

The Joint Chiefs had a bold plan for airpower, but political leaders chose gradualism instead.



The Vietnam War That Wasn't

By Jack Broughton

As the US first became involved in direct combat with North Vietnam, America's airpower resources were used sparingly, spastically, and less than efficiently. Many observers pronounced the mere threat of US airpower might bring the North to its knees. That did not happen. America's formidable and available airpower arsenal was only tentatively committed and was shackled by gradualism and micromanagement from the highest levels of government.

Because of this, the scene was set for a string of reports on airpower's ineffectiveness, that it was failing to "win" the war. Many historians still cling to this view.

But a good number of those who fired shots, and got shot at, believe to this day that had US military capabilities been better utilized, the outcome of the war in Vietnam would have been dramatically altered.

As early as 1962, Vietnam scholars such as Bernard B. Fall, arguably the most prominent war correspondent, historian, political scientist, and expert on Indochina during the 1950s and 1960s, spoke of the North's fear that American retaliation to military action by Hanoi would destroy their emerging economy and lead to post-war Chinese occupation. Ho Chi Minh had cleverly extracted a great deal of assistance from both the Soviet Union and China, resulting in an industrial complex that was the only real economic entity in Southeast Asia at the time.

In less than 40 years, Ho and his followers had gained the freedom from China that had eluded their ancestors for the preceding two thousand years. The leadership and the people of North Vietnam were fanatically proud of this accomplishment.

Ho himself had spent enough time in Korea to know what air strikes had done, and he was hesitant to trade the glory of conquering the South for sacrificing his national pride and economic potential to American bombs. The fact that the leadership in Hanoi was smart enough to fear a determined assault by US airpower was lost on American leadership. The US leadership also ignored the historical advice of theorist Carl Von Clausewitz, who professed that if you have to go to war, victory is all that counts, and using the maximum amount of force as quickly as possible is the preferred path to victory.

Washington also paid little attention when Fall, from his on-scene combat perspective, predicted that both France and the US would suffer defeat because

A post-strike photo showing a target in North Vietnam destroyed with no collateral damage.

of their tactics and lack of understanding of Vietnamese society.

In 1964 the Joint Chiefs of Staff directed the development of a list of strategic targets in North Vietnam. The 94 targets they identified were considered to have a direct relationship to the North's war-making capabilities and will to fight. Additionally, Air Staff planners had designed an air campaign that Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. John P. McConnell considered capable of knocking out those 94 targets in 28 days.

By all accounts, American airpower was capable of immediately implementing the plans. There was a fully combat ready F-105 fighter-bomber wing at Yokota AB, Japan, and another at Okinawa, prepared to deploy to operating bases at Takhli and Korat in Thailand. Tactical Air Command fighter squadrons were routinely accomplishing trans-Pacific flights for temporary duty deployments to Southeast Asia. B-52 bombers were in position to engage, and aerial refueling tankers were prepared to operate out of Bangkok. Naval carrier air wings were on, or en route to, "Yankee Station"—their operating position in the South China Sea, well within range of Hanoi and Haiphong.

STRATEGY FOR DEFEAT

The White House announced to the world in August 1964 that the US would strike firmly if the North or their allied Viet Cong units chose to attack any US facilities in South Vietnam.

The reply came with a mortar attack on the US air base at Bien Hoa, South Vietnam in November, killing and wounding Americans, and destroying aircraft just 20 miles north of Saigon.

In the aftermath of the attack, the Johnson Administration professed concern over Chinese reaction should America do what it had said it would do. The President, ignoring the JCS and US Ambassador to South Vietnam Maxwell D. Taylor, decided to take no retaliatory action.

In his book *Strategy for Defeat*, Adm. Ulysses S. Grant Sharp Jr., commander of US Pacific Command from 1964 to 1968, said that the President should have initiated the JCS plan. Sharp stated air attacks "would have had a major effect on North Vietnam and might well have been the very thing needed to stop North Vietnamese aggression in the south and to bring Southeast Asia back to a peaceful, stabilized situation." Some 11 years before the war's end, he argued, the US may well have prevented the costly and drawn-out war that followed.

Instead, Operation Rolling Thunder was designed to be the effective air campaign against the North, but was constantly hobbled by President Johnson's frequent invocation of the "China Card"—a pronounced fear of a large-scale Chinese intervention in Vietnam, much like in the Korean War. But this fear ignored the historic enmity between the Chinese and Vietnamese, and the frequent analogy with the Korean War was seriously flawed.

