

When US aircraft struck the Xom Bang ammunition depot, 35 miles inside North Vietnam, on March 2, 1965, the White House denied there had been any change in policy on the war.

In truth, it was a major policy change—and one the Administration sought to conceal from the public. It was also the beginning of Operation Rolling Thunder, the sustained US air campaign against North Vietnam.

The operation would last for another three years and eight months. During that time, the Air Force and the Navy would fly more than 350,000 combat sorties over North Vietnam, losing hundreds of airmen and aircraft. It finally ended in 1968 when President Lyndon B. Johnson stopped the bombing of North Vietnam in hopes of reaching a negotiated settlement.

Rolling Thunder went down in history as a failure, regarded by some as an instance of airpower promising more than it could deliver. Closer examination shows the performance of Air Force and Navy airmen in Rolling Thunder was consistently strong and often outstanding.

The problem was the strategy, objectives, and rules of execution, which were established by political leaders in Washington. The main flaws were apparent from the start, but professional military advice was discounted by the White House and Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara.

It is accurate to conclude that Rolling Thunder did not achieve its objectives—but essential to remember what the objectives were. North Vietnam was fighting a war. The United States was sending signals. Top US decision-makers did not intend for the air campaign to achieve a military victory. Their plan was to convince North Vietnam to stop its aggression and bargain for terms. Within the first six months of Rolling Thunder, the key decisions affecting the outcome of the war were already in place.

LBJ IN A BIND

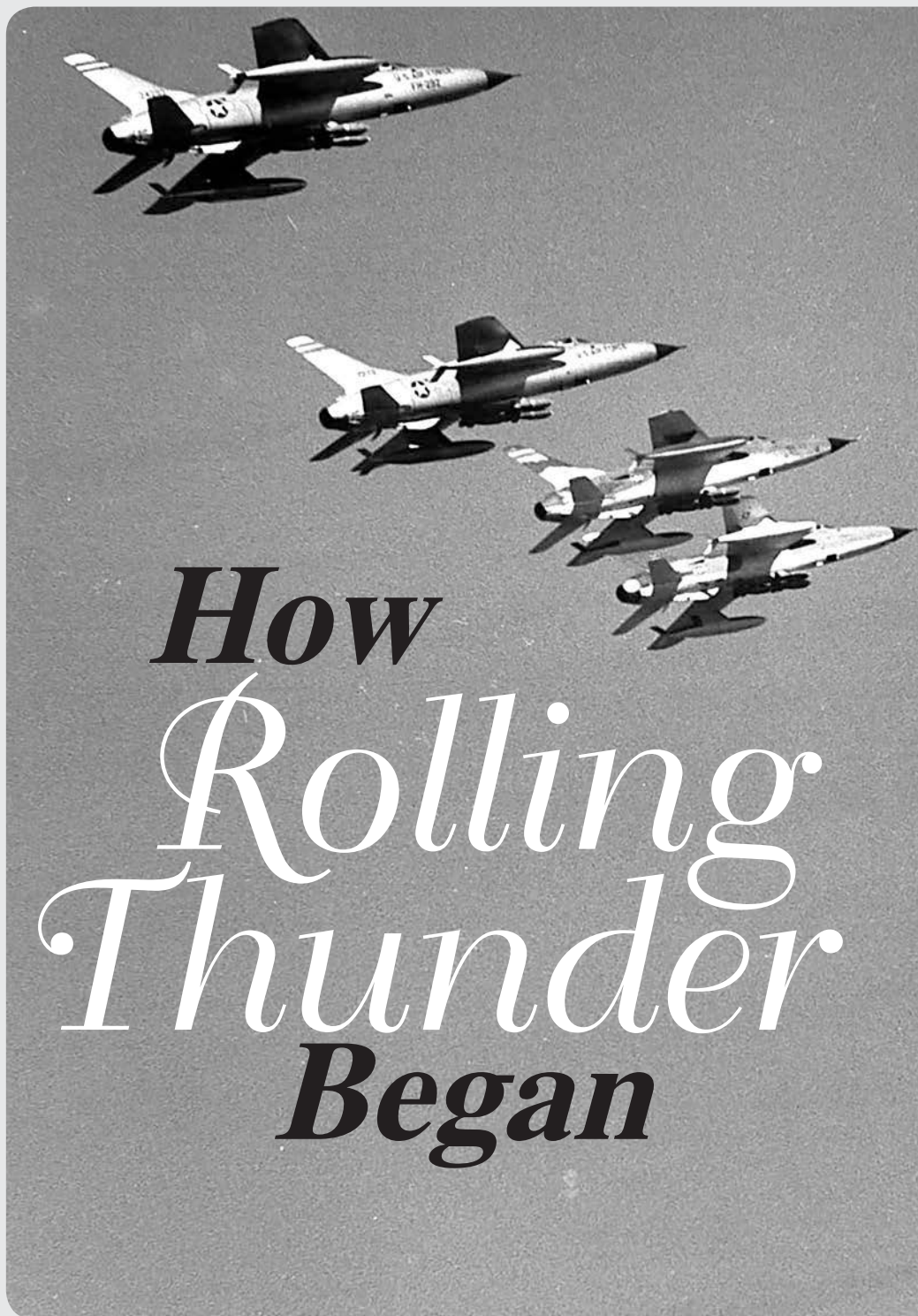
As 1965 began, the situation in Vietnam was deteriorating. The South Vietnamese government was losing the war and was on the verge of collapse, with rival factions in Saigon battling each other for control.

