

# Linebacker i and linebacker ii on the outcome of the war



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Strategy and Policy based on the following assigned topic:

Question #7:“ In light of how the Paris Peace Accords were reached in 1972-1973, what effect did Linebacker I and Linebacker II have on the outcome of the war?”

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

December 15, 2016

Seminar 20 Moderators:

CDR John Sheehan

Professor Michelle Getchell

To quickly end the Vietnam War and withdraw American troops in an honorable fashion, the Nixon Administration engaged in a strategy of diplomacy and cocurrent military pressure. The focus of the diplomatic track was to negotiate a formal agreement between belligerents. This diplomatic track ultimately resulted in the accord known as the Paris Peace Accords. The military track endeavored to persuade the North to come to the negotiating table in by destroying its will to resist and war-making capabilities through a demonstration of America’s superior air power and

<https://assignbuster.com/linebacker-i-and-linebacker-ii-on-the-outcome-of-the-war/>

unwavering commitment to a free and independent South Vietnam. The series of air raids conducted in support of this goal are known as LINEBACKER I and LINEBACKER II. Both LINEBACKER I and LINEBACKER II had an effect on the war, but both had different results. LINEBACKER I disproved the theory of victory for the North due to their misinterpretation of timing in switching from Phase II to Phase III of Mao's strategy, and understanding of the level of support President Nixon would have from key North Vietnam allies. LINEBACKER II was ultimately successful in bringing all belligerents to the negotiating table, the North by deteriorating the will to fight and further degrading North Vietnamese Warfighting capabilities, and the South due to the waning support of the new U. S. Congress for the war.

In early 1972, the North began to shift military tactics from Phase II guerrilla warfare to a much more conventional Phase III form of according to Mao's three phase strategy. <sup>1</sup> This change is seen in the Easter Offensive that launched on March 30 which was brought about by the success the North enjoyed in Lam Son 719. Because of the South's need for security and poor military execution, and communication, Operation Lam Son 719 collapsed when faced with resistance from the Northern commanders. The campaign was a disasterous for the South, demonstrating their deficiencies and proving that the best units of the South could be defeated by the North. <sup>2</sup> North Vietnam conducted the Easter Offensive to take the initiative and weaken America's commitment to South Vietnam with a significant impact on negotiations producing more favorable terms for them at negotiations. The general feeling was that once troop reduction had reached a certain level the U. S. would have insignificant influence to affect the strategic situation. <sup>3</sup>

<https://assignbuster.com/linebacker-i-and-linebacker-ii-on-the-outcome-of-the-war/>

Prior to this the North Vietnamese were on Stage II of Mao's three-stage plan for war. The decision to initiate the strategic counter-offensive in the Easter Offensive was premature. The South Vietnamese and U. S. still held a position of greater military power and changing phases at that point was counter to the Mao's theories. <sup>4</sup> In this second stage, enemy troop morale should continue to deteriorate, which it was in the case of the U. S. Due to American support. The position of North Vietnam in contrast to South Vietnam had not progressed far enough to give an advantage that would support Phase III, and international support should also have grown for the North Vietnamese. Due to the Easter Offensive and lack of willingness to negotiate on the part of the North Vietnamese the International support was not there. Having fulfilled only two of the three requirements to change phase, it was not the proper time, and the North Vietnamese hurt their war efforts.

As a result of early North Vietnamese action, President Nixon announced the negotiations between North Vietnam and the United States taking place in Paris as well as the concessions the South Vietnamese and United States were willing to concede to. Failure of these negotiations allowed the President to put the blame on North Vietnam for refusing to negotiate a peaceful end to the war. This address would do several things, first put diplomatic pressure on North Vietnam by announcing the negotiations in progress and placing North Vietnam in the position of the faithless party. Second, the speech demonstrated that America had exhausted all diplomatic options, which had already been initiated, and set the stage for military action if North Vietnam continued to insist on continuing inflexibility. Hanoi

rejected the peace terms offered which gave Nixon the legitimacy he needed to turn to military pressure, the very thing that the North had discounted in their calculations.<sup>4</sup>

Another problem facing the North at this time is the increasing warmth of relations between the U. S. and the North's patrons Russia and China. While China was using the U. S. to balance against Russia they were forced to realign forces and took support from North Vietnam. Concurrently, Russia was stepping up détente and viewed China as an enemy.<sup>5</sup> This increasing cooperation with Northern allies isolated the North and presented an opportunity for a series of painful military strikes against the North Vietnamese that would decimate entire infantry units and nearly all of the North's armored vehicles.<sup>5</sup> With waning support from their key allies acquiring replacement equipment was difficult and outright victory in a conventional campaign was all but impossible. President Nixon stated that the U. S. was "going to continue fighting until the Communists agreed to negotiate a fair and honorable peace or until the South Vietnamese were able to defend themselves on their own - whichever came first."<sup>5</sup>