In the fall of 1950, US forces had pushed invading North Korean forces back over the 38th Parallel and had advanced to the banks of the Yalu River, the border with China.

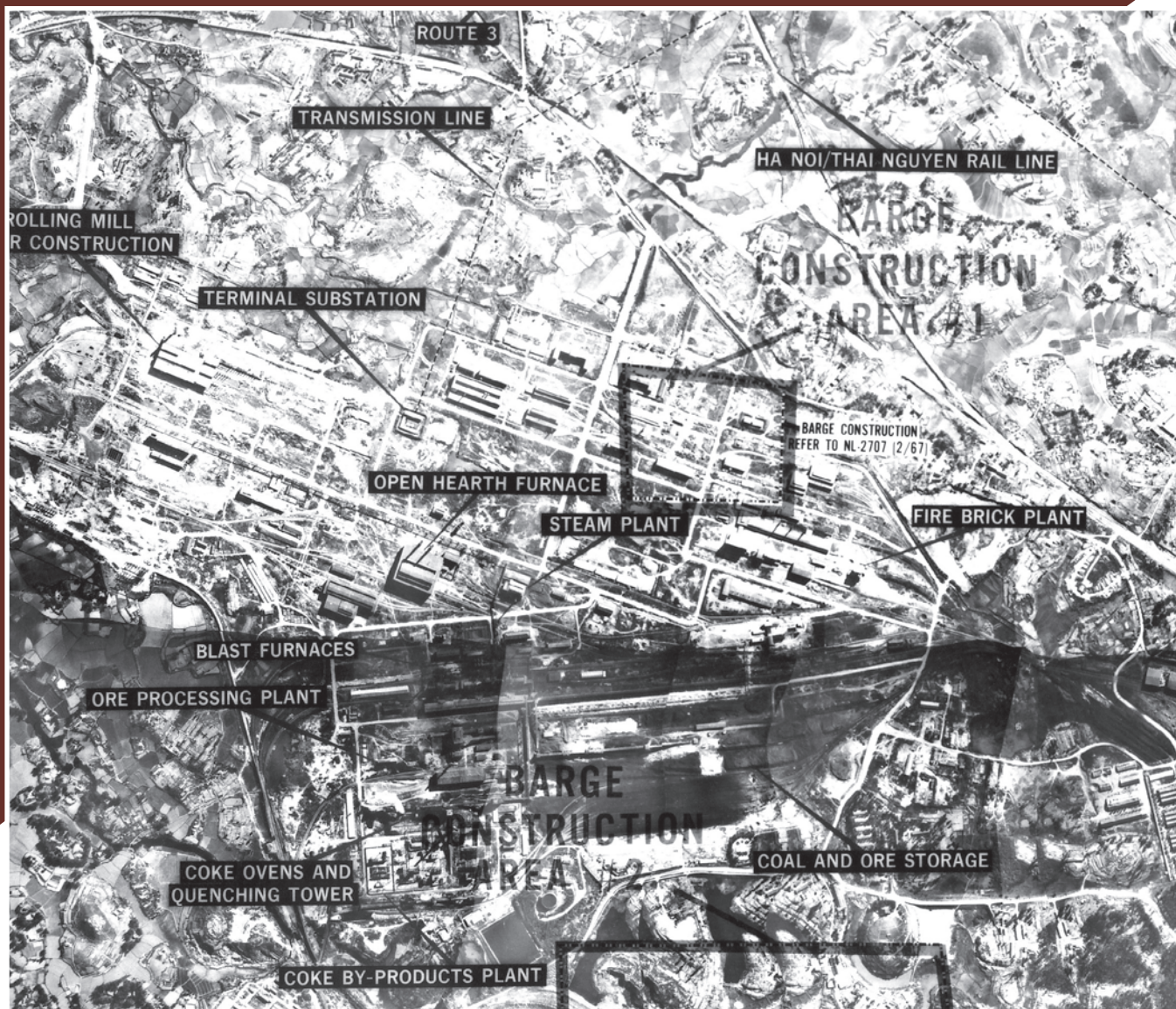
Gen. Douglas MacArthur was threatening to enter China, so the Chinese responded by simply marching their assembled forces across the border into the Korean War.

In Vietnam, US ground units were never closer than 400 miles from the Chinese border and never threatened to enter North Vietnam—much less China. Had Chinese ground forces chosen to enter the ground war in South Vietnam, such action would not only have widened the war substantially, but the Chinese would have faced US airpower that would have forced their forces to pay dearly en route to South Vietnam. Also, as the Cultural Revolution began in 1965-66, the Chinese were too bound up with their own internal difficulties to respond militarily except to a direct threat to their national security interests. China was under additional stress due to the worsening diplomatic friction in the 1960s between China and Russia.

