

Research paper on operation rolling thunder: failure through mismanagement and im...

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The United States has a proud tradition of military accomplishment and support. Federal holidays like Memorial Day and Veterans Day celebrate the men and women who have fought and died in battle for American freedom. Historians have coined terms like the “ Great War,” and the “ Good War,” to describe the proud feelings of America’s participation in modern wars. After World War II, the country experienced an unprecedented economic growth and increased political power throughout the world, leading some to label the decades after World War II “ the American half-century.” However, the memories of one American war stand in stark contrast to the veneration and pride that Americans take in celebrating soldiers and war—the Vietnam War. The Vietnam War, waged primarily in the 1960s, occurred at a time of change and dissent in American domestic culture and politics. The 1960s saw the most significant battles and gains in the Modern Civil Rights Movement, an increase in women’s rights and equality, and a growing distrust of political leaders and government. The war seemed to tie these issues together and add the dimensions of international, Cold War tension and a high death rate of both American soldiers and Vietnamese citizens. Waged over the course of four presidential administrations that each experienced varying degrees of failure, the Vietnam War became America’s longest sustained war to that point in time. The dissent and distrust created as a result of this war has had a lasting effect on domestic politics and military procedure more so than any other war of the 20th century. One of the most spectacular failures of the Vietnam War was Operation Rolling Thunder, an operation whose mismanagement and faulty implementation provided American military and government officials important lessons for

how not to wage war.

Operation Rolling Thunder was the gradual and sustained air bombing of high value targets in and against North Vietnam. The operation officially began in March of 1965 and lasted until November of 1968. It was planned in early February of 1965 under President Lyndon Johnson who ordered a plan for air strikes against North Vietnamese targets. This air campaign came as a response to several attacks by North Vietnamese soldiers on American military bases in Pleiku and Qui Nhon that killed more than 30 American soldiers as well as the attack on two American ships in the Gulf of Tonkin. While evidence and testimony released later in the 1970s raises questions about the legitimacy of the attacks on the American ships in the Gulf of Tonkin, the attacks on military bases in South Vietnam were indisputable and Johnson felt they required a response. He stated, " Doing nothing was more dangerous than doing something." Although only originally scheduled to last eight weeks until April of 1965, Rolling Thunder continued until November of 1968. The operation marked the first sustained involvement of American forces in Vietnam and was the point at which the United States became irrevocably involved in the Vietnam War.

Operation Rolling Thunder had four main objectives: to boost the morale of South Vietnam and demonstrate the American commitment to the cause of an independent and noncommunist government in South Vietnam, to persuade North Vietnam to halt their support of communist forces within South Vietnam, to destroy the North Vietnamese infrastructure to make it more difficult for them to wage war, and to stop the flow of soldiers and materials into South Vietnam. The key component in Operation Rolling

Thunder was the emphasis on the gradual escalation of air strikes. Military commanders originally presented President Johnson with a plan that called for the quick destruction of 94 high value targets such as bridges and supply stores in order to cripple the North Vietnamese forces. President Johnson rejected this plan because he wanted to maintain flexibility to negotiate peace with the North Vietnamese. He felt that he could demonstrate the power of the United States with a few initial strikes and then be in a stronger position to negotiate with North Vietnamese leaders. However, he underestimated the North Vietnamese resolve and the initial air strikes did not dissuade them from continuing their assault on both South Vietnamese and American targets.

The plan for air strikes originated with both the Johnson administration and the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Together, this group of men felt that bombing North Vietnamese targets could produce the desired result of dissuading North Vietnam from continuing its support of communist forces attempting to overthrow the government in South Vietnam. They reasoned that a small nation like North Vietnam could not withstand constant air strikes and still survive and that they would quickly relent and cease their assault against South Vietnam. However, when the time came to implement the air strikes, Johnson opted for a smaller initial bombing campaign and gradual approach rather than the aggressive and overwhelming campaign that had been discussed by government and military leaders.

