This article analyzes the strategic shortcomings of Rolling Thunder's Operation (1965–1968) from a doctrinal and strategic-theoretical perspective. It argues that U.S. leadership misinterpreted the evolving character of the Vietnam conflict by relying excessively on conventional airpower against a hybrid and ideologically motivated adversary.

Misunderstanding the character of war: doctrinal blindness in Rolling Thunder's Operation during Vietnam's Hybrid Conflict

Incomprensión del carácter de la guerra: sesgo doctrinal en la Operación Rolling Thunder durante el conflicto híbrido en Vietnam

Este artículo analiza las deficiencias estratégicas de la Operación Rolling Thunder (1965–1968) desde una perspectiva doctrinal y teórico-estratégica. Se argumenta que el liderazgo estadounidense malinterpretó el carácter evolutivo del conflicto en Vietnam, al confiar excesivamente en el poder aéreo convencional frente a un adversario híbrido y motivado ideológicamente.

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"Just as water has no constant shape, in war there are no constant conditions or forms."
Sun Tzu, trans. 1963, p. 23

"Así como el agua no tiene forma constante, en la guerra no existen condiciones ni formas constantes."
Sun Tzu, trad. 1963, p. 23

INTRODUCCIÓN

Operation Rolling Thunder was a prolonged and sustained strategic bombing campaign conducted primarily by the United States from 1965 to 1968 during the Vietnam War. The broader conflict exemplified the complexity of hybrid warfare, wherein North Vietnam employed both conventional and irregular forces to achieve its long-term objectives. The North Vietnamese Army (NVA) represented the conventional military component, while the Viet Cong operated as a guerrilla force, executing irregular warfare throughout South Vietnam.

This article outlines three key reasons why Operation Rolling Thunder failed to achieve decisive strategic results. First, conventional bombing proved largely ineffective against guerrilla tactics and the decentralized, elusive nature of the enemy. Second, American political and military leaders significantly underestimated the resilience of their adversary and misunderstood the strategic significance of North Vietnam's objectives. Third, there was a

KEYWORDS: HYBRID WARFARE, STRATEGIC BOMBING, WESTERN MILITARY DOCTRINE, CONCEPTUAL AMBIGUITY, DOCTRINAL RIGIDITY, STRATEGIC MISCALCULATION.
PALABRAS CLAVE: GUERRA HÍBRIDA, BOMBARDEO ESTRATÉGICO, DOCTRINA MILITAR OCCIDENTAL, AMBIGÜEDAD CONCEPTUAL, RIGIDEZ DOCTRINAL, DESACIERTO ESTRATÉGICO.

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fundamental misreading of both the operational environment and the character of the conflict itself.

These factors collectively underscore a broader strategic lesson drawn from Clausewitz:

> *"The first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgment that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish... the kind of war on which they are embarking; neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature."*
>
> (Howard & Paret, p. 88)

Therefore, while the nature of war as a political and violent phenomenon remains constant, its character—defined by actors, means, and methods—inevitably evolves over time. In this light, Operation Rolling Thunder illustrates the dangers of failing to grasp the true character of a conflict. The campaign serves as a case study in the difficulties of decision-making under conditions of strategic ambiguity and uncertainty. Rather than judging past decisions in hindsight, the intent of this analysis is to examine the inherent limits of foresight in warfare. The "fog of war" often obscures accurate assessment, and even the most capable actors must operate with incomplete or ambiguous information.

While theoretical models such as the Rational Actor Model assume decision-makers have access to clear and complete information, the reality of war rarely permits such clarity. Consequently, strategic miscalculations become not only possible but probable when the character of the conflict is mischaracterized from the outset.

The purpose of this article is not to judge or criticize past decisions, but rather to appreciate the difficulty of making choices in such a multifaceted and dynamic context. In these circumstances, leaders must aim to guide their teams with flexibility and the ability to adapt quickly to emerging variables and gaps in the decision-making process, drawing on critical thinking and reflective insight. In the same way, the contents of this article reflect the author's personal views and do not necessarily represent those of any affiliated institution or organization.

