 billion; but that tells little.² The United States failed to gain its political objective, and it paid a high moral price—its domestic institutions were badly shaken, its youth visibly alienated, its currency debased, its will and ability to use military force to protect national interests stunted for many years.³

America, moreover, was much less secure in 1975, when Saigon fell, than it was in 1961, when President John F. Kennedy made the first hesitant steps into Southeast Asia (SEA). Between 1965 and 1973 the US defense budget nearly doubled, but the increase brought neither success in Vietnam nor added security. Inflation reduced by one-third the value of each dollar the defense budget increased. After the United States withdrew from the war, the Congress, disheartened by SEA failures, appropriated less purchasing power for defense than it had done since early in the Dwight D. Eisenhower presidency.

In the meantime, America’s key adversary, the Soviet Union, had not slowed its military buildup. While American defenses were declining, Soviet armed forces dramatically increased their land, sea, and air capabilities. The Soviet Union, moreover, appeared to have become more aggressive with its own and proxy forces in such places as Ethiopia,

Angola, and Afghanistan. Such states as Japan, Thailand, the Philippines, and South Korea, furthermore, seemed to doubt the will of the United States to respond to military challenges.⁴ The Vietnam War defeat contributed to reducing America's ability to protect itself and its friends.

Inadequate Strategy

But it need not have been a demoralizing loss; indeed, it need not have been a defeat at all. Once they had engaged America in the war, US political leaders owed to their people and to the men they committed to battle an opportunity to achieve the country's limited objectives in Vietnam. This could have been done through the use of air power, the "major unplayed trump card."⁵ The difficulty was not a quantitative restriction on the use of American air forces; indeed, American aircrews flew more than 1,248,000 fixed-wing and more than 37,000,000 helicopter combat sorties between 1965 and 1973.⁶ The problem was not that air power was absent, but that it was squandered and misapplied. Because the political bureaucracy in the United States failed to understand the nature of the war itself and the capabilities of air power, the military strategy, especially its air component, was hopelessly flawed. And since defeats in war are, first of all, failures in strategy, a proper analysis must begin there.

The political bureaucratic decision makers in the Defense Department and the National Security Council, beginning with the president, were ambivalent about whether they were engaged in a counterinsurgency or a subtheater conventional war against a foreign invasion. Throughout, they never sought even a limited victory—they tried only not to lose—and they produced an objectiveless strategy that never aimed for more than a stalemate. Eventually they developed a plan to outlast North Vietnam, ignoring the fact that the North Vietnamese had a much more compelling reason to persevere than did the United States. This inadequate national strategy seriously hampered military planning, most notably the use of air power.⁷

Brevity does not permit anything like a complete analysis of the air war here. Instead we shall briefly explore the inadequacy of the air

strategy and then discuss the American air campaign, with emphasis on several engagements that demonstrate air power's potency in that conflict.

Confusion over the Nature of the Vietnam War

It is difficult to simplify an essay on the air strategy of the Vietnam War. The conflict went on too long. Too many players had roles. The views of the players changed and changed again. Some policy and strategy formulators (mostly civilians aided initially by some military decision makers) saw the war as a counterinsurgency and considered the defeat of the Vietcong in South Vietnam their major objective. Others viewed the war as an effort by North Vietnam to conquer South Vietnam. As it turned out, the latter view was more accurate, as today indigenous South Vietnamese communists are nowhere near the center of power in old Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City).

The intent here is not to be critical of those who saw the war incorrectly, especially as we maintain that this fundamental error need not have led to defeat, because the air strategy ought to have been similar in either case. If the war was considered an insurgency, then it was necessary to shut off outside assistance to the guerrillas to achieve victory. There have been no successful counterinsurgencies without effective interdiction of outside assistance.⁸ If, on the other hand, North Vietnam was considered the direct aggressor, then the war needed to be taken to Hanoi in no uncertain terms. The key in either case, therefore, was striking North Vietnam's heart and major logistic arteries and not squandering precious assets as the United States did on the capillaries in southern North Vietnam, South Vietnam, and elsewhere.

We recognize the fears decision makers in the Johnson administration had concerning Chinese or Soviet (especially the former) involvement in the war if bombing North Vietnam were to become intolerable to them. We recognize but do not understand. Certainly, whatever the apprehensions Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara and his key adviser on air strategy, John McNaughton, had, those fears should have been

dissolved by the lack of overt Chinese or Soviet moves during times of relatively intense bombing activity. In any case, whatever excuse Lyndon B. Johnson and his advisers had would appear not to apply to President Richard M. Nixon and his advisers, given the moves by the Chinese in 1970 to open relations with the United States and simultaneous Soviet attempts to enhance détente. It appears that Johnson—the president most responsible for the debacle—took advice from people who understood only the potential liabilities of air power and not its military benefits. These people took counsel of their fears and promulgated a strategy that produced disaster. They formulated an important air strategy that aimed only at protracting the war until Hanoi and the Vietcong could stand it no longer. In the end, the American people's tolerance for pain without hope proved to be shorter lived than the North Vietnamese leadership's ability to tolerate destruction of superficial national assets in pursuit of their lifelong dream.

