

"The Role of Airpower in Vietnam"
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I welcome this opportunity to discuss with you some aspects of military airpower which I believe are of timely interest to you. As both citizens of this air-minded community and members of the Council on World Affairs, you have doubtless given much thought to the role of airpower in supporting our national objectives. In particular, you may have some searching questions regarding the part which airpower plays in Vietnam. I will address some of these questions in the hope that this will help gain a better understanding of the major evolution in the employment of airpower which was brought about by the unprecedented demands of the Vietnamese conflict.

In his pronouncements and talks President Johnson has made it unmistakably clear why we are in Vietnam and what our objectives are. As he has emphasized, these objectives are not military because they do not call for destruction of the enemy and his unconditional surrender but, rather, for peaceful and mutually acceptable settlement through unconditional negotiations. But to achieve these objectives in the face of persistent military aggression, it has become necessary to assist the South Vietnamese nation in many ways which include appropriate military action.

In this endeavor, the airpower provided by all our military Services and the South Vietnamese Air Force was assigned a variety of tasks. Some of these tasks may be considered adaptations of roles and missions that have become traditional over the years. In addition to these established roles, however, airpower in Vietnam now is being used in two new areas of operations which are truly unique in the annals of aerial warfare. The two new areas are the use of airpower for what might be called "strategic persuasion" and the employment of airpower in guerrilla warfare. Let me dwell on these new areas for a moment because I consider them of great significance, not only in the present conflict but in both deterring and fighting similar conflicts in the future.

"Strategic Persuasion"

Turning first to what I termed "strategic persuasion," we must bear in mind that, in effect, we are fighting a war with two different elements in Vietnam, of which one pertains to the north and one to the south. In turn, airpower has a dual objective in North Vietnam. One objective is to interdict the flow of supplies to the Viet Cong in the south, and I will come back to this objective shortly. The other objective is to apply a measured amount of strategic airpower in order to persuade the North Vietnamese leaders to cease their aggressive actions and to accede to President Johnson's offer of negotiating a peaceful settlement of the conflict.

It may well be, at this point, to clear up some misconceptions that exist, even within the military, regarding the difference between "strategic warfare" and "tactical warfare." Such misconceptions are readily understandable because these two types of aerial operations permit wide interpretation and there are many "gray areas" of overlap. But, in general, strategic warfare

is defined as aerial operations designed to "destroy the enemy's capability and will to continue the war." This is accomplished normally by progressively destroying fixed military as well as industrial and urban complexes, that is, targets of strategic significance in the territory under the enemy's domination.

This type of warfare came into its own during World War II, and emerged as the most vital factor in destroying the war-making capability of our enemies. In fact, it was primarily the relentless application of strategic airpower which led to the unconditional surrender of Japan, obviating the need for an invasion operation that might have cost untold thousands of American lives.

Since then, our strategic airpower has been vastly strengthened and refined through the conversion of our World War II bomber force to a fleet of all-jet, long-range bombers, through the development of compact nuclear weapons of greatly increased firepower, and through the addition of large numbers of land-based and submarine-borne intercontinental ballistic missiles carrying nuclear warheads. Today, this awesome nuclear force, composed principally of the bombers and missiles of the Strategic Air Command and the missiles of the Navy's Polaris submarine fleet, is capable of destroying any aggressor or combination of aggressors, even under the most unfavorable conditions of a nuclear surprise attack.

Being well known to any potential aggressors, this capability has acted as a powerful deterrent to nuclear aggression. It not only helped prevent an all-out general war to this date but also provided a "nuclear umbrella" which gave our statesmen more freedom of action in dealing with local crises and conflicts.

Strategic Aerospacepower in Vietnam?

The question has been raised why we are not using this powerful strategic capability to force an end to the war in Vietnam. There can be no doubt that we could destroy all of North Vietnam virtually overnight. But while this might end the war in Vietnam, it could easily spark a general nuclear war—the very contingency we are determined to avoid and deter. Moreover, such drastic action is neither necessary nor in accord with the declared intentions and policies of this country.

Our policies in this respect were spelled out by President Johnson in his historic address at Johns Hopkins University last April when he declared: "We have no desire to devastate that which the people of North Vietnam have built with toil and sacrifice. We will use our power with restraint and with all the wisdom that we can command. But we will use it."

And use it we do, but only to the extent necessary to achieve our declared aims. Toward this end, our strategic capability is utilized in two ways. First, our full nuclear strategic capability must continue to act as a deterrent, that is, provide us freedom of action in taking whatever military measures are required in Vietnam without risking escalation into nuclear war. Second, our conventional strategic capability is being applied, as the President said, with restraint and discrimination until the rulers of North Vietnam become persuaded to agree to negotiations on an equitable basis. That point will be reached when these rulers recognize that the price of continued aggression is higher than they are willing and prepared to pay.