On Jan. 27, Johnson was told by McNamara and McGeorge Bundy, the

presidential assistant for national security, that the United States had reached “a fork in the road.” They said he could either use US military power to force a change or “deploy all our resources along a track of negotiation, aimed at salvaging what little can be preserved.”

or ten thousand miles away from home to do what Asian boys ought to be doing for themselves,” Johnson said.

At the same time, he desperately did not want to be known as the President who “lost” Vietnam in the way the Truman Administration was accused of



How Rolling Thunder Began

LBJ was in a bind. In the 1964 Presidential campaign, he had depicted the Republican challenger, Barry M. Goldwater, as a dangerous warmonger. “We are not about to send American boys nine

“losing” China. He sought to balance his commitments so that foreign affairs did not upset support and funding for his “Great Society” social programs at home.

“Johnson assumed that in war, as in the Senate, everyone knew the rules of the game, what kind of agreement would be reasonable, and that eventually an agreement would be reached,” said historian Doris Kearns Goodwin, who was on LBJ’s staff at the White

win said. “So, faced with a situation he could not control and an adversary who was unwilling to bargain, Johnson would force him to bargain.”

A Viet Cong attack on Pleiku Feb. 7, killing nine Americans and destroying several US aircraft, provided the trig-

Fifty years ago this month, the US air campaign against North Vietnam got off to a “measured and limited” start.

By John T. Correll



A KC-135 refuels an F-105 on the way to targets in North Vietnam. The F-105 was the Air Force’s main strike aircraft in Rolling Thunder, deployed first in temporary rotational squadrons and then in permanent wings at Korat and Takhli air bases in Thailand.

USAF photo

House and who later helped him write his memoirs.

“Johnson’s adversary in Vietnam—unlike nearly all of his opponents at home—was unwilling to bargain,” Good-

ger. Air Force and Navy fighters, along with the South Vietnamese air force, conducted reprisal attacks, code-named Flaming Dart, against installations in North Vietnam from Feb. 7 to 11.

“As an example of what was to become an unfortunate pattern throughout the war, the civilian decision-makers selected the weakest attack options available; that is, the combination of targets selected and amount of force employed that would have the least impact on the enemy,” said Adm. U. S. Grant Sharp, commander of US Pacific Command.

GRADUAL ESCALATION

More air strikes in North Vietnam were a foregone conclusion. The only question was what form the operations would take.

