

What does the Vietnam War tell air power theorists and strategists about the viability of coercive air power as a strategic tool?

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Abstract. In modern wars and conflicts, coercive air power has been commonly utilised by states in order to attack their adversaries. The fact that the United States conducted this strategic air offensive with four air bombing campaigns known as Rolling Thunder, Freedom Train, Linebacker I, and Linebacker II against North Vietnam during the Vietnam War. American air power theorists and strategists point out two latter had effective goals because they used denial strategy attacking military targets. Conversely, many thinkers assert that none of them were successful. The paper examines clearly this by analysing the impacts of these air attacks on the United States and North Vietnam. Ultimately, the Vietnam War tells air power strategists that the United States did not get the main purposes which were to compel the North to support the insurgency in the South and destroy its civilian morale. On the contrary, North Vietnam achieved the primary goal that its adversary had to withdraw all military and civil personnel out of South Vietnam and the North won this war in April 1975.

Since World War II, coercive air power has been considered as a crucial instrument which 'states may still conduct strategic air offensives against their adversaries' [1, p.103]. In the Vietnam War, it is no doubt that the United States utilised coercive theory in order to attack North Vietnam, 'for the purpose of altering Hanoi's behaviour on the battlefield and position at the negotiating table'. Additionally, there are a number of debates and controversies which analyse and argue 'when coercion will succeed or fail' [1, p.103]. The author, Pape,

found that the success of coercion theory in general, of the Vietnam War in particular results from the use of air power to exploit the opponent's military vulnerabilities, not civilian vulnerabilities [1, p.104]. On the contrary, other researchers criticise those air attacks failed completely because they did not coerce North Vietnam to halt the infiltration of men and supplies into South Vietnam [2-4]. Furthermore, after the final air force strike known as Linebacker II in 1973, Hanoi achieved the primary goal that the United States had to withdraw all military and civil personnel out of South Vietnam in accordance with the Paris Accords. This leads to the fact that the

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South Vietnamese Government collapsed and North Vietnam ultimately won this war in April 1975.

The aim of the paper is to respond to the question: what does the Vietnam War tell air power theorists and strategists about the viability of coercive air power as a strategic tool? The paper will be divided into three sections. In section one, a brief overview of coercion theory is going to be considered. Subsequently, the coercion theory which was applied in four air force campaigns throughout the Vietnam War will be presented in section two. In the last section, the impacts of these air attacks on the United States and the Northern Vietnamese are going to be analysed.

1. A brief overview of coercion theory

Firstly, it is necessary to note that in the ordinary term 'coercion' refers to 'the use of threats or orders to make some one do something that do not want to do'⁽¹⁾. In the military term, it is 'efforts to change the behaviour of a state by manipulating costs and benefits' [1, p.106]. Therefore, the coercion strategy of air power theory means the assailant typically seeks to compel reduction of political aims, agreement to a cease-fire, withdrawal of forces, or even surrender, by states that retain the capacity for continued military operations. According to Pape, there are four basic strategies of coercive air power such as: punishment, denial, risk, and decapitation [5, p.30].

1.1. Punishment strategy

This strategy concentrates on the use of air force to attack directly the civilian targets of an adversary so as to break 'the population's morale or to foment an uprising against the opposing government' [5, p.30]. The strategy was supported by Giulio Douhet, Hugh Trenchard, and William "Billy" Mitchell. Furthermore, these authors address that it can be utilised to destroy the enemy's will to fight. They assert that demolishing 'an enemy's war-making capability through attacks on its economic 'vital centers' would disrupt its social fabric and lead to a collapse of moral' [6, p.2].

1.2. Denial strategy

The second strategy focuses on not civilian vulnerability, but military vulnerability. The goal of the strategy is to neutralise the enemy's military potential before it can be brought to bear on the battlefield [1, p.111].

1.3. Risk strategy

Risk strategy includes utilisation of air force so as to achieve the level of risk faced by an adversary, thus attempting to leverage an adversary's fear of 'future costs in order to coerce action in the present'. This strategy is the model of Thomas Schelling. Also, Abbot [5, p.31] criticises that it 'focuses almost solely on integration with a punishment strategy' which Pape has demonstrated it is a poor choice of coercive strategy because he believes it will fail to coerce an adversary into action.

1.4. Decapitation strategy

John Warden is the author of this strategy who advocates the use of air force against key leadership and command and control targets, thereby achieving 'paralysis' of a target's decision making without resort to the massive force requirements of more traditional denial or

⁽¹⁾ *Longman Dictionary of contemporary English* (new edition), Director, Della Summer). Harlow: Longman, c2003. XVII: p.289.

punishment strategies (Warden 1992 cited in [5, p.32]).

