

Win or Go Home

IT HAS been very difficult to judge the effectiveness of the air war against ISIS terrorists in Iraq and Syria. The information the US government releases is so generic it is nearly impossible to determine whether the US-led multinational effort to beat back the terrorists is succeeding, failing, or something in between.

To those watching from afar, the war against ISIS, also known as ISIL or IS, is oddly reminiscent of times in two previous air wars. The points of reference date back 15 years and half a century—to Kosovo and Vietnam, respectively.

One war was frustrating but ultimately successful, the other was frustrating and ultimately unsuccessful. It remains to be seen whether Operation Inherent Resolve (the war against ISIS) will more closely resemble Vietnam or Operation Allied Force, but decisions made today will help determine its effectiveness.

The Vietnam parallels begin with the fact that the US appears to be in a war without a clear strategy. The problem was famously elucidated by President Obama himself.

“We don’t have a strategy yet,” Obama admitted Aug. 28—nearly three weeks into the air campaign against ISIS. “I think what I’ve seen in some of the news reports suggests that folks are getting a little further ahead of where we’re at than we currently are. And I think that’s not just my assessment, but the assessment of our military, as well. We need to make sure that we’ve got clear plans, that we’re developing them.”

The US appears to be stumbling into a broader war without its heart fully in the fight. Obama ran for president with a promise to end the US war in Iraq, which he did. But now ISIS is forcing the US back into that country. Obama is reluctant to commit US ground troops to defeat ISIS, wishing to rely on local forces to handle ground combat.

The Administration has subsequently backed into what is gradually becoming a larger campaign. When Obama did come forward with a strategy to “degrade and ultimately destroy” ISIS, the Sept. 10 announcement included sending 475 additional US troops to

Iraq to support the “forces fighting these terrorists on the ground.”

The expansion continued. On Sept. 22, the US began air operations in Syria, where ISIS has also seized large chunks of territory. Then on Nov. 7, Obama authorized sending 1,500 additional troops to Iraq to advise, assist, and train Iraqi forces. This includes forces for “logistics and force protection,” according to a DOD release.

All of this recalls the early days in Vietnam. As John Correll noted in “The

A halfhearted attempt to defeat ISIS is doomed for failure.

Long Retreat,” in our October issue, “The US experience in Vietnam was a classic case of unplanned mission creep. It started as training and advice but slipped into counterinsurgency and then into conventional war.”

But unlike Vietnam, the war against ISIS has been focused on air operations from Day One. This creates parallels to another war, Allied Force, the 1999 air war to save Kosovo from Serbian aggression.

Ground forces were ruled out as an option in Allied Force, meaning the 78-day campaign was air-only from the get-go. And like today’s war against ISIS, Allied Force was conducted with highly restrictive target lists and cautious rules of engagement. In both wars, avoiding civilian casualties was a major but necessary constraint.

The two wars elicited similar enemy responses. Forces in the open are targeted and destroyed by allied airpower, typically but not always forcing the enemy to disperse and hide. When enemies do emerge or set up fixed positions, they risk death. Enemies know this, which leads to slow progress.

Still, recent news releases from US Central Command have listed many examples of airpower taking out enemy facilities or small concentrations of ISIS forces, such as an ISIS “armed truck and a vehicle convoy” consisting of 10 armed trucks in mid-November.

The air campaigns against Serb forces in 1999 and ISIS today were both criticized for their tepid level of

effort. For example, in Allied Force it took the allies 12 days to hit the same number of targets as were hit in the first 12 hours of Operation Desert Storm.

Both air campaigns were also difficult to judge. In 1999 and 2014, official statements typically lacked useful strategic details and did little to explain progress or inspire confidence.

The Allied Force air campaign slowly and steadily ramped up over the spring of 1999, however, and the war was being won even though few outside government knew it. The cumulative, around-the-clock effort wore down Serbia’s will and ability to wage war.

By the end of Allied Force, there were more than 400 strike missions on some days and 28,000 bombs were dropped in the two-and-a-half month campaign.

By point of comparison, there were just 1,084 air strikes in the first 13 weeks against ISIS, with the Air Force conducting more than 600 of them.

A lesson of Vietnam, Allied Force, and Inherent Resolve is this: Airpower will work if it is applied in a meaningful way. Airpower should not be employed under the false presumption that it is an easy and painless way for the US to “do something” against an enemy. Airmen are performing courageously and are in danger on every mission they fly.

The Administration needs to decide what it wants to accomplish against ISIS. If these terrorists are not important to fight to defeat, they are not important enough to fight at all. The US can choose to ignore them—there are bad guys doing terrible things all over the world, and the US can never destroy them all.

ISIS is not just a terror organization—it calls for attacks worldwide and has ambitions of being an actual nation. The US and its allies (which include Bahrain, Jordan, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates) can destroy ISIS, but half-measures won’t do the job.

If the Administration is serious about victory, it is time to step up the effort. The air campaign must be dramatically increased, with more flights, more targets, more surveillance, and more destruction. ★