

Bombs and Ballots: The Search for Peace in Vietnam

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You don't understand. I want to meet their terms. I want to reach an agreement. I want to end this war before the election. It can be done, and it will be done.

—National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger to his diplomatic aides in Paris, 8 October 1972

1 Introduction

Do democracies fight wars differently than non-democracies? Differences in a country's political institutions may translate into differences in foreign policy, military strategy, and operations on the battlefield. The democratic system incentivizes the distribution of wealth and benefits to the majority of its citizens, resulting in greater prosperity and superior domestic institutions. However, the conduct of foreign policy often requires a unified and resolved state, leading observers of politics to ask whether aspects of the democratic system in fact undermine a state's ability to conduct international politics. During the Vietnam War, the dichotomy between foreign policy and public support could not have been more clear—the military campaign in South Vietnam polarized the United States and resulted in mass demonstrations, a dedicated anti-war movement, and at times threatened to throw the country into systematic unrest. Anti-war protests that turned violent such as at Kent State University in 1970 offered dramatic images that galvanized public support against the war and contributed to an increasing disillusionment with government that would continue through most of the 1970s. Yet American leaders could not simply withdraw and leave South Vietnam to fall under communist control. Convinced that they could not leave without endangering U.S. national security, yet unwilling to devote additional resources to a conflict that was so unpopular at home, Johnson and Nixon would chase a peace accord with North Vietnam for eight long years.

When politicians are responsive to an electorate, they are incentivized to make policy decisions that satisfy the will of the majority. While this responsiveness to public opinion may result in better domestic outcomes, the conduct of international affairs, wartime strategy, and realpolitik at times require politicians to ignore public opinion in order to ensure victory in conflict and the survival of the state. As a result, it is important to understand when and how politicians respond to these competing demands while in office, and how these factors affect a state's ability to wage war. I argue that because domestic constituencies are casualty-sensitive, democratically elected civilians face strong incentives to temporarily trade long-term strategic success for a short-term decrease in casualties in the lead up to an election, resulting in the direct and indirect politicization of military operations. As a result, civilian politicians systematically influence military operations

on the battlefield to favor low-risk strategies in the months preceding a domestic election. This culminates in a preference for defensive operations in the months leading up to a domestic election, while high-risk offensive strategies are delayed until after electoral pressures have been resolved.

This paper evaluates the bombing campaign in South Vietnam as a part of the politicization of conflict. Tied to military offensives on the ground, I assess how electoral politics motivated the interdiction and support campaign in southern Indochina, and the ways in which domestic parochial interests in party politics played a role in shaping the end of the war. To do this, I use bombing and casualty data from the Air Force Research Institute and the U.S. National Archives to evaluate how changes in the electoral calendar affected military strategy throughout the Vietnam War. I then take a closer look at the politics of peace in a case study of Nixon, Operations Linebacker I and II, and the 1972 general election. In sum, I find that domestic parochial concerns also influenced the way in which the campaign in the South was fought, and ultimately influenced the conditions under which the war was ended.

2 A Principal-Agent Theory of Military Operations

As politicians become increasingly concerned with their electoral prospects and sufficiently myopic about public opinion, elected leaders are more likely to consider the domestic political implications of military operations when the country is at war. Democratically elected leaders are cognizant of and responsive to public opinion before elections, and this need to generate public support in order to retain power domestically results in strategic policy changes by the political leadership. Unlike peacetime elections, during times of war the public votes overwhelmingly on issues of foreign policy, resulting in strong incentives for incumbents to manipulate military strategy in order to maintain high approval ratings and win elections (Kagay and Caldeira 1975, Light and Lake 1985, Hess and Nelson 1985, Aldrich et al. 1989). However, I suggest that this political maneuvering does not stop at grand strategy but also affects areas traditionally considered to be the military's purview: the operational and tactical levels of war. This results in predictable and systematic variation in how military operations are conducted and doctrine is implemented on the battlefield. While civilian leaders do not always violate normal civil-military relations during war, they are much more likely to exert control over military operations as elections draw near.

The civil-military relations literature has traditionally seen the military as agents of civilian masters (Huntington 1954, Betts 1977, Desch 1999, formalized by Feaver 2003). However, civilians during wartime are also agents of the national interest with strong incentives to shirk their responsibility to attend to national security in order to retain power domestically. Elections, which during peacetime are intended to hold politicians responsible to the preferences of the electorate, can actually divert

attention and resources away from protecting the national interest when the country is at war. Thus, politicians in democracies during wartime must respond to competing demands regarding the execution of military operations on the battlefield. As statesmen, they are expected to approve operations that are most likely to win a war, but as politicians they must compete for votes and appeal to the short-term preferences of a casualty-sensitive electorate. Because foreign policy and military actions are often kept secret to protect information vital to national security, it is relatively easy for politicians to exploit information asymmetries between themselves and the public in order to maintain public support. This results in a trade-off between prescribed military doctrine and the execution of operations more likely to be politically favorable. Knowing that the public often votes on foreign policy during wartime and that they hold politicians accountable *ex post* for failing military strategies, I argue that the executive responds *ex ante* by altering various aspects of military operations to be more politically palatable immediately before an election. As a result, operations on the battlefield become a tradeoff between long-term gains and short-term casualties, and politicians are much more likely to prioritize their electoral concerns over prescribed military strategy as elections approach and public opinion becomes important to the administrations domestic political survival. Therefore, when politicians anticipate that the public will view offensive actions (and the subsequent increase in casualties) unfavorably, they are more willing to order military commanders to assume defensive positions and delay offensive operations until the electoral threat has passed. After domestic elections, operations return to normal levels and may even result in an increase in offensive activity as operations that had been put on hold are finally initiated.

I further argue that there lies a subtle yet important distinction in how these preferences are operationalized both on the ground and during air campaigns. Politicians and military officers managing ground offensives are principally concerned with mitigating the number of friendly military casualties — soldiers whose loved ones are part of the electorate. Because offensive ground operations tend to be more risky and costly in terms of lives lost, this means that new offensives are likely to be delayed in the lead-up to an election, and then initiated once the executive and his/her co-partisans are electorally unconstrained. Air operations, however, while still risky for pilots and crew members, also have much more power to cause collateral damage and affect the non-combatants — an outcome fundamentally at odds with the ideology of liberal democracies and traditionally very unpopular with democratic publics. As a result, when military forces achieve air superiority (and changes to operations thus include no greater risk to friendly forces), I argue that politicians will take pains to avoid non-combatant deaths by overriding the organizational interests of their air forces and change the kind objectives targeted by bombing raids.

In contrast to the assumptions made in most studies of the civil-military relations literature, civilian leaders in democracies have both the ability and willingness to intervene in tactical and operational

military affairs during conflict. During time of immense domestic pressure on an administration, the executive and his/her political appointees will intervene using a variety of mechanisms in planned military strategy and operations to make them more politically palatable to domestic audiences. Many of these mechanisms of direct politicization, while politically-motivated, do not require individual approvals but rather improve on monitoring and reporting abilities. Others set guidelines at the tactical level, such as altering the rules of engagement, to ensure politically-palatable outcomes while others still rely on the civilian's ultimate prerogative in hiring, firing, and promoting military officers. These political actions then set an expectation within the military about the preferences of the executive branch and leads to the top echelons of the officer corps making decisions with an eye toward the political impact on the home front. These mechanisms of indirect politicization can be motivated by organizational concerns, bureaucratic preferences, or personal ambitions. Ultimately, both direct and indirect politicization result in the modification of decision-making at the strategic, operational and tactical levels of war to accommodate domestic electoral concerns.