Johnson and Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara used the China Card to justify their preferred gradualist approach. They advocated short periods of limited air strikes followed by a unilateral cease-fire declaration, to allow the North to assess the situation and in theory beg the US for peace talks.

The North took advantage of this approach and used the cease-fires to repair strike damage, improve and practice tactics, perfect their communications, further disperse MiGs and associated fuel and munitions, build new surface-to-air missile sites, and strengthen readiness for the next push southward. Rolling Thunder, as it unfolded, struggled for effectiveness.

North Vietnamese ground forces, empowered from ending French colonial rule at the battle of Dien Bien Phu, were certainly a dominating force in the war against South Vietnam, but were not a large factor in the JCS plan for aerial action against the North. The North's anti-aircraft capability at the initiation of hostilities was minimal and in no way resembled the fiercest air defenses



in history that materialized later in the war—after a massive Russian and Chinese infusion of equipment, communications, training, and technical assistance.

At the beginning of the air war, there were no SAMs to contend with, the North Vietnamese MiG interceptor aircraft program was practically non-existent, and anti-aircraft guns were mostly limited to what was left over from the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu.

There was a high probability that aggressive US Air Force and US Navy aviation air attacks could have changed the calculations in Southeast Asia.

Initially USAF and Navy fighters could have disabled all of the North's communication and warning facilities, plus anti-aircraft gun positions. Fighters could then have destroyed the wide open, easily identified fuel tank farms in and around Hanoi and Haiphong, before the North began dispersing fuel in barrels into the villages of the countryside. Those

same fighters could also have crippled the docking and storage facilities of Haiphong harbor, without damaging international shipping vessels. Adequate warnings to the nations sponsoring the shipping, plus the strategic sowing of mines by B-52s in the waters surrounding Haiphong, would certainly have hindered ship traffic bound for the North.

The next step in the North's isolation could have been the crippling of the main source of supply input from China, the northeast rail line that ran from the Chinese border to downtown Hanoi. This was a 140-mile, single railroad track, allowing only one-way traffic. One end of the line was supply and transshipment facilities on the Vietnamese-Chinese border, while the other end was the one and only roundhouse in Hanoi.

Fighters could have disposed of the near-border supply facilities without violating the Chinese border. B-52 bomber crews were ultimately capable of eliminating

An aerial photograph of Thai Nguyen shows an unprotected cluster of industrial targets.

Hanoi's roundhouse and disabling the nearby Gia Lam airfield. Supply inroads to the North would have been virtually nonexistent.

An ideal strategic mission awaited B-52 bombers, at the Thai Nguyen steel mill complex, 50 miles north of Hanoi. It was a large, modern, self-contained industrial complex. If there was a single, meaningful symbol of the North's industrial sophistication, Thai Nguyen was it. It was bordered on the north by the relatively accessible Highway 3 and the Hanoi/Thai Nguyen rail line and on the south by extensive coke ovens and coal and ore storage facilities. Its inner area contained blast furnaces, iron and steel works, a thermal power plant, an open hearth furnace and steam plant, a major four-track rail choke point, a brick plant, barge construction and as-

sembly units, and multiple logistics and administration buildings. It was a prime strategic target—and initially lacked MiG and SAM protection.

Farther west, at the junction of the Red and Black rivers, was the Viet Tri thermal power plant and rail marshalling facility. Between them was a large, grey, four-story building that prior to the war was a chemical plant. At the opening of hostilities it was decorated with a large white circle centered with a red cross and immediately designated as a hospital. Intense 37 and 57 mm gunfire from the rooftop and smaller arms fire from all the windows greeted aircraft approaching the hospital. A B-52 mission and a few fighter strikes could have removed Viet Tri from the target list. Another target for initial action would have been any one of a number of irrigation dike systems that were the main feature of the Red River Delta. Rupturing even a small segment would have issued notice to the majority of the North's population that the US had the capability of quickly depleting their main food staple: rice.

Though the major Soviet deliveries of MiG fighters were yet to come, a few bomber trips to the airfields at Phuc Yen and Kep would have been appropriate. SAM sites were also a thing of the future, but as they arrived, the earth-moving, grad-

ing, installation, and calibration activity, accomplished by Russian crews, was a very conspicuous series of events. Fighter flights could have destroyed the sites and their protecting anti-aircraft weaponry while under construction.

