

Operation LINEBACKER II: A Retrospective

PART 5: LINEBACKER I

With an Introduction to the Series

SAC – LSU Shreveport

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*Prepared for
The Strategy Alternatives Consortium
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STRATEGY ALTERNATIVES CENTER

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QUOTES

Every SAM in Hanoi went off—just a fantastic barrage of SAMs!...and then the bombs started to hit...It was a continuous din of noise and shaking of the ground...We had a panoramic view over the courtyard roof of the prison...You could see the flashes of explosions on the overcast... they just keep coming and kept coming!...a constant barrage of sound, flash, and concussion...An awesome display of power...We were just pasting hell out of them for the first time.¹

Capt Bob Lilly, Prisoner-of-War (POW), 1965-1973

The first few 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 screamed incomprehensible orders to get out.²

The Viet Cong Minister of Justice Truong Nhu Tang

At the heart of warfare lies doctrine. It represents the central beliefs for waging war in order to achieve victory. Doctrine is of the mind, a network of faith and knowledge reinforced by experience which lays the pattern for the utilization of men, equipment, and tactics. It is the building material for strategy. It is fundamental to sound judgment.

General Curtis Emerson LeMay, 1968

The purpose of surprise is to strike at a time or place or in a manner for which the enemy is unprepared. Surprise can help the commander shift the balance of combat power and thus achieve success well out of proportion to the effort expended...³

Joint Publication 3.0 Doctrine for Joint Operations

We have the power to destroy his war making capacity. The only question is whether we have the will to use that power. What distinguishes me from [former President] Johnson is I have the will in spades.⁴

Richard Nixon to Henry Kissinger

¹ Luse Shackelford, and Ray, "Eleven Days in December: Linebacker II" (USAF Southeast Asia Monograph Series, Air University, 1977), V.

² Truong Nhu Tang, *A Viet Cong Memoir* (New York: Vintage Books, 1985), 168.

³ U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Doctrine for Joint Operations*, Joint Pub 3-0. (Washington: U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, 10 September 2001), A-2.

⁴ Henry A. Kissinger, *White House Years*, (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1979), 1199.

One more observation needs to be made, which goes to the very heart of the matter. Only the commander who imposes his will can take the enemy by surprise....⁵

Carl von Clausewitz

The first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgment that the statesman and the commander have to make is [rightly to understand] the kind of war on which they are embarking, neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that its alien to its nature. This is the first of all strategic questions and the most comprehensive.⁶

Carl von Clausewitz

The bastards have never been bombed like they're going to be bombed this time.⁷

President Richard M. Nixon, May 1972

In any two-week period you mention.⁸

General Curtis LeMay, July 1986, when asked if the United State could have won in Vietnam.

I never said we should bomb them back to the Stone Age. I said we had the capability to do it.⁹

General Curtis LeMay

In war there is never any chance for a second mistake.

Lamachus, 465-414 B.C.E.

⁵ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* ed. by Michael Howard, Peter Paret. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 200.

⁶ Clausewitz, *On War*, 89.

⁷ Richard Nixon, statement to White House Chief of Staff H. R. Haldeman and Attorney General John Mitchell, April 4, 1972.

⁸ Interview of Curtis LeMay by Manny-Ann Bendel, *USA Today*, July 23, 1986, 9A.

⁹ Gen. Curtis Emerson LeMay, in *Washington Post* interview published October 4, 1968.

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PREFACE

The Strategy Alternatives Consortium at Louisiana State University in Shreveport SAC LSUS) created a series of essays to commemorate the forty-fifth anniversary of the Operation LINEBACKER II, which, for America, all but ended the Vietnam War. These essays have been combined into a White Paper. All seven essays and the White Paper are available, free of charge, on the SAC LSUS website – www.lsus.edu/sac. The purpose is to assist professors, high school teachers, Air Force Association chapters, and ROTC units understand the campaign and put it in context of the time and the consequence it made in Air Force doctrine and subsequent political/military decisions.

Operation LINEBACKER II marked a seminal point in the Vietnam War. The campaign, sometimes referred to as “The Eleven-Day War,” brought the North Vietnamese, with sincerity, back to the peace talks in Paris and all but destroyed their ability to wage a defensive war against American Airpower. Most historians and strategists agree that LINEBACKER II was a tremendously successful endeavor. There are some dissenters, who point to a lack of significant targets.

This series of essays examines the literature, the role of participants, presidential administrations, and military commanders and planners to provide an overarching examination of LINEBACKER II. They also provide both orthodox and dissenting opinions so that the reader may make up his or her mind concerning the subject.

The chapters cover a brief examination of the campaign, a discussion of the political climate from the end of World War II to through the decisions to execute Operation LINEBACKER and LINEBACKER II, an examination of strategic bombardment theory from World War II to the early years of the Vietnam War, strategic assets and micromanagement of those assets between 1965 and 1972, Operation LINEBACKER I, Operation LINEBACKER II, and, finally, the consequences and change in strategic thought brought forward by the campaigns.

The authors, Gary D. Joiner, Ph.D. and Ashley E. Dean, wish to thank Lane Callaway, the Eighth Air Force Historian, the good folks who handle the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests at Barksdale Air Force Base, Louisiana and Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama, for their often as for requests, and Lieutenant General Robert Elder (USAF retired) for guidance in this project.