It is evident, therefore, that the principle of "strategic persuasion" is not meant to achieve total military victory, as all-out strategic airpower helped to achieve in World War II. Rather, it is designed solely as an instrument of foreign policy for the attainment of a diplomatic objective.

The great advantage of such strategic persuasion lies in its flexibility. Under the protection of the nuclear umbrella, its pressure can be increased in measured steps, as may be necessary, while still being kept well below the level uncontrollable escalation. By the same token, the pressure can be decreased if warranted by a reduction in the intensity of the enemy's aggressive actions, as Secretary of Defense McNamara indicated in a TV interview a few weeks ago. Finally, the pressure can be discontinued altogether at any time if it has achieved its purpose or if such action is expected to foster its achievement.

There are indications that this measured application of the principle of "strategic persuasion" in Vietnam is beginning to take effect. This is not surprising if it is realized that, in the past six months, South Vietnamese and US aircraft have flown over 15,000 sorties against carefully selected targets in North Vietnam and dropped more than 14,000 tons of bombs on them.

The targets included primarily lines of communication and military facilities such as bridges, railroads, highways, barracks, ammunition depots, radar sites and the like. Most of the targets in North Vietnam were attacked for the added or principal purpose of helping to impede the flow of reinforcements and supplies to the Viet Cong in South Vietnam. And this brings me to the second new area of aerial operations in that war, namely, the use of airpower against guerrillas.

Use of Aerospacepower Against Guerrillas

Offhand, it may seem futile to employ airpower in trying to combat extensive guerrilla activities, especially under conditions as they exist in Vietnam. There are no well defined fronts; virtually all of South Vietnam is the battlefield and combat operations shift rapidly and unpredictably from one locale to the other. Hiding in the jungle or mixing with the civilian population, the Viet Cong normally strike in relatively small numbers and whenever they have the advantage of surprise.

Moreover, the Viet-Cong continue to receive sizable reinforcements and an incessant flow of materiel from the Hanoi regime. Deputy Secretary of Defense Cyrus Vance stated in a talk a few months ago that the bulk of the Viet Cong weapons—at least 60 to 70 percent, including almost all the heavy and modern weapons—come from external communist sources. But therein lies also one weakness of the Viet Cong which airpower is well suited to exploit, and that is through what is known as "interdiction" or attacks against the lines, means and sources of supply.

As you will remember, our initial aerial interdiction effort was limited to targets in South Vietnam in the hope that the conflict could be kept at the lowest possible level of intensity. But in granting the North Vietnamese a sanctuary where they could safely collect and store any amount of supplies for the Viet Cong guerrillas, we found ourselves in the same position as a narcotics squad that is trying to smash a dope ring by going after the pushers but has no warrant to enter the ring headquarters from where the pushers are directed and supplied.

When we began striking targets in North Vietnam last February, we not only added greatly to the effectiveness of our efforts to impede the flow of supplies to the guerrillas but we also made it increasingly costly for the North Vietnamese to engage in the provision of these supplies. A bridge and a highway which carry a flow of military supplies to the guerrillas in the South, normally serve local needs also, and when they are destroyed as interdiction targets, all other traffic is disrupted at the same time. This is the direct price which we are now exacting from the North Vietnamese themselves for their active support of the guerrillas in South Vietnam.

There can be no doubt that aerial interdiction, in combination with naval surveillance of the sea supply routes, has greatly reduced the support which the Viet Cong are receiving from the outside and that it will have an increasing impact on their guerrilla operations throughout the

remainder of the war. But because of geographic conditions, these actions cannot cut off outside support entirely; they can only reduce it and make it more costly. Nor is reduction of outside support sufficient, by itself, to defeat the guerrillas because they will continue to capture weapons and ammunition and to take whatever else they need from the civilian populace.

Other Aerial Tactics in Vietnam

But interdiction is only one of several ways in which airpower is being employed to combat the guerrillas. While interdiction as such is not a new tactic—although it had to be adapted to the specific needs of anti-guerrilla warfare—some other aerial tactics now used in South Vietnam have little, if any, precedent.

For instance, airpower was called upon to deny the Viet Cong another type of sanctuary that is peculiar to guerrilla warfare in that part of the world—the jungle. Hiding in the dense woods, the guerrillas could make frequent lightening raids against camps and bases, sabotage railroads, ambush road and canal traffic, and fade safely back into the jungle after their forays. These raids and ambushes have been made far more difficult and costly to the Viet Cong ever since our aircraft started spraying a commercial type of weed killer which defoliates the brush and trees adjoining any area likely to be ambushed.