Direct politicization occurs when the civilian leadership in the executive branch uses its authority to alter the way in which the military conducts wartime operations. While there are times when civilians personally interfere with and control military operations from the capital and punish (or threaten to punish) those who do not account for the domestic impact of operations, they also rely on subtler, less time-intensive mechanisms. In addition to direct orders and consequences, direct politicization may take two other forms: the insertion of political actors into the war zone and the management of rules and guidelines for forces. Politicians may choose to insert political actors into a conflict environment by sending civilian advisors to monitor military decisions or by utilizing advances in information technology and communications to be more assertive from the home front. Alternatively, they may issue new guidelines that change the rules of engagement operational and tactical guidelines for how forces seek out and engage enemy forces or mark certain territories as off-limits to military operations. Through these three classifications, politicians are able to directly influence military operations during conflict.

Additionally, as civilians issue guidelines and make clear their political preference regarding the execution of operations, the military then may alter the advice and proposals it presents to the civilian leadership in order to accommodate the domestic political environment. This indirect politicization may manifest through three primary concerns - organizational concerns, bureaucratic preferences, and personal ambition. Because organizations develop standard operating procedures and tend to institutionalize recurring phenomenon, politicization may be internalized within the structure of the organization. Additionally, bureaucratic preferences to increase budgets and maintain control over their personnel may result in self-policing efforts according to domestic

politics. Finally, personal ambition may result in military officers taking more notice of domestic political problems on the home front in order to secure promotions and media coverage.

3 Why Study the Bombing Campaign in South Vietnam?

The bombing campaign over Indochina signaled an important shift in the deployment and use of forces by the American military. As technologies improved and American industrial power grew, the U.S. increasingly favored capital-intensive conflict. Because casualties are politically unpopular, American policymakers increasingly choose to substitute expensive, yet less precise, weapons for manpower, which while effective also comes with substantial political costs (Caverley 2010). Airpower was thus used to conduct operations that had traditionally been carried out by infantry: clearing out areas before a major offensive, eliminating trapped insurgents, performing reconnaissance activities before attacks. However, though significantly improved from World War II, bombing operations continued to struggle with precision in the difficult Vietnamese climate, and by the end of the conflict civilian casualties were estimated to be upwards of one million, or three percent of the population.¹ Interdiction strategies in both the North and the South required far more munitions to be dropped than necessary in order to compensate for poor precision, and even then enemy forces were able to quickly adjust their supply lines and/or make repairs.

Airpower further allowed forces to project power into territory that would have been logistically and strategically unfeasible just two decades before. Airlifts providing supplies eliminated the need for long supply chains, and helicopters enabled wounded soldiers to be quickly evacuated and replaced. Yet this also came with a heavy cost — anti-aircraft defenses resulted in significant attrition in heavily populated areas, and helicopters were particularly vulnerable to small arms fire and anti-aircraft artillery. It is estimated that over ten percent of all Vietnam casualties were the result of helicopter crashes. Thus, while airpower enabled U.S. forces to perform many activities that increased its ability to reduce risk to American forces and project power into traditionally inaccessible terrain, it also resulted in costs to precision and the Army's ability to effect strategic change on the ground. In the words of Arthur Schlesinger, “[O]ur strategy in Vietnam today is rather like trying to weed a garden with a bulldozer. We occasionally dig up some weeds, but we dig up most of the turf too” (Schlesinger 1967, 47-48).

Finally, the Vietnam War represented the first time that a war had been featured on television for the American public more broadly. In conflicts prior, administrations and leaders had kept tight control over the media reports that were released to the public, editing footage and showing highlights in movie theaters under the watchful eye of public affairs officials. By the mid 1960s, many

¹For reference, an equivalent percentage in the United States today would total almost 11 million civilians.

if not most American families owned a television, and journalists would report from the battlefield back to the United States for the evening news. For the first time, the government did not exert overwhelming control over the media reports that made it back to the public, giving them a closer look at combat than ever before. Weekly casualty reports, announced at local events and printed in the newspapers, reminded towns across American of the sacrifices that their own communities were making for the defense of South Vietnam. After the Tet Offensive and the revelation of a credibility gap between the reality on the ground and the government's official stance, the role of an independent media would become more important than ever in bringing the war home to American citizens.

The importance of bombing to Vietnam military strategy and its profound consequences on the natural environment and human population of Vietnam has led to a remarkable cannon of scholarship that sought to understand and explain both the strategy behind and results of the bombing campaign. These works in general focus on one of two questions: 1) How effective was the bombing campaign, and 2) What explains the strategy chosen for the bombing war? Answers to the first have largely coalesced to conclude that the bombing of civilian targets did little to help the war effort while bombing that targeted military capacity was much more effective in inducing concessions. Answers to the second have developed three competing explanations that respectively attribute the attritional strategy to organizational biases, military incompetence, and civilian mismanagement. However, neither these questions nor their explanations emerge as satisfactory in order to explain temporal and special variation in the bombing campaign. This chapter fills this gap in the literature by explaining the implementation of bombing operations through the lens of domestic politics.

3.1 How Effective Was the Bombing Campaign in Vietnam?

The bombing campaign during Vietnam was divided into two largely independent campaigns: the coercive campaign over North Vietnam against the North Vietnamese Army and the tactical support operations flown over South Vietnam to aid in fighting Viet Cong insurgents and their North Vietnamese advisors. The campaign over North Vietnam was intended to coerce the NVA into withdrawing their support for Viet Cong rebels via advisors and arms shipments. Further, it intended to create difficulties for the NVA, which was shipping supplies and fighters south via the Ho Chi Minh Trail, and force concessions from the North Vietnamese government in the peace negotiation process. The campaign in South Vietnam, by contrast, was intended to aid the military effort in the South to eradicate the Viet Cong and fight the communist insurgency being funded by the North.

Research on the bombing campaign over the North has largely come to the consensus that the

gradual escalation of bombing over urban and civilian areas was ineffective at forcing concessions from the North Vietnamese during Operation Rolling Thunder. Pape (1996) suggests that the coercive campaign against the North during Rolling Thunder failed to produce major concessions both because the bombing was used as a punishment strategy, and thus severely underestimated the willingness of the NVA to absorb costs, and because a denial or interdiction strategy would not have worked due to the guerrilla nature of the campaign. By contrast, he argues, Operations Linebacker I and II were able to force concessions by the North Vietnamese because they targeted military sites, which became more vulnerable over the course of the war as the NVA increasingly relied on conventional warfare to fight U.S. forces. Similarly, research suggests that the bombing campaign in the South was only successful when used to support military operations and target military assets. Hamlets bombed during the war on average corresponded to higher levels of Viet Cong control, suggesting that bombing was counterproductive to a counterinsurgency strategy that focused on winning the hearts and minds of the population (Kocher et al. 2011). This supports numerous anecdotes from soldiers on the ground, who often complained about the uncoordinated nature of the two campaigns and inability to win local support amidst the bombing campaign. Though some research suggests that civilian victimization and random shelling during war can be an effective tool in counterinsurgency (Stoll 1993, Downes 2006, 2007, 2008, Lyall 2009), the conventional wisdom remains that indiscriminate violence in counterinsurgency campaigns is counterproductive to the goals of the state (Thompson 1966, Galula 1964, Kilcullen 2009, Nagl 2005, Valentino 2004, Valentino et al. 2004, Kalyvas 2006, Condra and Shapiro 2012). In sum, decades of research, aided recently by new methods and better data, suggests that despite the monumental effort and expense associated with the bombing campaign during the Vietnam War, it was ultimately ineffective at both forcing concessions from the North Vietnamese and maintaining control over territory in South Vietnam.