Gary D. Joiner
Director, SAC LSUS
Louisiana State University in Shreveport
November 5, 2017

ABBREVIATIONS USED IN THE LINEBACKER II SERIES

AAA- Anti-Aircraft Artillery	DIA- Defense Intelligence Agency
AAD- Anti-Aircraft Defenses	DMZ- demilitarized zone
AAF- Army Air Force (United States)	DOD- Department of Defense
AB- Air Base	DOE- Department of Energy
ABM- Anti-ballistic Missile	DRVN- Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam)
ACC- Air Combat Command	ECM- electronic counter-warfare measures
ADC- Air Defense Command	ELINT- electronic intelligence
AEC- Atomic Energy Commission	EW- Electronic Warfare
AFA- Air Force Association	EWO- Electronic Warfare Officer
AFB- Air Force Base	FAS- Federation of American Scientists
AFGSC- Air Force Global Strike Command	HE- high explosive
AFM- Air Force Manual	ICBM- Intercontinental Ballistic Missile
ALCM- Air launched cruise missile	IP- Initial Point
ARVN- Army of the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnamese national army)	IRBM- Intermediate Range Ballistic Missile
BARCAP- Barrier Combat Air Patrols	ISIS (IS, ISIS, ISIL, Daesh) - Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
BDA- Bomb Damage Assessment	JCS- Joint Chiefs of Staff
BW- Bomb Wing (USAF)	LGM- laser guided munitions
CALCM- Conventional air launched cruise missiles	MACV- Military Assistance Command, Vietnam
CENTCOM- Central Command (US)	MAD- Mutually Assured Destruction
CH- CORONA HARVEST	MAJCOM- Major Command
CIA- Central Intelligence Agency	MiG CAP- MiG Combat Air Patrol
CINCPAC- Commander US Military Assistance Command Pacific	MIRVs- multiple independently targeted vehicles
COMUSMACV- Commander US Military Assistance Command Vietnam	MIT- Massachusetts Institute of Technology
CONUS- Continental United States	NATO- North Atlantic Treaty Organization
DEW- Defense Early Warning (radar system)	NSC- National Security Council
	NSM- National Security Memorandum

NVA- North Vietnamese Army (North Vietnamese communist national army)

NVN- North Vietnam

PACAF- Pacific Air Forces

PAVN- People's Army of Vietnam (North Vietnamese communist national army)

PGM- Precision guided munitions

POL- Petroleum Oil and Lubricants

PRC- Peoples Republic of China

PTT- Post Target Turn

ROE- Rules of engagement

RP- Route Package

RT- Radar Troops

RTNAB- Royal Thai Naval / Air Base

SAC- Strategic Air Command

SAM- Surface to Air Missile

SAM-2- Surface to Air Missiles, model 2

SEA- Southeast Asia

SECAF- Secretary of the Air Force (U.S.)

SIOP- Single Integrated Operational Plan

SLBM- Submarine Launched Ballistic Missile

TAC- Tactical Air Command

TACAIR- Tactical Aircraft, Tactical Air, or Tactical Air Forces

TOT- Times on Target

UN- United Nations

UNSC- United Nations Security Council

USAAF- United States Army Air Force

USAF- United States Air Force

USS- United States Ship

USSBS- United States Strategic Bombing Survey

USSR- Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

VC- Viet Cong (guerilla communist force that cooperated with the PAVN/NVA)

WMD- Weapons of Mass Destruction

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PART 1

SERIES INTRODUCTION: OPERATION LINEBACKER II

In December 1972, in what was hoped to be the final weeks of the Vietnam War, President Richard M. Nixon ordered a massive bombing campaign against North Vietnam. The military campaign had strictly political origins. The Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) recommended in 1964 that North Vietnam be bombed and determined 94 targets that would wreck their ability to wage war.¹⁰ President Lyndon B. Johnson, Secretary of Defense, Robert S. McNamara, and Secretary of State Dean Rusk balked at the idea, fearing a Chinese invasion as in Korea.¹¹ This set the stage for civilian micromanagement of the military conduct of the war, troop strength, selection of targets, rules of engagement (ROE), and, to many commanders, observers and historians, the primary reason the war descended into the chaos that it became.¹² McNamara, in his position since 1961 and never popular with the military, became a pariah to the JCS and the commanders who followed his orders.¹³

North Vietnam invaded South Vietnam earlier that year using standard military tactics rather than guerrilla warfare. They hoped to take over the South Vietnamese government before U.S. forces, (deep into troop draw-downs) could hold them back. A series of long drawn out negotiations in Paris frustrated the Americans and the South Vietnamese. On December 13, North Vietnam suspended negotiations that attempted to establish a cease-fire agreement and return U.S. prisoners of war.¹⁴ At the same time, the U.S. Congress, tired of the political consequences of the war, determined to cut off funding for Southeast Asia military operations when members returned to Washington D.C. from their holiday recess in January 1973.¹⁵

The bombing campaign, known as Operation LINEBACKER II, began on December 18 and lasted for 11 days. Air Force Strategic Air Command (SAC) B-52 bombers flew 729 sorties,

¹⁰ Richard H. Kohn and Joseph P. Harahan editors, *Strategic Air Warfare: An Interview with Generals Curtis E. LeMay, Leon W. Johnson, David A. Burchinal, and Jack J. Catton* (Washington, 1988), 123; Robert F. Futrell, *The United States Air Force in Southeast Asia: The Advisory Years to 1965* (Washington, 1981), 253-256

¹¹ Futrell, *The United States Air Force in Southeast Asia*, 253-256; Alain C. Enthoven and K. Wayne Smith, *How Much Is Enough? Shaping the Defense Program 1961-1969* (New York, 1971); Charles J. Hitch, *Decision-making for Defense* (New York, 1965).

¹² Kohn and Harahan, *Strategic Air Warfare*, 121.

¹³ *Ibid.* 122; William W. Momyer, *Airpower in Three Wars* (Washington, 1978), 90-98; Carl Berger, ed., *United States Air Force in Southeast Asia, 1961-1973: An Illustrated Account* (Washington, 1977), 74-89; U.S. Grant Sharp, *Strategy For Defeat: Vietnam in Retrospect* (San Rafael, Calif., 1978), 94-104; James Clay Thompson, *Rolling Thunder, Understanding Policy and Program Failure* (Chapel Hill, 1980); John Morrocco, *Thunder From Above: Air War 1941-1968* (Boston, 1984), 50-71; U.S. Department of Defense, *The Pentagon Papers: The Senator Gravel Edition*, 4 vols., (Boston, 1972), III, 284-286, 321-324, 332-334, 339-340, IV, 55-56, 68-70, 109-110, 138, 421-422.

