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US Air Force F-4C Phantoms refuelling from a Boeing KC-135 tanker during a ROLLING THUNDER mission (USAF)

Rolling Thunder: A Failure of Intelligence and Cultural Awareness?

By Cdre Paul Robinson

Strategic bombing with conventional weapons as a means of coercing an enemy into negotiation was an untested concept in the 1960s. Nonetheless this was a key element of the protracted ROLLING THUNDER campaign conducted over 3 years in the latter half of that decade, a component of the Vietnam War that is considered to have been a failure. Given the complexity of this War, analysis of any one such facet reveals a morass of interrelated issues so this essay will try to bring clarity to the germane elements by opening with a brief overview of the geo-political situation. This will illustrate how the roots of ROLLING THUNDER are intimately laced into the overall American approach to involvement in Vietnam, spanning France's period as a significant regional influence in Indochina through to the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations. It will analyse some of the reasons behind the campaign's failure both in the logic underpinning its inception and in the management of its execution. Higher level doctrinal issues will then be considered before taking an alternative look at the campaign, postulating how it might better be pursued in today's timeframe drawing on lessons learned over the intervening 3 decades. Deriving specific conclusions from such a subjective analysis could all too easily be flawed, but some themes do stand out, notably the need for and benefits of 'Unity of Command', as well as the continuing influence of domestic political pressures on the American military.¹ The essay will conclude by drawing out the thread that runs throughout the entire piece, namely the failure of basic, low-technology intelligence gathering and analysis which, together with an improved grasp of the Vietnamese culture, would

have enabled the Americans better to understand their enemy. Hence this author's thesis that ROLLING THUNDER was a failure of intelligence and cultural awareness.

In the early 1950s it was in America's interest to bolster French efforts in Vietnam both to contain the spread of influence of the Chinese sponsored Viet Minh and to force the Chinese to provide support on two separate fronts, Korea and Indochina. As Lewy observes 'The Indochinese and Korean theaters [sic] of war were now interdependent battlefields, for in each case China was the major source of support for the communist armies involved in the fighting.'² With France's waning influence in the country, especially after the battle of Dien Bien Phu, it became increasingly clear to the Oval Office that with no steadying American hand, the Pacific Rim countries could all collapse like dominoes. While this theory can be tracked back to remarks from the State Department in 1951 it was not without its naysayers, most notably the CIA. There were other more abstract strategic factors that undoubtedly affected the Administration's attitude towards South East Asia, namely connections to the Soviet Union and the Cold War. America's standing on the world stage was in danger of waning after supporting the failed Cuban invasion in 1961 and there was a perceived need to show her worth as a world power; add to this the developing position of America within NATO in the Cold War, with associated undertones of her real commitment to European security and defence, and it is entirely conceivable that from the President's perspective, America had to be seen to do something, and Vietnam provided the opportunity.³

The original strategy initiated under Kennedy's leadership was founded on a reluctance to commit significant numbers of troops, not least to avoid any sense of American imperialism in the post-French era. Instead emphasis was placed on provision of 'advisors' (special forces) charged with monitoring the Ho Chi Minh trail and training the South Vietnamese in guerrilla warfare. The removal of President Diem from office, his subsequent execution and 7 coups and changes of Saigon government failed to quell insurrection in the South and American sights turned to the North with the intention of suppressing cross-border support to the insurgents. In early 1964, Secretary McNamara and President Johnson sought to increase the pressure on North Vietnam using covert military operations, endeavouring to persuade them to cease support to the South. However, after visiting Vietnam in March, McNamara concluded that 'material aid to the South should be continued or increased' so planning for the bombing of North Vietnam was initiated.⁴

Throughout the rest of 1964 the strategic situation continued to deteriorate with the Americans struggling to control the Viet Cong and increasing diplomatic pressure on Hanoi. Following the Gulf of Tonkin incident when USS MADDUX was attacked by North Vietnamese craft, Congress responded to the general feeling of ire within the American populace by giving the President almost unanimously the right to use 'all necessary measures' to 'repel any armed attack' against American forces; by September 1964 the Administration had reached the conclusion that any further attacks on Americans should lead to bombing raids on North Vietnam.⁵ The pump was fully primed for ROLLING THUNDER.



