

The Folly of “Strategic Persuasion”

Gen. John P. McConnell became Chief of Staff in February 1965, as the Vietnam War was expanding. By fall, the US was engaged in a major air war. It was a strange type, though. As McConnell told a Dallas audience, US objectives “are not military.” He outlined, instead, a goal of “strategic persuasion,” in tune with the views of Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara. While the US was busy sending signals to Hanoi, however, North Vietnam was fighting a real war. That explains why the USAF war effort, though enormous, had limited impact. Incrementalism, gradualism, micromanagement, hesitation, stops, and starts—they all served to hamstring US airpower. In this speech—and with 45 years of hindsight—you can see it all coming.

In his pronouncements and talks, President [Lyndon B.] 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. ...

Turning first to what I [term] “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.... 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. ...

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. ...

Being well-known to any potential aggressors, [America’s massive nuclear arsenal] 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.

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.”

“The Role of Airpower in Vietnam”

Gen. John P. McConnell, USAF Chief of Staff
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“Keeper File”

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 [of] 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. ...

Of course, airpower is only one phase of the overall 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 ... 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. ■