¹⁴ Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston, 1979), 717-744.

¹⁵ In November 1973, Congress enacted the War Powers Resolution, which limited the President's ability to send troops back into the theatre of operations to 90 days without receiving congressional approval. See Guenter Lewy, *America in Vietnam* (New York, 1978), 202-222; John H. Sullivan, *The War Powers Resolution* (Washington, 1982), 31-42, 103-166, 179, 183; W. Hays Park, "Linebacker and the Law of War," *Air University Review* 34 (Jan-Feb 1983): 2-30.

and U.S. Navy and Air Force Tactical Air Command (TAC) fighter-bombers flew 1,000 sorties.¹⁶ The SAC bombers, naval fighter-bombers, and TAC aircraft dropped 20,370 tons of bombs on North Vietnam.¹⁷ They destroyed command and control structures, power generating plants, railroad marshalling yards and trackage, and destroyed military airfields, surface to air missile (SAM) assembly and storage facilities. At the end of the campaign, North Vietnam was largely in the dark, very low on ammunition, and had exhausted its supply of SAMs.¹⁸ Although additional missions were planned and preparations made, President Nixon halted the bombing on December 29.¹⁹ North Vietnam, without replenishment from China and the Soviet Union, agreed to return to negotiations in earnest. The results were merely a formality. The cease-fire agreement was signed on January 23, 1973 by Henry Kissinger for the United States and Le Due Tho for North Vietnam.²⁰

Operation LINEBACKER II's strategy and tactics remain the topic of discussion and planning today, forty-five years later. It proved that the Air Force commanders' concept of ending the war in 1965 would work militarily, but largely due to the threat of Chinese intervention, was nullified. Once the JCS and Air Force commanders could set targets themselves and not answer to the White House staff (within reason), destruction of the North Vietnamese will and capacity to wage became evident. The operation also led to unanticipated consequences. SAC lost much of its prestige due to its inflexibility. Beliefs in bomber stream formation from World War II and Korea for conventional bombing missions proved problematic for SAC crews who were trained to follow orders blindly in their nuclear combat roles. Iron bombs soon gave way to precision guided weapons. The vulnerability of the B-52s to SAMs quickly led to changes in tactics, mission concepts, and a reduction in the numbers of the heavy bombers. More senior commanders were chosen from the ranks of the fighter pilots.²¹

¹⁶ James R. McCarthy and George B. Allison, *Linebacker II: A View From the Rock* (Montgomery, Ala., 1979), 39-89.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 91-167.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Richard M. Nixon, *RN, The Memoirs of Richard Nixon* (New York, 1978), 717-744.

²⁰ Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* 740-744.

²¹ See Mike Worden, *Rise of the Fighter Generals: The Problem of Air Force Leadership 1945-1982* ((Montgomery, AL, 1988).

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PART 5

LINEBACKER I

The United States believed it was making progress in stemming the flow of the infiltration of men and supplies down the Ho Chi Minh Trail during the spring of 1972. The Air Force's COMMANDO HUNT operations ceased on March 31, 1972. On that date, the North Vietnamese launched a conventional armed attack on South Vietnam. The American policy of "Vietnamization," turning the war over to South Vietnam's army (ARVN), seemed to be going well. As American troop strength dwindled, American air power proved to be "guardian angel" of the ARVN. But this new combined arms attack appeared to be a second version of the Tet Offensive of 1968. The new attacks would be known as the "Easter Offensive." This time SAC, TAC, and the Navy simply did not have enough aircraft and crews to keep the enemy at bay in Laos and Cambodia while stemming the tide in South Vietnam.²²

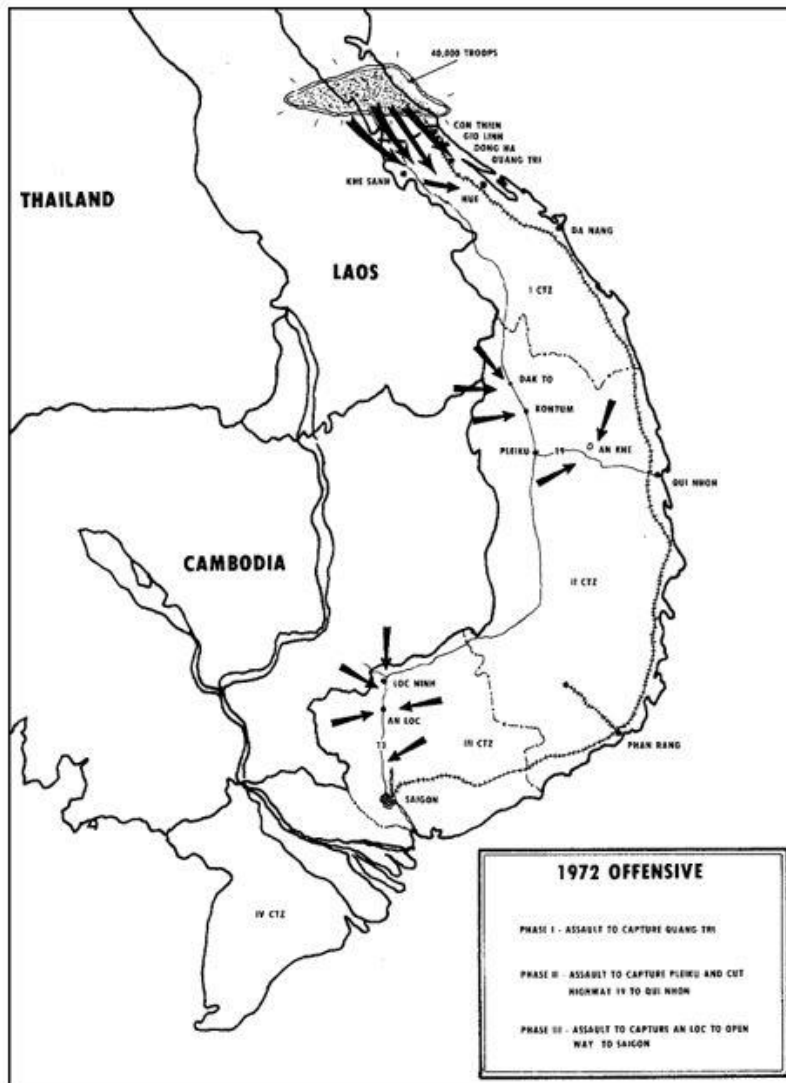


Figure 1. Map of the principle invasion routes at the beginning of the Easter Offensive. Source: William W. Momyer, *Air Power in Three Wars* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1978), 366.

