



Grupo de Investigación  
**Historia Militar**



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The Vietnam War

This chapter is based largely off the recent publication *Air Power's Lost Cause: The American Air Wars of Vietnam*. As a historian of the Vietnam conflict and the role of air power during and after, I wanted to make sense of something that I had studied extensively, but also to write a concise manuscript covering all aspects of the air wars in their entirety. The initial concept for this work was to be a concise book that anyone could pick up for everything that went on in the air during the American involvement in the Vietnam conflict. The purpose of this chapter is to condense the book itself into a concise one hour presentation or, in the case of the printed version, a precise on the air wars in the Vietnam conflict.<sup>1</sup>

The concept of Air Power's Lost Cause based largely off of readings in the American Civil War. Historians of the American Civil War often speak of the concept of "The Lost Cause" ideology. This "Lost Cause" is, based off of the reaction to the Losing side in that conflict the Confederate States of America. American Civil War historian Garry Gallagher noted "The architects of the Lost Cause acted from various motives. They collectively sought to justify their own actions and allow themselves and other former Confederates to find something positive in all-encompassing failure. They also wanted to provide their children and future generations of white Southerners with a "correct" narrative of the war."<sup>2</sup>

Those who lost the war began to develop ideas, motives, and explanatory factors as a means to justify their own actions and explain why they felt they had lost the war. They sought to find something positive in their failure, in their loss. They also wanted to provide their children and future generations of Southerners with their own narrative of the war. In the United States this became the genesis of the "Lost Cause" ideology. To that end I decided that there was some "Lost Cause" ideology in American involvement in Vietnam. There were certain "truths" that American airmen came out of the war with that needed to be addressed. It was important to discover what these so-called truths were true, were they relevant, and did they still have a place in our study of American airpower.

The "Lost Cause" facets that came out of the American air war were as follows. The first tenant present in writing after America left South Vietnam was that, "more bombing earlier" would have changed the outcome. The thought process here goes that if "we" (American military and political leaders) had just attacked North Vietnam in 1965 or 1966 in the manner was used throughout 1972, the war would have ended earlier. The second tenant is that the heavier bombing later in the war conducted in 1972, particularly in December of 1972, "won" the war for the United States or at least allowed the American military to end the war with honor. Both of these statements are much more complicated than the way in which they were presented as truisms.

A final important note is that during the American involvement in the conflict, there did not exist a single cohesive air war. There were in fact multiple air wars occurring both consecutively and concurrently. Depending on how one wants to define what makes for a separate air campaign, there

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed analysis of this paper, please see Brian D. Laslie, *Air Power's Lost Cause: The American Air Wars of Vietnam*, Rowman and Littlefield Press, 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Garry W. Gallagher, Ed. *The Myth of the Lost Cause and Civil War History*, Indiana University Press, 2000

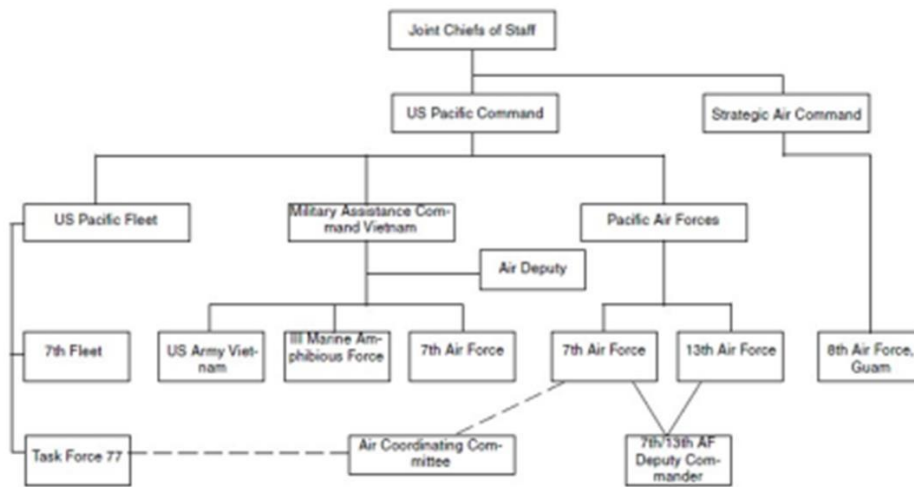
could be four, five, or even six separate air campaigns going on at any given moment between 1961 and 1973.