Johnson's order for gradual air strikes was met with dissent from both the State Department and the Defense Department because, in the minds of officials from those departments, the gradual increase approach to air raids

did not provide a viable solution for winning the war. Advisors to Johnson recommended the use of overwhelming force as a first step. Dissent against a gradual approach was voiced by both military and government leaders in meetings with the President concerning Vietnam. In *At the Water's Edge: American Politics and the Vietnam War*, Melvin Small describes how those who voiced their opposition to Johnson's plan, like Senator and Asian expert Mike Mansfield, were "frozen out" of any successive conversations concerning policy on Vietnam. Small also asserts that the timing of the operation had much to do with political considerations. The Gulf of Tonkin attacks occurred in August of 1964 however with an election less than three months away, Small explains that Johnson did not want to implement any major military policy that might affect his chances of reelection. He therefore waited to begin the air strikes until after he had won reelection (by a large margin) and was politically safe from any pushback from the American public. Small asserts that these types of political considerations drove policy decisions throughout the Vietnam War which caused it to be longer and bloodier than needed. Political jockeying also stifled any dissent from advisors soon after they witnessed how Johnson treated those who disagreed with him.

Military officials were also against the gradual increase of air strikes; several more hawkish commanders argued heavily for the use of atomic weapons against North Vietnam which they asserted would quickly and decisively end the conflict. In *American Tragedy: Kennedy, Johnson, and the Origins of the Vietnam War*, David Kaiser focuses on the disconnect between military and government officials concerning how the war was planned and waged. He

explains how, despite Johnson's continued insistence to the contrary, military commanders were sure that Johnson would eventually agree to use nuclear weapons against the North Vietnamese as part of the air strike campaign. This sense of false positivity affected their actions as the men in charge of the war. Kaiser explains that soon after the operation began, air force commanders discovered that the "stocks of conventional bombs were insufficient for the Rolling Thunder operation—yet more evidence that the Air Force had assumed that any major strategic bombing campaign would use nuclear weapons." Like the political considerations, military assumptions, opposition to policy, and miscommunication with government leaders lengthened the war.

However, once the operation was approved, military commanders had no choice but to implement the orders they were given and begin bombing North Vietnamese targets. United States Air Force and Vietnam Air Force pilots dropped the first bombs in Operation Rolling Thunder on an ammunition depot and a naval base on March 2, 1965. Soon after the first wave of strikes began, the campaign was extended at the behest of military commanders from eight weeks to three months. The main targets of the air strikes were military and industrial strongholds throughout North Vietnam—places that if destroyed would hamper the ability of North Vietnamese to continue to wage the war. The air strikes targeted bridges, storage facilities, military bases (both formal and informal); the only places considered off-limits for bombing were the cities of Hanoi and Haiphong as well as a 10 mile "buffer zone" on the border of China.

The "buffer zone" between China and Vietnam presents another interesting

factor that President Johnson had to consider during Operation Rolling Thunder. His approach of gradual increase was due in part to his belief that after witnessing the power of the American military, that North Vietnam would be willing to negotiate. However, he also had to walk a fine line between showing assertiveness and not provoking China or the Soviet Union to become involved in the conflict. Often lost in the disaster of the Vietnam War is the larger context of the Cold War. The Cold War struggle centered on the battle against the spread of communism into Europe and Asia. Initially, the United States was most worried about the Soviet Union promoting the spread of Communism in Europe, but after the Chinese government fell to communists forces in YEAR, the United States then begin focusing on stopping communism from spreading throughout Asia. Presidents Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon all committed American forces to help the South Vietnamese for the sole reason of preventing it from falling under communist control. The possibility of the Soviet Union or China helping the North Vietnamese win the conflict and take over South Vietnam always existed. If either nation had chosen to lend their support to North Vietnam, the conflict could have led to another world-wide war, an outcome that American presidents strove to avoid at all costs. Johnson therefore opted for a gradual approach that would at once send the North Vietnamese a message but would also not provoke either the Soviet Union or China into becoming involved in the conflict.

However Johnson's "strong message" did not work. The air strikes were spread out too "temporally and geographically" to be affective and the "piecemeal pattern of air strikes lacked any decisive effect on North Vietnam."

The operation also suffered because it was not spearheaded by one overriding command force, but instead controlled by several different entities who did not coordinate with each other. The 7th Fleet at Yankee Station in the Gulf of Tonkin were responsible for all Navy and Marines missions while the Seventh Air Force Headquarters was responsible for operations flown inside of North Vietnam. Finally, General William Westmorland was in charge of bombing in the demilitarized zone. The lack of unified military instruction coupled with the gradual approach hampered the efforts of Rolling Thunder from the operation's inception.