The Joint Chiefs of Staff argued for a dramatic and forceful application of military power. They drew up a list of 94 key targets in North Vietnam and proposed bombing all of them within 20 days. However, the JCS were not part of LBJ’s inner circle, where policy was formulated.

The President wanted the support of the military leaders but he was not interested in their advice except on technical matters. Open dissent from the Joint Chiefs would have been a problem. Realizing that, LBJ kept them in line with appeals to their loyalty and program concessions important to their services.

Gen. Curtis E. LeMay, the Air Force Chief, had been the strongest voice for a serious air operation, but LeMay was gone. Gen. J. P. McConnell succeeded him Feb. 1, 1965. “With LeMay’s replacement by McConnell, a Secretary McNamara selection, the transition of the Joint Chiefs of Staff from a body of warriors to one of officers attuned to the complexities of the nuclear age and willing to defer to civilian authority was complete,” said an official JCS history of the Vietnam War published in 2012.

The first team on war policy consisted of civilian officials at the Pentagon, the State Department, and in the White House. They urged a step-by-step program, limited in scope and intensity, that could be cranked up or down, depending on how North Vietnam responded.

Gradual escalation meshed with what LBJ himself wanted to do. According to Goodwin, Johnson held a “fundamental premise” that the Soviet Union and China had entered into secret treaties with North Vietnam. He never knew which targets, if bombed, might “set off the provisions of those secret treaties,” he said. Thus, Goodwin said, “Johnson lived in constant fear of

triggering some imaginary provision of some imaginary treaty.”

The formal decision to launch Rolling Thunder was handed down in a presidential directive Feb. 13, which said, “We will execute a program of measured and limited air action” against selected military targets in North Vietnam.

The beginning of Rolling Thunder was postponed several times for various reasons. In the meantime, the State Department published a white paper Feb. 27 stating that the war in Vietnam was “not a spontaneous and local rebellion.” It was an armed attack on a neighboring state “inspired, directed, supplied, and controlled by the Communist regime in Hanoi.”

The first Rolling Thunder target to be struck, Xom Bang, was carefully chosen. It was important enough but not

the first Air Force POW of the Vietnam War and would spend just shy of eight years in North Vietnamese captivity.

The last wave of the attack consisted of B-57 light bombers, which arrived as the F-105s were finishing up.

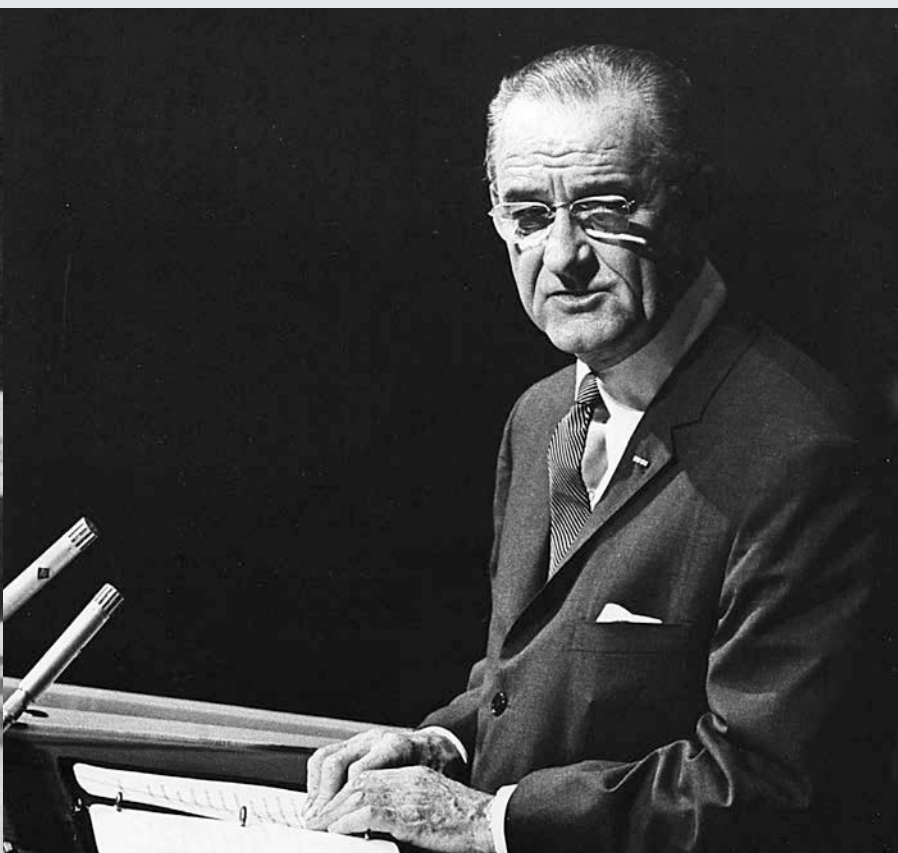
The strike destroyed or damaged almost 80 percent of the target area, but six US aircraft were lost to the guns. Five of the pilots were recovered. It was a hard price for meager results, and there would be no more strikes for more than a week.