²² Eduard Mark, *Aerial Interdiction: Air Power and Land Battle in Three American Wars* (Washington: Center for Air Force History, 1994), 329.

The Johnson administration was constantly plagued by the fear of either Soviet or Chinese intervention in the Vietnam War, or perhaps both. The intermittent bombing halts at each point when success was at hand were gestures to the North Vietnamese to negotiate and to convince the two great communist powers that the United States was not threatening either of them nor did it wish to utterly destroy North Vietnam. The Nixon administration offered a different set of criteria. Richard Nixon promised prior to his first term in office to end the war. He was unsuccessful. However, Nixon, among the forefront of Cold Warriors, surprised everyone by seeking a détente with the Russians and even to the hardline Chinese with what later was termed “ping-pong diplomacy.” The Chinese allowed American competitive ping-pong players to come to China to play against the Chinese national team. The United States reciprocated. President Nixon saw this potential thaw in Sino-American relations as a way to end America’s involvement in Vietnam. The November elections were coming later that year. The President’s National Security Advisor, Henry Kissinger, secretly visited Beijing and soon after, Nixon went to China in February 1972.²³ The Easter Offensive by the North Vietnamese was a ploy to derail these overtures and to remove the Americans once and for all from the complex equation that was the Vietnam War.

During Operation COMMANDO HUNT, in December 1971, U.S. Intelligence services picked up information that an offensive may be happening soon. The Air Force tasked TAC to fly approximately 1,000 sorties into the southern portion of North Vietnam between the 17th and 20th parallels.²⁴ The President ordered an additional 207 F-4 Phantom fighter-bombers into theatre and 161 additional B-52s were ordered to Andersen Air Force Base on Guam and to U-Tapao Royal Thai Navy/ Air Force Base (RTNAFB), bringing the total force of BUFFs to 210. This was more than half of all of SAC’s B-52s.²⁵ This placed a tremendous strain on Fail-Safe Missions. The first thirty B-52s were sent to Guam under Operation BULLET SHOT in February.²⁶ The increase in airpower proved fortunate. Between April and July 1972, Air Force bomber and attack aircraft increased from 375 to 900, the Marines deployed 40 F-4 Phantom fighter-bombers to Da Nang, two squadrons of A-1 Sky Raider ground attack aircraft to Ben Hoa, and the Navy operated six carrier groups in the Gulf of Tonkin. Each aircraft carrier carried 60 attack aircraft.²⁷ Strike aircraft increased from 495 to 1,380 in the first three months of the offensive.²⁸

President Nixon later described the timing “to go for broke and bring the enemy to his knees.”²⁹ The President, having created stronger ties with Russia and China, believed he could force North Vietnam to negotiate. He intended to resume the bombing of North Vietnam and mining Haiphong Harbor.³⁰

²³ For an in-depth account, see Nicholas Griffin, *Ping-pong Diplomacy: The Secret History Behind the Game That Changed the World* (New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 2015),

²⁴ History, Seventh Air Force, July 1, 1971– June 30, 1972, 273–77; Mark Clodfelter, “Nixon and the Air Weapon,” in *An American Dilemma: Vietnam, 1964–1973*, ed. Dennis E. Showalter and John G. Albert (Chicago: Imprint Publishers, 1993), 169.

²⁵ History, PACAF, 1 July 1, 1971– June 30, 1972, vol. 1, 121–22; Clodfelter, “Nixon and the Air Weapon,” 169; 145; Earl H. Tilford Jr., *Crosswinds: The Air Force’s Setup in Vietnam* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 1993), 145; and History, Seventh Air Force, Linebacker Operations, May 10 –October 23, 1972, 1973, 3–5, file K740.04-24, AFHRA, Maxwell AFB, Ala.

²⁶ Clodfelter, “Nixon and the Air War,” 16; Capt Charles A. Nicholson, *The USAF Response to the Spring 1972 NVN Offensive: Situation and Redeployment* (Project CHECO, Seventh Air Force/DOAC, 1972), 21.

²⁷ Nicholson, *NVN Offensive*, 123-24; Clodfelter, “Nixon and the Air Weapon,” 16.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Richard M. Nixon, *RN*, vol. 2, *The Memoirs of Richard Nixon* (New York: Warner Books, 1978), 606; Clodfelter, “Nixon and the Air Weapon,” 172; Seymour M. Hersh, *The Price of Power: Kissinger in the Nixon White House* (New York: Summit Books, 1983), 506; and Melvin F. Porter, *Linebacker: Overview of the First 120 Days* (Project CHECO, Seventh Air Force/DOA, 1973), 14–15.

³⁰ Porter, *Linebacker: Overview*, 14-15.



B-52s cover Andersen's flightlines after the Bullet Shot deployments.

Figure 2. B-52Ds and G models on Guam in February 1972. Image Source: United States Air Force.