Growing Military Demand for the Unfettered Use of Air Power

The majority of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) in 1964 recognized that North Vietnam was the enemy and air power was a key to success in the war.⁹ The JCS and the Pacific Command developed a strategy that aimed at sealing off North Vietnam from outside logistics support by mining harbors and attacking shipping and further hampering communist operations in South Vietnam by severing lines of communication to the south.¹⁰ Proponents of this strategy recognized the need to prevent Chinese and Soviet supplies from reaching guerrillas and North Vietnamese regulars in South Vietnam. But Air Force leaders also knew that attacking capillary-sized lines of communication far from Hanoi (the industrial, transportation, and administrative center of North Vietnam) would be ineffective because these were small and relatively easy to construct and, therefore, could be multiplied almost indefinitely by the enemy. Remembering Korea and the French experience with the Vietnamese, the Air Force knew

that the enemy would also be able to move supplies, once they were widely distributed, at night or over well-camouflaged routes in daytime. The key was to strike ports, railroad marshalling yards, and major rail and highway choke points.¹¹

Defense Secretary McNamara rejected the strategy of sealing off North Vietnam and ruled out interdicting major lines of communication close to Hanoi. He would permit striking targets in North Vietnam only near the demilitarized zone separating North from South Vietnam, but targets further north were reserved for strike only if the North Vietnamese failed to respond to US pressure.¹²

Air Force Chief of Staff Curtis E. LeMay argued forcefully for an immediate and concentrated attack against strategic targets in the Hanoi-Haiphong area. General LeMay believed interdiction elsewhere was not likely to be decisive. He was opposed by Generals Earle G. Wheeler, Army chief of staff, and Maxwell Taylor, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who preferred a more gradual increase in air pressure on North Vietnam. They believed the war had to be won in South Vietnam and that the Army should carry that burden. Wheeler also believed an air campaign should support the war in South Vietnam chiefly through close air support (CAS). The Army view in 1964 was essentially that of McNamara, who called for two main air missions (in addition to essential airlift): CAS by the Air Force or Army units and interdiction of enemy lines of communication in and near South Vietnam. The secretary believed, without any evidence (and he persisted in this incorrect belief until he left office), that the implicit *threat* of air attacks on military industrial targets would influence the North Vietnamese to restrain their support of the Vietcong.¹³

In mid-1964, at a meeting in Honolulu, General Taylor questioned whether the United States should attack North Vietnam at all and agreed with the secretary of defense that the main air effort should be designed to support the forces of South Vietnam by cutting enemy lines of communication. If an attack were to be made against North Vietnam, it should be only to *demonstrate* resolve to expand the conflict.¹⁴ The strategy that emerged from this Honolulu conference differed in no important way from the preconference strategy. The

JCS, however, looking to the future, had the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) develop a list of strategic targets in North Vietnam. Initially there were 94 key targets considered to have a direct relationship to North Vietnam's war-making capacity and the will to fight (by 1967 this list had grown to 244 targets).¹⁵

Gradualistic Use of Air Power

August 1964 saw the first overt American air attacks on North Vietnam. These punitive strikes, code-named Pierce Arrow, were launched in response to the North Vietnamese attacks on US Navy destroyers. They struck ports, naval facilities, and North Vietnam's petroleum stocks. They marked the end of the period of strategy making that had focused on restricting American involvement in Indochina to economic aid, advice, and covert pressure against North Vietnam. Pierce Arrow was the first of a series of "tit for tat" bombings, with targets being released for attack a few at a time, in reaction to North Vietnamese activities, rather than on the basis of a comprehensive American air strategy.

Significantly, these strikes were oriented toward achieving some particular effect upon the ground war in South Vietnam and not on destroying the will or capability of the North Vietnamese to fight. McNamara, supported by his civilian and ranking Army advisers, had argued that bombing a few targets in North Vietnam would demonstrate the potential costs to Hanoi and therefore restrain the communist government. But Ho Chi Minh's response to the Pierce Arrow attacks was not restrained. He moved 30 jet fighters from China to Hanoi's main military airfield. The air attacks did not shock Ho; they simply spurred him to start working on what was to become a superb air defense system of jet fighters, surface-to-air missiles (SAM), and anti-aircraft artillery.¹⁶

Further demonstrating that limited retaliatory attacks were not reducing their will to fight, the Vietcong and North Vietnamese also stepped up attacks against American airfields. These attacks led the JCS in November 1964 to propose a series of strikes against North