DISCUSSION

To better frame the U.S. strategic missteps during the Vietnam War, it is essential to begin with a doctrinal understanding of the types of warfare that characterized the conflict. According to the U.S. Department of Defense, asymmetric warfare refers to "warfare in which the resources of two belligerents differ in essence and in the struggle interact and attempt to exploit each other's characteristic weaknesses" (DOD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms, 2021). This definition captures the stark contrast between U.S. technological superiority and the low-cost, adaptive tactics used by the Viet Cong and NVA.

Closely related, irregular warfare is defined as "a violent struggle among state and non-state actors for legitimacy and influence over the relevant population," favoring "indirect approaches, including insurgency, terrorism, guerrilla warfare, and other forms of non-traditional conflict" (Department of Defense, 2020). These methods were central to the enemy's political strategy, allowing them to erode the legitimacy of the South Vietnamese government while avoiding decisive engagement. Unconventional warfare, as outlined by the U.S. Army, consists of "activities conducted to enable a resistance movement or insurgency to coerce, disrupt, or overthrow a government or occupying power by operating through or with an underground, auxiliary, or guerrilla force" (U.S. Army, FM 3-05.130, 2019). This concept applies directly to North Vietnam's covert support to the Viet Cong insurgency.

Beyond these U.S. definitions, NATO's framework adds a broader dimension: hybrid threats are described as combining "military and non-military as well as covert and overt means, including disinformation, cyber-attacks, economic pressure, and the use of irregular armed groups and conventional forces" (NATO, 2016). Frank Hoffman further defines hybrid warfare as the blending of "conventional warfare, irregular tactics, terrorist acts, and criminal behavior in the battlespace to achieve political objectives" (Hoffman, 2007).

These definitions were not just theoretical, they reflected the reality on the ground. Asymmet-

ric warfare was evident in how the resource-limited Viet Cong leveraged tactical ingenuity to challenge a militarily superior opponent. Irregular warfare dominated much of the conflict's early phases, with ambushes, terrorism, subversion, and strategic messaging undermining U.S. and South Vietnamese efforts. Unconventional warfare was practiced by North Vietnam through sustained logistical and political support to the insurgency in the South. Hybrid warfare ultimately encompassed all of these components, combining regular forces, guerrillas, propaganda, and international influence to shape the battlefield and achieve strategic goals. Although the term "hybrid warfare" emerged decades later, it provides a useful analytical lens to interpret the combination of conventional, irregular, political, and informational methods employed during the Vietnam War.

Bernard B. Fall, Ph.D., is considered a pioneer in the study of asymmetric conflicts and insurgency warfare. He argues that the terms "guerrilla warfare" or "insurgency" are insufficient to fully capture the complexity of modern conflicts. Instead, he proposes the concept of Revolutionary Warfare (RW). According to his formula, RW = G + P, where G represents guerrilla warfare and P stands for political action. The crucial difference between simple guerrilla warfare and revolutionary warfare lies in this political dimension, since the main objective is not merely military victory but the transformation or control of the political system. Fall emphasizes that although many 20th-century conflicts are referred to as "small wars" due to their territorial scale or troop numbers, their social and political consequences are significant and deeply affect the populations involved. He also criticizes the traditional military approach, especially in Western armies, which focuses solely on the military component—the so-called "kill aspect"—while neglecting the ideological, administrative, and social dimensions of the conflict. According to Fall, in revolutionary warfare, approximately 80% of the effort is political and ideological, and only 20% is military, highlighting the need to understand the true nature of these conflicts in order to address them effectively. (Fall, 1965)

Together, these concepts reveal the complexity of the situation that leaders faced during the Vietnam conflict, marked by ambiguity and blurred conceptual distinctions that made it difficult to discern the true character of the warfare they were engaging in. This helps to explain why conventional strategies, such as Rolling Thunder's Operation, proved insufficient to confront the adversary effectively and failed to foster the adaptability and resilience required in such an unconventional and protracted conflict.