With relating to these strategies of coercive air power theory, Pape also points out 'coercion through civilian vulnerability is unlikely to succeed....Conversely, coercion through military vulnerability is sometimes possible, because there is often a close relationship between the battlefield and the home front' [1, p.112]. Moreover, he found that 'denial strategy less effective a guerrilla strategy than a conventional, or mechanised, war strategy' [5, p.38]. He tested these hypotheses in a particular case study: the Vietnam War. Throughout the war, the United States applied mainly two strategies: punishment and denial strategy. As a result, the author has analysed the failure or success of four coercive air campaigns which the United States employed to attack the Northern Vietnamese. These air strikes are going to be presented clearly in the next section.

2. Four air attack campaigns in the Vietnam War

In the Vietnam War, from 1965 to 1973 the United States applied the theory of airpower coercion with four air bombing campaigns known as Rolling Thunder, Freedom Train, Linebacker I, and Linebacker II. As considered briefly above, the two former strikes failed because they aimed at civilian vulnerability. On the contrary, the two latter attacks destroyed military targets so they were successful. However, it is the fact that this is not correct fully. Hence, they are going to be analysed respectively.

2.1. Rolling Thunder and Freedom Campaigns

With regard to the former, after twenty-three Americans were attacked and killed in Quy Nhon at the beginning of February 1965, President of United States, Lyndon Johnson officially ordered the sustained air campaign known as "Rolling Thunder" on 13 February [6, p.59]. Some officials, particular Maxwell Taylor⁽²⁾ advocated this strike as an important strategy in order to break the North Vietnamese will to support the insurgency; to boost South Vietnamese morale; and to limit North Vietnam's physical capability to support the Southern insurgencies [6, p.59]. Furthermore, Pape analysed that the main aim of Rolling Thunder 'was intended to coerce the North into stopping infiltration of men and supplied into the South and into negotiating a peace settlement' [1, p.113].

Rolling Thunder was implemented significantly in four phases during three years (from 1965 to 1968). The American air force pounded North Vietnam with hundreds of thousands of bombs aiming at a list of ninety-four targets which General Curtis LeMay⁽³⁾ planned. He stated that had all targets been attacked we would have bombed the North Vietnamese "back into the Stone Age" (LeMay 1965 cited in Milne [7, p.184] and Clodfelter [6, p.77]. Consequently, after those phases 'nearly all of North Vietnam's industrial war potential had been destroyed' [Dyke: 27 cited in Pape [1, p.123]. Although all industrial and economic targets were demolished significantly, the air campaign failed to achieve the main goal. In fact, Hanoi continued to funnel men and material southward and North Vietnam still survived [1, p.65]. In response to the failure of Rolling Thunder, Pape [1, p.124] has explained that it failed because none of the

⁽²⁾ Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, then Ambassador to South Vietnam.

⁽³⁾ Head of a Pentagon Planning Study.

strategies could exert much leverage against North Vietnam. Though the campaign exploited punishment vulnerability, North Vietnam's industrial sector was not highly valued asset so 'Rolling Thunder did not pose high risks to the civilian economic as a whole'. Also, the author demonstrates that 'the risks to population centers were low' [1, p.125]. Therefore, as a report of the Centre Intelligence Agency stated: 'there is no evidence that the air strikes have significantly weakened popular morale' [7, p. 193].

Similarly, the United States employed the latter to strike continuously POL (petroleum, oil and lubricants) storage areas in the North. Again, Freedom Train campaign did not have the effective result as the President Richard Nixon Administration's advisors had predicted. Hanoi had no intention of pulling back from the offensive and Henry Kissinger¹ thought that 'Hanoi was so close to victory,...it no longer needed even the pretense of negotiations' (Kissinger: 1175 cited in Pape [1, p.134]).

2.2. Linebacker I and Linebacker II campaigns

Due to the North Vietnamese activities in the South, the United States used other coercive air attacks known as Linebacker I (from May to October 1972) and II (between 18 and 29 December 1972) so as to compel 'Hanoi to halt its conventional offensive and accept a stand-still cease-fire agreement' [1, p.132]. Particularly, President Nixon thought that the final campaign would be a chance to 'use military power effectively to win this war' [6, p.184]. Likewise, Kissinger declared "peace is at hand", followed by the resumption of talks, led many Americans to speculate that the war would end by Christmas' [6, p.191].

Pape concluded that these air strikes had the positive outcome because they coerced the North to agree a negotiated ceasefire. One of them 'played in a key role in defeating the North's ground offensive and so compelled Hanoi to accept U.S. terms for the peace accords' [1, p.141]. Furthermore, as the author has demonstrated they aimed at military targets rather than civilian and economic ones so they were successful campaigns. During Linebacker II, 'aircraft demolished 191 storage ware houses. Electric power generating capacity fell from 115,500 to 29,000 kilowatts, and the raids reduced POL supplies by one-fourth...' [6, p.194-95]. Linebacker II did not bomb directly civilian population so it 'caused few civilian casualties' [6, p.192].

