

Historic Book Review

The Limits of Air Power: The American Bombing of North Vietnam

Reviewed by Air Cdre Neville Parton

Now we reach an interesting point in our series of historic book reviews, as we have arrived at the point where we start to consider books written by individuals who are still living - and where the publications are more widely known. Not that this negates in any way the value of continuing with the series - but it does mean that the interpretation can always be challenged by the author - something which has not been likely with any of the previous reviews! However, the overall aim of the series remains the same - to provide a degree of background regarding the author, an overview of the book itself, and then to consider the subsequent impact of the publication.

Mark Clodfelter, better known throughout his service career (and subsequently) as 'Clod', joined the United States Air Force in 1973, as a cadet at the USAF Academy (USAF), Colorado Springs.¹ His father, Walter A Clodfelter Jr, had served in the United States Army Air Force (USAAF) towards the end of the Second World War, in the Pacific campaign, and his stories of watching the B29s rolling off the runway on their way to Japan clearly sparked an interest in the young Clodfelter. His Class at the Academy was marked by a number of 'firsts': the first not to have to attend chapel on Sundays, the

first to enter Colorado Springs after the Vietnam War had ended, and the first to see female entrants (in 1976). Although he majored in history at the Academy, he was commissioned into the ground radar branch, and spent his early career at ground radar units in both the United States and South Korea. It was during the latter tour that his interest in the Vietnam conflict, and particularly the USAF's involvement, was sparked by Clodfelter's commanding officer, who had participated in three Linebacker II missions.²

The study of history obviously continued to hold a fascination for Clodfelter, as the remainder of his career would be spent in the educational sphere, including teaching back at USAFA in the History Department, as well as at the School of Advanced Airpower Studies (SAAS) Maxwell Air Force Base (AFB), and as the Air Force ROTC Professor of Aerospace Studies at the University of North Carolina. Indeed, his PhD was undertaken at the University of North Carolina, and it was on this work that his 1989 book *The Limits of Air Power* was based. Since 1997 Clodfelter has been on the staff of the National War College in Washington D.C., where he is now a Professor of Military History, and continues to write on a broad range of defence-related subjects. From a more

parochial perspective, Clodfelter is also a member of the Academic Advisory Panel for the Royal Air Force Centre for Air Power Studies (RAFCAPS), and a 2006 reprint of his book was included in the 2008 Chief of the Air Staff's Reading List.³ And it is to *The Limits of Air Power* that we must now turn.

Clodfelter is an avowed Clausewitzian, and *The Limits of Air Power* seeks, quite simply, to address the issue of the USAF's air war in Vietnam against the test of the contribution that the campaign made to achievement of the nation's overall war aims. Particular attention is paid throughout to both the positive and negative aims sought through the application of air power, because of Clodfelter's belief in their importance in terms of Clausewitzian theory – in particular Clausewitz's observations that “a preponderantly negative policy will ... retard the decision.”⁴ In this usage, negative goals related to objectives that could only be achieved by *limiting* the use of air power – for instance President Johnson's desire to avoid bringing Russia or China directly into the war. Positive aims on the other hand related to an end-state that could only be brought about by *applying* air power, such as President Nixon's aim of forcing the North Vietnamese government in Hanoi to accept his ceasefire proposals by directly affecting its will to resist.

The book consists of seven chapters, which, after considering the growth of American air power theory from World War Two to Korea, then examine the American air campaign in Vietnam on a chronological basis. Meticulously researched throughout, and based on a mixture of archival

research and interviews with many of the key decision makers, it manages to be both readable and yet hugely comprehensive. The origins of the American approach to the offensive use of air power against North Vietnam, which led to the instigation of the ROLLING THUNDER air campaign in February 1965, are explored in some detail, together with the rationale that led to the campaign being run on such a protracted basis – and with such a high level of political involvement in the detailed planning of the missions. Consideration is then switched to the latter four years of the conflict, detailing President Nixon's initial approach to the use of air power, before moving to the critical period in 1972 which resulted in the LINEBACKER operations. A short epilogue pulls the threads together with a commendably clear set of conclusions.

Considerable attention is paid to the restraints that were imposed upon the air commanders, particularly by President Lyndon Baines Johnson, who sought by ‘... restricting weaponry, targets and sortie rates... to fashion an air campaign that would hurt North Vietnam without provoking external observers.’⁵ The need to examine this area was related to a deep-seated belief within the USAF that the war could have been won if air power had not been subject to those political constraints imposed on it, perhaps encapsulated best in General Curtis Le May's quote that the war could have been won “In any two-week period you want to mention”.⁶ This is based upon an understanding that during the ROLLING THUNDER period of operations, which lasted from 1965 to 1968 and saw 643,000 tons of bombs

dropped, the fundamental lessons of air power learnt during the Second World War, and subsequently in Korea, were being ignored. However, even whilst ROLLING THUNDER was in progress, its effects - and prospects for success - became suspect, with a civilian study concluding that "North Vietnam has basically a subsistence agricultural economy that presents a difficult and unrewarding target system for air attack."⁷

Further attention was paid to the political aspects of the conflict. By 1972 the strategic situation had changed markedly, with the President, Richard Nixon, having quite clearly indicated during the first three years of his presidency that his goal was to achieve 'peace with honour', which in Nixon's mind meant a withdrawal of American forces in such a manner that it did not simply abandon the South Vietnamese to their fate. However, Nixon also worked hard on the political front to isolate North Vietnam from its political supporters - Russia and China, and success on this front was key to what would come later. The massive invasion of South Vietnam by North Vietnamese forces in early 1972 forced Nixon to reconsider how he was to achieve his aims, and the ultimate result was the LINEBACKER operations.