Vietnam based on the DIA's list of 94 strategic targets. President Johnson rejected this proposal, but it served to put all of the joint chiefs on record in favor of more aggressive air strikes against North Vietnam. Despite the consensus among the generals and admirals, McNamara advised Johnson to continue his gradualistic approach. Johnson also retained total control of air strikes. From the first strikes in 1964 until he left office, targets were doled out "abstemiously and with detailed personal attention in the Tuesday luncheons to which no military officer was regularly invited until late in 1967." Johnson and McNamara "regulated the pace of escalation personally by minimizing autonomy in the field and discouraging the development of comprehensive campaign plans."¹⁷

Johnson and McNamara were stymied by their fears and their inadequate understanding of the nature of war. Johnson worried that dramatic strikes might prompt Soviet or Chinese involvement (although there had been no serious response to American attacks), that such bombing might impede chances for negotiations (when Hanoi had shown no willingness to compromise), and that bombing, in any case, was not cost effective¹⁸ (as if defeat had no price tag).¹⁹ The debate went on until the end of the war. It was about whether bombing was a political signal or a military means to political ends.²⁰

Misapplication of Air Power

Rolling Thunder

To raise South Vietnamese morale and to increase incrementally the pressure after a series of attacks by the Vietcong and North Vietnamese on Pleiku and Qui Nhon, a campaign called Flaming Dart was begun in February 1965. The next month it evolved into a more systematic air campaign called Rolling Thunder. The latter involved strikes on lines of communication in North Vietnam below the 19th parallel (well south of Hanoi and Haiphong) and elsewhere.

General LeMay retired in January 1965, still calling for a truly strategic air campaign; his successor, Gen J. C. McConnell, was no less vocal. McConnell argued that the United States needed to concentrate

on destroying the center of the North's logistics network, not its tertiary tributary aspects. Despite McConnell's views, the secretary of defense continued to maintain that the primary role of air power was to support ground forces in South Vietnam—McNamara was only interested in avoiding defeat.²¹ But so long as the North Vietnamese paid no major price for the war and could bring all they needed to fight into the war zone and hide it beneath triple jungle canopy or in caves and tunnels, their victory remained only a matter of time.

In early 1965 the JCS advocated a four-phase strategic attack against North Vietnam. All agreed with McNamara on the need to continue an appropriate level of close air support of the South Vietnamese and American troops in South Vietnam, but the JCS knew the United States was in for a prolonged war of attrition without strategic attack on North Vietnam. The chiefs believed a strategic air attack that destroyed the ports, mined the harbors, completely interrupted the transportation net, and destroyed ammunition and supply areas in the heartland of Vietnam would convince Hanoi that South Vietnam was not worth the price—destruction of its society.²² On the other hand, civilian bureaucrats in the Defense Department argued that an all-out bombing campaign might widen the war and would “transmit a signal of strength out of all proportion to the limited objectives of the United States in Southeast Asia” and foreclose the promise of achieving American goals at a “relatively low level of violence.”²³ But war is violence, and the North Vietnamese had become inured to low-level violence by more than 20 years of armed struggle. Only an obvious indication that the destruction of their society was imminent would dissuade them.

Hanoi's Air Defense Network

Hanoi responded to the piecemeal attacks on southern North Vietnam by building comprehensive air defenses, and in July 1965 shot down its first American fighter. In response to this loss, the president and McNamara authorized strikes against only those

surface-to-air missile sites that were actually firing at US aircraft. Even this authority did not extend to targets above the 20th parallel.²⁴

American reconnaissance, as early as April 1965, had revealed the construction of Soviet SAM sites in North Vietnam. The military had immediately asked for permission to strike the sites before they were completed. DOD refused that permission. Gen William Westmoreland quoted John McNaughton on Hanoi's air defense missiles: "Putting them in is just a political ploy by the Russians to appease Hanoi." (To McNaughton [and McNamara] it was all a matter of signals.) "We won't bomb the sites and that will be a signal to North Vietnam not to use them."²⁵ That sophistry cost the United States hundreds of lives, billions of dollars in destroyed aircraft, and the imprisonment of hundreds of Air Force and Navy aircrew members.

The Johnson/McNamara/McNaughton Approach to Bombing

Johnson's key civilian advisers did not understand how air power had contributed to victory in the Second World War, especially in the Pacific theater, and how it had helped end the ugly stalemate in Korea in 1953. They also would not listen to those who did. Their complete misreading of the enemy, combined with their misunderstanding of air power, led to a series of bombing halts in the false hope that the North Vietnamese, with relief from limited pressure, would see the error of their ways and negotiate a peace or withdraw from South Vietnam. McNaughton, McNamara, and Johnson devised an air strategy of "uncoordinated carrots and sticks" that, by smashing nothing of great value, succeeded in signalling nothing.²⁶ Between 1965 and 1968 Johnson halted the bombing 16 times and publicly promulgated 71 peace initiatives—the last coming upon his dramatic withdrawal from the presidential campaign of 1968.²⁷ Hanoi was not impressed, except perhaps with its own ability to drive the American political process.