CONVINCING EVIDENCE

Though the JCS and Sharp had identified 94 significant targets, proper airpower action could have quickly changed the direction of the war even if only a fraction of the targets were destroyed. Airpower could have convinced the North that US military forces were indeed determined to decimate the economic and national progress Ho held dear.

In evaluating what could have been done, accuracy of the strikes and collateral damage were always under scrutiny. For pilots, postmission evaluation of strike photos was adequate for mission assurance, but outsiders needed more convincing.

It would be difficult to find more accurate evidence than on-scene comments from a qualified observer, and John Colvin, British consul in Hanoi, and John Clark Pratt, provided such a critique excerpted in the book *Vietnam Voices*, by John Clark Pratt.

Colvin recounted that he and his vice consul walked to their balcony as the air raid sirens sounded in May 1967, and “as

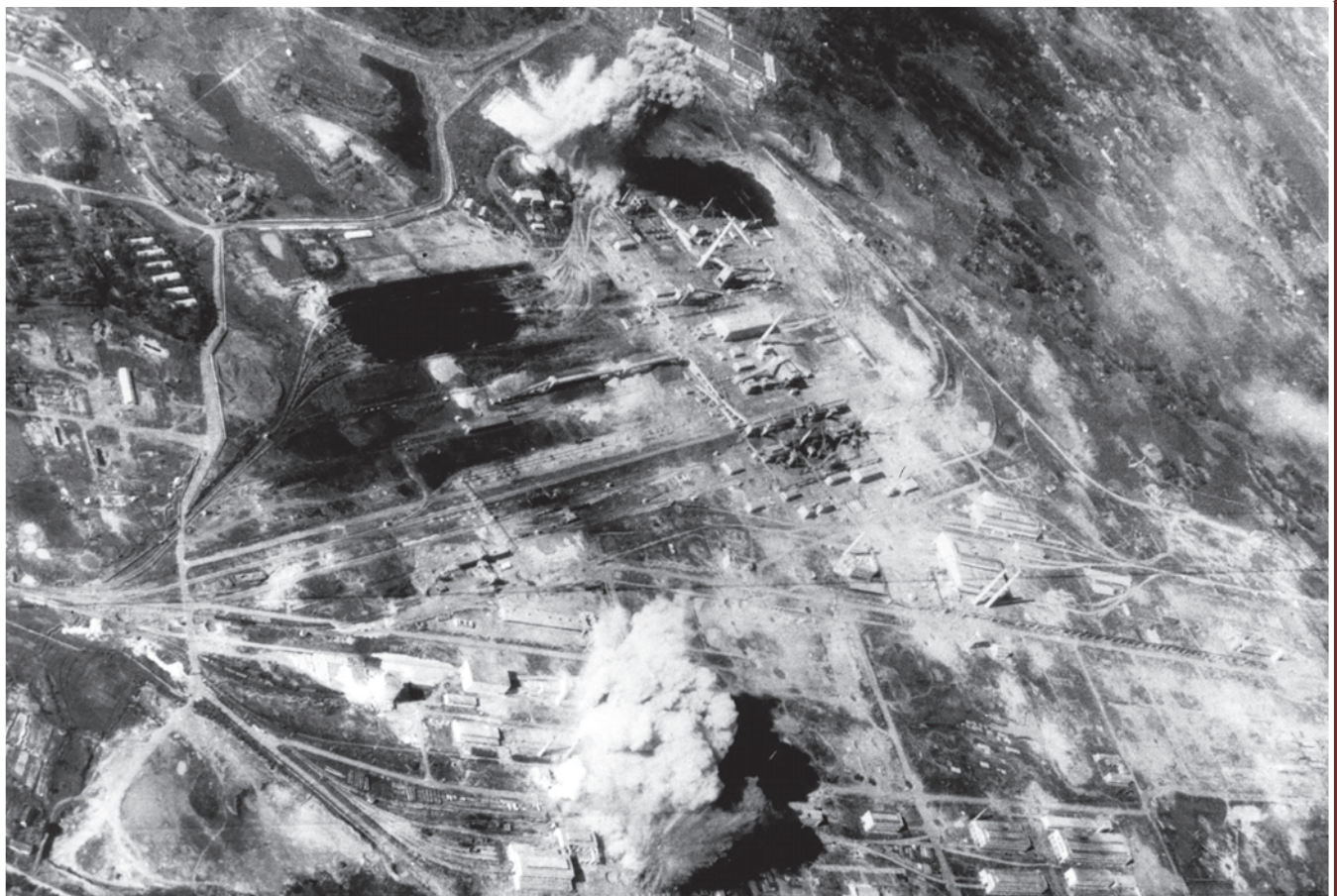
we stood there, seven or eight United States F-105 Thunderchief fighter-bombers, flying at scarcely more than rooftop height and no more, it seemed, than 100 yards away, shot across our vision ... [at] enormous speed. They had come on us suddenly out of nowhere, the hard, gray, sleek aircraft, in superb formation at approximately 600 mph, disappearing for an instant behind the trees and buildings that lay between us and the power station (thermal power plant), ... then quickly climbing clear and away. ... Almost simultaneously, such lights as were on in the apartment went out, the fan stopped turning, and a column of dust, smoke, and flame rose from the direction of the power station. ... The performance of this squadron disposed of every communist or other illusion about the laxity of American bombing or the imprecision of US bombing techniques. ... There was, in our opinion, no hope at all for [the power plant].”