3.2 What Explains the Bombing Strategy?

If the bombing campaign was generally ineffective, then why was it chosen? Johnson's bombing policy of gradual escalation and the strategy of attrition warfare pursued by General William Westmoreland came under heavy scrutiny in the aftermath of the conflict, with critics coalescing around three different potential explanations: bureaucratic biases, military incompetence, and civilian mismanagement. Robert Komer's (1972) seminal white paper, published in the immediate aftermath of the conflict as a lessons learned guide to the war, lays out the clearest explanation for how organizational biases prevented the U.S. from succeeding in the Vietnam counterinsurgency campaign. In "Bureaucracy Does It's Thing," he claims that military preferences for kinetic action, standard operating procedures, and chains of command prevented a full implementation of the Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) program that was a central part

of the Vietnam counterinsurgency program. As a result, pacification was never able to truly make an impact in the countryside and alternative strategies to the war in Vietnam were never truly considered.

A second explanation suggests that the military was principally at fault for the strategy chosen in Vietnam. Taking insights out of Komer's observations, these scholars suggest that civilian leadership was unable to exert sufficient control over the military establishment, and this failure in civil-military relations contributed to a failing strategy developed by a military intent on fighting the last war (Nagl 2005, Lewy 1978, Krepinevich 1984, Cable 1986, Sorley 1999). Explanations that focus on the military's role in developing the Vietnam strategy are particularly critical of General Westmoreland and General William Momyer, who developed and oversaw the ground and air strategies in Vietnam, respectively. Westmoreland in particular, they argue, was given too much freedom in his strategy and was incapable of developing and implementing a more sophisticated strategy than attrition warfare, which resulted in too many U.S. casualties for too little gain (see Krepinevich 1984). A final view of military failure suggests that the Joint Chiefs were at fault for not advocating the military's assessment vigorously enough. McMaster (1997) ultimately finds fault with civilian management, but points to a lack of military leadership in the Joint Chiefs office, and in an unconventional civil-military argument suggests that senior officers in the military should not have been as accommodating of civilian direction as they were during the war.

The final argument indicates that the fault for an ineffective air and ground strategy lay with the civilian leadership and mismanagement of the war. One vein of scholarship suggests that the military strategy employed during Vietnam by Westmoreland was in reality the correct strategy to combat the insurgency in the South; early withdrawal and changes to command initiated by Washington led to the abandonment of a strategy that was working as planned (Carland 2004, Andrade 2008, Birtle 2008, Moyer 2006). A second vein points instead to exceptional levels of civilian control over target lists and unprecedented levels of communication between military commanders and the White House, they argue that civilian micromanagement of the conflict led to a handicapped military unable to effectively execute operations.² Further, civilian emphasis on reportable statistics and numbers in the conflict, in an attempt to measure progress, resulted in perverse incentives on the battlefield that hindered the military's ability to conduct operations which, though not immediately quantifiable, would have resulted in more permanent battlefield gains (Kinnard 1977). In general, scholars contend that civilian political leadership, eager to keep casualties and costs at a minimum, exerted too much influence over everyday operations and matters traditionally seen as the purview of the military. However, as the need for more troops, more bombs, and more equipment became increasingly apparent, civilians were forced to devote more resources to the conflict, resulting in a

²This is the argument pursued by Caverley's "Myth of Military Myopia."

policy of gradual escalation.

A particularly prominent argument in this literature focuses on the impact of domestic politics on civilian decision-making and motives for micro-managing the war. Sensitivity to public opinion and casualty aversion led the Johnson administration to pursue a war strategy that attempted to substitute capital-intensive strategies for those which would require a heavier footprint, and thus more soldiers (Caverley 2010). The unwillingness of the Johnson (and later, Nixon) administration to commit additional human resources to the conflict for fear of domestic political backlash resulted in a strategy that focused heavily on bombing and an unwillingness to fully implement a pacification program that focused on winning hearts and minds (Gelb and Betts 1979). In particular, Johnson's preoccupation with his domestic legislative agenda, the Great Society, meant that decisions about Vietnam were often made in the context of pacifying a hawkish Congress, rather than with strategic objectives in mind.

These explanations, however, prove unsatisfactory when one attempts to explain special and temporal variation in the implementation of military strategy across Vietnam. Variation in the intensity and focus of the bombing campaign, in particular, are difficult to explain by simply blaming organizational biases or civil-military failures across the board. As a result, one must look for explanations that vary over time and make geographic distinctions over the course of the war to fully explain the bombing campaign over Vietnam. I thus argue that variation in election cycles and sensitivity to both U.S. and civilian casualties contributed to significant variation in bombing operations over South Vietnam. I show that the targets and tactics of bombing operations change according to the U.S. electoral calendar, and that casualties subsequently declined in the lead-up to an election and a result of changes in strategy.

4 Theoretical Expectations

When citizens are required to expend both human and physical capital in order to fight wars, they become casualty-sensitive and less supportive of conflict. In democracies, this results in more dovish behavior internationally as elected leaders represent the attitudes of their constituents in the government. These dovish tendencies are then amplified as elections approach; because voters are myopically retrospective, politicians seeking reelection are especially likely to pursue policies that conform to public opinion in order to win favor with the electorate. I argue that during times of war, these cyclical patterns can profoundly affect the timing and nature of military operations on the battlefield. As politicians try to emphasize positive developments and divert negative attention away from the war, they are less likely to approve high-risk and potentially costly operations. As a result, offensive operations and assaults are delayed until after an election, when the executive is

no longer constrained by public opinion about body counts.

While theories of casualty sensitivity make clear predictions about the type and timing of ground offensives, understanding how electoral pressures affect bombing campaigns requires a more nuanced understanding of public opinion and strategy. Because bombing campaigns before the advent of GPS-guided munitions were largely indiscriminate and inflicted significant levels of collateral damage through civilian casualties, displacement, and property damage, politicians had to consider the number of potential civilian casualties inflicted by each operation in addition to expected friendly losses due to air defenses. Public opinion polls consistently show that citizens are generally uncomfortable with the targeting of civilian populations and prefer bombing campaigns to be conducted with as few civilian casualties as possible.³ However, tactics that reduce civilian casualties often result in increased danger to pilots as they conduct operations in conditions with better visibility and at lower altitude. While this tradeoff between collateral damage and risk to friendly forces is not unique to bombing campaigns, the magnitude of potential civilian casualties from indiscriminate bombing operations from a single pilot results in more consistent concern about collateral damage from bombing operations than land offensives.

Bombing operations can be altered in several ways to limit the number of casualties incurred by friendly forces while conducting raids over enemy territory. Due to visual constraints on anti-aircraft weapons, it is easier for defenders on the ground to shoot down bombers during the daylight hours. Daylight provides better targeting capabilities, more advanced warning, and more information about the nature and capabilities of the bombers than the cover of darkness. Yet, increases in navigational abilities and safety measures in the cockpit allow pilots to fly at night with similar levels of ease and safety as flying during the day. As a result, switching bombing operations to be conducted during evening and nighttime hours, when ground visibility is lowest, is an effective way of reducing friendly casualties in the air. Additionally, flying fewer missions necessarily reduces the risk to pilots and crewmembers. Conducting fewer raids means exposing fewer planes to enemy fire, resulting in fewer casualties. Finally, changing bombing targets to areas less contested (and thus less likely to mount serious resistance) will reduce the number of pilots and crewmembers shot down. Bombing less populated areas and restricting air operations to targets in locations with less consolidated enemy presence results in a substantially decreased risk to pilots.⁴

³See Chapter 5: The Politics of Operation Rolling Thunder

⁴It is worth noting here that bombing operations for either coercion or interdiction require bombing enemy territory and enemy forces. While obviously there would be no casualties at all if bombing operations were to either a) cease or b) only target forces that were not going to fire back, this is clearly unrealistic in a wartime setting. Small adjustments, however, can have large effects on the average risk to a pilot and his crew. As a result, targeting areas that are still considered enemy territory, but perhaps contain fewer people and/or secure enemy bases, can be an effective way of limiting friendly casualties.