Military historian Edward J. Marolda asserts that the "abysmal management of the operation by President Lyndon Johnson's administration doomed" Operation Rolling Thunder from the start. The main objectives of the operations—to convince the North Vietnamese to end their direction of communist forces in South Vietnam and therefore the war, and to cut off supplies from their forces—failed miserably due to mismanagement and inadequate implementation of the air strikes. This failure is illustrated in by Kaiser who describes a meeting between President Johnson, the Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff on April 8, 1965, about a month after the air strikes had begun. In this meeting, Joint Chief General McConnell reported that despite dropping 432 bombs, the air strikes had failed to destroy a strategically important bridge. Failures like this pervaded Operation Rolling Thunder throughout the three and a half year sustained campaign. Despite these types of failures, Johnson insisted on continuing the campaign, gradually increasing the number of bombs dropped on North Vietnamese targets until, by the end of the 1965, the United States

was dropping 4, 000 bombs a month.

Most importantly, it soon became clear to military leaders and the President's government advisors that an air campaign alone, especially one implemented gradually and unevenly, could not win the war in Vietnam. Contrary to earlier belief, North Vietnam withstood the sustained air strikes against their supplies stores and bases and continued to fight. In addition, because the air strikes only sought to destroy targets and not occupy any territory, soldiers were needed in the country to fight North Vietnamese ground forces. The need for soldiers, which increased exponentially as the war progressed, led to almost 60, 000 American soldiers' deaths and thousands more wounded during the Vietnam War. Like the air campaign, the ground assault was badly mismanaged by both government officials and military commanders.

On a purely strategic level, Operation Rolling Thunder failed because it did not achieve its stated goal of forcing the North Vietnamese to negotiate. Instead, the Vietnam War waged on for almost five years after the end of the air strike campaign. Stephen Wilson asserts that another reason Operation Rolling Thunder failed was because the United States grossly misunderstood the methods through which the North Vietnamese waged war. He describes the "unconventional methods" through which the North Vietnamese fought and asserts that the areas targeted by the air strikes were not vital to North Vietnamese operations and therefore their destruction did not hinder the North Vietnamese efforts.

While the operation itself is widely considered a complete disaster, several important lessons were learned by both military and government officials.

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Stephen Wilson asserts that “ the ghosts left over from the Vietnam War have haunted our military and shaped its educational and training philosophies.” During the planning and implementation of the operation, the Navy discovered several “ deficiencies in its tactics, aircraft, weapons, and equipment.” For example, Marolda explains that:

Low-level bombing attacks by multiplane " Alpha Strikes" produced heavy losses of men and machines; World War II- and Korean War-era " iron bombs" lacked precision; older A-4 Skyhawks and propeller-driven A-1 Skyraiders proved vulnerable in the lethal skies of North Vietnam; and the Fleet's fighter arm registered an unacceptable 2-to-1 win-loss ratio. Even before the end of Rolling Thunder on 31 October 1968, the naval service had begun to address these and other problems.

In addition, government officials and military commanders alike have remained vigilant against getting embroiled in another long, drawn-out war like Vietnam. The lessons of Vietnam guided American policy in 1991 during Operation Desert Storm when United States military officials took the lessons learned from Operation Rolling Thunder and the Vietnam War and implemented a policy of “ Shock and Awe.” This policy, officially known as Rapid Dominance, utilizes the full and impressive strength of the United States military and proclaims that during any conflict that the United States finds itself in, it will apply that overwhelming force to achieve concrete goals as quickly and efficiently as possible. This policy of shock and awe produced undeniable success during Operation Desert Storm and guided military policy for the next decade until the Iraqi and Afghanistan Wars. While the legacies of those wars are still being debated, their long, drawn-out nature are

reminiscent of the Vietnam War. However, regardless of the historical legacy of America's latest wars, the Vietnam War, and especially Operation Rolling Thunder, stand as military and government failures in American history. The gradual approach, unequal implementation and mismanagement at all levels not only produced a blueprint for how not to conduct a war, but also caused an untold number of needless military and civilian deaths.

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