In early 1966 McNaughton wrote a memo that characterized the Defense Department view of bombing North Vietnam. Bombings, he asserted, were to interdict infiltration, bring about negotiations,

provide a bargaining counter—we will stop bombing if you stop fighting—in negotiations (which he called “minuets”), and sustain South Vietnamese and US morale. He doubted that, short of drastic action against the North Vietnamese population, an air campaign could persuade Hanoi to come to the table.

He recognized that the Air Force, using only conventional munitions, was capable of destroying industrial targets, locks and dams on the waterways, and significant portions of the population. The first he rejected because of North Vietnam’s primarily rural economy; the last, because it might produce a “counter-productive wave of revulsion abroad and at home.” Paradoxically, he thought that flooding might have some merit. But he ended up arguing against strategic bombing and supported strikes only as frequently as is required to keep alive “Hanoi’s fear of the future.”²⁸ McNaughton did not understand war or its principles. He looked on air power as a sophisticated “ratchet” to tighten or loosen the pressure on Hanoi to alter the politburo’s mood.²⁹

McNamara argued before the Congress in 1965 that his objectives were “limited only to destruction of the insurgencies and aggression directed by North Vietnam against the political institutions of South Vietnam.” He wanted to convince Ho Chi Minh, by close air support and interdiction in southern North Vietnam, South Vietnam, and elsewhere, that North Vietnam could not conquer South Vietnam.³⁰ Here McNamara was describing a strategy of attrition and protracted war. In such a war, there was no way that Hanoi was likely to become convinced it could not outlast the United States, a country fighting halfway around the world with its major national interests elsewhere. The JCS, when McNamara made this comment, disagreed with his view of the conflict, saying that it was no longer an insurgency but a conventional war that demanded an air campaign not confined to South Vietnam. McNamara’s view was badly flawed because, even if the war was an insurgency, no victory could be achieved so long as Hanoi could run in supplies and equipment to its forces in the South without grave risk to its own centers.³¹ The task McNamara gave air power—to sever the supply system by striking only its terminal phases—was exceptionally costly and proved impossible.³²

The Air Force wanted to concentrate bombing in North Vietnam. Having made that point clear in 1964, it never ceased calling for a strategic campaign. That service recognized the enormous tonnage being dropped on SEA was largely hitting empty jungle. The joint chiefs argued that the only aspect of the war in which the United States could take the initiative was in the air campaign against North Vietnam's heartland and that this had to be prosecuted vigorously. McNamara repeatedly ignored this military advice.³³

In late 1966, having rejected a strategic air campaign, McNamara counselled the president that there was no way to end the war soon and that the country needed to "gird" itself "openly for a longer war." But he lost his nerve less than two years later and abandoned office.³⁴ It seemed that no civilian in the DOD in 1965 and 1966, when they were counselling gradualism, recognized the frustrations building in the American population, although it had happened before within all of their memories. During the Korean War President Harry S Truman was driven out of the presidential campaign of 1952 (as Johnson was in 1968) in large part because he could not bring that war to a rapid conclusion. McNamara counselled Johnson to take the same path as Truman—with the same result.

It should be acknowledged that the Central Intelligence Agency until 1966 advised that bombing was not cost effective. The Institute for Defense Analysis also advised McNamara in 1966 that the bombing was having "no direct measurable effect."³⁵ But the bombing they were analyzing was on the fruitless targets which McNamara had allotted to air power.

The brief analysis above shows that the strategy governing the application of air power in Vietnam was badly flawed. With this in mind, let us now review air operations between 1961 and 1972, paying particular attention to the significant air efforts in the two climactic years—1968 and 1972.

The Slow Kennedy Buildup

Although American air power had assisted the French in their effort to maintain control of their Southeast Asia empire, our story properly

begins with the first deployments of air power to South Vietnam by the Kennedy administration. By the time Kennedy took office, what appeared to be insurgencies in Laos and South Vietnam were accelerating. Kennedy initially sent more military and civilian advisers to the friendly governments to stem what appeared to be an attempt by international communism to overflow “free” governments, continuing a program dating back to the Eisenhower administration. In May 1961 Kennedy sent Vice President Johnson to Saigon to survey the deteriorating situation. Subsequent to that visit, Kennedy increased US military assistance, including, in the case of the US Air Force, the dispatch of a radar mobile control and reporting post to Tan Son Nhut Air Base outside of Saigon.³⁶

Later in the year the Air Force sent a combat unit of air commandos equipped with T-28s, B-26s, and other “vintage” aircrafts. In the United States the outfit had been called Jungle Jim. When it got to South Vietnam it was called Farm Gate. Slowly, from 1961 to the end of 1964, US combat air power grew in Vietnam, but by the end of 1964, there were only 117 American aircraft in Vietnam, 50 of which were strike-capable. By the end of 1965, however, there were about 500 American aircraft based in Vietnam and three US Navy aircraft carriers with more than 250 aircraft off the Vietnamese coast. Tactical air warfare in Vietnam was by then being fought on a large scale. The initial hope (but not expectation) of the Defense Department had been that the Air Force would be used only to train the South Vietnamese air force, but the strength of the North Vietnamese and Vietcong compelled the United States to up the ante dramatically to prevent a South Vietnamese defeat.³⁷