Colvin noted that of the complex of 50 houses around the plant only three had been damaged—and by blast rather than bomb hits.

US combat aviators of all services involved in the Vietnam War were well-

This photo shows the Thai Nguyen steel plant under attack in 1967.

USAF photo





trained, experienced, and highly dedicated. The majority of USAF pilots ranged in rank from seasoned captains to full colonels, with new lieutenants a rarity. Navy and Marine units were similarly manned. A good percentage of these pilots had seen combat before, and actively employed units had seasoned combat veteran commanders. Proper utilization of available airpower and personnel could have, in a matter of weeks, eliminated a high enough percentage of those 94 targets to alter the entire war.

But the basics of the JCS plan were ignored. Bombers were not committed against strategic targets, but were relegated to bombing runs over jungles down south. Fighters were used in a restricted and wasteful manner against strategic targets up north.

Tactical commanders, up to the general officer level, were forbidden from exercising target selection and mission control, nor could they specify attack techniques. Instead, power over the air war was confined to detailed decrees from the Washington, D.C.-based "Tuesday Lunch Bunch," as described by Sharp in his book.

"The final decision on what targets were to be authorized, the number of sorties allowed, and in many instances even the tactics to be used by our pilots, was made at a Tuesday luncheon in the White House attended by the President, the Secretary of State, the Secretary of Defense, Presidential Assistant Walt Rostow, and

the presidential press secretary. ... The significant point is that no professional military man, not even the Chairman of the JCS, was present at these luncheons until late in 1967," he wrote.

If the USAF penchant for seeking knowledge by way of analysis of lessons learned is valid, then it is appropriate to theorize as to what would have happened if airpower had been used effectively at the start of the Vietnam War. Colvin's recounting from central Hanoi was a persuasive tale, and his on-scene comments define the conditions that existed even as Rolling Thunder was strangled by gradualism.

In his report, Colvin observed the evidence of malnutrition was clear among adults and children in the capital area, as food was not coming in from China. "For three days there was no water supply" due to failed electrical pumps, he wrote, and already unsanitary conditions were growing worse. The economy of the North was at last "breaking down," and for the first time "no amount of excited exhortation could correct" the conditions. Since Colvin had arrived in Hanoi in 1966, the streets had been lined with war materiel delivered from China, but by August and September 1967 there was little left. "The trains were com-

Left: Army Gen. Creighton Abrams, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, Chief of Naval Operations Adm. David McDonald, and USAF Lt. Gen. David Burchinal (l-r) discuss war plans in 1966. McNamara and President Johnson rejected the Joint Chiefs of Staff's recommendations in favor of "gradualism." Above: Adm. Ulysses Sharp, chief of US Pacific Command from 1964 to 1968, believed the JCS plan could have averted the long and costly war.

ing no longer," he wrote. "The country's endurance had reached its limits."

A determined air assault would not have immediately defeated the North's ground army, but Ho would still have been forced to consider two premier rules of communist ideology: one, that half a loaf is better than none, while the second affirms that time is on our side.

Ho could well have selected alternate options to protect his country.

Finally, proper utilization of US airpower could have achieved an even more important goal: With a strong display of airpower at the beginning of the conflict, the US could have saved many of the 58,000 American lives that were later lost. ■

Jack Broughton is a retired USAF colonel and fighter pilot. During his time on Active Duty he was the recipient of four Distinguished Flying Crosses, two Silver Stars, and the Air Force Cross. He is the author of two memoirs from the Vietnam War era, Thud Ridge and Going Downtown. This article is adapted from his 2007 book Rupert Red Two. His most recent article for Air Force Magazine, "The Heart of the North," appeared in the April issue.