Politicians are naturally most sensitive and responsive to concerns over the lives of their own citizens and constituents, and thus the overwhelming emphasis in a bombing campaign will be to limit the number of casualties incurred by pilots and crew. However, when risk to pilots and aircraft is minimal and/or when steps to reduce civilian deaths would place friendly forces in no greater danger, politicians may take steps to limit the number of civilian casualties inflicted on the ground by bombing forces as well. Thus, politicians may seek to limit civilian casualties by flying fewer missions in the lead up to an election. Fewer missions on average means that there will be fewer opportunities for collateral damage, resulting in an expected decrease in civilian casualties. Finally, bombing populated areas exposes more civilians to collateral explosives, resulting in substantial numbers of killed and injured. By moving targets farther away from city centers, politicians can substantially reduce the number of civilians killed or injured in each raid, thus temporarily decreasing the amount of collateral damage inflicted by bombing missions.

Rather than attempting to achieve coercive objectives, the bombing campaign in the South was a coordinated effort between the Air Force and the Army to aid U.S. and South Vietnamese forces in combating Viet Cong communist insurgents attempting to overthrow the pro-Western government in Saigon. February 9 saw the first deployment of U.S. combat forces to Vietnam; escalation and the “Americanization” of the conflict occurred rapidly throughout 1965 and by December the Johnson administration had committed over 200,000 troops to combat the insurgency in South Vietnam. Cognizant of casualty sensitivity amongst the American public and wary of the significant costs of a counterinsurgency pacification campaign, the Johnson administration chose to deploy significant amounts of air support and firepower to substitute for “boots on the ground” (see Caverley 2010). As a result, the U.S. became heavily reliant on strategic and tactical air support throughout the entire war to reinforce and assist territorial gains on the ground, and air power became a dominant feature of the campaign. Bombing operations were announced and conducted liberally throughout South Vietnam with little interference from the White House. Unlike Rolling Thunder, civilians did not exert direct control over targets in South Vietnam, instead leaving much up to the discretion of Military Assistance Command – Vietnam (MACV), commanded by Army General William Westmoreland.⁵

Yet despite air power’s critical role in providing tactical and operational support to ground forces, the vast majority of targets and munitions dropped were against targets more readily described as interdiction. Bombers routinely and liberally targeted munitions storage facilities, bridges,

⁵All U.S. Air Force operations in South Vietnam were under the direct control of MACV in order to prioritize close air support operations. Operations against the Ho Chi Minh trail in Southern Laos and inside Cambodia, however, reflected disparate chains of command and control amongst the Air Force, Army, and Marines. At no point, however, did the White House or civilian leaders exert nearly the amount of direct influence on bombing targets and operations that they did over North Vietnam.

transportation hubs and networks, and supply depots, among others across Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia in an effort to interfere with the ability of the Viet Cong to resupply and organize. The use of B-52 bombers to support ground operations in Operation Arc Light resulted in considerable clearing potential — each bomber alone had the capacity to carry 30 tons of high explosives.⁶ More indiscriminate measures such as Napalm and CBU cluster bombs were also heavily employed against interdiction targets, while herbicides like Agent Orange cleared away hundreds of acres of foliage at a time to reveal transportation networks and enemy locations. This lopsided nature of targeting, despite the priority given to tactical support operations, suggests that any temporary reductions in close air support translated into increases in interdiction operations rather than overall reductions in bombing.

Because of its primary (if dwarfed) role in supporting troop operations, public opinion regarding the air campaign in the South was dramatically different from opinion about the North. The perception that bombing and air support in South Vietnam was both necessary and helpful to the war effort meant that the campaign was largely uncontroversial and considered primarily in connection with the ground war as opposed to a separate campaign. Even after the Tet Offensive, emergence of the credibility gap, and dramatic decline in public support for the war, not a single national poll asked specifically about bombing operations in South Vietnam, with questions focusing instead on the resumption of operations against North Vietnam or the potential for hostilities against Cambodia and Laos.⁷

As a result, predictions about the bombing campaign in South Vietnam (as well as the bombing of the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Southern Laos and the bombing of Cambodia) more closely resemble predictions about the presence of ground offensives and limiting friendly casualties. New ground offensives result in additional risk to friendly forces as they attempted to retake enemy territory — the corresponding air support operations are also far more risky as bombers fly over heavily defended and entrenched areas. As a result, as politicians limit friendly exposure to enemy fire by delaying ground offensives, we should observe a similar decrease in close air support targets and operations. Further, daytime operations are riskier to pilots and crew as defenders are better able to visualize and track incoming planes; we should thus observe an increase in operations flown at night in the lead up to an election. This can be summarized as follows:

H1 Close air support operations should decrease in South Vietnam before an election.

⁶It should be noted that B-52s were not used solely against interdiction targets but were also of key importance as close air support in key battles, such as the liberation of Khe Sanh in April 1968 and An Loc in 1972.

⁷Via the Roper Center. All of these polls show considerable levels of public opposition to bombing Laos and Cambodia, with only marginal support for bombing North Vietnam contingent upon the failure of peace talks.

H2 U.S. forces should conduct more missions at night in the lead up to an election.

H3 U.S. casualties should decrease in the lead up to an election.

5 Data

To evaluate the above hypotheses I use data from two distinct sources. First, I use the data from the Air Force Research Institute described in Chapter 5, which catalogues bombing operations over all of Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos from 1966 through 1975. Released in 2013, it totals over 4.6 million observations of individual sorties flown during the war and their operation specifications, including but not limited to target location, target country, target type, weight of munitions loaded, type of aircraft flown, and the time of day of the operation. While in Chapter 5 I analyzed information on the location of targets, the number of sorties, and daytime operations, in this chapter I utilize the types of facilities targeted by bombing raids in South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. In order to disaggregate between close air support operations and interdiction operations, I indexed each target type listed in the database and coded it as either close air support or other. Assuming that targets of enemy forces, enemy trucks, and enemy barracks could be considered close air support, while targets of bridges, dams, and roads (such as the Ho Chi Minh Trail) are more likely to be interdiction and/or denial operations, I developed a coding system that systematically categorizes whether an operation is most likely to be considered close air support or part of a larger strategic campaign in the south.

Data on casualties comes from the U.S. National Archives. Available for download online, this database catalogues each soldier, sailor, Marine, and airman who died as a result of wounds sustained from the War in Vietnam. Observations are at the individual level, and include personal information such as name, rank, hometown, age, religion, and marital status, while also including information about branch, duty, unit, cause of death, and date of death. I edit the dataset in two major ways. First, I exclude soldiers who did not succumb to their injuries while in theater. Because I only have data on those killed rather than wounded, and those wounded who died as a result of wounds sustained some time after the initial injury after treatment stateside are not very different from those who recover from their injuries, I only count those casualties that occur while overseas. Further, because this is a study of decision-making about operations during war, the best way to estimate casualties is to count those incurred in the midst of the operation. Second, I collapse the dataset to the week level. Because there is considerable fluctuation from day to day on operations, and most offensives last a week or longer, I estimate weekly casualties averages rather than averages by day.