Hanoi’s Battlefield Success Draws More Air Power

The year 1965 opened ominously. Ho Chi Minh, his defense minister Vo Nguyen Giap, and the rest of the politburo in Hanoi saw triumph ahead. They confidently broadcast over Hanoi radio that 1965 would be “the year of victory.” This confident judgment was

based on Hanoi's assessment of South Vietnamese weakness and Washington's unwillingness to offer major assistance.³⁸ Apparently the American attacks on North Vietnamese coastal torpedo bases and oil storage facilities in August 1964 and the subsequent passage of the Gulf of Tonkin resolution had not impressed Hanoi.

South Vietnam was in desperate straits in 1965, with one military coup following another and the United States anxiously trying to find ways to bolster South Vietnamese defenses and morale. To improve South Vietnamese spirits, Washington openly talked about deploying additional American forces to Vietnam, and the White House lifted restrictions on the use of US aircraft over South Vietnam.³⁹ As an exclamation point, B-52s dropped their first bombs on South Vietnam in June 1965.⁴⁰

During 1966 American troop strength continued to grow, reaching a total of 325,000 troops, and several American allies—Korea, Australia and New Zealand—also supplied forces. The growth of American forces apparently induced an increase in North Vietnamese forces, which in turn caused another expansion in American forces. By the beginning of 1968 there were about 500,000—approximately 10 percent of which belonged to the US Air Force.⁴¹

Events in 1968, especially the Tet offensive, changed the political and social climate in the United States to the point that President Johnson dropped from the presidential campaign. It is useful here to dwell momentarily on the contributions of air power to two important military campaigns of 1968: the Tet offensive and the siege of Khe Sanh.

Air Power and the Tet Offensive January to March 1968

During the Tet offensive, air power played a key role in keeping the enemy from accomplishing his military objectives. Beginning on 31 January, violating a holiday truce, the Vietcong and North Vietnamese Army launched simultaneous attacks on 36 of the 44 provincial capitals, five of the six autonomous cities, 23 airfields, and numerous district capitals and hamlets. Apparently General Giap

hoped the South Vietnamese army would disintegrate and the people of South Vietnam would rally to the communist cause.⁴² Fortunately, because of intelligence warning, the American Seventh Air Force had entered Tet on full alert⁴³ and was able to support South Vietnamese and American ground forces as they, although momentarily shaken, bravely fought back.

Initially the enemy seized temporary control of 10 provincial capitals and succeeded in penetrating such important cities as Quang Tri, Da Nang, Hue, Nha Trang, Kontum, and even Saigon, including the grounds of the American Embassy compound in the center of the city. But except in Hue, the enemy was cleaned out after the first two or three days of the offensive. Despite the heavy simultaneous demands placed upon Seventh Air Force to help defend Khe Sanh (which we will cover next), Seventh Air Force, Marine, and Navy strike aviation and Air Force airlift were major factors in the enemy's wholesale military defeat.⁴⁴

Air power did everything expected of it. Between 30 January and 25 February more than 16,000 strike sorties were flown by the Air Force, with additional thousands flown by the Marines and Navy, all in support of American and Vietnamese ground forces. And airlift—some 280 aircraft—moved troops rapidly wherever needed to thwart an enemy attack. Because of American airlift, the enemy's disruption of surface lines of communication during the Tet offensive was of little value to him. At one point more than 12,000 troops were moved in hours from the southern military regions to the most threatened area—Military Region I—to frustrate any plans General Giap might have had to separate part of that region from South Vietnam.⁴⁵

Retaking Hue proved to be the most difficult problem. The enemy moved into the inner city and hung on. Marine, Navy, and Air Force fighters flew hundreds of sorties to support marines and the 1st Air Cavalry Division as they battled house-to-house to drive out the enemy. It took almost a month, but by the 25th of February the inner city was again in friendly hands.⁴⁶

North Vietnamese and Vietcong losses were exceptionally heavy. The enemy lost 5,000 troops at Hue alone. Overall enemy losses

during the month-long attack were about 45,000.⁴⁷ So serious were these losses, the Vietcong was never again a major factor in the war—the overwhelming burden of fighting now falling to regular North Vietnamese troops. Nonetheless, the Tet offensive proved to be a political disaster for the Johnson administration. Although the battle seems to have failed to have the desired effect upon the South Vietnamese population, it caused many Americans to doubt the possibility that the United States could ever achieve its goals in Vietnam.⁴⁸

The domestic political loss notwithstanding, American air power demonstrated to the enemy that he could not succeed in conquering South Vietnam so long as the United States retained its military forces there. American air power was flexible, and the Air Force centralized command and control apparatus functioned smoothly, rapidly moving Air Force fighters and airlifters from one end of the country to the other, shifting whenever necessary to meet the enemy. Air power denied the enemy any kind of sanctuary in South Vietnam day or night. Even bad weather provided little cover because the enemy could be struck by radar-controlled fighters and bombers. Airlift, especially the C-130s capable of working in the worst weather conditions, delivered supplies under all conditions.