USAF F-4C Phantoms bombing a target in North Vietnam, led by an EB-66 Destroyer EW aircraft (USAF)

This Operation was enacted in early 1965, hot on the heels of its predecessors, FLAMING DART I and II which were retaliatory raids into North Vietnam mounted in response to lethal attacks on American special forces' bases at Pleiku and Qui Nhon in the south. ROLLING THUNDER was conceived as a graduated operation intended to show the North Vietnamese that America was standing 'four-square' behind South Vietnam. Its purpose was threefold; firstly to signal to Hanoi the firmness of American resolve to defend South Vietnam against communist subversion and aggression; secondly to boost the sagging morale of the South Vietnamese; and thirdly to impose increased costs and strains upon the North Vietnamese if they continued their support of the Southern insurgency.⁶ This concept was loosely in keeping with Walt Rostow's thinking in the State Department; his generic thesis (with clear relevance to Vietnam given that his paper was circulated in late 1964) was that 'externally supported insurgencies could only be successfully dealt with by striking at their sources of support and



USS Pueblo

neutralising them'.⁷ But he also opined that 'any incidental improvement in morale in the country troubled by insurgency or improvement in bargaining leverage were to be regarded as bonuses'.⁸

Over the following 3 years ROLLING THUNDER was executed through several incremental phases interspersed with halts in the bombing. Some of these halts were deliberate, effectively strategic pauses intended to allow the enemy to reconsider his position and ideally to enter into peace negotiations, while others were driven by factors largely beyond the control of the American war machine, for example the North Korean seizure of USS PUEBLO in early 1968 which temporarily drew American carriers away from the Gulf of Tonkin towards the Korean peninsula. This attempt at a carrot and stick approach was broadly in keeping with Schelling's thesis; an influential game theorist, his concept was adopted by Johnson and McNamara when trying to determine how to escalate the pressure on the North Vietnamese to quell their

support to insurgency in the South.⁹ But the logic for such an approach was founded in nuclear strategy rather than the application of conventional, coercive force, a situation that was aggravated by questions over just how much of a carrot was actually being offered. However, as is shown later, the harsh reality of war does not appear to have been a good bed-fellow for this theoretical concept. The other significant feature of the campaign as it unfolded was the steady lifting of politically imposed targeting restrictions arising from Johnson's deep-felt concern that the war might spread and draw in Russia or China. The irony here is that Johnson caused the air campaign to edge ever closer towards the shape that the Joint Chiefs of Staff had advocated in the first instance, thereby denying the possible dislocation that an early 'shock and awe' bombing campaign might have had on the Hanoi government, although it is far from certain that the North Vietnamese would have capitulated early on, even in the face of a concerted and highly aggressive kinetic effort.

On 31 October 1968, and after losing approximately 750 Air Force and 470 Navy aircraft Johnson declared an end to the bombing of North Vietnam as a precursor to peace talks.¹⁰ Differing conclusions are drawn from the analyses of ROLLING THUNDER, itself an illuminating indication of varying motivations behind the agencies reporting. Considerable damage undoubtedly was inflicted on the North Vietnamese, but what is questionable is the applicability of pursuing a doctrine optimised for debilitating highly industrialised societies when confronted with one that is less developed, more rudimentary and highly adaptable. However the Americans did have

limited success and Lewy identifies that the bombing did indeed boost GVN morale, although this has to be offset by the fact that by the middle of 1965 the South Vietnamese army was near collapse, hardly a condition conducive to high morale.¹¹ Clodfelter supports this train of thought, but develops the idea that the boost's short-lived nature was more a reflection of the difficulty of sustaining morale once bombing had become the status quo.¹² What would seem to be self-evident, however, is the fact that if one's enemy is showing no sign of capitulation in the face of intense and continuing offensive action, then one's own morale inevitably will be eroded.