The key point here, brought out most distinctly by Clodfelter, is that many of the targets struck on LINEBACKER were the same as those that had been attacked during earlier campaigns - where he differs from previous observers is in his analysis and deductions as to why the operations were successful in 1972 where they had not been

earlier. Earlier consideration, which had become 'received wisdom', was that it was the degree of political interference which led to the failure of ROLLING THUNDER, as it meant that air power was not applied in the correct manner - overpowering and sudden. However, this ignored the very different political aims behind the two operations: in the mid-1960s the American aim was to assist South Vietnam in winning the war against the North, which at that stage was largely guerrilla in nature. At this point air power was largely ineffective, as it could not prevent the meagre amount of supplies required for such a campaign from reaching the Vietcong forces in the South. In 1972, the aim was to coerce the North Vietnamese into accepting a ceasefire to allow the Americans to withdraw their forces from South Vietnam. Following the longer-term impact of the Tet Offensive in 1968, which resulted in a conventional campaign in the Easter Offensive of 1972, North Vietnamese military success now made considerable logistical demands, which when combined with significant technological advances in terms of precision guided munitions (PGMs) meant that air power operating in the interdiction role could now be effective.

Equally as important, the isolation of North Vietnam from Russian and Chinese support - in a physical as well as a moral sense, and to the point where the Communist Party newspaper in North Vietnam described the actions of the Communist superpowers as 'throwing a lifebuoy to a drowning pirate' - enabled air power to be used effectively against all targets in the North of the country. In other words,

the 'negative' limitations had been removed because of a change in the political climate and this, together with the change in the nature of the conflict, enabled air power to live up to its promise.

A significant number of lessons are identified in the book's epilogue, with the most fundamental being that unless there is a clear understanding of the political end state that is required, and this is matched with an understanding of what air power can realistically achieve against that aim, then success is unlikely. A further plainly identified point is the need to comprehend the true nature of the conflict in which you are engaged, and here the marked differences between the situation in Vietnam between the ROLLING THUNDER years of 1965 to 1968, and the LINEBACKER operations of 1972 are made evident. Clodfelter began his manuscript by observing that:

In the final analysis, the supreme test of bombing's efficacy is its contribution to a nation's war aims. Clausewitz's definition of war as "a continuation of political activity by other means" provides the only true measure for evaluating air power's effectiveness.⁸

and concluded by pointing out that in relation to LINEBACKER II:

As long as Hanoi waged an unrestrained conventional war, Linebacker threatened much more than the North's ability to win; it also threatened the North's ability to defend itself.⁹

In between those two statements, a continuous linking of political ends and military means support Clodfelter's basic contentions,

and lead to a conclusion which subsequent history has proven to be remarkably apposite:

Bombing doctrine remains geared to a fast-paced conventional war, and the conviction that such doctrine is appropriate for any kind of conflict permeates the service. Until air commanders and civilian officials alike realize that air power is unlikely to provide either "cheapness" or "victory" in a guerrilla war - and that success in such a conflict may well equate to stalemate - the prospect of an aerial Verdun will endure.

So what justifies placing *The Limits of Air Power* in our series of historic book reviews? Perhaps the most straightforward answer is quite simply that it is almost impossible to find a publication or journal article produced on the subject of the air war in Vietnam since 1990 that does not begin with Clodfelter's analysis. But it was also a polarising piece of work, which threw the USAF's beliefs regarding the conflict into sharp relief. It made clear the fact that the Vietnam campaign could not simply be regarded as a continuum, and thereby provided a compelling and coherent explanation as to why the LINEBACKER operations produced results whilst those of ROLLING THUNDER did not, which went beyond the conventional wisdom that simply pointed to 'political interference' in the conduct of the campaign.

Equally, an understanding of Vietnam is important in terms of the role that it has played within the American military psyche ever since 1973. In many ways the Gulf War of 1990-91, at least from a USAF perspective, provided an opportunity to lay some

particular ghosts from that conflict to rest. This was especially evident in the air campaign, where even the name originally chosen (Operation INSTANT THUNDER) consciously referenced the Vietnam War - where as we have seen Operation ROLLING THUNDER had been so unsuccessful.

This is a book which repays careful study, and rewards the reader on a number of levels. It provides an object lesson in how to deconstruct and analyse a problem area to gain a better understanding of the relevant facts, and then to synthesise those facts in order to produce a new understanding. But it also shows tremendous moral courage; the courage to commit to producing a piece of work which is likely to be extremely unpopular - in this case with the very Service in which the writer was serving. It is, quite simply, an air power classic.

Bibliography

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Notes

¹ A short history of USAFA can be found at <http://www.usafa.af.mil/information/factsheets/factsheet.asp?id=9409>.

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³ Reference

⁴ Mark Clodfelter, *The Limits of Air*

Power: The American Bombing of North Vietnam (New York: The Free Press, 1989), p. xi.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 206.

⁷ The Jason Summer Study of 1966 was based on the analysis of a number of scientists who had been briefed on the war by members of the government, and had a considerable impact on members of the administration; from that point on Secretary of Defense McNamara would never again recommend intensifying the air war. *Ibid.*, p. 99.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. xi.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 206.

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