Sharp said that this level of operation was “completely insignificant” and that “the North Vietnamese probably didn’t even know the planes were there.” US Ambassador to South Vietnam Maxwell D. Taylor said that leaders in Hanoi were unlikely to be impressed and guessed that “Rolling Thunder in their eyes has been a few isolated thunderclaps.”

frame,” Sharp said. Eventually, target approval would be given in two-week packages.

The principal advocates of a vigorous Rolling Thunder effort were Sharp and Air Force Chief McConnell. Army leaders did not agree. Gen. Harold K. Johnson, the Army Chief of Staff, held that the war would be won or lost on the ground in South Vietnam and urged the deployment of a large ground force. He declared as “fictional” the notion that the United States must avoid a land war in Asia.

Gen. William C. Westmoreland, head of Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) described Rolling Thunder as “pie in the sky.” MACV was supposedly a joint service command, but under Westmoreland it was basically operated by and for the Army.



too important. It could deliver a message without being overly provocative.

THUNDER FAINTLY HEARD

More than 100 US aircraft took part in the attack on Xom Bang March 2. The base was well-defended by anti-aircraft guns, so first in were flak suppression F-100s. Next came the main strike force of F-105s, led by the noted fighter ace Lt. Col. Robinson Risner, who saw one of the F-100s go down in flames. The pilot, Lt. Hayden J. Lockhart, became

Lt. Gen. Joseph H. Moore, commander of the 2nd Air Division in Saigon, said, “I was never allowed in the early days to send a single airplane North [without being] told how many bombs I would have on it, how many airplanes were in the flight, and what time it would be over the target.”

Later in March, Washington “eliminated the requirement that we strike only on a specifically designated day and left the precise timing to field commanders within a one-week time

The 2nd Air Division commander was MACV deputy for air operations but the air deputy was not part of the MACV staff structure.

MACV was a subunified command reporting to Pacific Command, where Sharp restricted Westmoreland’s authority over airpower. Westmoreland ran the war in the south but Sharp exercised direct control of Rolling Thunder through his component commanders in Pacific Air Forces and the Pacific Fleet.

On March 8, US Marines deployed to Da Nang, ostensibly to protect the Air Force installation there, but it began the introduction of ground combat forces into Vietnam.

A CHANGE IN STRATEGY

It did not take the Administration long to give up on Rolling Thunder. “After a month of bombing with no response from the North Vietnamese, optimism began to wane,” said the Pentagon Papers, a classified reappraisal by the Department of Defense that was leaked to the *New York Times* in 1971.

In National Security Action Memorandum 328, LBJ approved a “change of mission for all Marine battalions deployed to Vietnam to permit their more active use” but ordered that the decision be kept secret to avoid “pre-

Lest he be misunderstood, McNamara said that “I do not want one plane dropping bombs on North Vietnam if it can be used advantageously for combat in South Vietnam.” In Sharp’s estimation, “this fateful decision contributed to our ultimate loss of South Vietnam as much as any other single action we took during our involvement.”