Immediately prior to the 1972 elections, peace talks between Hanoi, Saigon, and Washington began to deteriorate. As a result, President Nixon authorized a follow on air campaign against North Vietnam that would be called LINEBACKER II. The objective of LINEBACKER II differed from LINEBACKER I in that it was intended to destroy Hanoi's will to fight, and demonstrate America's commitment to South Vietnam's independence after the withdrawal of American troops. Many of the LINEBACKER I targets were

<https://assignbuster.com/linebacker-i-and-linebacker-ii-on-the-outcome-of-the-war/>

attacked again during LINEBACKER II. However; LINEBACKER II had a purpose other than interdicting Northern forces. Military commanders wanted the bombers to cause distress to the civilian population in an effort to dissuade them from committing to the fighting on the side of the North while avoiding civilian casualties. To degrade North Vietnamese will to fight, U. S. leadership wanted “ the people of Hanoi to hear the bombs.” <sup>6</sup> The ability of a nation to fight is military force and the will of the people. In the case of North Vietnam the military force had been significantly reduced and that left the will of the people to force settlement.

With congressional support waning, North Vietnam adjusted its actions to delay negotiations until after the newly elected Congress was sworn in, believing that support to continue the war in Vietnam would wane. Nixon thought the only way to break the North’s inflexibility and bring them back to the negotiating table was to raise the cost of their reluctance in negotiation. The President commented, “ We have now reached the point where only the strongest action would have any effect in convincing Hanoi that negotiating a fair settlement with us was a better option for them than continuing the war.” <sup>7</sup>

The strongest show of force in this case was the use of the B-52 Stratofortress. This decision was the optimal choice for attacking the will of the populace. President Nixon and his advisers desired to inflict maximum psychological impact on the North Vietnamese, supporting the South and reducing the cost to the U. S. in American lives. <sup>8</sup> The B-52 could carry a massive conventional payload, was capable of carrying nuclear weapons

which sent a message in itself, and had all-weather capabilities making it a perfect tool to deliver a psychological blow to the enemy. The B-52 could attack at altitudes of over 30, 000 feet, rendering it impossible to be seen or heard by North Vietnamese troops on the ground allowing for attacks that happened without warning. The suddenness of the attacks along with their intensity had a telling effect. Recalling personal experience with LINEBACKER II's bombing campaign one Viet Cong member said, "The first four times I experienced a B-52 attack it seemed, as I strained to press myself into the bunker floor, that I had been caught in the Apocalypse. The terror was complete. One lost control of bodily functions as the mind screams incomprehensible orders to get out." <sup>9</sup>

During the LINEBACKER II operation, military leaders had authority to use air power to end the war effectively and the results were apparent. The North's transportation network was decimated. Aircraft attacked and destroyed storage warehouses, electric power generating facilities cutting their capacity by three-quarters, and petroleum facilities reducing that capability by one-fourth. <sup>10</sup> LINEBACKER II inflicted significant damage to North Vietnam's war-making capability, but more importantly accomplished its primary purpose of unsettling the civilian population. As a result of LINEBACKER II, the belligerents came back to the bargaining table after eleven days of intensive bombing. The scale and success of the operation persuaded the North to accept terms that included some of Thieu's newly added provisions. Congressional outcry over the scale of LINEBACKER II caused the South to realize that support for the war might be running out, making this an opportune time to accept peace and retain as much as

<https://assignbuster.com/linebacker-i-and-linebacker-ii-on-the-outcome-of-the-war/>

possible ensuring survival. <sup>11</sup> Linebacker I was politically and practically a remarkable success. As a result of the bombs dropped during the campaign, the North had a shift in thought. For the first time in the war the U. S. had used air power in a way that influenced the will of the North to continue the fight. The North had been convinced that the war was becoming too costly for them.

Some would argue that the North Vietnamese theory of victory was not disproven and they were not forced to go to the negotiating table. Their theory of victory was only put on hold by the actions of LINEBACKER and the U. S. was never in a position to win. The results LINEBACKER II did not force the North to the negotiating table but enabled them to transition back to Phase II, along with the withdrawal of U. S. forces and lack of support to the South ultimately enabled them to succeed in their bid to unite the Vietnamese people.