In that way, Heuser (2022) mentions in "War: A Genealogy of Western Ideas and Practices", that Western thinkers have long viewed war in rigid categories—like interstate vs. civil war, just vs. unjust war, and combatants vs. civilians—which limits our understanding of its true nature. Instead, she suggests that war exists on a spectrum, with different types of violence overlapping and changing over time (e.g., an interstate war might also include civil war elements) This "either/or" way of thinking comes from ancient Greek logic and fails to capture how conflicts mix tactical, legal, ethical, and political aspects. She calls for seeing war as multidimensional and dynamic, not fixed in simple boxes. (Heuser, 2022, p.65)

These blurred conceptual distinctions not only complicated decision-making during the Vietnam conflict but also reveal a deeper, enduring strategic challenge: the Western tendency to compartmentalize conflict into rigid doctrinal categories. Distinctions such as "war" (its nature), "warfare" (its character) and "peace" often obscure the fluid, ambiguous realities on the ground, especially in hybrid conflicts like Vietnam, where adversaries deliberately blurred these boundaries to exploit both conceptual and operational gaps. This strategic rigidity, deeply rooted in Western military thought, prevented planners from fully grasping the adaptive and nonlinear character of modern warfare. Consequently, such compartmentalization led the United States to misjudge the fundamentally political and hybrid character of the Vietnam War, treating it like a conventional interstate clash rather than a multifaceted conflict where guerrilla and political warfare intertwined.

To confront these challenges, it is crucial to heed Sun Tzu's ancient insight: "Just as water retains no constant shape, so in warfare there are no constant

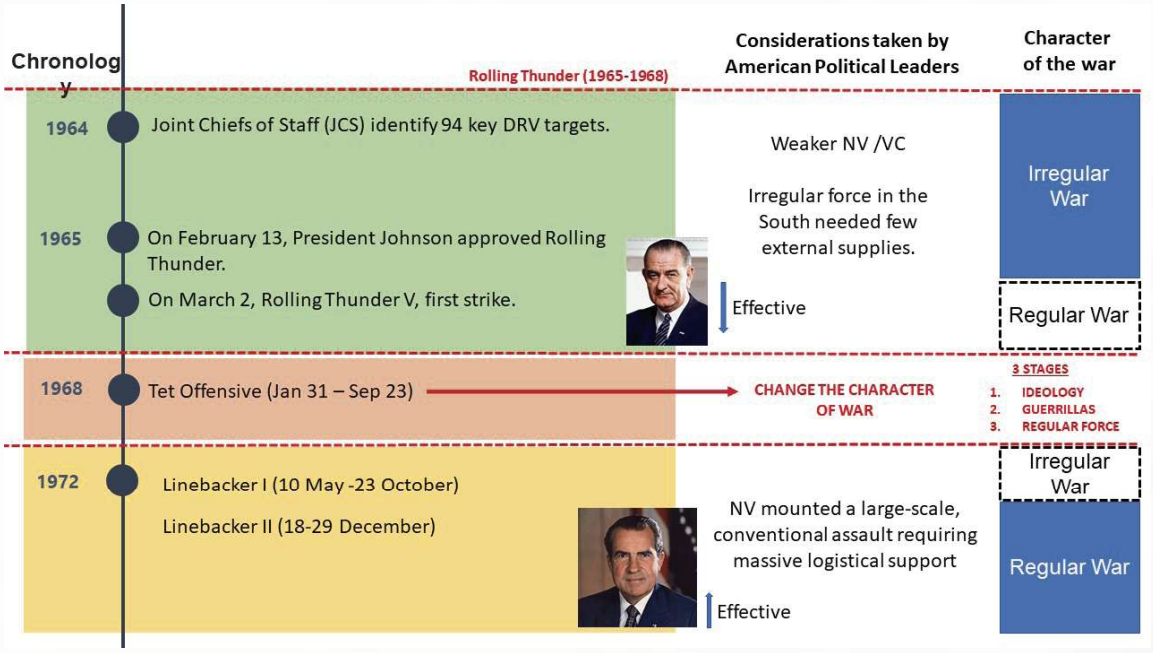
conditions." This maxim serves as a reminder that success in contemporary conflict demands thinking outside the box, cultural awareness, strategic flexibility, and intellectual agility and flexibility, qualities far beyond what rigid doctrines permit.[1]