First, there was the air war that occurred in the skies over South Vietnam and this air campaign could be further subdivided: the close air support war to American and South Vietnamese troops in contact on the ground, and then the United States Army's airmobile war. Although many air power and army scholars do not consider the use of rotary wing helicopters as a subset of "air power," there is an argument to be made that because the use of helicopters was an innovative use of an aerial asset, it should be considered part of air power in a grander construct. Once America became more fully involved following the Gulf of Tonkin Incident, aerial conflict expanded into the second aerial campaign, the war in the north. Taken together, these conflicts were commonly denoted as the in-country war for the campaign in the south and the out-country war for the campaign in the north.

Obviously most of the focus in histories on the War in Vietnam focused on these two air wars: in the north and in the south, but there also existed the shadow wars, the phantom wars, which occurred in Laos and Cambodia. The focus of the bombing which occurred in these two countries was principally an interdiction war against what the Americans called the Ho Chi Trail and the forces of North Vietnam called the Đường Trường Sơn strategic supply route. Here the United States, with varying degrees of success attempted to stop supplies from reaching the Vietcong and later of interdicting the regular North Vietnamese Army. The "trail" was really a series of routes that twisted and turned from North Vietnam and exited into the South as far north as near Da Nang and further south nearer to Saigon.

To prosecute these various air wars the United States Air Force, United States Navy and United States Marine Corps established numerous bases. In the Country of Thailand, the USAF flew from the seven different bases owned and operated by the Royal Thai Air Force or the Royal Thai Navy. In South Vietnam, the USAF and USMC flew out of a dozen separate locations as far south as Binh Thuy and Tan Son Nhut in the Delta region and as far north as Da Nang. With the U.S. Navy launching missions from the Gulf of Tonkin in the North and the South China Sea—as part of Task Force 77—North Vietnam was bracketed on three sides by the air forces of the United States. To conduct these aerial operations the Navy's Task Force 77 met with representatives of the USAF's Seventh Air Force at an Air Coordinating committee in order to pick targets. These targets were then routed up through the Pacific Command to the Joint Chiefs of Staff and often times into the office of the President of the United States.

This proved to be a far from effective way to conduct air operations. In addition to Task Force 77 and the Seventh Air Force, there were also elements of the USAF's Eight Air Force which was responsible for the conduct of strategic bombing missions using B-52s out of Guam Air Force Base and U Tapao in Thailand. At no time did the Seventh Air Force, the United States Air Force's leading war-fighting echelon ever have control over the B-52s whose operations ran from a different chain of command. Chart One indicates the complicated relationship between the organizations operating in the theater.



Source: Gen. William W. Momyer, USAF (Ret.), *Air Power in Three Wars*.

Once all of this was added together there existed three, if not four separate air force organizations conducting operations across four different countries and at no time was there ever a single air leader responsible for the overall conduct of these operations. General William Momyer who was one of the 7<sup>th</sup> Air Force commanders and one of the leading airmen in Vietnam noted in his book *Air Power in Three Wars* that the conduct of air operations was disjointed and that with numerous air commanders in theater the situation “grew unworkable.” From the very beginning of his tenure, he worked at trying to bring all of the disparate air commands under one organization, and he was never successful in doing that. Furthermore, since the U.S. Navy believed that its own air power was an indissoluble part of the fleet, the USAF and US Navy agreed to divide North Vietnam into seven separate “route packages,” starting in the south and moving north: one, two, three, four, five, six-a, and six-b. The Air Force was responsible for the areas in RP five and six-A, while the Navy conducted operations in RPs one, two, three, four, and six-B, and never the two shall meet. Again Momyer noted that the route package system “compartmentalized our Airpower and reduced its capabilities.”<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> William Momyer, *Airpower in Three Wars*, 92, 106

