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## Air Campaigns

reviewed by Col S. N. Collins, Jr. USMCR(Ret)

**THE LIMITS OF AIRPOWER: The American Bombing of North Vietnam.** By Mark Clodfelter. The Free Press, New York, 1989, 297 pp., \$22.95 (Member \$20.65)

In this book on the nature and role of airpower, Mark Clodfelter, associate professor of history at the Air Force Academy, takes to task the existing mindset of Air Force doctrine. The endnotes and bibliography alone in this accurate, scholarly, and very readable treatise are reasons enough for the serious student of military aviation to read this book.

Professor Clodfelter traces the evolution, through World War II and Korea, of current Air Force doctrine that airpower is an ultimate weapon upon which the outcome of war can be based. The author shows how this faith in airpower led Lyndon Johnson to failure in his air campaign in Vietnam. He further demonstrates how Richard Nixon, using airpower as a political tool matched against specific military objectives, was able to accomplish his war aims.

President Johnson had several objectives in Vietnam. He envisioned a free and independent South Vietnam much like South Korea. He sought to prevent the North Vietnamese from interfering in the affairs of South Vietnam. He aimed to apply just enough pressure on the Hanoi leadership to accomplish his goals without provoking Russia and China into war. At the same time, he did not want to jeopardize his Great Society on the homefront.

These stipulations imposed restrictions, identified by Professor Clodfelter as negative objectives, which were to render the accomplishment of the President's war goals, through airpower, impossible. Nevertheless, President Johnson authorized Operation ROLLING THUNDER, his air campaign against the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese. That he attempted to run it from the Oval

Office further doomed it.

Apparently neither President Johnson nor his top advisors thoroughly considered whether bombing was the correct instrument given the nature of the war at that time. They were never able to define a clear military objective for bombing. An air campaign was somehow thought of as war on the cheap, with minimum involvement by U.S. forces, especially ground forces. Frustrated by mismatched strategy and objectives, conflicting war goals, an increasingly hostile Congress, and extensive antiwar demonstrations, President Johnson chose not to run for reelection in 1968.

When he took office in January 1969, President Nixon faced a different set of problems than had his predecessor. His mandate was to end the war and get the troops and prisoners of war home. His war aim became "peace with honor." This translated into a measured withdrawal of U.S. troops without the imminent takeover of the South by Communist forces.

As did his predecessor, President Nixon chose airpower, but with far different results. Seeking to isolate Hanoi from its two principal supporters, the Soviet Union and China, he correctly gambled that neither would directly interfere with his operations. Furthermore, with the shelling of Saigon in December 1971 and the Easter Offensive in 1972, the war shifted dramatically from a guerrilla war to a conventional war requiring conventional logistics support.

LINEBACKER I was devised to thwart the gains of the Easter Offensive, strike at supply facilities, and bring Hanoi closer to the peace table. The smart bomb was introduced during LINEBACKER I, making bombing more accurate and lethal while reducing the possibility of civilian casualties, always a concern of the Johnson administration.

Fearing that Congress would cut off funds for the war when it convened in January, President Nixon launched an all-out effort against such targets as

transportation facilities, oil and gas storage, and thermal power plants. It was designed to bring Hanoi to the peace table once and for all.

Airpower turned Hanoi's arrogant optimism after the Easter Offensive to despair after the December bombing. It had, as many air commanders may feel to this day, brought the war to a conclusion and could have as early as 1965. It would be easy to conclude that airpower was vindicated, but Professor Clodfelter places the real lesson in focus.

Hanoi certainly assumed that if U.S. forces were withdrawn from Vietnam, given the political climate in the United States, their return would be unlikely. This left them with two choices: they could stall until January 1973 and see if Congress would end the war, or go to the peace table before every usable national asset was destroyed by the bombing.

The former was uncertain because of President Nixon's reelection mandate. They chose the latter. Either course of action would ultimately accomplish their goal. Of course, when the Northern troops rolled into Saigon in 1975, President Nixon was no longer in office.

According to Professor Clodfelter, outside of the complete devastation of nuclear war, the results of an air war are uncertain. The air war in Vietnam was too often evaluated in quantitative terms—sorties flown, ordnance expended, and destruction measured. The real evaluation of airpower must be how, from the lowest tactical level to the highest strategic level, it aids in the accomplishment of the desired objective.

The recent air campaign against Iraq accomplished its stated military and political objectives. We seem to have learned from Vietnam. But as Professor Clodfelter might point out, if the war had stopped with the bombing, the results would be incomplete. It took a large land force facing a demoralized Iraqi army to finish the job.

Marine Corps planners will probably never be faced with objectives involving the use of strategic airpower, but like Presidents, they should never forget that an aviation combat element must be tailored to accomplish specific objectives that contribute to ultimate war aims. That is the lowest common denominator of airpower.

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