Air attacks began on April 2 with pinpoint strikes against anti-aircraft artillery (AAA) and surface to air (SAM) sites within 25 miles of the DMZ. These were followed by attacks within 60 miles of the DMZ as part of Operation FREEDOM TRAIN.³¹ The NVA streamed supplies south through multiple routes and the air attacks did not greatly diminish their delivery. President Nixon then expanded the area of operations to parallel 20° 25' or 231 miles north.³² B-52s flew their first sorties on April 16, with eighteen BUFFs from the 307th Strategic Wing stationed at U-Tapao targeting oil storage facilities near Haiphong.³³ Nixon, after consultations with Henry Kissinger and the president's military assistant, Major General Alexander Haig, used TAC, Navy, and Marine aircraft in North Vietnam and utilized B-52s in South Vietnam under the codename Operation LINEBACKER.³⁴ President Nixon viewed LINEBACKER as the beginning of the end for America's presence in Vietnam. He intended to inflict direct pain on the North, explaining that "the bastards have never been bombed like they're going to be bombed this time."³⁵ The new effort began on May 10 and lasted until October 15, 1972.

Pentagon planners designed LINEBACKER to have three specific goals: "1) restrict resupply of North Vietnam from external sources; 2) destroy internal stockpiles of military supplies and equipment; and 3) restrict flow of forces and supplies to the battlefield."³⁶ These were to be achieved in four distinct

³¹ Clodfelter, "Nixon and the Air Weapon," 170; MACV, *Linebacker Study* (unofficial/uncoordinated draft report), January 20, 1973, chap. 2, 2, File K712.041-19, AFHRA; Nixon, *RN*, 2:64-65; and PACAF, CH, *USAF Air Operations against NVN, 1 July 71-30 June 72*, 1973, 52-61.

³² Clodfelter, "Nixon and the Air Weapon," 170.

³³ PACAF, CH, *USAF Air Operations against NVN, 1 Jul 71-30 Jun 72*, 1973, 52-61.

³⁴ Kissinger, 1118, 1176; Clodfelter, "Nixon and the Air Weapon," 170-71; and Nixon, *RN*, 2:81.

³⁵ David Fulghum and Terrence Maitland. *South Vietnam on Trial: Mid 1970-1972* (Boston, MA: Boston Publishing Co., 1984), 168.

³⁶ PACAF, CH, *Command and Control*, bk. 1, 1-24.

phases. First, destroy major railroad depots and rolling stock in and near Hanoi and the primary trunk line toward China. Second, demolish railroad marshalling yards and storage areas surrounding Hanoi. Third, destroy provisional storage and transshipment points created as a response to the first two phases. Fourth, destroy enemy defenses, particularly ground control intercept radar sites, command and control, MiG airfields, SAM and AAA sites, and associated logistics depots and support facilities.³⁷

Part Two of the operation, Operation POCKET MONEY, mined North Vietnamese ports. Following mine seeding, the mines had a 36-hour delay in arming. All international ocean traffic was notified. From the day the mines came alive through September, no vessels entered or left any North Vietnamese ports.³⁸ Supply vessels were forced to remain outside the twelve mile limit from shore to the edge of the minefield. At the same time, North Vietnamese small vessels attempted to ferry off loaded supplies to shore. They were attacked by TAC, Navy and Marine aircraft.³⁹

Operation FREEDOM TRAIN was active from April to June 1972. US forces flew 27,745 attack and support sorties, 1,000 of which were flown with B-52s.⁴⁰ The United States lost 52 planes—17 to SAMs, 11 to AAA, three to small arms, 14 to MiGs, and seven to unknown causes.⁴¹ The enemy fired 777

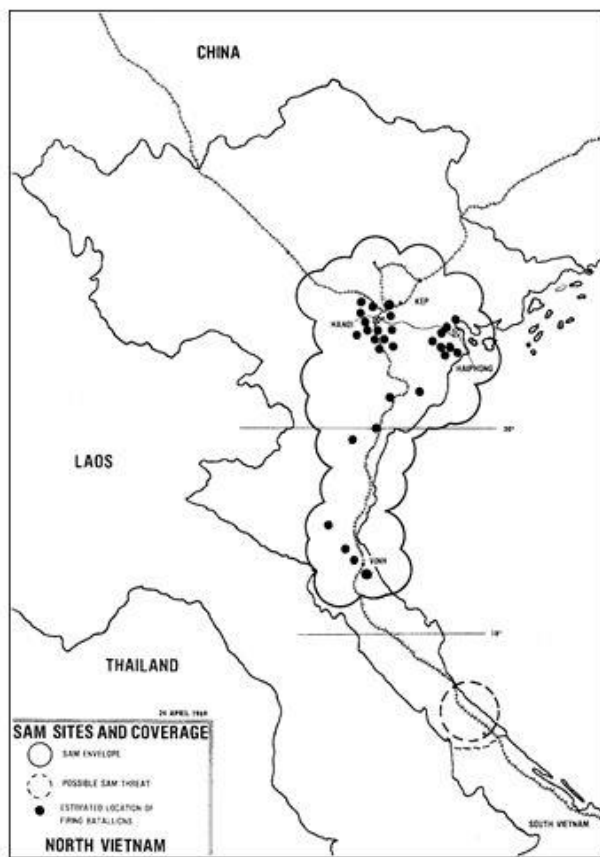


Figure 3. SAM coverage in North Vietnam during LINEBACKER. Source: William W. Momyer, *Air Power in Three Wars* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1978), 140.

³⁷ PACAF CH, *USAF Air Operations against NVN*, 90–91; Momyer, *Air Power in Three Wars*, 33; Tilford, *Crosswinds*, 149–50; and PACAF CH, *Command and Control*, bk. 1, 1–24.