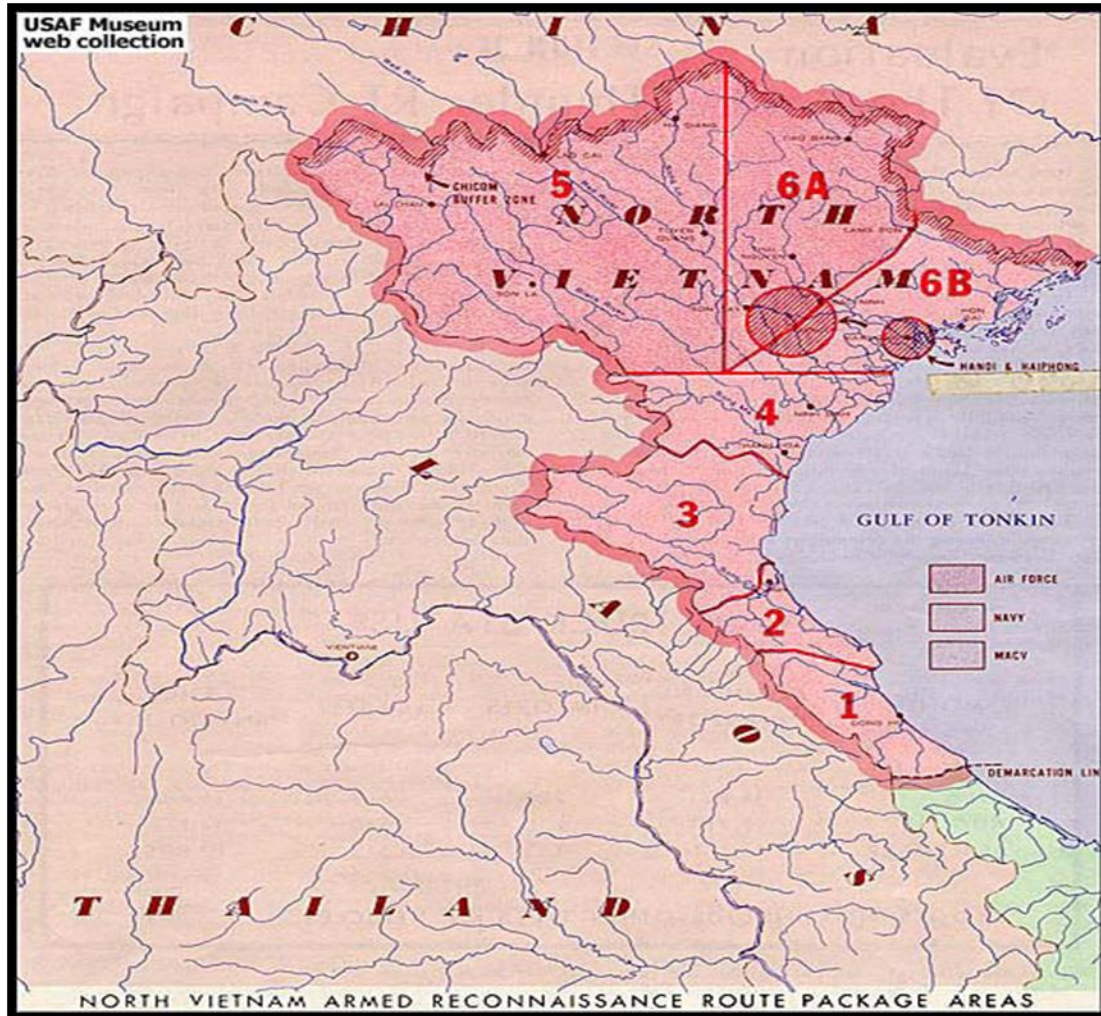


Chart Courtesy of USAF.