The defoliation tactic has been extremely effective. Interrogation of prisoners and defectors indicates that it has had a major effect on the operations as well as on the morale of the Viet Cong. Although the defoliant is no more harmful to humans than the chemical used to kill crab grass and dandelions, and in fact does not even harm the plant roots, communist propaganda has charged that it is poisonous. Apparently, this vicious claim is widely believed by Viet Cong partisans who, as a result, fear the defoliant's alleged toxic effects on themselves as much as its impact on their ambush tactics.

Our aerial defoliation program has helped the fight against the guerrillas in other respects also. In addition to denying raiders and snipers protection against discovery close to their intended targets, defoliation provides timely detection and a clear line of fire in case of attack. Moreover, it greatly improves not only horizontal but also vertical visibility. This adds to the effectiveness of another type of aerial operations employed against the guerrillas, namely, the Forward Air Controller operations.

Forward Air Controller Operations

We are now operating some 120 light observation planes, known as the O-1, which are fanned out over virtually all of South Vietnam. Each pilot is assigned to a specific geographic area, about the size of a large county in the United States. Cruising over his area day after day, the pilot gets to know it as intimately as he knows his own back yard at home. Therefore, he is likely to spot any suspicious movement or change on the ground below despite the fact that the Viet Cong are experts on camouflage, having been known to transplant live trees to cover new ground positions.

The Forward Air Controllers serve two important functions. First, they conduct continuous surveillance and reconnaissance of Viet Cong movements and operations. Second, they direct and control air strikes by fighters and fighter-bombers. This has proved particularly effective in repelling Viet Cong attacks on government-held villages and outposts. Very few South Vietnamese positions have ever fallen to the Viet Cong when airpower could thus be directed against the attackers.

Use of B-52 Bombers

Information provided by the O-1 pilots is also helpful to an aerial tactic which is used to an increasing degree against widely deployed Viet Cong troop concentrations, and that is the intensive bombing of large areas suspected of concealing such concentrations. Strategic Air Command B-52 bombers started to fly missions last June, and these missions have proved so effective that their frequency has been stepped up considerably.

Three questions have been raised regarding the use of the big eight-jet bombers for dropping conventional bombs in the Vietnam war although they were designed primarily for carrying nuclear weapons in a general war. It may be well to use this opportunity to answer these questions.

The first question is: why use our most powerful strategic bomber against essentially tactical targets while tactical bombers are used against strategic targets in North Vietnam? There are several compelling reasons for choosing the B-52 for the job that it is doing in South Vietnam. For one, this airplane can carry a total of 51 conventional 750-pound bombs—twelve under each wing and 27 in the bomb bay—which makes it ideally suited to thoroughly cover a large area within a matter of minutes. It can reach its target from its distant home base which is far beyond the reach of any enemy. Equipped with highly advanced bombing and navigation systems, it can bomb with the utmost accuracy from a wide range of altitudes, day and night, and in any kind of weather.

The performance and carrying capacity of this strategic bomber, which make it so suitable for area-bombing with conventional munitions, are not matched by tactical aircraft. If we were to use our much smaller tactical planes for this task, a number of them would be required to do the job a single B-52 can do. Therefore, by employing relatively few B-52s to take care of the area-bombing against expansive enemy troop concentrations and positions, we free many more tactical aircraft for urgent missions for which they are much better suited.

Therein lies also the answer to the next question, and that is, why we are not using B-52s against targets in North Vietnam. The reason is simply that the types of targets we have been attacking in North Vietnam so far can be handled as well or better by land-based and carrier-borne tactical aircraft. It has, therefore, become as yet neither necessary nor desirable to divert more B-52s from our nuclear strike force than are needed for the area-bombing operation in South Vietnam.

And this leads to the final question regarding the use of the B-52 in Vietnam: how does this affect our nuclear deterrent? I can assure you that the effect on our nuclear strike capability is negligible because the B-52s, which have been converted to the delivery of conventional bombs in Vietnam, can be reconverted rapidly to their nuclear configuration. Moreover, the Single Integrated Operational Plan for all our nuclear strike forces is so flexible that it permits the temporary reassignment of targets if some of the weapon systems in that plan are withdrawn for one reason or another. And with an inventory of over 1200 land-based and submarine-borne ballistic missiles our nuclear superiority certainly remains great enough to provide a most convincing deterrent to nuclear aggression and to escalation of any local conflict into nuclear war.

Emergence of the Helicopter

Another development to come out of the Vietnamese War that is related to airpower is the emergence of the helicopter as a most useful aerial vehicle in support of the fight against guerrillas. As you may remember, the helicopter's capability to land and take off vertically was

utilized extensively during the Korean War to evacuate wounded from areas not accessible to other aircraft and to rescue downed airmen from enemy-held territory. This now traditional role has been greatly expanded in Vietnam.

With guerrillas striking in many remote and unexpected places, from small bands of snipers to well-sized ambushes, helicopters have proved invaluable in evacuating outnumbered patrols and outposts, and in landing reinforcements and ammunition where paradrops are not feasible.