Understanding this conceptual and strategic rigidity is essential to analyzing why Operation Rolling Thunder ultimately struggled. From the outset, U.S. leadership misread the character of the Vietnam War. Constrained by Cold War logic and domestic political pressures, policymakers interpreted the conflict through the lens of conventional warfare. Influenced by prior successes in World War II and Korea, they placed undue faith in air power as a tool for deterrence and coercion—overestimating its ability to break the will of a deeply committed, ideologically driven adversary. As historian Mark Clodfelter observes:

> *"They failed to consider whether massive bombing suited the character of the war, which was primarily a guerrilla... President Lyndon Johnson believed in February 1965 that the threat of destruction presented by limited bombing would deter North Vietnam from supporting the Viet Cong... and Air commanders remained convinced throughout the war that bombing would ultimately compel the North Vietnamese to stop fighting"*
> (Clodfelter, 2006, p. XIV).

This evolution in the character of the conflict is clearly illustrated in Figure 1, which I developed. The figure chronologically summarizes how the perceptions of U.S. political leaders influenced military planning and the execution of air campaigns such as Rolling Thunder and Linebacker I/II. Initially conceived as an irregular war dominated by guerrilla forces in South Vietnam, the biased U.S. intervention failed to adapt to the gradual transition toward a regular war driven by the strengthening of the Viet Cong and support from the North. The 1968 Tet Offensive marked a strategic turning point, not only for its psychological and political impact in the United States, but also for revealing that the enemy was already operating under a conventional warfare logic.

FIGURE 1. CHANGING CHARACTER OF THE VIETNAM WAR.



Developed by the author (Mujica, 2025).

1 Mujica Caballero, M. (2024). Perspectivas e interpretaciones en torno a los Juegos de Guerra a partir de la visión de Sun Tzu y Clausewitz. Revista De La Escuela Superior De Guerra Naval, 21(1), 81-89. Recuperado a partir de https://revista.esup.edu.pe/RESUP/article/view/190

The figure illustrates how this strategic misalignment between perception and reality hindered the coherent integration of national power instruments—particularly military power—by failing to adjust to the hybrid and evolving nature of the conflict.

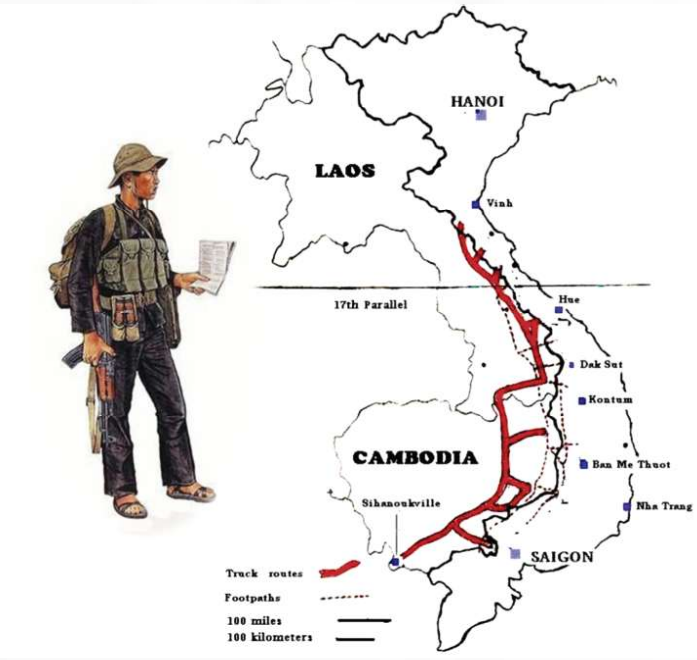
These doctrinal miscalculations were most clearly reflected in the planning and execution of Operation Rolling Thunder. The campaign was intended to demonstrate U.S. resolve and contain escalation, but in practice, its message was either misinterpreted or strategically ineffective. From its beginning, Rolling Thunder lacked a coherent and cumulative logic that could connect tactical actions to broader strategic objectives. For example, the initial strategy targeting 94 so-called 'high-payoff' objectives overlooked the enemy's decentralized and adaptive nature. Furthermore, the excessive number of designated targets revealed inconsistencies in assessing their true strategic value.