Air Power and the Battle for Khe Sanh **January to April 1968**

Similarly, with General Giap's siege of the Marine base at Khe Sanh, whatever his intention—and some think it was to repeat his capture of a large body of defenders as he had done in Dien Bien Phu in 1954—air power saw to it that he gained nothing while suffering enormous losses. About a week before General Giap launched the Tet offensive, he laid siege to the Khe Sanh Marine fire base located on a plateau about 30 minutes flying time west of Da Nang. For two and one-half months, beginning in late January, the enemy pounded the base continually with artillery and mortars and made numerous infantry probing attacks in an attempt to overrun the 6,000 American

marines who, along with a small number of South Vietnamese army troops, were stationed there. General Giap invested about three North Vietnamese infantry divisions in this venture.⁴⁹

Air power's response to the communist attack involved traditional missions—interdiction, close air support, airlift—all under the command and control of the Seventh Air Force. Alarmed at the buildup of troops in the Khe Sanh area, Gen William Momyer directed more than 20,000 attack sorties during December 1967 and January and February 1968 against communist lines of communication leading to the forces. More than 3,000 trucks supplying North Vietnamese forces were destroyed in this effort.⁵⁰ Interdiction was crucial because the enemy counted on his high consumption attack to soften the defenses and destroy morale at Khe Sanh.⁵¹

Close air support was provided from the Air Force, Marines, and Navy Task Force 77 off the coast of Vietnam. Each day, 350 tactical fighters and 60 B-52s struck the enemy.⁵² To effect the command and control of this many aircraft in the confines of the valley where Khe Sanh was situated was a major feat. To meet this challenge, control of all tactical air units was centralized under Seventh Air Force, making General Momyer the single manager for air. During the two and one-half months of combat in that tiny area, more than 24,000 tactical and 2,700 B-52 sorties were flown, and more than 110,000 tons of bombs were dropped. Fighters were in the air day and night. During darkness, AC-47 gunships provided constant gunfire and illumination against enemy troops.⁵³

The B-52s struck enemy staging, assembly, storage areas, and known gun positions. When communists were discovered digging trenches and tunnels to protect their advancing infantry, the B-52s bombed their positions, even though some were within 1,000 feet of the base perimeter.⁵⁴ The weather was an enemy ally during this campaign; more than half of the fighter strikes and all of the B-52 strikes were controlled by Air Force radar.⁵⁵

Another major air effort at Khe Sanh was the aerial resupply of the US Marines and South Vietnamese troops at the camp. The runway at Khe Sanh was put out of operation by enemy artillery early in the

siege. Therefore, for most of the period, the Air Force supplied Khe Sanh by airdrop and low-level cargo extraction missions. During the siege the Air Force delivered more than 12,000 tons of supplies to Khe Sanh while under constant enemy fire. Supply levels at the fire base never became dangerously low because of the air lifeline.⁵⁶

This massive air power effort was orchestrated by the Seventh Air Force at Saigon and its Direct Air Support Center at Da Nang. The actual coordination of air and artillery fire was directed by an Air Force airborne battlefield command and control center (ABCCC) C-130 aircraft which orbited over Khe Sanh. Forward air controllers, working directly for the ABCCC, directed the precise application of air power where it was most needed.⁵⁷

General Giap's forces suffered terribly, probably losing 10,000 killed. Two of his divisions were driven out of the war for the remainder of the American involvement.⁵⁸ Activities at Khe Sanh punctuated the lesson General Giap must have learned during the Tet offensive—that he could not conquer South Vietnam so long as American ground forces supported by air power remained.

American Withdrawal and Vietnamization

Regardless of the important role air power played in thwarting General Giap's plans for 1968, the political climate in the United States had become so poisoned by the length and apparent futility of the war that President Johnson withdrew from the presidential campaign of 1968. Less than six months after taking office, the new president, Richard M. Nixon, announced his plan to pull US combat troops from Vietnam. Fighting a drawn-out, apparently pointless, war was unacceptable to the American public, and by the end of Nixon's first year in office, 69,000 American troops had been removed from Vietnam—somewhat more than 10 percent of the total.⁵⁹

The Air Force continued to support military operations in South Vietnam and kept up its attempt to interdict enemy lines of communications. After the American ground forces dwindled and national policy dictated "Vietnamization" of the ground combat, air

power became America's primary military arm. In the last months of Nixon's first year, B-52s struck time and time again at enemy concentrations, staging areas, and fortifications to prevent the enemy from massing while American forces withdrew and South Vietnamese forces expanded. In the last five weeks of 1969, B-52s dropped more than 30 million pounds of bombs on enemy positions.⁶⁰