Tactical Airpower: Most Important Weapon

Turning next to tactical airpower, there can be no doubt that this has proved our most important aerial weapon in both South and North Vietnam. Although it has never been used before against guerrillas to the extent and in the manner it is being employed in Vietnam, tactical airpower as such is not at all new. In fact, its first major use was against the Nazis at El Alamein, Egypt, in World War II. US and Royal Air Force planes first gained aerial superiority, then isolated the battlefield and finally smashed directly at enemy ground forces. This concept was further developed during the rest of the African campaign and refined in Europe during the remainder of the War.

Tactical airpower was also used effectively in the Korean War, in gaining aerial superiority and in close support of ground troops as well as in hitting the enemy's means and lines of supply. Of course, the front in Korea was fairly stable and well-defined, at least during the latter stages of the War, while the opposite is true in Vietnam. However, we have again absolute air superiority, which is a vital factor in Vietnam because, without it, airlift, helicopter and air-controller operations would be all but impossible. Moreover, we have greatly improved communications which permit the rapid dispatch of tactical aircraft to any village, outpost or position threatened by, or subjected to, Viet Cong attack. As I mentioned earlier, the Forward Air Controllers have been most helpful in that respect and deserve much credit for permitting the timely and effective application of tactical airpower in the defense of South Vietnamese villages and facilities under attack.

The magnitude of the tactical air effort is emphasized by the fact that, during the past six months alone, South Vietnamese and US aircraft have flown almost 25,000 sorties in direct support of government forces, delivering over 40,000 tons of bombs on Viet Cong positions. It would have been far more difficult for the South Vietnamese government to cope successfully with the aggressive and elusive bands of guerrillas if it had not been for the massive and effective assistance of tactical airpower.

Airlift, Evacuation and Rescue

Another vital, although often overlooked, airpower function in the Vietnamese war are the US Air Force's spectacular air evacuation and air rescue operations as well as its cargo and troop airlift. As rail and road facilities in South Vietnam are limited and, where existent, are always threatened by Viet Cong attack, airlift has been our primary means of bringing in badly needed supplies and reinforcements.

In the past six months the Air Force has flown some 30,000 airlift sorties, carrying almost 250,000 personnel and over 50,000 tons of cargo. The cargo included just about everything—military equipment, medical supplies, food. C-123 cargo aircraft even airdropped live farm animals, ranging from chickens to cows.

Competent Professionals in Vietnam

I want to mention one more facet of airpower in Vietnam that deserves particular recognition, and that is the extraordinary type of men who make up our flight and ground crews. Many of these men are volunteers; in fact, there are waiting lists for some of the specialized assignments that call for volunteers. Both volunteers and those on regular assignment are men of the highest quality.

The personnel on whom our airpower rests in this area are superbly trained and competent professionals in the best sense of the word. Almost across the board, they are mature, serious-minded and businesslike in all their actions. Above all, they know why we are in Vietnam, what is at stake, and what is expected of them. All this is proved again and again in innumerable instances of standing initiative, resourcefulness and gallantry.

I am proud to say that this is equally true for all the men, regardless of whether they participate in the operations of tactical and strategic bombers, carrier aircraft, helicopters, transports or the little air-controller planes. And this is also true for the men of the young Vietnam Air Force which we helped to create, train and equip. With some 10,000 men and about 300 aircraft, the Air Force of South Vietnam is doing a tremendous job and is a major factor in the pursuit of our common objectives in behalf of their country.

From what I have said it should be evident that the combined airpower of South Vietnam and the United States is serving its intended purposes exceedingly well. Despite the continued intransigence and boasts of the communist leaders, our operations in Vietnam have an increasing impact on the activities and morale of the Viet-Cong, and airpower plays an all-important role in this turn of events. Analysis of all available intelligence information indicates that the Viet Cong view airpower as one of the most significant elements for preventing them from capturing or holding major objectives and from meeting and defeating the government forces in open battles.

Of course, airpower is only one phase of the over-all military effort needed in Vietnam. In turn, the military effort is only part of the total effort that will be necessary to bring peace, security and economic health to the brave 15 million people of South Vietnam. But to achieve this goal in the face of armed aggression, our military effort must continue until we have convinced the aggressors that a peaceful settlement of the conflict is in the best interests of all concerned, particularly their own.

To quote again from President Johnson's Johns Hopkins address: "We will not be defeated. We will not grow tired. We will not withdraw, either openly or under the cloak of a meaningless agreement." I share the President's confidence that we will never be defeated in Vietnam and that we will never withdraw until we have achieved our peaceful objectives.

I have no doubt that we can and will achieve these objectives and, when we do, airpower will have had a major part in the victory of reason and compassion over force and hate.

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