Control variables for the regressions in Southern Indochina are different than the controls used

in Chapter 5 due to a lack of available weather data from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Association during the Vietnam War. Because of a lack of geo-located weather data from NOAA, I use reports of cloud cover and rain given in each operation log that is found in the dataset. Troop levels publicly available from the National Archives are used to control for overall levels of engagement in South Vietnam — a particularly important control given that the dependent variable in H3 is U.S. casualties. Further, because I am interested in U.S.-led offensives and decisions, I include indicator variables for the two main North Vietnamese attacks of the war — the Tet Offensive and Easter Offensive. Finally, I include month and year indicators in my analysis to control for seasonal and yearly effects.

6 Empirical Strategy

I test the above hypotheses using two OLS regressions that evaluate the correlation between U.S. domestic electoral cycles and bombing operations over South Vietnam, and one that assesses the relationship between domestic elections and U.S. casualties in Vietnam. In this analysis, unlike in Chapter 5 where the focus was solely on Operation Rolling Thunder, I evaluate the entire war period, from 1966 to 1973. 1965 is omitted from the regressions due to a lack of data.

To evaluate H1, I evaluate the likelihood that a sortie is identified as close air support on two independent variables — one a natural log function of the number of months left before the next election, and the other a binary variable that indicates whether a given month is three months before or after an election. Keeping the data disaggregated, rather than averaging to weekly totals, allows me to identify how likely it is that a sortie flown will be a close air support mission as opposed to an interdiction mission. By contrast, simply summing close air support missions allows me to measure total sorties, but not the relative tradeoff. Theoretically, because close air support operations are most often used to support ground offensives rather than as a part of a strategic campaign, we should observe a decrease in the months leading up to a presidential election. The stagnation of activity in an effort to reduce risk to soldiers and pilots should result in a decline in new ground offensives, and with that decline and corresponding decrease in support operations. As a result, I evaluate whether the number of air operations with target types designated as close air support correlates with changes in the U.S. domestic electoral cycle.

To evaluate H2, I use data on time of day of raids to estimate the likelihood that a sortie would be flown during the day in the lead up to an election. As in my evaluation of H1, I use both a logarithmic function as an independent variable and two binary indicators. Because daylight raids are more dangerous to pilots, I expect that as elections draw closer, we should observe fewer sorties flown during daylight hours.

Table 1: Summary Statistics, South Vietnam

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev	Min	Max
Daylight Raid	4.34 E06	0.699	0.459	0	1
Close Air Support	4.34 E06	0.183	0.387	0	1
Troops in Theater	85	344,467	177,708	50	536,100
Cloudy	4.34 E06	0.087	0.282	0	1
Clear Skies	4.34 E06	0.233	0.422	0	1

To evaluate H3, I regress weekly casualties on domestic electoral cycles. The clearest prediction of the theory presented in this dissertation is that casualties should decline in the lead up to an election. Leaders make changes to tactics and operations in order to reduce the risk that friendly military forces are exposed to. As a result, we should observe that in the months leading up to a domestic election, casualties are much lower than average, while casualties return to average levels, or are slightly higher, in the months immediately following an election. As in Chapter 3, I use two independent variables — months until the next domestic election (natural log), and binary variables that indicate whether an observation is three months before or after an election. Casualty levels are aggregated to weekly totals for historical reasons: Public announcements of local service members killed in action were made on a weekly basis. Thus, it is weekly, rather than daily, totals that are most significant.

7 Statistical Results and Analysis

Overall, results below indicate strong support for the hypotheses articulated above. We observed a marked decrease in the likelihood that sorties flown over South Vietnam are flown as close air support missions and during daylight hours in the lead up to an election. Further, results suggest that this effect disappears in the immediate aftermath of the election, indicating that the policy change coincides with a change in the electoral politics of the war rather than strategic offensives. Finally, efforts to reduce service member risk appear to be successful — casualties in Vietnam are significantly lower during the three months before an election, while post-election casualties maintain average levels.

Tables (2) and (3) are logit regressions that evaluate the likelihood that: 1) a sortie flown will target objectives considered close air support operations, and 2) a sortie will be flown during daylight hours. Two independent variables operationalized in Models (1) and (2) as a natural log function and binary indicators, respectively, estimate the effect of electoral cycles on close air support missions. Control variables include measures of the number of troops in South Vietnam, indicators for the Tet

Table 2: Daylight Sorties on Election Cycles, South Vietnam 1965 – 1973

	<i>Daylight Sorties</i>	
	(1)	(2)
Year Indicators	Y	Y
Month Indicators	Y	Y
Months Until Next Election (Natural Log)	0.063** (0.03)	
3 Months Before Election		-0.166** (0.07)
3 Months After Election		-0.015 (0.09)
Troops in Theater (in thousands)	2.34 E-06*** (6.1 E-07)	1.98 E-06*** (2.87 E-07)
Tet Offensive	-0.417*** (0.14)	-0.438*** (0.14)
Operation Linebacker	-0.211** (0.09)	-0.239** (0.10)
Cloudy Weather	0.072*** (0.02)	0.071*** (0.02)
Clear Skies	0.052** (0.02)	0.051** (0.02)
Spring Monsoon	-0.018 (0.06)	-0.026 (0.06)
Constant	1.214*** (0.15)	1.44*** (0.04)
Observations	2,047,382	2,047,382

Note: All models clustered by month. Robust standard errors in parentheses.

***p<0.01, **p<0.05, *p<0.1

and Easter Offensives, and weather/seasonal indicators. However, because decisions are individual sorties are not made independently of each other, it is important to cluster results by a unit of analysis that corresponds to decisions made by military commanders and civilian leaders. As a result, all models are clustered by month in order to account for the lack of independence between individual observations.

Results from Tables (2) provide support for Hypothesis 1. The positive significant coefficient in Model (1) indicates that as an election draws closer (and thus, the number of months until an election decreases), the likelihood a sortie will target close air support objectives also decreases. This change likely reflects the absence of offensives to support on the ground in the lead up to an election. Model (2) supports this hypothesis. We observe that in the three months before an

election, sorties are significantly less likely to be close air support, but immediately after an election they are just as likely as other averages. That there is a discrete, significant break in outcomes that coincides within a few months of a presidential or midterm election indicates that electoral politics had a significant effect on the kinds of objectives that aircraft targeted during the Vietnam War.

Similarly, results from Table (3) support Hypothesis 2. Model (1) also reports a positive, significant coefficient, which suggests that as the number of months until an election decreases, the probability that a sortie is flown during the daytime also decreases. Because daytime operations are more likely to be seen and easier to be shot down, we expect that as politicians and commanders seek to expose their pilots to less risk, daytime sorties should decline, and the data bear this out. Model (2) further confirms the expected mechanism — while daylight sorties are significantly below average levels in the three months before and election, they are indistinguishable from average levels in the aftermath of the election. This discrete change in sortie timing coincides precisely with a U.S. domestic election, suggesting that electoral politics has a pronounced effect on tactical-level decisions made during wartime.

Table (4) is an OLS regression that estimates the effect of electoral cycles on the number of weekly casualties incurred during the Vietnam War. Models (1) and (2) operationalize two independent variables as: 1) an exponential function that takes the natural log of the number of months until an election; and 2) two binary variables that indicate whether an observation occurs three months before or after an election. While casualty data is available at the individual level, it is consolidated into weekly totals for historical reasons. Control variables include the number of forces in theater, indicators for the Easter and Tet Offensives, and an indicator for the spring monsoon, which typically brought forth the beginning of a new fighting season. To account for profound differences in yearly casualties levels, policies, and trajectory of the war, I include year fixed effects.⁸

Results from Table (4) reveal strong support for both Hypothesis 3 and the theory presented in this dissertation. The positive significant coefficient in Model (1) indicates that as an election draws closer, the number of casualties decreases likely as a result of the risk-reduction efforts taken in the months before. Model (2) provides even stronger evidence — weekly casualty levels in the three months before an election reveal an average of thirty fewer casualties per week — more than a 27% drop from average levels. This decrease translates into almost 400 soldiers per election cycle. Further, weekly averages return to exactly average levels in the three months immediately following an election. This dramatic, discrete difference that coincides precisely with the timing of a U.S.