In 1970 the first US Air Force element began to leave Southeast Asia while the South Vietnamese air force enlarged its force structure. By year's end the South Vietnamese had nearly 700 aircraft, including A-1s, A-37s, F-5s, AC-47s, O-1s, and AC-119s.⁶¹

By the end of 1971, the Air Force had reduced its combat aircraft in South Vietnam to 277 (from a high in June 1968 of 737) with similar reductions of aircraft stationed in Thailand, the Philippines, and Okinawa. The number of Air Force people in South Vietnam itself also declined from the peak in 1968 of 54,434 to 28,791. By the end of the year, 70 percent of all air combat operations were performed by the South Vietnamese air force.⁶²

The next year saw some of the most dramatic uses of air power in the entire war. The US Air Force and naval air forces returned to the theater with dramatic vengeance in the spring of 1972 to smash the North Vietnamese attempt to conquer South Vietnam in an open invasion, complete with tanks and massed troops.

Notes

1. Harry G. Summers, Jr., *On Strategy*, vol. 2, *A Critical Analysis of the Gulf War* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1992), chap. 2.

2. Lance Morrow, "Vietnam, 'A Bloody Rite of Passage,'" *Time*, 15 April 1985, 22.

3. Those who served have been characterized as a "wounded generation" (author Robert Muller's term), and those who protested were also alienated. The former ask: "Where are our leaders? Where are the politicians that (*sic*) sent us to war? . . . I can't see these jokers . . . The total abandonment of these people that (*sic*) sent us to war is unbelievable," Johnson Wheeler, "Coming to Grips with Vietnam," *Foreign Affairs*, Spring 1985, 750.

4. Allen R. Millett and Peter Maslowski, *For the Common Defense: A Military History of the United States of America* (London: Free Press, 1984), 542-44.

5. *Ibid.*, 549. We do not imply here that aviators always applied air power optimally, or even correctly. We recognize, further, the difficult and never resolved command and control problems that existed among the American air forces and even within the US Air Force. We maintain, however, that the surfeit of air power was much more than enough to overcome all errors of application and command and control arrangements if the strategy had been correct. The air strategy, as promulgated by civilians in the Department of Defense, was the fatal flaw.

6. M. J. Armitage and R. A. Mason, *Air Power in the Nuclear Age* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1983), 112–13.

7. For an unsurpassed treatment of the nature of the bureaucratic strategic failure, see Leslie H. Gelb with Richard K. Betts, *The Irony of Vietnam: The System Worked* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1979). See also Herbert Y. Schandler, *The Unmaking of a President: Lyndon Johnson and Vietnam* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1977), for an in-depth view of the way domestic politics and international relations interacted in Johnson's administration. Another excellent work is Harry G. Summers, Jr., *On Strategy: The Vietnam War in Context* (Carlisle Barracks, Pa.: Army War College, 1983). Summers recognized the flaws in the American strategy and also recognized the failure of the president and secretary of defense to employ air power properly. Summers quotes South Vietnamese Secretary of Defense Tran Van Don as arguing the United States would have done well to bring under control the infiltration of North Vietnam because until that was done the war could not be won. But the United States scattered its air effort everywhere in Vietnam and failed to focus for a number of reasons on the North Vietnamese who were the locus of the problem (page 104). Indeed, the entire book is an indictment of American strategy. See especially page 80, where Summers argues that we failed to focus on any of the North Vietnamese "centers of gravity." Summers argues that the war was most certainly, especially after the mid-1960s, not a counterinsurgency and that the United States should have treated the war from the start as a conventional theater war.

8. There is a whole body of literature now gathering dust in libraries on successful counterinsurgencies. Twenty years ago the Rand Corporation seriously studied this form of warfare and made major contributions to understanding its nature. Readers can refer to A. H. Peterson et al., *Symposium on the Role of Airpower in Counterinsurgencies in Unconventional Warfare* (Santa Monica, Calif.: Rand Corporation, 1964); *Idem*, *Symposium on Airpower: The Algerian War* (Santa Monica, Calif.: Rand Corporation, 1963); *Idem*, *Symposium on Airpower: The Malaysian Emergency* (Santa Monica, Calif.: Rand Corporation, 1964); *Idem*, *Symposium on Airpower: The Philippines Huk Campaign* (Santa Monica, Calif.: Rand Corporation, 1963).

9. David Fromkin and James Chase in "What Are the Lessons of Vietnam?" *Foreign Affairs*, Spring 1985, 725, acknowledge that the JCS saw the war more clearly than the "National Security Council and other civilian bodies."

10. Robert F. Futrell, *Advisory Years* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1983), 195–206.

11. William W. Momyer, *Air Power in Three Wars*, ed. A. J. C. Lavalley and J. C. Gaston (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1978), 13.

12. *Ibid.*

13. *Ibid.*, 13–14.

14. *Ibid.*, 14.

15. *Ibid.*, 15.