The LINEBACKER I operation had left the North's conventional forces decimated. <sup>10</sup> The North had unsuccessfully tried persecuting the war by conventional means but U. S. air power had proven its worth and destroyed the majority of Northern troops and armored vehicles. <sup>11</sup> Though costly to the North, the theory of victory through conventional means was not disproven, only delayed. To the conventional adversary this would have led to a cessation of hostilities due to lack of ability to continue the fight, but one of the strengths of the North was in following the theories of Mao. These theories garnered the support from the local populace. The North Vietnamese forces understood that Vietnamese peasants had endured



hundreds of years of oppression and rule.<sup>12</sup> The South's treatment of the peasants was similar to outside forces which had oppressed them with little attempt to understand them. In contrast the North Vietnamese forces dutifully followed Mao's teachings, politely asking for supply and helping work for their repayment as well as proclaiming their belief in land reform, equality and governmental reform.<sup>13</sup>

The South by contrast was rife with corruption, inefficiency, and greed often setting themselves above the peasantry stealing supply and food. In this way the South Vietnamese were their own worst enemy. Their lack of support to the peasants drove them to the side of the North for protection against the unjust rule of the state. This led to "not the hills menacing the villages, hills were the villages."<sup>13</sup>

The Cause of the North had become an ideal that the peasantry had bought in to and they had become the insurgents who would continue to fight for their cause, overthrow of the local elites, good treatment and increased living standards enjoyed by the peasants through the efforts of the North. This dynamic created a situation in which it was difficult to tell who was the enemy and who was the villager. The U. S. was never in the position to win a lasting peace in this situation for several reasons. We lacked an understanding of the people and what they desired.<sup>14</sup> Without the proper understanding of the desires of the people the U. S. could try to secure villages, give out aid and try to reinforce the government, but the government was a primary reason for the insurgency. More importantly, the U. S. was viewed as an unwanted foreign presence. Since the Vietnamese

<https://assignbuster.com/linebacker-i-and-linebacker-ii-on-the-outcome-of-the-war/>

had fought against and suffered foreign oppression for so long there was initial distrust and with our self imposed lack of cultural awareness we would not be able to destroy the idea that was the root cause of the war.

LINEBACKER II did not force the belligerents to the negotiating table, it just provided the North with the opportunity to regroup revert to Phase II and wait for the U. S. to withdraw its forces leaving the North in a more advantageous position from which to rebuild for the next Phase III and the reunification of the Vietnamese people that they desired.

The misinterpretation of their success in Lam Son 719 led the north to the Easter Offensive and as a result cost them a good deal of men and equipment. The only thing that they had left was the peasant population which it enjoyed great support from. <sup>14</sup> Realizing their tenuous position the North signaled that it wished to resume peace negotiations and as a result the LINEBACKER II raids immediately ceased. In the absence of these continued the attacks the North would secure a political victory at the peace table by keeping Northern forces in the South. <sup>15</sup> During this time they would be able to rebuild and strengthen their forces and would, in time, translate this into a full-scale military conquest of South Vietnam upon their transition back to Phase III.

Not long after the end of Linebacker II, the U. S. withdrew its forces from the war in Southeast Asia and returned home. Two years later the North, knowing that it no longer faced any realistic threat of another Linebacker II, invaded South Vietnam across a broad front. <sup>16</sup> The Communist forces of the North entered Saigon on April 30, 1975, and unified the two Vietnams under <https://assignbuster.com/linebacker-i-and-linebacker-ii-on-the-outcome-of-the-war/>

one government. A full application of airpower in a Linebacker could have achieved military victory, prevented the long and costly U. S. involvement and saved South Vietnam as a nation. While the North had went to the table to negotiate, it was to buy time and gain an advantageous position, not in good faith.

1 Sun Tzu. *The Art of War* . Translated by Samuel B. Griffith. Oxford: Oxford University Press, (1980), III 5.

2 Carl von Clausewitz. *On War* : Edited and translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret. Princeton. Princeton University Press, (1976), 618.

3 Ibid., 186.

4 Kevin McCranie. *The War at Sea* .(presentation, Strategy and War Course, Naval War College, Newport, RI, 14 December 2016).

5 Paul M Kennedy. *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery* . New York. Humanity Books, (1976), 242.

6 Ibid. 245

7 Kevin McCranie. *The War at Sea* .(presentation, Strategy and War Course, Naval War College, Newport, RI, 14 December 2016).

8 Paul M Kennedy. *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery* . New York. Humanity Books, (1976), 245

.

9 Ibid. 248

<sup>1 0</sup> Kevin McCranie. *The War at Sea* .(presentation, Strategy and War Course, Naval War College, Newport, RI, 14 December 2016).), 147.

<sup>1</sup> Elliot A. Cohen and John Gooch. *Military Misfortunes: The Anatomy of Failure in War*. New York. Free Press, (1990), 134.

<sup>1 2</sup> Ibid. 134.

<sup>3</sup> Carl von Clausewitz. *On War* : Edited and translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret. Princeton. Princeton University Press, (1976), 177.

<sup>4</sup> Elliot A. Cohen and John Gooch. *Military Misfortunes: The Anatomy of Failure in War*. New York. Free Press, (1990), 136.

<sup>5</sup> Admiral von Holtzendorf. *German History in Documents and Images* . Selected Readings. Naval War College, Newport, RI, (2016), 2.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 3.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 4.