⁸In this regression I chose not to cluster the data by time periods because it is already aggregated to the week level. Further, while offensives can be longer than week-long endeavors, some new assaults only last a few days. Thus, I do not subject the models to clustering. Results indicate that with clustering, while the statistical significance of Model (1) decreases below conventional levels, Model (2) retains its significance.

Table 3: Close Air Support Sorties on Election Cycles, South Vietnam 1965 – 1973

	<i>Close Air Support</i>	
	(1)	(2)
Year Indicators	Y	Y
Month Indicators	Y	Y
Months Until Next Election (Natural Log)	0.077* (0.02)	
3 Months Before Election		-0.160** (0.08)
3 Months After Election		-0.071 (0.08)
Troops in Theater (in thousands)	8.11 E-06*** (6.0 E-07)	7.42 E-06*** (5.9 E-07)
Tet Offensive	0.191** (0.07)	0.172** (0.07)
Operation Linebacker	-0.016 (0.11)	-0.045 (0.11)
Cloudy Weather	0.131*** (0.03)	0.129*** (0.03)
Clear Skies	0.162*** (0.05)	0.160*** (0.05)
Spring Monsoon	0.105 (0.10)	0.022 (0.09)
Constant	-1.173*** (0.19)	-1.838*** (0.12)
Observations	2,047,382	2,047,382

Note: All models clustered by month. Robust standard errors in parentheses.

***p<0.01, **p<0.05, *p<0.1

presidential or midterm election strongly suggests that U.S. casualties are decreased in the lead up to an election as incumbents attempt to dampen bad press about an ongoing conflict.

Overall, the evidence presented strongly suggests that operations, tactics, and targets were influenced in the lead up to U.S. domestic elections, but that once the electoral moment had passed, operations returned to business as usual. This electoral influence then had very real consequences on the battlefield — Table (4) indicates that weekly casualty figures declined by almost 30% in the months leading up to November elections, but returned to typical levels once the polls closed. Over eight years of conflict and four election cycles, this translates into over 1,500 soldiers — almost the same number of total Americans killed in action during the War in Afghanistan. These significant, substantive differences in military operations and their effects around U.S. electoral cycles suggest that electoral politics have substantive effects on the way that states fight wars.

Table 4: Weekly Casualties on Election Cycles, The War in Vietnam 1965 – 1973

Year Indicators	<i>Soldiers Killed in Action</i>	
	(1)	(2)
	Y	Y
Months Until Next Election (Natural Log)	12.191*** (5.61)	
3 Months Before Election		-30.035*** (10.84)
3 Months After Election		-0.640 (9.92)
Troops in Theater (in thousands)	0.001*** (0.0001)	0.001*** (0.0001)
Tet Offensive	138.1*** (24.8)	137.0*** (24.7)
Easter Offensive	-2.409 (20.42)	-11.76 (20.71)
Spring Monsoon	39.85*** (7.46)	38.90*** (7.67)
Constant	-147.3*** (23.94)	-109.1*** (14.72)
Observations	424	424

Standard errors in parentheses.

***p<0.01, **p<0.05, *p<0.1

8 Nixon and the Search for Peace

The Vietnam War ended in the same manner it was begun: with a presidential election. By the beginning of 1972 President Nixon’s popularity had substantially and he was facing renewed pressure to end the war in Vietnam before the November election (Karnow 1983, 636). Public dissatisfaction and frustration with the war had continued to rise throughout his presidency as an increasing number of people felt betrayed by the gap in his campaign promises versus the outcomes delivered. While Nixon had pledged in 1968 to end the war within six months of his inauguration, even going so far as to suggest he had a “secret plan” to end the war, over the next three years he would secretly widen the bombing campaign to extend far inside Cambodia and later authorize an invasion of Cambodia and Laos, effectively expanding the war to include all of Indochina. While Nixon had successfully reduced the number of Americans fighting inside Vietnam through his policy of “Vietnamization,” an additional 20,000 soldiers had died by the 1972 election under Nixon. Large-scale protests on college campuses and big cities that occasionally turned violent, as at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago and Kent State University, reinforced divisions amongst

the American public and threatened to re-erupt in the tense political environment of a presidential election season. Further, Nixon's secret bombing campaign inside Cambodia had antagonized an already hostile Congress, which was now actively seeking ways to limit presidential authority in Indochina, including debates on repealing the Tonkin Gulf Resolution and using congressional power in appropriations to limit funding for the war (Karnow 1983, 646). With public opinion overwhelmingly against further escalation and a majority of Americans disapproving of how Nixon was handling the War in Vietnam, Nixon had run out of time to win the war outright.

Nixon was thus very concerned about his prospective opponent in the 1972 general election and the platform that he would be running against. While every serious Democratic candidate ran on ending the war in Vietnam and were highly critical of Nixon's handling of the conflict, there remained considerable differences in their visions for domestic and foreign policy, from segregationist governor George Wallace of Alabama to the very liberal Senator George McGovern of South Dakota. With early wins in Iowa and New Hampshire, however, the frontrunner for the nomination going into the New Hampshire primary in March was Senator Edmund Muskie of Maine — a very popular former governor and Humphrey's 1968 vice presidential candidate. Muskie was so popular that in August 1971, before the Democratic primaries even began, a poll taken showed that were the election to be held then, Nixon would lose his bid for reelection against the Maine politician (Gallup 1971). As a result, Nixon's campaign committee forged a letter that was printed in the Manchester Union-Leader just days before the New Hampshire primary, asserting that Muskie had used slurs against French Canadians and further attacking his wife for drinking and using off-color language on the campaign trail (Herring 2001, 291). Muskie's emotional defense of his wife, coupled with his poor showing in New Hampshire after the publication of the "Canuck letter," effectively ended the campaign, throwing the Democratic primaries wide open again. By the end of March and after five primaries, there was no clear frontrunner for the nomination — until the Wisconsin primary on April 4, the eventual nominee (George McGovern of South Dakota) had not won a single race.

Nixon was not the only party interested in the outcome of the Democratic primaries and the 1972 general election, however. Leaders in North Vietnam were actively planning their spring offensive with an eye toward the U.S. election calendar as well. Negotiations in Paris had stalled with the stalemate on the battlefield and neither side willing to make any additional concessions (Karnow 1983, 632). Hanoi calculated that the only way to break the logjam would be to initiate a major land grab and alter the balance of power on the battlefield (Karnow, 640). U.S. and South Vietnamese military leaders were thinking along similar lines and preparing for a new North Vietnamese offensive, but assumed that it would come around the Lunar New Year (Tet), as it had in 1968 (Karnow, 640). Hanoi, however, planned the offensive for two months later in order to coincide more closely with the U.S. election and deliver a new sense of urgency to the negotiations

(Herring, 304). While the Easter Offensive was not intended to win the war outright, Hanoi felt that a show of strength against a weak South Vietnamese military close to the U.S. presidential election would force Nixon and Kissinger into making additional concessions in the negotiations, regardless of the losses sustained by North Vietnam in such an operation.

Thus, on March 30, 1972, North Vietnamese forces attacked South Vietnam across the demilitarized zone (DMZ), into the Central Highlands from Laos, and south from Cambodia toward Saigon. Committing a total of 14 divisions and 26 independent regiments to the offensive — almost its entire army — the PAVN amassed an enormous force that dramatically outnumbered South Vietnamese defenders in the largest conventional military confrontation of the conflict (Herring, 304). They quickly captured territory and ran over several South Vietnamese defenses, putting front and center the weakness of Vietnamization without corresponding American air power. Within a month, PAVN forces had captured Quang Tri and most of the four northern provinces, held substantial parts of the western highlands, and had the southern city of An Loc under siege and down to a 1,000 yard perimeter (Turley 2010).