16. Gelb and Betts, 101, 114–15; Momyer, 15–16.

17. Gelb and Betts, 137; Momyer, 17.

18. Gelb and Betts, 136–37.

19. Paul Warnke, one of McNamara's assistants in DOD, confessed that McNamara's view of gradual pressure with the bombing was bankrupt because DOD had "guessed wrong with respect to what North Vietnamese reaction would be. We anticipated that they would respond like reasonable people." Gelb and Betts, 139. McNamara and company, in other words, believed that the North Vietnamese would calculate, mechanistically, costs and benefits as did he and therefore be willing to lower demands as the price rose—as if Ho Chi Minh managed his revolution the way McNamara managed the Pentagon.

20. Department of Defense, *United States-Vietnam Relations 1945–1967*, IV.C.7. (a), vol. 1, *The Air War in North Vietnam, The Pentagon Papers* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1971), 5. (Hereafter *The Pentagon Papers*.)

21. Gelb and Betts, 136; Momyer, 18–19.

22. Momyer, 19.

23. *The Pentagon Papers*, 1.

24. Momyer, 20.

25. Gelb and Betts, 138. General Momyer resented the proscriptions of attacks on North Vietnam airfields, surface-to-air missiles, and antiaircraft artillery sites. The costs were terrible. Momyer, 338–39.

26. Gelb and Betts, 53; Armitage and Mason, 85; *The Pentagon Papers*, 1–6. Col Harry Summers called McNamara's bombing halt "fatal flaws" in the strategy. See Summers, 72.

27. Gelb and Betts, 140.

28. *The Pentagon Papers*, 33–39. John T. McNaughton was a lawyer and a newspaper columnist. Unquestionably bright (a Rhodes Scholar), he had been a lawyer and professor for more than a decade before joining the Department of Defense as an attorney and as an assistant secretary of defense in international security affairs. Although he had served in the Naval Reserves during the Second World War, there is nothing in his background or writing that indicates he had even scant knowledge of air power. McNaughton was apparently chief among McNamara's advisers counselling skepticism about bombing. He argued

continually that bombing in South Vietnam would be more effective than bombing in North Vietnam and by mid-1967 he had become so alarmed by the growing public protest against the war that he counselled President Johnson to rethink the entire premise of the war itself. He argued all along that there was no way the air war against North Vietnam could force Hanoi to abandon its war in the south. The Air Force agreed that at the levels McNaughton and McNamara allowed there was no way. *Who Was Who in America (With World Notables)*, vol. 4 (Chicago: A. N. Marquis Cq., n.d.), 646; Nelson Lichtenstein, ed., *Political Profiles: The Johnson Years* (New York: Facts on File, n.d.), 395.

29. *The Pentagon Papers*, 21.

30. *Ibid.*, 17–19.

31. Momyer, 22–23.

32. McNamara, as is well known, became increasingly disheartened and left office some months before the end of the Johnson administration. By the end of his days in office he was condemning the bombing, reciting the comparative figures of so many more tons dropped on Vietnam than all of Germany, Japan, and North Korea. In fact, more tons were dropped on Vietnam than in all of the Second World War and Korea combined, and he reiterated “it is not just that it isn’t preventing supplies from getting down the trail, it is destroying the countryside in the south. It is making lasting enemies and still the determined Air Force wants more.” Gelb and Betts, 169–70.

33. Momyer, 22–23.

34. Gelb and Betts, 147. In 1966 the Central Intelligence Agency called for a drastically heightened air campaign in North Vietnam to drive Hanoi out of the war (249–50).

35. Gelb and Betts, 147–48.

36. Carl Berger, ed., *The United States Air Force in Southeast Asia*, (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1977), 4–10.

37. Momyer, 10–11, 20–21; Armitage and Mason, 93; Berger, 11–13.

38. Douglas Pike, “The Other Side,” in Peter Braestrup, ed., *Vietnam as History: Ten Years after the Paris Peace Accords* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1984), 71.

39. Gelb and Betts, 118–19; Berger, 40.

40. Berger, 40–41.

41. *Ibid.*, 47–52.

42. Momyer, 311–13; Berger, 56.

43. *Ibid.*, 313.

44. Berger, 56.

45. *Ibid.*, 176; Momyer, 319.

46. Momyer, 318; Berger, 56.

47. *Ibid.*

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48. Ibid.
49. Berger, 52, 56; Armitage and Mason, 97–98; Momyer, 309–10.
50. Momyer, 307–8.
51. Ibid., 307.
52. Ibid., 310.
53. Berger, 52–56.
54. Ibid., 151–57.
55. Momyer, 310.
56. Bernard C. Nalty, *Air Power and the Fight for Khe Sanh* (Washington, D.C.: Office of Air Force History, 1974), 58, 28–31, 103–5; Berger, 61–64; Momyer, 310–11.
57. Armitage and Mason, 97–98; Momyer, 307–9.
58. Momyer, 310–11.
59. Berger, 61.
60. Ibid., 61–64.
61. Ibid.
62. Ibid.