The chart above indicates the division of air power the U.S. Air Force and U.S. Navy in Vietnam.

Between the USAF and the USN there were Tactical Fighter Wings, Strategic Air Wings, Navy Carrier Air Wings, Special Operation Wings, and Reconnaissance Wings active in and across Vietnam and based in South Vietnam and Thailand and along the coasts.

### The War in the South

Since the end of the Vietnam Conflict in 1973—at least American involvement in that conflict—the portion of the war that most Americans are familiar with is undoubtedly the war in the South. Hollywood films about the American experience in Vietnam, primarily focus on the war in the south. Perhaps this is because, this is where the troops, the Army, and the Marines are fighting the Vietcong and later the regular North Vietnamese army. Popular films including *Hamburger Hill*, *Platoon*, *We Were Soldiers*, and *Full Metal Jacket* all demonstrate operations that occurred in South Vietnam and the use of airpower plays a particular role in each of these films and this helps shape follow-on American

generation's perceptions about the war's conduct: soldiers in rice paddies or jungles, soldiers on rest and relaxation in Saigon, or the ubiquitous Huey helicopter disgorging soldiers into the field: this is the war in the south. Again, note that I have included the U.S. Army's air mobile war—the movement of troops from one point on the ground to another point on the ground—as a subset of the air war in South Vietnam—the Army's rotary wing helicopter air war *was* air power. The U.S. Army during Vietnam developed and used its own kind of specific concepts of how operation in and through the air could aid the war on the ground.

It is also important to note that the war in the south ostensibly began as a training mission to aid the pilots of the Air Force of South Vietnam. The training component where attempted to use American airmen to train South Vietnamese aviators to fly and provide close air support to their Army of Vietnam (ArVn pronounced "Arvin.") on the ground. No less a persona than General Curtis LeMay noted that at any given time you may have a South Vietnamese marked aircraft with South Vietnamese aircrew, a South Vietnamese marked aircraft with American and South Vietnamese aircrew, and American marked aircraft with South Vietnamese aircrew, and American marked aircraft with South Vietnamese and American aircrew. It proved to be a completely confusing situation for what was supposed to be a training environment. Most of the time, the American pilot was supposed to sit in the back, but again, Curtis LeMay noted what American pilot wants to sit in the back when he could take control of the mission? So even the training of the South Vietnamese Air Force caused a lot of consternation and confusion.

### The War moves North

Following the Gulf of Tonkin Incident in 1964, the United States military began the introduction of jets into the theater as bombing operations expanded to include targets in the North. The different types of aircraft that the Americans used during the war in Vietnam was a cross-section of aircraft designed and planned to be used against the Soviet Union in a Western Europe Scenario. These included everything from the F-4 Phantom, the F-105 Thunderchief, the F-100 Super Sabre UH-1 and HH-3 rotary wing helicopters, medium bombers like the B-47, strategic heavy bombers including the B-52, World War II era propeller driven aircraft A-1 Skyraiders. The bulk of these forces brought to bear in South and North Vietnam and flown by pilots essentially trained and equipped to fight a war in Western Europe. This was the force organized, trained, and equipped to go to war against the Soviet Union when they come through the Fulda Gap gap. All of the air forces operating in this conflict were forced on the crucible of war to find new and innovative ways to use these aircraft. As an example, the F-105 Thunderchief was an aircraft that was principally designed to deliver tactical nuclear weapons onto the battlefield and USAF was forced to change this nuclear fighter-bomber into service as a conventional attack aircraft. The same was true for the F-4 Phantom, an aircraft that principally designed for the U.S. Navy as a carrier and fleet defense air superiority fighter. Both the USAF and USN take this air superiority fighter and use it as a very capable air-to-ground attack aircraft as well.