For any campaign to be successful there needs to be correlation between the strategic intent, the nature of the enemy and how he might pursue his own war aims, what weaknesses and vulnerabilities he might expose that could be exploited, and then the development and execution of a winning concept of operations. In isolation and when viewed from a Western perspective, it could be seen that ROLLING THUNDER broadly adhered to this paradigm and was congruent with the President's desire to ramp up the overall pressure on Hanoi, but this next section will expose some of the rifts in this flow of logic.

Firstly, it is highly questionable whether the Americans ever fully recognised the nature of the enemy that they were facing in Vietnam, certainly during the ROLLING THUNDER campaign itself. This was a classic example of a failure to look at the problem through the eyes of the opposition, something that was acknowledged by McNamara post facto.¹³ For example,

the North Vietnamese were set for a long and destructive war - Ho Chi Minh recognised that time was his ally as American will and resolve to fight and sustain a long war ultimately would stumble, a truly 'generational' frame of mind. Added to this was the stoic resolve that developed in the face of bombing, akin to that of the Londoners in the Blitz, commented on by General Giap when he stated that the effect of the bombing campaign was that 'our people's determination to defeat them is now higher and firmer than ever before'.¹⁴ But the pointers to Ho's philosophy were there to be read prior to 1965; for example in 1962 he shared his view of a long war of attrition with the French author Bernard Fall, an expert on Indochina, when he remarked that 'It might perhaps take ten years but our heroic compatriots in the South will defeat them [the Americans] in the end'.¹⁵ This was but one manifestation of Mao Tse Tung's influence on Ho Chi Minh, another being Mao's three phases for the successful prosecution of an insurgency; first, building political strength; second, consolidating and conducting limited military operations to wear down government forces; third, committing regular forces in a final offensive, for which the Tet offensive of 1968 would seem to be a prime candidate.¹⁶ There were clear indications of these 3 phases in the North's campaign plan but while the Americans had recognised the relationship between the bombing of the North and insurgent activity to the South, they had not appreciated the scale of the insurgency threat that had been growing for years, or the significance and influence of Mao's doctrine. The Vietnamese insurgency had its most recent roots in the Geneva Conference of 1954 when the communists were riding high following

Dien Bien Phu and succeeded inter alia in having the country partitioned along the 17th parallel. Following this separation the population nominally was free to choose where to live but the sought-after polarisation of the country, with communist factions to the North, was an illusion. In fact the communist regime had established a loose cadre of several thousand Viet Minh in the South whose popularity in general was high following their successful ousting of the French, and whose latent potential was further enhanced by communist refugees from the South spending just a short period of time in the North before returning. Furthermore the communist elements in the South were instructed by Hanoi to start armed revolution in early 1959, a move towards Phase II of Mao's doctrine. From all of this one could conclude that not only was the scale of the insurgency so great that the 'limited war' of ROLLING THUNDER was never going to meet the strategic intent, but also that attempts to undermine North Vietnamese commitment through strategic bombing were potentially flawed from the outset. In fact it might well be that the American actions were never going to have a decisive impact.

Moving to the efficacy of the kinetic approach, the American military developed 3 options ranging from action against infiltration routes in retaliation for any major Viet Cong attack, through an all-out and speedy bombing campaign across the North, to a 'slow squeeze' option.¹⁷ Johnson's choice of a compromise option (broadly an amalgam of 2 of these 3 proposals) involved a graduated response intended to achieve a change of heart by the North Vietnamese leadership with the American Administration able to control the weight of effort based on their