U.S. response was generally sluggish and inhibited by a lack of available resources due to the drawdown of forces. Convinced that intelligence about an impending assault had been wrong, the U.S. Commander of Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MAC-V), General Creighton Abrams, and U.S. Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker were out of the country during the initial assault, making communication and rapid responses very difficult for U.S. and South Vietnamese forces (Herring, 309). Further, monsoon weather patterns in April made visibility through the low cloud cover very difficult to navigate and forced the Air Force to rely on aircraft with radar targeting capabilities (Michel 2001, 23). As a result, the drawdown and reduction of American military presence, including close air support craft and maintenance crews, in Vietnam significantly contributed to the sluggish initial response. By the spring of 1972, the U.S. Air Force had just three squadrons of F-4 Phantoms and one of A-37 Dragonflies in the country, totaling only 76 aircraft in Vietnam and supplemented by 114 fighter-bombers out of Thailand. The number of B-52s available from Guam had dropped significantly to just 83; the Air Force had very few resources to mount an immediate response through difficult weather, and were forced to redeploy aircraft from Korea and the continental United States to compensate. From April to May 1972, the U.S. would transfer 176 F-4 Phantoms and 12 F-105s from Korea and the United States to Thailand, reinforce Guam with an additional 124 B-52s bombers, and add four carrier groups off the coast of Vietnam (Michel, 21-24).

Once the weather cleared and the Air Force had reinforced its available aircraft, the air support campaign proved devastatingly effective against a North Vietnamese Army that had switched to a conventional battlefield (Michel, 27). PAVN assaults against Hue in May resulted in the loss of

Figure 1: The Easter Offensive



dozens of tanks and over 800 men as American air power supplemented defending ARVN forces and destroyed armored units, supply lines, and advancing units. In July, the U.S. launched almost 5,500 tactical sorties and over 2,000 B-52 strikes in support of an ARVN counteroffensive to retake Quang Tri. In the south, American air support in defense of An Loc cost the PAVN 40 tanks and almost 800 men in May. At the height of the aerial assault, U.S. forces were sending a B-52 strike every 55 minutes, and by mid-June, the siege was declared over at the cost of an estimated 25,000 North Vietnamese soldiers. By the end of May, U.S. Air Forces could focus on the stalled North Vietnamese offensive in the central highlands and support ARVN defenses around Kon Tum. Helicopters firing TOW missiles and B-52 strikes again decimated large numbers of North Vietnamese forces, and by the time the North Vietnamese forces withdrew back west, an estimated 30,000 men had lost their lives advancing in the central highlands (Pape 1996, 199-201).

Close air support operations against advancing North Vietnamese forces were quickly complemented by a retaliatory strategic bombing offensive against North Vietnam. Initially, Nixon (with the support of Kissinger) rejected a plan to attack Hanoi and Haiphong using B-52 Stratofortress bombers out of concern for ongoing negotiations with the USSR over the Strategic Arms Limitation

Treaty, set to be formalized the following month. However, just 5 days after the PAVN invasion, Nixon authorized tactical air strikes, dubbed “Freedom Train,” inside North Vietnam up to the 18th parallel, and a day later on April 5 he authorized air strikes north of the 20th parallel in an operation known as Freedom Train. These missions were largely part of a tactical interdiction effort aimed at cutting off PAVN supply lines, bridges, and other logistical lines necessary to sustain the kind of the conventional military assault launched by the PAVN. Once supply lines had largely been destroyed, the Air Force then switched to target petroleum reserves inside North Vietnam, forcing PAVN units operating south to slow and conserve resources (Michel, 30).

Nixon was further concerned about the international politics of broadening the bombing campaign. Negotiations with the Soviet Union on the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT) were ongoing and due to be finalized in May. A new bombing offensive against North Vietnam, whom the USSR had been aiding throughout the conflict, could have been seen as escalatory during a time when the U.S. had been taking steps to reduce its presence in Indochina. Additionally, Nixon and Kissinger worried about a potential Chinese response (Karnow, 607). Just as the Chinese intervention in Korea had influenced Johnson’s decision-making during Rolling Thunder, Nixon now weighed a similar dilemma. Yet international politics were also different in 1972 than they had been under Johnson. The USSR valued détente with the United States more than its ally in North Vietnam. The Chinese economy and power structure were reeling from the effects of the Cultural Revolution, and Nixon’s visit just months before promised better bilateral relations between the two countries.

North Vietnamese gains during the Easter Offensive changed the balance of power between negotiators in Paris, and Nixon and Kissinger understood that without increasing pressure on Hanoi, negotiations over the summer would require more concessions than they could realistically make. On April 20 Soviet Premier Brezhnev agreed to exert more pressure on Hanoi to end the offensive, to little avail (Karnow, 608). When Kissinger met with his North Vietnamese counterpart, Le Duc Tho, in Paris on May 2, Tho made it clear the North Vietnamese were unwilling to make concessions given their battlefield success (Karnow, 607). With the election just five months away and advancing North Vietnamese forces threatening to derail any hope of a negotiated “peace with honor,” Nixon had to restore balance between the parties. Yet at the same time, escalation without a peace agreement would have been wildly unpopular with a war-weary electorate. Trusting that the USSR and China would not respond to a new bombing campaign, Nixon decided to gamble for victory.

On 8 May 1972, Nixon announced via televised address that the United States would begin mining Haiphong Harbor to prevent new shipments of arms and aid from reaching North Vietnam. This step, code-named “Pocket Money,” explicitly rejected by Johnson during the early years of the war

and signaled a dramatic escalation of hostilities and would significantly hurt North Vietnamese transportation and shipping — 85% of its imports came through Haiphong Harbor. Though the operation was politically controversial, Nixon took every precaution to spare allies and friendly forces. Mines were set to activate three days after the drop in order to allow foreign ships time to evacuate the port. Further, Nixon altered the rules of engagement for guided missile cruisers protecting the mining aircraft and approved a free-fire zone to defend against attacks from Soviet-made MiG fighters. When it became clear that neither China nor the Soviet Union would intervene on behalf of North Vietnam, Nixon further expanded the bombing campaign.

Two days after Pocket Money, large-scale bombing operations against North Vietnam commenced for the first time since the end of Rolling Thunder in Operation Linebacker. For the first time, Nixon “took the gloves off” of bombing strategy against North Vietnam, and the operation involved air strikes against a broad set of military including logistical centers, roads, bridges, rail houses, fuel dumps, vehicles, power plants, and anti-aircraft defenses (Pape, 199). The campaign was largely successful. It considerably dampened Hanoi’s ability to ship military equipment and manpower south, and cut its imports by almost 75%. By July, the Easter offensive had largely stalled, and Nixon’s popularity increased as he took a “tough stand” against North Vietnamese aggression (Herring, 305).

Two months after the beginning of Operation Linebacker on 13 July 1972, George McGovern accepted the Democratic Party nomination for president after a protracted and contentious convention. A very liberal Senator from South Dakota, McGovern was criticized heavily even in his own party for support for social policies that many felt were out of touch with Middle America such as abortion rights, amnesty, and drug legalization. His propulsion to the top of the field was largely fueled by a grass-roots, anti-war effort, guaranteeing that Vietnam would dominate the fall campaign season for a third presidential election unless Nixon was able to negotiate a peace agreement before election day. Like Johnson in 1964, Nixon now had the opportunity to portray himself as the reasonable, responsible leader who both brought peace to war-weary country and understood American values.