It is important to note that the Air Force and Navy came to this conflict with differing notions of the best way to employ air power. Both sides approached this war in different ways. While the Air Force used—primarily but not exclusively--F-4s and F-105s for their bombing missions, the Navy used

dedicated aircraft specifically designed for the air-to-ground or “attack” missions. The U.S. Navy found that its A-4 Skyhawk, A-6 Intruder and, later, A-7 Corsairs were perfect for bombing missions. Numerous attack pilots who flew in these missions, noted that the war in North Vietnam was a Navy attack pilot’s war. That is how the Naval aviators perceived it and that was the lens through which they viewed the war.

Even though the USN and USAF divided up North Vietnam into different areas of responsibilities, there were a number of “off-limits” areas noted in the rules of engagement. The cities of Hanoi and Haiphong circled in red in the chart above, were among perhaps the most lucrative of targets that remained something of an “out-of-bounds” area for American airmen as well as a ten to twenty-mile barrier up against the border with China. These were no-go areas; you could not attack these areas, especially in the period 1964 to 1968, during Operation Rolling Thunder, for a number of reasons. One, the United States was very concerned, and they had very good reason to believe, that attacks in these areas would lead to an inadvertent death of Soviet or Chinese members who were aiding the north. Any attack in these areas especially in the context of the war early on could unintentionally pull China or the Soviet Union into the conflict. Obviously, North Vietnam knew that U.S. forces were not attacking these areas, so obviously North Vietnam stored large numbers their supplies there. In fact, American pilots flying in route packages five and six could often look down and see numerous supplies on railroads right up against the border with China and in Hanoi and Haiphong that they simply were prohibited from going after.

From 1964 to 1968 the United States conducted a strategic air campaign code-named “Operation Rolling Thunder” against a series of targets in the North. In order to send signals to the leaders of North Vietnam to stop their support of the ongoing counterinsurgency in the south. The problem here was that the American Air Force, in particular, attempted to execute a strategic bombing campaign of the same type of doctrine we used in World War II, the same type of doctrine used in Korea against the North Vietnamese. U.S. military planners used outdated strategic bombing theory practices against strategic and operational level targets including petroleum, oil, and lubricant factories and weapons-making facilities. Obviously, the problem with this was that most of the weapons that the North Vietnamese used against American forces were not produced in North Vietnam so any attacks against those targets did not seriously hinder North Vietnam’s war-waging capability. The forces of North Vietnam were not using indigenously produced materials; most of North Vietnam’s weapons were being imported China and the Soviet Union.

Historians generally agree that Rolling Thunder was doomed from the start, as it was going to prove difficult to achieve the desired end state which President Johnson desired. Furthermore, the Department of Defense—and the USAF in particular—were going to find it difficult to interdict or destroy the production of war making materials when so much of that material was not produced internally. Finally, with the very real possibility that an errant bomb might widen a regional war into a global conflict (something everyone in the Administration and DOD wanted to avoid) meant that any campaign was going to be find it near impossible to achieve the effect of getting North Vietnam to stop supporting the insurgency in the south. Again, President Johnson is not only constrained by wanting to keep the conflict regional, but also wanted to keep American involvement limited. As far as the idea of