perceptions of the required coercive need.¹⁸ This relatively conventional approach was in tune with very senior American military officers, for example Admiral Sharp (Commander-in-Chief Pacific Fleet, responsible for prosecution of the naval element of the bombing campaign in the North) who claimed the war to be conventional in nature and, therefore, best prosecuted by conventional tactics.¹⁹ However, Clodfelter argues how destruction of resources necessary for conventional conflict would not have a deleterious impact on an enemy prosecuting the war along non-conventional lines; in his argument he weaves together the failings of America's conventional approach with their lack of understanding of their enemy, asserting that 'The United States had never opposed a guerrilla foe in the nuclear era, and memories of unconventional conflicts in the Philippines and Latin America had faded in the aftershock of Hiroshima'.²⁰ The reality is that this campaign was not comparable to the Second World War strategic bombing campaign, and the Vietnamese industrial machine was not the Ruhr Valley and vulnerable to the massive firepower that the Americans were able to deliver. This was largely because once the few major installations that existed had been destroyed, that industrial capacity and process was regenerated in a distributed fashion around the country. While there was undoubtedly a reduction in output capacity, this dispersed industry was still capable of delivering the bare minimum to sustain the Vietnamese, with the shortfall met by imports from Eastern Europe, but most notably through China and Russia. Weapons, ammunition and food were supplied overland and by sea through the port of Haiphong, but the President had introduced 'restricted

areas' along the Chinese border, and around Hanoi and Haiphong, within which bombing initially was absolutely forbidden. Consequently supplies continued to be imported and stockpiled in the border area in particular, immune from attack, a militarily ludicrous situation. As Lewy points out, the Joint Chiefs of Staff 'regularly urged the destruction of Haiphong harbour' but continuing worries over Soviet or Chinese retaliation precluded this option even though there was evidence of these powers providing material support to the North.²¹ Finally, lines of communication both internally and to the South were troublesome. The Vietnamese experience from preceding years was of having to cope with sub-optimal transport networks and they had developed a comprehensive repair capability which led to this target set being a very much harder nut to crack than was originally envisaged. Interestingly McNamara writing after the war claimed that he had reservations about the likelihood of the bombing seriously affecting the production and flow of materials given that they were sourced in Russia and China, moved to the front line via lines of communication that were difficult to target, and had inherent 'fall back' options.²² Arguably this was an acknowledgement that the 'stick' element of the campaign was not well founded but could be an example of a McNamara volte-face after the event, not exactly a rarity. In sum, the American bombing failed significantly to erode the sustainability of Hanoi's war effort, borne out by the weight of military capability fielded by the North Vietnamese in the Tet offensive of 1968.

With a dubious understanding of the enemy's real values and therefore his weaknesses and consequent

vulnerabilities, along with doubts over the usefulness of the kinetic actions, it is questionable whether ROLLING THUNDER could ever have coerced the enemy to the negotiating table. This view is captured in a North Vietnamese observation that 'one key reason for the failure to reach a negotiated settlement despite the many attempts at negotiation between April 1965 and 1967 was the issue of American bombing of both North and South Vietnam.'²³ Although the author does not develop this line of logic he does highlight that the communist leadership was not entirely averse to negotiation, but that such attempts were too early and that Hanoi maintained this position even in the face of considerable pressure from Moscow to enter dialogue with Washington.²⁴ As for the merit of the stop/start approach to the bombing campaign it is difficult to determine whether this was a viable strategy, but given that the Vietnamese capitalised on the bombing breaks to make good damage incurred and to reinforce where necessary, one could conclude that it did not meet expectations. At the time this coercive and 'compellent' style of warfare was new to both sides and any predictions of its outcome were theoretical, which reintroduces Schelling and his theses; as Kaplan makes clear, when confronted with the harsh reality of an aggressive situation rather than the purer intellectual arena of game theory, Schelling was 'stumped' when trying to apply his concept to a real war.²⁵ In his writings after the event, Schelling is inconclusive in his determination of the usefulness of the graduated coercive approach, from which one can probably conclude that the North Vietnamese felt similarly.²⁶ In the early days of ROLLING THUNDER Hanoi might also have been confused over precisely what



President Lyndon B Johnson

the Americans were trying to achieve given that the precursor FLAMING DART strikes were patently in retaliation for the attacks forces at Pleiku and Qui Nhon. One could well imagine that the North Vietnamese regarded these specific strikes as tactical punishments and did not appreciate that a strategic coercive bombing campaign had been visited upon them. If so, there is the possibility that by the time that they had awoken to the American strategic intent, their resolve had already hardened to the point that any further strikes would have had an opposite effect.