Moreover, operational decisions were tightly constrained by political considerations. Key logistical corridors and sanctuaries—most notably the Ho Chi Minh Trail running through Laos and Cambodia—were excluded from the target list. This omission allowed North Vietnam to sustain the movement of troops and materiel to the South virtually uninterrupted.

At the tactical level, the limitations of conventional bombing became increasingly evident. The Viet Cong's dispersed, low-signature operations required minimal external support and were nearly impossible to disrupt through aerial bombardment. Figure 2 visually reinforces this challenge. On the left, a guerrilla fighter is shown equipped with sandals, dark clothing, a jungle hat, an AK-47, grenades, ammunition pouches, and a map—symbolizing the irregular force's adaptability and low-profile mobility. On the right, a detailed map highlights the Ho Chi Minh Trail, an extensive and redundant logistical network crossing from North Vietnam through Laos and Cambodia into the South. Including truck routes and footpaths, the Trail allowed covert, sustained movement of troops and supplies despite American air superiority.

U.S. political constraints prohibited attacks beyond Vietnam's borders, effectively allowing these cross-border sanctuaries to operate as secure logistical hubs. According to Mao Zedong's guerrilla doctrine, such sanctuaries—or base areas—are essen-

FIGURE 2. VIET CONG GUERRILLA GEAR AND HO CHI MINH TRAIL LOGISTICS NETWORK



Fuente: Moor History, n.d.

tial for regrouping, resupply, and launching renewed attacks against a stronger adversary. The Viet Cong effectively implemented this principle during the Vietnam War by using remote rural areas and international border zones to avoid American firepower and maintain initiative. The red lines shown in Figure 2 represent the critical supply routes that sustained the military operations of the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese forces. These routes functioned as secure logistical corridors, linking decentralized tactical units to sanctuaries in neighboring countries that provided refuge and passageways, effectively avoiding aerial bombardments. Unfortunately, the governments of Cambodia and Laos were largely incapable of preventing the Viet Cong from exploiting their territories for these purposes.

Initially, these cross-border routes supported decentralized operations requiring minimal inputs. Later, as the conflict evolved, they also sustained the deployment of conventional North Vietnamese forces. This shift widened the gap between U.S. strategy and the hybrid character of the war. As such, Figure 2 highlights a central argument of this article: Operation Rolling Thunder proved fundamentally ineffective against an enemy that blended guerrilla tactics with physical concealment in dense jungle terrain, thereby exposing the inherent limitations of conventional airpower.

Beyond dense jungle terrain and operational limitations of U.S. strategy, the ideological and human dimensions of the conflict further reveal the mismatch between American approaches and the war's true character. At the outset, the Viet Cong played a crucial role in attrition and in harassing both American forces and the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). Following the three stages of insurgency—first consolidating ideology, then waging guerrilla warfare while weak, and eventually combining conventional operations with guerrilla tactics and political-ideological subversion—the Viet Cong built a resilient, adaptive force capable of sustaining a long-term campaign. Political subversion proved particularly effective in mobilizing the population, recruiting fighters, and strengthening morale. Many individuals were willing to fight and even sacrifice their lives for what they perceived as a just and nationalist cause. As Mao thought, guerrilla fighters move among the people like fish in water, securing their support and winning their hearts and minds. Within this complex context, a conventional bombing campaign focused on the North was unlikely to deliver decisive results.