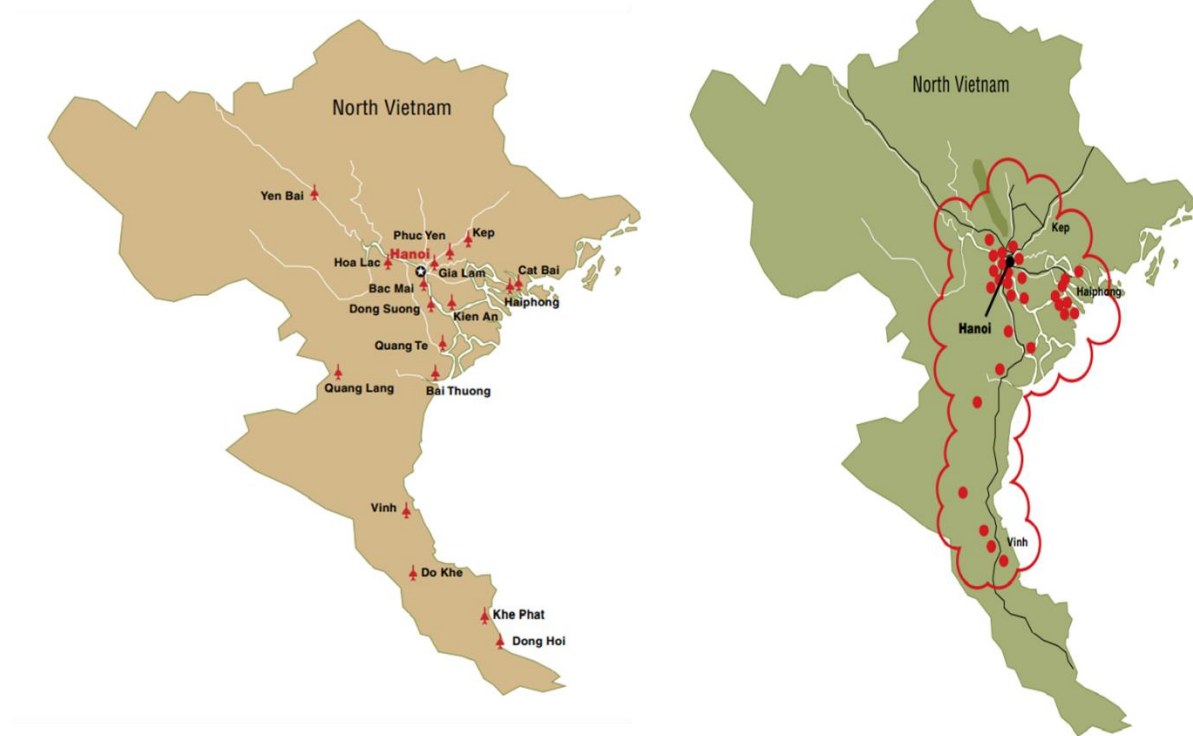


lost cause ideology is concerned, the war that Johnson is fighting in the later 1960s is not the same one contextually that Nixon will face in the early 1970s.

As the air force of the United States begin to attack targets in North Vietnam, the North Vietnamese air defenses began to proliferate at an alarming rate. The spread of surface-to-air missiles and Anti-Aircraft Artillery (AAA) is so rapid that they catch a lot of the American military's initial missions in North Vietnam in 1964 and 1965 by complete surprise. American fighter pilots over North Vietnam witness the setting up of the SAM sites, but are shocked when they actually begin to fire the missiles. Another technological problem arose here as well. The aircraft flying over North Vietnam at this time are not equipped with radar homing and warning (RHAW); this meant that American pilots had no indication of a SAM being fired until they were able to catch sight of the smoke trail from the flying telephone pole that was then hurtling at their aircraft. Tactical and technological changes needed to occur in theater so that the fighter pilots had a better chance of surviving what was rapidly becoming the most densely populated air defense region on the planet.

American fighter pilots flying in North Vietnam during Operation Rolling Thunder missions between 1965 and 1968 face three principle threats: surface-to-air missile threat, AAA threat, and also the emergence of Soviet produced MiG aircraft. During Vietnam, the MiGs come in three varieties; the MiG-17, 19, and 21. The surface-to-air missile threats represented high-altitude threats and the AAA threat was a low-altitude threat. This presented American pilots with a "damned if they did and damned if they didn't" problem. To fly low meant your aircraft was in the dangerous AAA range; however, to fly above that placed the aircraft into the envelope of SAM fire. Most aircraft shot down during the conflict are lost to AAA and not to SAMs, but it was because the SAM threat was so potent that the flyers were forced into having no other option but to attempt to fly low and fast, pop up and hit their targets, before evading enemy fire and attempt to escape the area. The chart below indicates the MiG air bases in North Vietnam as well as the Surface-to-Air missile threat rings where North Vietnam's radar had the

ability to track and target American aircraft.