The final rifts in the flow of campaign logic lie in the management of ROLLING THUNDER and start at the highest level, the President. As Clodfelter summarises 'Johnson's controls on the air campaign flowed from his negative political objectives... the goals of avoiding Soviet or Chinese intervention...securing a favourable image for America overseas, and maintaining the support of Western allies caused him to keep a tight rein on Rolling Thunder'.²⁷ Not only did

this result in the 'restricted areas' for bombing, but it also led to micro-management of the campaign with attendant problems and military frustrations. Political imperatives overrode military judgement, and the President's predilection with personally approving targets in weekly and subsequently bi-weekly meetings introduced considerable inertia and friction to say nothing of massive frustration in the military. This arose from his drilling down into attack times and sometimes even approach routes, and pursuing a decision making process that all too frequently excluded his senior military officers. There were other pressures of relevance inside the Pentagon, arising from inter-Service rivalry. Air Force Chiefs had supported the introduction of the bombing, indeed the very existence of the Air Force as a separate Service was based on the theories of strategic bombing. The Navy was not without its own single Service politics and aspirations, largely centred around the newly founded capital ships, the aircraft carriers, which with their air wings had absorbed massive amounts of procurement monies; the Navy leadership needed to prove their theories on the use of naval air power as much as the Air Force needed to prove theirs. The Army's position was one of greater ambivalence with a slightly cynical (although entirely credible) assessment being that 'the Army supported the bombing to see it fail which would lead to more ground troops, the only way to win the war in their view';²⁸ there is a highly plausible view that this single Service polarisation was a prime reason for the Goldwater-Nichols Act of 1986, a watershed in the American approach to joint operations. Inevitably, such a hands-on approach by the Supreme Commander, in

conjunction with the 'Beltway politics' being pursued by the single Services, complicated General Westmoreland's conduct of the war at the operational level. Over and above the President's tactical management of ROLLING THUNDER, the entire air campaign suffered from dislocated command and control with effectively three separate battles being fought; the bombing campaign in the North, bombing in Laos and the air war in South Vietnam, the latter being the only element under Westmoreland's control. While he might have had a reasonable view of the progress of the campaign across the region, which would in itself have been a challenge in light of the stove-piped intelligence processes that were effectively single Service protectorates, Westmoreland struggled with several other command and control incoherencies. Air operations in his area of interest were variously controlled by Commanders from the Air Force, Navy, Marine Corps, Army and Strategic Air Command, spread from Saigon, through the Philippines, to Hawaii and on to Nebraska. This construct inevitably undermined any efforts that Westmoreland might have wished to pursue in trying to tackle the insurgent problem holistically; if he had been delegated oversight of the entire air war, he might have elected to reduce the emphasis on the bombing effort to the North in light of the counter-insurgency success he was realising through the Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support initiative within the overall pacification programme. But it is accepted that it is easy to apply a reverse-engineered command and control arrangement developed in our contemporary, highly Joint environment; the 'nirvana-like' proposition offered above would have required



Ho Chin Minh

Westmoreland to have grown up with an understanding of the benefits (and management issues) of Joint Command and to have established an appropriately configured headquarters with trusted air advisors.

When considering the key doctrinal lessons to be learned from ROLLING THUNDER the starkest candidate lies in command and control. The variety of entities managing some aspect of control of air operations countered one of the enduring Principles of War, 'Unity of Command' which, noting the provisos outlined above, would have afforded said Commander (perhaps Westmoreland) the ability to manage the entire air campaign. This arrangement flies in the face of the now recognised importance of having a single commander oversee the complex process of apportionment, command and control of air assets. An almost inevitable adjunct to the dislocated command structure was a failure to make best use of the assets available, in other words there was no 'Economy of Effort' exemplified, albeit at the tactical level,

by pilots remarking on how they would jettison ordnance at sea if their targets, approved by the White House, were no longer there, even at the expense of attacking viable targets of opportunity.²⁶ When viewing ROLLING THUNDER from an even more contemporary doctrinal angle, it would be tempting to claim that this was a classic example of how not to pursue a Comprehensive Approach which in itself is intended to bring coherence to the campaign across all instruments of power.²⁷ Given the immature state of this Approach it is impossible to draw too many objective lessons from Vietnam, although intuitively it is hard to imagine that a more 'joined-up' approach would not have delivered significant benefits.