The main mission of airpower against North Vietnam had been switched to interdiction. “I had made the point many times that air attacks on lines of communication have never been able to stop infiltration, only hinder it,” Sharp said. “The primary objective of using airpower should not be to try to stop infiltration but rather to destroy the sources of the materials being infiltrated.”

Assistant Secretary of Defense John T. McNaughton, the principal civilian war planner in the Department of Defense, explained US purposes in South Vietnam in a remarkable memo. Seventy percent of the objective, he said, was

Tennessee Valley Authority project that had provided navigation, flood control, and electricity to the rural United States in the 1930s. He invited Hanoi to join the effort in “peaceful cooperation.” Hanoi ignored him.

In May, pressed by student protests and liberal Democrats, LBJ ordered a week-long bombing halt in hopes, he said, that “it might trigger a sequence of events leading Hanoi either to negotiate or to reduce its support of the insurgency.” Hanoi ignored that, too, as well as the six subsequent LBJ bombing halts.

During the spring of 1965, Rolling Thunder gradually expanded to 10 or 12 missions per week. However, by June, only 24 of the 94 targets on the JCS list had been struck. The accusation persists that the air campaign was against a North Vietnamese industrial base that did not exist. In fact, only eight of the targets on the list were industrial. Twelve targets were lines of communication nodes; nine were airfields; 53 were military installations and ports; and 12 were road and rail routes.



L-r: Fighter ace Lt. Col. Robinson Risner led the first Rolling Thunder mission against the ammunition depot at Xom Bang; President Johnson did not want to be known for having “lost” Vietnam; Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara—wearing a set of aircraft carrier launch crewman’s “Mickey Mouse” headgear—on the USS Independence. Flaws with the Rolling Thunder strategy were apparent from the start, but McNamara and the White House ignored advice from military professionals.

“to avoid a humiliating US defeat (to our reputation as a guarantor).” Another 20 percent was “to keep SVN (and then adjacent) territory from Chinese hands.” Only 10 percent was “to permit the people of SVN to enjoy a better, freer way of life.”

The Army presence in Vietnam rose steadily. The White House press office said, “There has been no

change in the mission of United States ground combat units in Vietnam.” The Pentagon Papers, on the other hand, noted that, “by the summer of 1965, bombing NVN had been relegated to a secondary role in US military strategy for dealing with the war.”

THE RITES OF SPRING

In April, still seeing the war as a variation on Texas politics, LBJ proposed a “billion dollar American development” in the Mekong River basin, akin to the

“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—first Bill Moyers, later George Christian,” Sharp said. “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.”

Air Force fighters from bases in Thailand and South Vietnam flew about the same number of early Rolling Thunder missions as Navy aircraft from carriers offshore did. The Air Force, whose F-105s carried more ordnance than the Navy A-4s, delivered more of the bombs. The South Vietnamese air force flew 13 percent of the missions over the north in the spring of 1965.

Through late June, the Air Force had lost 24 aircraft over North Vietnam, the

mature publicity.” Even internally, the Administration insisted that “these movements and changes should be understood as being gradual and wholly consistent with existing policy.”

At a conference in Honolulu April 20, McNamara announced a fundamental change of strategy. “Emphasis from then on would be on the ground war in the south,” Sharp said. “Targets in the south took precedence over those in the north, and sorties would be diverted to fill the requirement.”



Gen. John McConnell (l), USAF Chief of Staff, is greeted by Gen. William Westmoreland, commander of MACV, at Tan Son Nhut Air Base in South Vietnam. McConnell argued the case for airpower, but did not have the same influence as his famous predecessor, Gen. Curtis LeMay.

Navy 26. All but three of them were shot down by anti-aircraft guns. MiG interceptors and surface-to-air missiles were not yet the big problems they would become.

SPINNING THE STORY

The Johnson Administration, fearful of political repercussions, repeatedly misled the public about the deepening US involvement in Vietnam. In his memoirs, McNamara elaborated on what motivated LBJ to “refuse to take the American people into his confidence.”