³⁸ Clodfelter, “Nixon and the Air Weapon,” 171.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ PACAF, CH, *USAF Air Operations against NVN*, 65, 121–31; PACAF, SEA Report, “Air Operations Summaries, April, May, and June 1972,” File K717.3063, AFHRA.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

SAMs in April, 429 in May, and 366 in June.⁴² The Air Force countered with a new type of hunter-killer team to ferret out SAM radars. F-105 Wild Weasels found the sites and F-4 Phantoms destroyed them with cluster bombs or High Explosive ordnance.⁴³

North Vietnam possessed 4,000 23mm to 100mm AAA guns, of which half were located in and near Hanoi and Haiphong.⁴⁴ They also had more than 200 MiGs, 70 of which were newer MiG 21s.⁴⁵ The MiGs used a tactic that involved following heavy-laden attack aircraft and firing on them as they slowed airspeed to prepare for attacks or before they could use evasive maneuvers.⁴⁶ From March through July, the U.S. lost twenty-six aircraft while the North Vietnamese lost thirty-two.⁴⁷ The Air Force countered with a new system called “Teaball,” a weapons control center in Thailand that linked data from Laos and the Gulf of Tonkin to triangulate aircraft movements, both friendly and enemy.⁴⁸ From August 1st through October 1st, the number of kills dropped to five for the U.S. and nineteen for North Vietnam.⁴⁹ PACAF announced in June that “the enemy has shown no signs of response to the interdiction . . . ; therefore it is estimated that only a small amount of material is entering NVN [North Vietnam] via the highway system.”⁵⁰

B-52 strikes were concentrated on supporting ground operations in South Vietnam to help stem the tide of the North Vietnamese invasion. These included massive strikes on either side of the DMZ against supply cantonments, road choke points, and staging areas.⁵¹ Of particular importance, the BUFF’s averaged thirty sorties every day against bridges on Route Package 1 (RP1).⁵²

President Nixon removed many of the restrictions that plagued ROLLING THUNDER. Pentagon planners changed the target priority list, moving some targets to the top of the list. Among them were rail trunk lines between Hanoi and the Chinese border and those between Haiphong and the DMZ, oil and gas processing plants (Petroleum Oil and Lubricants [POL]), power stations, and rolling stock and storage areas.⁵³ At the same time, restrictions were placed on a thirty-mile buffer south of the Chinese border, dams, dikes, civilian watercraft, civilian population centers, and non-Vietnamese seaborne shipping.⁵⁴

TAC F-4s focused on destroying bridges as quickly as the North Vietnamese could rebuild them, sometimes in a matter of hours.⁵⁵ B-52s flew sortie missions to An Loc, laying bombs within 1,000 meters of the defenders and neutralizing North Vietnamese attackers.⁵⁶ The B-52 raids in South Vietnam were

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Eduard Mark, *Aerial Interdiction: Air Power and Land Battle in Three American Wars* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Air Force History, 1994), 379.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ PACAF, CH, *USAF Air Operations against NVN*, 132–36; and History, Seventh Air Force, Linebacker Operations, 1973, 51–52.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ PACAF, *North Vietnamese Current Assessment*, vol. 7, *U.S. Air Force Operations in Defense of RVN*, June 1, 1972, CH Document Collection, File K717.03-219, AFHRA.

⁵¹ Mark, 382.

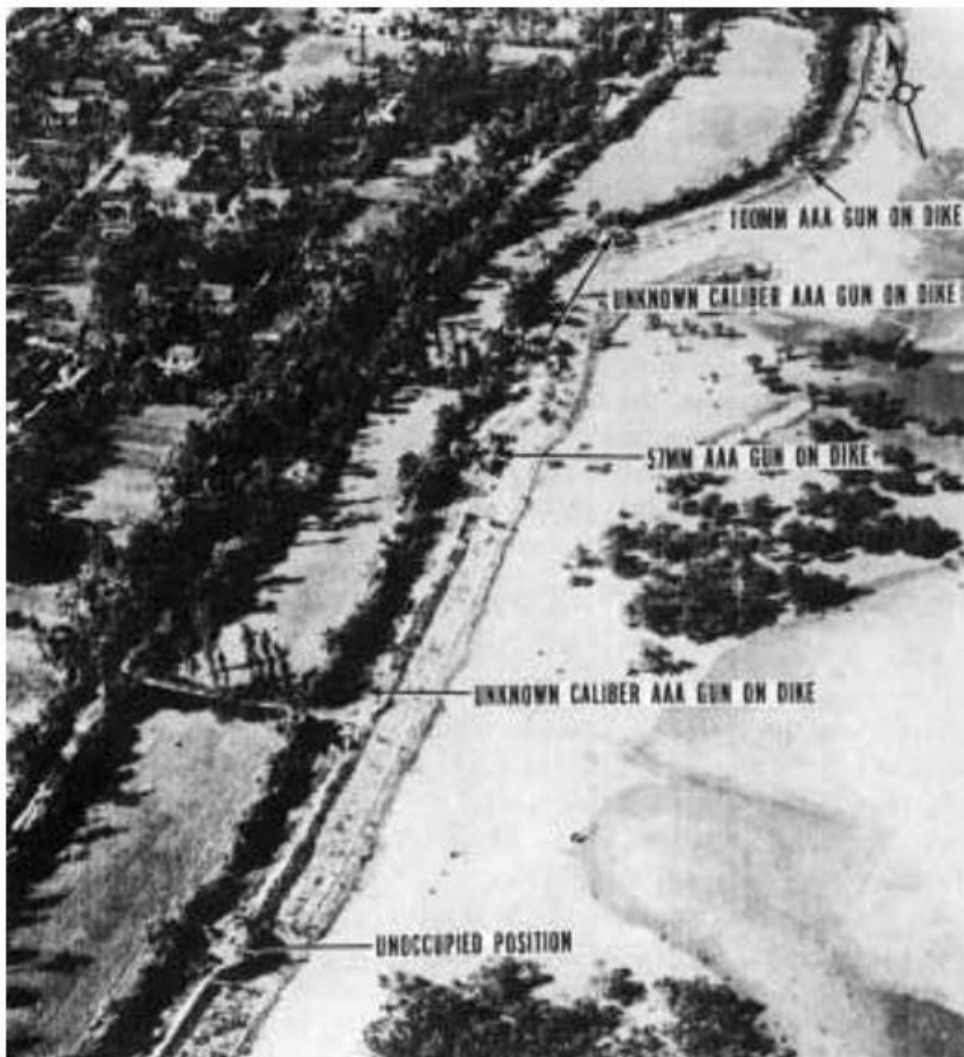
⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ PACAF, CH, *USAF Air Operations against NVN*, 91–95; and Momyer, *Air Power in Three Wars*, 174–75, 183–96.