What is considered more enlightening is to make a subjective judgement as to how the Americans would approach ROLLING THUNDER today, focusing at the operational level. Probably the largest advance that the Americans have made comes from their having embraced Jointness, predominantly at component level. Airspace management and asset apportionment would be coordinated by the Joint Force Air Component Commander (JFACC) who would have sight of all elements of the air campaign, be it tactical support to troops in the South, interdiction of the Ho Chin Minh trail in Laos, or bombing of the North. This single focus for command and control would bring coherence to the technically led intelligence gathering efforts, both pre- and post-strike, as well as to delivery of kinetic effect. The advent of precision weapons and ability to strike from greater range might change the nature of the air war (as was seen to some extent in Operation LINEBACKER) but it is difficult to anticipate just how much difference this

would truly make given that the enemy would also have commensurately better surface-to-air capability; also his ability to disperse, to camouflage and to re-generate would reduce the impact of precision. Modern Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities have undergone a massive improvement since the late 1960s and this would help inform targeting, battle damage assessment and related campaign effectiveness analysis; but a salutary lesson should be drawn from the air campaign in the Balkans which illustrated just how misleading ISR information can be when facing a crafty and elusive enemy. It would be naïve to consider that the simple introduction of a JFACC would solve the entire situation; the political influence of the American appropriations process on single Service agendas remains endemic, despite the best efforts of Joint evangelists, and this inevitably would undermine some of the coherence of a modern-day air campaign. There is also the omnipresent American attraction to technically based solutions which can all too easily lead to a tendency to measure campaign effectiveness through empirical data which will then be used to support procurement arguments with related political imperatives and influences – the vicious circle completes. In today's highly complex battlespace, a techno-centric approach to measuring effectiveness increasingly is acknowledged as only part of the answer and that much of the solution lies in a cognitive understanding of one's own actions on the enemy, a far harder determination. Achievement of this will require considerably greater investment in the more esoteric, less technical expertise vested in our Human Intelligence (HUMINT) capabilities in concert with a more purposeful

culture. But until this modern-day campaigning nirvana edges closer, it would be realistic to prepare for the more metricated approach to campaign effectiveness, aware that it is reflecting only part of the whole.

To conclude, this essay has set out to show that the dominant reason for the failure of ROLLING THUNDER was in the misunderstanding of the real nature and values of the enemy and, therefore, the most appropriate means of attacking him; this differs from the widely held view that the main reason for failure was associated with the higher level management and its intimate involvement in the campaign. The seeds of failure had been sown well before the first raid in 1965 through a combination of a well established and underestimated communist presence in South Vietnam and the long term approach that Ho Chi Minh adopted to ridding the region of Americans. Based on these factors the staccato coercive bombing campaign was likely never to achieve the desired intent. The execution was made more complex by excessively close involvement by the President who was desperate to avoid the conflict spreading to Russia or China, and by incoherent Service dominated command and control processes for management of the air campaign. The enduring nature of some of the tenets of higher level doctrine has been exposed and the campaign considered from a contemporary perspective. But the final word rightfully lies with intelligence and its role in assessing and analysing the enemy's thinking and values, a thread that draws much of this essay together, realistically delivered predominantly through better HUMINT and cultural awareness. This resonates with Sun Tzu: 'So it is said that if you

know others and know yourself, you will not be imperiled in a hundred battles; if you do not know others but know yourself, you win one and lose one; if you do not know others and do not know yourself, you will be imperiled in every single battle.'³²

Thus it is asserted that the reason for ROLLING THUNDER failing can be distilled down to poor intelligence and a lack of cultural awareness.

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Notes

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