

# How effective was the american use of strategic airpower during the vietnam war?

[War](#), [Vietnam War](#)



How effective was the American use of strategic airpower during the Vietnam War?

Since strategic bombers appeared as a class of air power, they have established a reputation as the biggest danger to vital enemy infrastructure and a big threat to the military potential of any country. ' The Vietnam war ' was a war that the United States had to enter in order to contain the spread of communism', and prevent the so-called ' domino theory'.[1]Initially, the American intent was to stop Hanoi plans with the use of strategic air power but it became an attempt to avoid a humiliating defeat. In order to argue how effective, the American use of strategic airpower was this essay will examine examples of the use of strategic air power during the Vietnam war. Firstly, this essay will discuss a brief background, so that one may understand the strategy of each side and further arguments. Next the essay will consider how the North Vietnamese guerilla warfare and support from allies influenced American limited success during operation Rolling Thunder. The second point will analyse how Linebacker 1 was conducted strategically and its influence on the North Vietnam. Finally, this essay will look at the effectiveness of the very short but intensive strategic operation Linebacker 2. To conclude the essay will demonstrate that although America can be considered to have success in the later operations that overall the use of strategic airpower during the Vietnam war was ineffective. To answer the question, firstly it is important to understand the features of the strategy of each side. As Clausewitz said, to achieve political objective it is vital to understand the kind of war one is fighting.[2]

To examine the topic, it is necessary to know what the aim was for both sides and what power opponents had at the beginning of the war. It was clear that America was the leading world country, which had a reputation as one the best country in terms of armed forces and their use. Initially there were different views on coercion of Vietnam with use of strategic air power, military leaders thought that the air campaign should be rapid and unrestricted to achieve political and military aims, civilian advisors of US president Johnson intended to use small ground offence and interdict the North using mainly air power. Also, to understand what the US tried to achieve, it is important to know the definition of the word `coerce`. Coerce is 'the persuade (an unwilling person) to do something by using force or threats'.[3]North Vietnam in its turn was a poor third world country, their force was the North Vietnamese army (NVA), supported by Viet Cong (VC) forces. It is necessarily to know that The Viet Cong pose as local population making them hard to distinguish and fight. Moreover, the VC and NVA were strongly dependent on aid from communist allies such as China or the Soviet Union.[4]North Vietnam was highly motivated, and tried to liberate two separated parts of Vietnam in a single move, communism wasn't the main idea for Northern authorities. However, communist ideology was a tool to get relationships with allies which would support the North throughout the war.

To begin the effective employment of strategic air power in Vietnam during operation Rolling Thunder, conducted from March 1965 to November 1968, will be examined. US strategy consisted of supporting South Vietnam by coercion of the North to stop the flow of insurgents to the South and force

Hanoi to start peace negotiations.[5]However, Rolling Thunder was faced with considerable problems due to Vietnamese guerilla warfare. Trained for battle on European terrain, the US found themselves involved in a war with guerillas in Asia.[6]First, it failed to halt the insurgency campaign and reduce their capacity to fight in South Vietnam. Vietnamese trails, used to send insurgents and supplies to South. These trails were robust, resilient and difficult to hit, also they could be easily moved or rebuilt during the war. [7]The needs of insurgents were little, VC mostly used resources from local sources inside South Vietnam. The insurgents required 200 tons of supplies to be sustained per day however only one quarter of these were supplied from external sources.[8]Furthermore, the total amount of daily supply of all guerillas was incomparably smaller than amount of supply for one US army division.[9]There is no doubt that the movement between North and South Vietnam became more dangerous, but the North Vietnamese adapted a transport system to provide essential supplies.[10]The next failure was the US failed to deny the North Vietnamese its war making economy and industry. The US president Johnson tightly controlled target selection during the operation, he avoided aggressive bombing because he feared it will escalate conflict with China and the Soviet Union.[11]These counties were providing heavy aid for the North throughout the war. Also, the US took a few pauses in bombing, which allowed North Vietnam to rapidly repair damaged facilities and reconstruct what was destroyed. During the operation, Americans destroyed 65% of oil storage capacity, 59% of power plants, 55% of major bridges but the cost of the campaign was high.[12]For example, in 1966 the cost of \$1 damage in Vietnam was more than \$8 for the US, an

increase of 28 percent in less than one year.[13]The resupply and guerilla warfare made the operation less effective. As a consequence, American operation “ Rolling Thunder” didn’t succeed in achieving its main aims. It was especially important for Americans to understand the principle of guerilla war, but they did not and as a result bombing wasn’t effective as a counterinsurgency and coercion campaign.