⁵⁴ Mark, 385–86; PACAF, CH, *USAF Air Operations against NVN*, 98–103; and Clodfelter, “Nixon and the Air Weapon,” 172.

⁵⁵ Mark, 395–97.

⁵⁶ Ibid.



Reconnaissance photo taken 22 July 1972 shows a series of anti-aircraft emplacements along a dike near Thai Binh, some 30 miles south of Haiphong.

Figure 4. Source: William W. Momyer, *Air Power in Three Wars* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1978), 150.

credited with slowing down the NVA timetable, forcing them spend needed time in taking Quang Tri City before losing it back to the ARVN troops and not taking Hue.⁵⁷

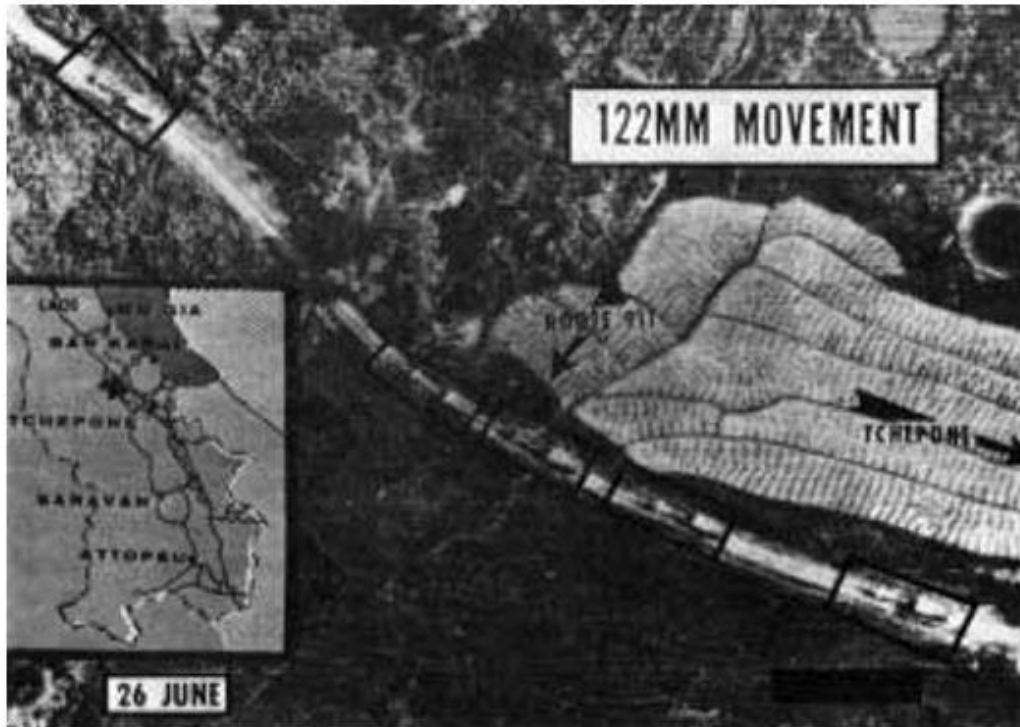
LINEBACKER dropped, between April 5 and October 23, 1972, 155,548 tons of bombs on North Vietnam, or, approximately twenty-five percent of the total dropped during ROLLING THUNDER.⁵⁸ The net effect on the North Vietnamese was the loss of seventy percent of electricity generating capacity and severe damage to their road and rail networks.⁵⁹ However, the NVA still occupied most of the rural areas of South Vietnam, and they planned to use this as a bargaining chip in the Paris negotiations.⁶⁰ There is no

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Clodfelter, *The Limits of Air Power*, 173

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ History, MACV, January 1972–March 1973, July 15, 1973, Saigon, Republic of Vietnam, 53, 74, 79.



Heavy North Vietnamese traffic along the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos.

Figure 5. Source: William W. Momyer, *Air Power in Three Wars* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1978), 96.

doubt that American air power halted the collapse of the South Vietnamese regime during the Easter Offensive.⁶¹ An unintended consequence of LINEBACKER was that the sheer amount of effort needed to stem the tide of the North Vietnamese forces within South Vietnam left the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos and Cambodia largely untouched for several months. Even with the tremendous buildup of air assets by the United States, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) estimated that the North Vietnamese had 14,000 trucks that were untouched and available for use.⁶² They also reported that despite the harbor mining and rail interdiction, between 55,000 and 75,000 tons of supplies crossed the Chinese border into North Vietnam each month.⁶³

International political considerations altered the continuation of LINEBACKER. President Nixon went to Moscow in mid-summer and curtailed some bombing sorties. Henry Kissinger believed the timing was right to reopen the Paris peace talks. Hanoi accepted, but the President, with recent diplomatic triumphs in Beijing and Moscow, and the November election nearing, decided he could use more airpower to push the North Vietnamese even harder.⁶⁴ Kissinger counseled against using more B-52s because it “would cause a domestic outcry and that in any case such attacks were unnecessary.”⁶⁵ Nixon did not fully adhere to Kissinger’s suggestions. He authorized a continuation of bombing

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² William P. Head, *War From Above the Clouds: B-52 Operations during the Second Indochina War and the Effects of the Air War on Theory and Practice*, Fairchild Paper, (Montgomery, AL: Air University Press, 2002), 72.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Clodfelter, “Nixon and the Air Weapon,” 172; *The Limits of Air Power*, 159–60.