To sum up, the fact that four coercive air strikes were employed to bomb North Vietnam so as to achieve U.S objectives. There are some explanations which interpret the failure and success of these campaigns in general, Linebacker II in particular [2, p.278-90]. Some researchers argue only Linebacker I and II succeeded in the war [1, p.104-5). Others criticise none of them were effective. This is going to be continuously explained more in the following section: the impacts of these air attacks on Vietnam and its adversary.

3. The impacts of these air attacks on the United States and North Vietnam

3.1 The United States

The American air forces bombed North Vietnam in order to get the main purposes. However, after these attacks the United States did not achieve them completely. For example of this is the Rolling Thunder campaign. After it had finished, North Vietnam did not abandon the Southern insurgency. On the contrary,

¹ National Security Advisor

North Vietnam had the Tet Offensive in 1968 which was 'a psychological defeat for the United States' [6, p.139]. Furthermore, Walt Rostow² claimed simply threatening North Vietnam's industrial base would compel the North to seek peace. In fact, bombing industry did not have effects because North Vietnam had only a few factories and they were quickly destroyed [7, p.201]. Subsequently, the northern part of Vietnam received more economic assistance from Hanoi' communist allies: the Soviet Union and China [7, p.129]. As a result, President Johnson announced a unilateral restriction of bombing, made a call for peace negotiation, and finally added that he would not seek a second term as President [7, p.200].

With relating to Linebacker I and II, President Nixon ordered to use them 'to win the war'. They avoided bombing civilian targets by laser-guided smart bombs and they only wanted 'the people of Hanoi to hear the bombs' [6, p.184]. However, they destroyed the Bach Mai Hospital which would be protected by International Humanitarian Law[†] and other civilian population areas of the capital. This leads to the fact that they received concurrently international and domestic criticism dismayed both military and civil leadership [6, p.191]. At the same time, the Northern Vietnam military downed many B-52s and modern aircraft fighters by SAMs (surface-to-air missiles) and anti aircraft guns. The American air force had a heavy loss of B-52s – American's mightiest war-planes - would create the antithesis of the psychological impact that Nixon desired [6, p.187]. Therefore, U.S. Congress did not want

Americans to intervene in the war and the Congress voted by a majority to cut off all funds for military operations and the safe withdrawal of American troops [6, p.192].

Finally, the United States had a commitment to withdraw American forces and civil personnel out of the Southern Vietnam. This is the primary aim of Northern Vietnamese leaders because they believed that Thieu's government could not survive if abandoned by the United States [6, p.197]. Ultimately, the South surrendered soon in 1975 as Hanoi predicted.

3.2. North Vietnam

There is no doubt that the United States was the assailant and they launched coercive air power to bomb the North of Vietnam. After those strikes, not only military and economic targets were destroyed, but also a huge of civilians were attacked, killed and injured severely. However, North Vietnam had three advantages: a settlement would end American involvement; an accord would legally permit Hanoi to maintain troops in the South; an agreement would involve minimal loss of face [6, p.199].

In addition, because of the US' withdrawal, Hanoi achieved the primary objective was reunification of Vietnam which President Ho Chi Minh pursued and President Johnson failed to see [8, p.353]. Also, North Vietnam and the National Liberation Front utilised flexibility military and diplomatic strategies to win the war. It is important to note that North Vietnam won the final air campaign, Linebacker II so this strike also is widely called 'the Dien Bien Phu battle in the air'.

² Chairman of the State Department Policy Planning Council

[†] 'The President sanctioned strikes against the Bac Mai communication center...in the capital heart' (Clodfelter 1989: 190). In fact, the President had wrong information because it was the National Hospital and it was bombed severely four times.

Conclusion

As Rosen [9, p.87] states 'wars are complex, and the Vietnam War was no exception'. Therefore, this answers correctly the question: what does the Vietnam War tell air power strategists and theorists about the viability of coercive air power as a strategic tool? Coercive theory is not always as an effective instrument in every case. In the Vietnam War, it is clearly doubt that four air campaigns were successful. Some researchers criticise only two of them failed because they bombed civilian population. Two latter had effective goals: Linebacker I and II which used denial strategy [1, p.104-5]. However, none of these campaigns succeeded. Many military strategists and theorists pointed out that the use of air power in the Vietnam War was controversial from the start [2, p.272].

In analysing the impacts of these attacks on the United States and North Vietnam, the United States did not achieve the main purposes which were to compel the North to support the insurgency in the South and destroy the civilian morale. Furthermore, the Nixon administration had to withdraw all military and civilian personnel. On the contrary, Vietnam still had the main goal of unifying the country. The lesson of the Vietnam War is as American leaders and military strategists had underestimated the traditional spirit of Vietnamese people. Also, this affirms that human factor plays a decisive role in modern wars and conflicts.

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