“Some point to his innate secretiveness, but the answer is far more complex,” McNamara said. “Two factors in particular influenced him. One was his obsession with securing Congress’s approval and financing of his Great Society agenda; he wanted nothing to divert attention and resources from his cherished domestic reforms. The other was his strong fear of hard-line pressure (from conservatives in both parties) for greater—and far riskier—military action that might trigger responses, especially nuclear, by China and/or the Soviet Union. The President coped with his dilemma by obscuring it—an unwise and ultimately self-defeating course.”

Once the infusion of US ground forces into Vietnam began, it was hard to stop. Westmoreland kept raising the requirement. In July 1965, he said he would need 175,000 troops by the end of the year—up from 82,000 in June—and another 100,000 in 1966. McNamara supported Westmoreland’s request and proposed mobilization of reservists and the National Guard.

At a press conference two weeks later, the President said he had agreed to sending more troops, but he depicted the buildup and the role as different than it actually was. The increase, he said, was from 75,000 to 125,000 and that “it is not essential to order reserve units into service.”

In response to a question about American forces carrying out offensive operations, he said the new deployment decision “does not imply any change in policy whatever. It does not imply any change of objective.” The *New York Times* took comfort the next day in an editorial that praised LBJ’s decision to maintain a “severely limited operation on the part of the United States.”

In *Dereliction of Duty*, published to wide acclaim in 1997, Army Maj. H. R. McMaster excoriated the Joint Chiefs of Staff as “five silent men” who did not dispute Johnson’s misrepresentations about force levels, cost, purpose, and conduct of the war. In response to questions from Congress, they did not disclose their reservations or actual estimates of requirements. (McMaster is still in the Army and is currently a three-star general.)

THREE MORE YEARS

LBJ finally called an end to Rolling Thunder in 1968 after the newspapers discovered that Westmoreland had asked for 207,000 more troops in addition to the 500,000 he already had, plus another 17

fighter squadrons. The President ordered a partial halt to the bombing of North Vietnam in March 1968 and a complete stop on Nov. 1.

In the three intervening years, more targets had been approved and the strikes went farther north, but always with restrictions and limitations. In 1966, McNamara said that US “objectives are not to overthrow the Communist government of China or the Communist government of North Vietnam. They are limited to the destruction of the insurrection and aggression directed by North Vietnam against the political institutions of South Vietnam. This is a very, very limited political objective.”

Nevertheless, the Pentagon Papers, written between 1967 and 1968 at the behest of McNamara by political functionaries on his staff, said that “the vaunted boosters of airpower would once again be proven wrong” in Rolling Thunder, “in which we relearned the negative lessons of previous wars on the ineffectiveness of strategic bombing.”

No doubt some of the expectations for airpower were excessive, but that was not the reason why Rolling Thunder failed. Gradual escalation allowed the North Vietnamese to adjust to the attacks, improve their defenses, and find countermeasures. The air strikes were micromanaged from Washington.

“I spent 10 hours a day worrying about all this, picking the targets one by one, making sure we didn’t go over the limits,” Johnson said. He would not allow bombing of the most critical targets. The rules of engagement for US aircraft were elaborate and restrictive. The objectives were an illusion.

“In Rolling Thunder, the Johnson Administration devised an air campaign that did a lot of bombing in a way calculated not to threaten the enemy regime’s survival,” Air Force historian Wayne Thompson said in *To Hanoi and Back*. “President Johnson repeatedly assured the Communist rulers of North Vietnam that his forces would not hurt them, and he clearly meant it. Government buildings in downtown Hanoi were never targeted.”

It was LBJ’s intention that Rolling Thunder send signals to North Vietnam and it certainly did that. Unfortunately, the message that got through was that the United States was not serious in its commitment and that all Hanoi had to do was wait out the operation. ✪

John T. Correll was editor in chief of Air Force Magazine for 18 years and is now a contributor. His most recent article, “Twenty-seven Minutes Over Ploesti” appeared in the February issue.