This section will talk about the effectiveness of operation Linebacker 1, conducted from May to October 1972. In 1969, when Richard Nixon became the president of the US, he started to use airpower more aggressively to end the American involvement in the war. At that time both North Vietnam and America wanted to finish the US campaign in Vietnam, even when the US understood that South Vietnam will not survive after its withdraw.[14]In 1972, Vietnam launched the conventional offence called Easter offence, this was a move from guerilla warfare to conventional. In response to the Easter offence, the US launched Linebacker 1, to halt the Vietnamese offence and bring them to negotiation. However, the US did not try to rescue captured territory. America tried to leave because there was growing pressure from the US population to end the war quickly. That was a great chance for Americans because unlike guerilla warfare, conventional strategy was highly vulnerable to interdiction by attacks from air.[15]The supply flow increased significantly from the North to South. Requests in supplement of ammunitions, food and oil for large units of the NVA was incomparably high. In terms of logistics it was much harder to supply regular forces with increased needs and therefore the logistical chain was a great target and

could be easily and effectively attacked.[16]The US tried to destroy logistics, reduce the ability of conducting the war and sustain manpower in fighting conditions to halt the offence. As a result of this 6 month operation, import into North Vietnam decreased by 80 percent. Import from China by railways reduced from 160, 000 tons to 30, 000 and mining of Haiphong port cut sea imports from 250, 000 tons to a trickle.[17]Vietnam became a victim of effective an interdiction campaign. Linebacker 1 successfully halted the Easter offence and brought Hanoi to the negotiation table. However, these agreements were not signed. Therefore, the US made a last effort to finish this war. Linebacker 1 demonstrated effective strategic air power.

Finally, the US conducted the last operation called Linebacker 2, from the 18 to 30 December, the so-called ' Christmas bombing'. This operation had the same strategic intention as Linebacker 1, but was conducted differently. Linebacker 2 moved from interdiction to intermediation.[18]When the peace agreement was not signed after 6 months of Linebacker, Linebacker 2 was launched. The plan was to use maximum force in minimal time.[19]It was the heaviest bombing in the Hanoi-Haiphong region, in 11 days more than two hundred B-52s dropped 15 thousand bombs.[20]President Nixon wanted aggressive force to intimidate the North authorities[21]. Targets were fuel lines, bridges, railyards, electricity plants, communication lines and military facilities near Hanoi and Haiphong. The Americans caused significant damage to these. There was a hundreds cuts in rail lines, almost two hundred storage facilities were destroyed and the electric generating capacity was drastically reduced.[22]The US conducted bombing mostly in

night time and the individuals that did not evacuate from Hanoi received only two hours of sleep due to bombing. This caused decline of morale within local population.[23]It was very hard task for air defense to stop the bombing raid, because of high intensity air attacks, the SAM supply was exhausted by the 29<sup>th</sup> of December, making further defense impossible[24]. In result of the operation Hanoi was forced to peace negotiations. The scale of Linebacker 2 was probably beyond anything expected by the North, enemy morale suffered.[25]Linebacker 2 was proved as effective and the North signed the Paris accords, this began a gradual decline of US forces in Vietnam.[26]The war for the US was close to its end.

This essay has reviewed the effectiveness of American coercive strategic air power against North Vietnam in 1960's-1970's. This can be seen in the results and achievement of strategic air power tasks by the US. The US may have been able to gain more from these bombings if they clearly understood Vietnamese strategy during the war, however the changing of strategy by Vietnam to conventional warfare in the 1970's and its large scale offence played into US hands. Rolling Thunder showed that strategic bombing is not effective against an enemy who uses guerilla strategy, because guerilla war is not susceptible to bombing. It does not require a lot of resources, which Vietnam did not have in the South. Attempts to bomb industrial and economical resources in North Vietnam were ineffective because Communists received these resources from allies, which allowed them to have the necessary recourses and reestablish any that been destroyed. But, Americans only succeeded in achieving their goals during Linebacker

operations because of the change in strategy to conventional warfare by Vietnam. To sustain regular forces, major resources were needed and, by destroying these, America halted the Easter offence and pushed the North to a peace negotiation. However, the agreement was not signed and US made a final effort. Linebacker 2 achieved its aim and the US had an opportunity to leave the war. To conclude, the early phases of the Vietnam war saw ineffective strategic air power from the US, the US failed to implement conventional warfare in an unconventional war zone. However, the later stages of the war, Linebacker 1 and 2, are examples of effective use of strategic air power by the US.

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[1]Wiest (2002), p. 8

[2]Clausewitz (1976), p. 80

[3]Concise Oxford dictionary (2006), p. 277.

[4]Wiest (2002), p. 19.

[5]Pape (1996), p. 175.

[6]Wiest (2002), p. 8.

[7]Ledwidge (2018), p. 118.

[8]Estimates of the Infiltration of Supplies and Personnel to North Vietnam (1967), p. 3

<https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP70S00385R000200190030-7.pdf>.

[9]Pape (1996), p. 192.

[10]Evaluation of the Effects of Bombing on Infiltration (1967), p. 6

<https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP78T02095R000900070021-0.pdf>.

[11]Clodfeter (2006), p. 118

[12]Ibid, p. 134.

[13]The effectiveness of the Rolling Thunder Program in North Vietnam 01. 01. 1966-30. 09. 1966 (1966), p. 9

<https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP78T02095R000900070034-6.pdf>.

[14]Wiest (2002), p. 56.

[15]Pape (1996), p. 195.

[16]Ledwidge (2018), p. 119.

[17]Clodfeter (2006), p. 167.

[18]Tompson (2005), p. 286.

[19]Clodfelter (2006), p. 184.

[20]Thompson (2005), p. 255.

[21]Olsen (2010), p. 126.

[22]Clodfelter (2006), p. 194.

[23]Ibid, p. 195.

[24]Ibid, p. 198.

[25]Thompson (2005), p. 277.

[26]Wiest (2002), p. 57.