It was thus with a renewed sense of urgency that Nixon and Kissinger approached the next round of negotiations in Paris. In response to the Easter Offensive, Kissinger had dropped the demand that North Vietnamese forces withdraw from the country in May, but with the North Vietnamese retreating and the success of Operation Linebacker, there was a renewed push in September to reach an equitable agreement that allowed the United States to exit the conflict and save face. Linebacker had done considerable damage to North Vietnam’s shipping and transportation, while the failure of the Easter Offensive had cost the PAVN 13 of their 14 divisions (Pape, 208). Further, October saw an increase in Air Force assignments over North Vietnam, despite the increased danger posed

to pilots over Hanoi, in order to demonstrate U.S. resolve and increase pressure on Hanoi (Michel 2001, 39). Yet despite the troubles faced by North Vietnam, it was Kissinger who was working under an every-looming deadline. Eager to wrap up negotiations by the end of the month, Kissinger became increasingly willing to accede to North Vietnamese demands for little in exchange (van Loi and Vu 1996, 239-272). Frustrated by the lack of progress, he exclaimed to an aide on October 8, “You don’t understand. I want to meet their terms. I want to reach an agreement. I want to end this war before the election. It can be done, and it will be done” (quoted in Karnow, 648).

On October 21, the two parties reached a draft agreement to be signed within ten days. Nixon and Kissinger took to the airwaves to announce the deal to the American public and build support for it in Congress. Seventeen days before the November election, it appeared that Nixon had delivered on his promise of peace. Kissinger went before the American public on October 26 to announce that “peace was at hand,” and public opinion toward Nixon — already ahead against an ostracized McGovern — climbed even higher, virtually guaranteeing a landslide. A war-weary public, already wary of the liberal Senator, celebrated the news by trending heavily toward the incumbent. By November 7, one in three anti-war Democrats would vote for Nixon.

Yet all was not finalized. South Vietnamese leaders expressed considerable concern over provisions in the deal, protesting that the United States had abandoned its ally in the rush to extricate itself from an unpopular conflict. With North Vietnamese troops permitted to stay in South Vietnam and the recognition of communist forces as legitimate political actors, the U.S. had relented on many of its key demands throughout the war and exposed South Vietnam to a potentially new offensive that would leave it without American air power or support (Karnow, 648). After the disaster of the East Offensive and revelation that South Vietnamese forces could not withstand another advance by the PAVN without considerable American firepower in support, South Vietnam refused to sign the October agreement and walked away from the negotiating table. With the deadline looming, Nixon half-heartedly attempted to apply pressure to South Vietnamese President Thieu but was unsuccessful and the deadline passed without an agreement. Yet Nixon allowed the deadline to pass without a response due in large part to the upcoming election. Speaking to the American public after the October 31 deadline, Nixon reiterated his commitment to the peace process and reassured American voters that the U.S. and North Vietnam would sign a peace accord shortly (Michel, 42). For the time, that was enough to calm nervous constituents and quiet anti-war opposition.

The 1972 election saw Nixon win in a landslide, due in large part to his announcement of the Paris Peace Accords. The peace announcement had given Nixon a bump in the polls, and as a result he won 48 states in one of the largest margins of victory in U.S. history. While the bombing campaign against North Vietnam had been unpopular, Nixon’s gamble had paid off — he had been

able to announce a peace deal of the eve of the election and silence anti-war critics as voters went to the polls in November. He thus went into the Christmas holidays with an enormous mandate and enjoyed a higher approval rating than at any point in his presidency.

Yet concern about the potential for reengagement in Vietnam had led the votes to elect a vehemently anti-War Congress, hostile to Nixon's foreign policy agenda and even less inclined to entertain the possibility of U.S. re-entry into the conflict. Troubled and inflamed at Nixon's actions in Cambodia and Laos, Congress had already at several points tried and failed to limit Nixon's authority over forces in Vietnam. Now that a peace deal had been announced, they would take little time to ensure that the U.S. got out and stayed out. Led by Republican Clifford Case and Democrat Frank Church, the Senate promised to re-introduce a controversial amendment to the budget that would prohibit funds for forces in Indochina onto the Senate floor in January, where it looked to have more support with the new Congress. Remarkd one Nixon aide, "We took the threats from Congress seriously... we knew we were racing the clock" (quoted in Herring, 317). As a result, Nixon knew that he only had a short time for military action before Congress pulled the plug on operations completely. If he was going to exert any more pressure on North Vietnam and convince the South to sign onto a peace deal, he had to do it before January 21, 1973.

Freed from the constraints of electoral politics yet facing a looming congressional deadline, Nixon decided to once again bomb North Vietnam until Hanoi agreed to come back to the negotiating table. Kissinger had warned Hanoi that, "Nixon, having secured a landslide victory over McGovern, would not hesitate to 'take whatever action he considers necessary to protect United States interests'" (quoted in Herring, 313). Though it would have been strategically more appropriate to wait until the spring to bomb, after North Vietnam's rainy monsoon season had passed, Operation Linebacker II commenced on December 18, earning it the nickname, the "Christmas bombings." Because Nixon did not have the luxury of waiting until the end of the monsoon season and needed to coerce both North Vietnam and South Vietnam back to the negotiating table, he removed all targeting restrictions in North Vietnam and applied substantial pressure to Thieu in order to force a deal (Michel, 51). After 11 days of relentless bombing raids where no target was off limits, both sides came back to the negotiating table in Paris. Short on time while the North Vietnamese were teetering at the breaking point, all three sides agreed to cease fighting and sign a peace — almost the same deal that had been agreed to in Paris just three months before. On 15 January Nixon announced a suspension of offensive actions against North Vietnam, and on January 27, just six days after the new Congress began its session, the Paris Peace Accords were signed by delegations of all three combatants.

9 Concluding Thoughts

This chapter has explored the role of electoral politics on the offensives of the Vietnam War writ large, finding that operations were consistently and substantially affected by changes in the electoral calendar as politicians sought to decrease casualties in the lead up to an election. Using new data on bombing operations and casualty figures from the National Archives, I found that there were dramatic differences in how bombing operations were conducted before and after U.S. domestic elections from 1966 to the end of the war in 1973. Further, I found that these risk-mitigating strategies were successful in reducing casualties — on average, the three months before an election witnessed 30% fewer casualties than non-election months. Together, these statistical results suggest that election politics play an important role in how the Vietnam War was fought.

I then turned my attention to a case study of the politics and military operations leading up to the Paris Peace Accords in January 1973. It is clear that the final year of the Vietnam War was inextricably linked to presidential and congressional politics leading up to and after the 1972 election. North Vietnam initiated the Easter Offensive in large part because it was trying to influence public opinion leading up to the November elections and coerce the U.S. into making additional concessions in Paris. Nixon's decision to initiate Operation Pocket Money and Linebacker I — unprecedented escalations of the bombing war against North Vietnam — was largely motivated by pressure to achieve a tolerable peace accord at any cost. Rather than delay offensive operations, Nixon knew that “peace with honor” would dwarf any opposition to the bombing campaigns and thus “went for broke” with Operation Linebacker. Desperate for a peace deal, Kissinger made considerable concessions to the North Vietnamese in order to announce on the eve of the election that “peace is at hand,” which enormously increased Nixon's popularity. Finally, in an effort to apply one last round of pressure on the North Vietnamese in anticipation of a hostile Congress and renewed talks in Paris, Nixon initiated Linebacker II despite a difficult strategic environment amidst the heavy monsoon rains. In the end, the Paris Peace Accords were signed just six days after the start of the new Congress, and Nixon finally extricated the country from its longest war.

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