It is worth noting here that because of the MiG threat, the air-to-air war becomes something of an off-shoot of Operation Rolling Thunder, with both the Navy and Air Force sending dedicated missions out to engage and shoot down those MiGs. From a certain point of view, this becomes a separate air-to-air war that occurs in the skies over North Vietnam. No American pilots earn the coveted status of “Ace”, by shooting down five enemy aircraft until 1972. By the end of the war only five Americans became aces. On the other side of the conflict, the Vietnamese people’s Air Force had over 15 Aces during the conflict. Despite the concept of an ace already becoming something slightly outmoded and outdated, both the USAF and USN hoped their pilots might achieve that particular mark. Although North Vietnam did have more aces, this had more to do with American and North Vietnamese flying policy than it did with flying prowess. American flyers contended pilot and crew rotation, tour length, cruise length, etc. Whereas, North Vietnamese pilots simply continued to fly missions until they either died or survived the war.

### Laos and Cambodia

The final separate air operations occurring during the Vietnam conflict is the decades long interdiction effort against the Ho Chi Minh trail in Laos and Cambodia, what the United States hoped to accomplish was to stop the flow of supplies from the north to the south. The fundamental problem was that the trail was not even a trail or a complete route. The Ho Chi Minh trail more closely resembled capillaries in the human blood system than it did a major artery. If American bombers successfully cut off one of the capillaries, the bloodline of supplies simply flowed around it into another vein and continued to pump men and materials into the South.

The countries of Laos and Cambodia, during the American conflict in Vietnam, became two of the most heavily bombed countries on earth, both of which far exceeded the tonnage of bombs that the United States dropped on Germany during the Second World War. During the entirety of the Vietnam conflict, the United States was never able to really stem the flow of supplies that flowed down the Ho Chi Minh trail, despite valiant and innovative efforts. During one electronic warfare mission (Operation Igloo), aircraft dropped electronic listening devices in order to “hear” what routes the North Vietnamese were using. Once the United States dropped radio receivers the North Vietnamese placed tape decks next to these monitors that would play the sounds of trucks moving down the trail, North Vietnamese forces then simply drove in a different location. This war in Laos and Cambodia also takes place in the dark from the American people who are almost completely oblivious to the fact that the American military was heavily bombing Cambodia and Laos.

### Conclusion

Hopefully what has been presented here is that there were four to six separate air wars which occurred in the skies of Southeast Asia between 1961 and 1973. By the time the Nixon Administration took control of the conflict and as American planners determined what leaving with honor was going to look like, the context of the war had changed.

In 1972, the U.S. launches the operations of Linebackers one (Spring and Summer 1972) and two (eleven days surrounding Christmas). Americans tend to view Linebacker II in particular as the conflict that really allowed America to depart the conflict and end the war with North Vietnam. Perhaps most fascinating though is that the North Vietnamese call that particular battle the Dien Bin Phu of the skies harkening back to their victory of the French forces. The Americans claim it as a victory, the North Vietnamese claim it as a victory and both combatants have valid reasons to see victory from their own contextual perspectives. The USAF lost sixteen B-52s during the Linebacker II operations, and it rumored that many as another dozen aircraft successfully returned to Thailand but never fly again. The United States Air Force did not count an aircraft that landed back at a base as a combat loss. Still, if Linebacker II accomplished anything, if it changed anything at the negotiating table, it did secure the release of the more than five hundred American POWs being held in North Vietnam.

Context matters in war. The United States could not have reasonably “won” a victory in Vietnam in the 1960s if it had applied a more heavy hand in a bombing campaign. While the United States fought for an independent South Vietnam, the North viewed it as a battle for the survival of the nation. By 1972, the context of the war had changed and while the United States did not entirely secure freedom for South Vietnam (the country did not fall to the North until 1975), it did allow Nixon a slightly freer hand in using the hammer of air power to achieve his desired goal of finally removing all American forces from the long nightmare that fundamentally altered the nation as a whole.