⁶⁵ Kissinger, 1102; and History, Headquarters Eighth Air Force, vol. 1, narrative, 148–49.

sorties by B-52s and ground attack fighters averaging thirty per day throughout October.⁶⁶ This round of missions was concentrated near the DMZ and targeted command and control and storage facilities.⁶⁷

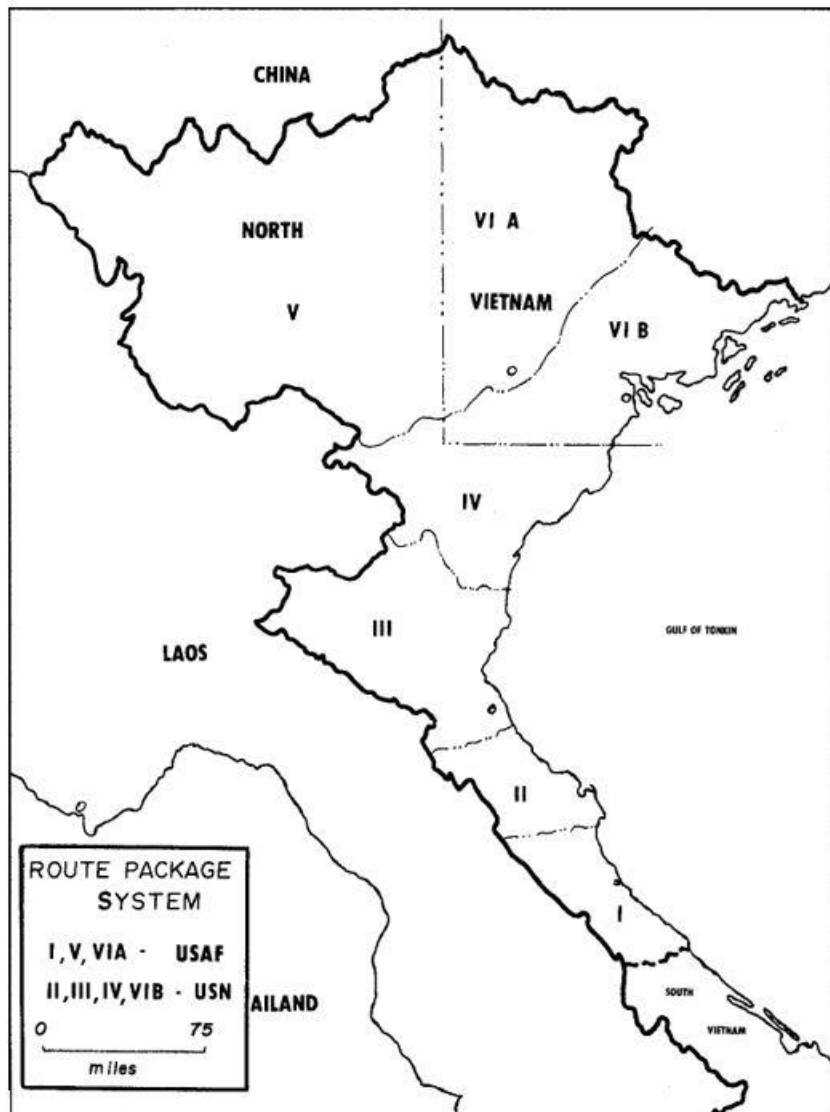


Figure 6. Route Package system in North Vietnam during LINEBACKER. Source: William W. Momyer, *Air Power in Three Wars* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1978), 107.

The North Vietnamese were not motivated to enter into serious negotiations. The Paris Peace Talks began in late July, but it was evident that they wanted to wait until the November elections. Nixon cabled Admiral John McCain on August 8, to “notify his subordinate commanders that Linebacker would begin to hit the North harder.”⁶⁸ Target planners created new lists and increased sorties to forty-eight per day in RP 5 and RP 6. The Navy was responsible for RP B and the Air Force worked on RP 6 A and RP 5.⁶⁹ The B-52s were held back

⁶⁶ Clodfelter, “Nixon and the Air Weapon,” 172; Clodfelter, *The Limits of Air Power*, 159–60; Kissinger, 1102; and History, Headquarters Eighth Air Force, vol. 1, narrative, 148–49.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ Clodfelter, *The Limits of Air Power*, 159–61.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

in deference to the presidential election and Kissinger's wishes.⁷⁰ The vast majority of the bombing was conducted by TAC, the Navy, and the Marines.⁷¹ A new weapon was added to the Air Force arsenal at the end of September when 48 F-111 Aardvarks deployed to Takhli Royal Thai Air Force Base (RTAFB).



Figure 7. F-111s in formation. Image Source: United States Air Force.

The Aardvarks flew in all weather, day and night, at very low altitudes and at supersonic speed. By the middle of October, the F-111s conducted an average of twenty-four sorties per night, half of all missions.⁷²

North Vietnamese combat forces within South Vietnam reached between 150,000 and 200,000 troops in October 1972.⁷³ Their negotiating strategy was to ask for a ceasefire. Nixon did not halt or lessen the bombing.⁷⁴ By early summer 1972 the NVA inserted fourteen new divisions into South Vietnam and this placed a heavy burden on the South Vietnamese government.⁷⁵ Despite American airpower, Saigon would probably be forced to concede by the end of the year. Nixon crushed South Dakota Senator George McGovern in the election, but failed to reach a Republican majority in Congress. When Congress resumed session in January 1973, it promised to invoke the War Powers Act, which

⁷⁰ Kissinger, 1102; and History, Headquarters Eighth Air Force, vol. 1, narrative, 148–49.

⁷¹ History, Headquarters Eighth Air Force, vol. 1, narrative, 148–49.

⁷² Clodfelter, *The Limits of Air Power*, 159–61. 198. Ibid., 161–62.

⁷³ Tilford, *Crosswinds*, 153.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 148.

would end all funding for the Vietnam War.⁷⁶ The President knew that if could end the war on his terms, he must do it before January 1973.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ The War Powers Resolution (also known as the War Powers Resolution of 1973 or the War Powers Act) (50 U.S.C. 1541–1548) limits United States to an armed conflict without the consent of the U.S. Congress.

⁷⁷ Clodfelter, “Nixon and the Air Weapon,” 173–74; Nixon, *RN*, 2:222–27, 230; Kissinger, 1411–12, 1416; and Clodfelter, *The Limits of Air Power*, 177–79.

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