In this regard, "both the military and the civilian policymakers misread the character of the conflict. Both groups were looking, for their own reasons, at a revolutionary insurgency war that they felt could be controlled, through the application of the Army Concept or limited war deterrence theory" (Krepinevich, 1990, p. 96). Clausewitz's paradoxical trinity—passion, chance, and reason—helps explain the asymmetric willpower observed during the conflict. The North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong pursued unlimited political aims and displayed a capacity for sacrifice that far exceeded the limited objectives of the United States and the ARVN. As Cohen and Gooch (2006) point out, "when American statesmen and military leaders entered the Vietnam War in surprising and deliberate ignorance of the French efforts there," (p. 235) they only encountered a determined enemy prepared to endure heavy losses.

Although Rolling Thunder inflicted considerable damage, its low-precision bombing often harmed civilians and lacked strategic coherence, producing counterproductive effects. As Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara later admitted, the campaign failed to break enemy morale; losses were replenished locally through recruitment in South Vietnam. General Joseph McChristian, Assistant Chief of Staff for Intelligence at the US Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (J-2, MACV), reinforced this conclusion by observing that despite sustained bombing, the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong "had the capability and the will to continue a protracted war of attrition … for an indefinite period." (McChristian, 1967, p. 78)

Meanwhile, the South Vietnamese government struggled to generate motivation within its ranks and maintain effective control. As U.S. Ambassador General Maxwell Taylor concluded, "the SV has the manpower and the basic skills to win this war. What they lack is motivation. The entire advisory effort

has been devoted to giving them skill and motivation. If that effort has not succeeded, there is less reason to think that U.S. combat forces would have the desired effect" (Krepinevich, 1990, p. 135).

Compounding the strategic and motivational asymmetries were the environment and tactical advantages leveraged by North Vietnamese and Viet Cong forces. They skillfully used their intimate knowledge of the terrain to maneuver in secrecy, employing guerrilla tactics rooted in the strategic thought of Sun Tzu: "If the enemy advances, we retreat; if the enemy camps, we harass; if the enemy tires, we attack; if the enemy retreats, we pursue." The geography of Vietnam—dense jungles, rugged mountains, and labyrinthine river networks—was highly favorable for setting ambushes, deploying booby traps, and maintaining secure sanctuaries. It also constrained the size and mobility of American and ARVN units, forcing a reliance on helicopters for transport across inaccessible countryside. Therefore, this dependence exposed them to new vulnerabilities in the air domain.

In response, the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong developed extensive defensive infrastructure, including tunnel networks, underground bunkers, and fortified "combat villages," which protected them from aerial bombardment and artillery fire. Despite the Geneva Accords' stipulation that no communist forces remain in the South, the Party covertly preserved a military nucleus. As Bergerud (1991, p. 13) notes, "Old weapons were taken to the North, and new ones were hidden. In areas where the terrain allowed secret activity, small main force units remained in existence." Many of these sites went undetected or were overlooked during bombing operations.

This advantage in terrain and concealment was well understood by Clausewitz, who observed that guerrilla warfare flourishes in "rough and inaccessible" terrain—mountains, forests, marshes, or terrain shaped by local cultivation (Handel, 1996, p. 124). Bergerud (1991, p. 96) reinforces this by noting that "the greatest inherent advantage held by insurgents in guerrilla warfare is that they do not have to defend any precise geographic point, while their opponents must defend many; insurgents always have targets of opportunity."

Further limiting U.S. effectiveness was the absence of a suitable airpower doctrine adapted to jungle warfare. As Clodfelter (2006, p. 73) argues, "Rolling Thunder would demonstrate the doctrine deemed appropriate for general war with the Soviet Union was ill-suited for a limited conflict with an enemy waging a guerrilla war." Unlike the industrial bombing campaigns of Europe or Korea—where fixed infrastructure presented identifiable targets—Vietnam's diffuse, rural landscape absorbed much of the damage. Dense forests and agricultural fields rendered conventional bombing largely ineffective, allowing the enemy to offset American technological superiority through superior adaptability and terrain mastery.

The antagonistic posture towards Operation Rolling Thunder often highlights its flawed strategic design; however, it is also necessary to consider that some analysts perceived the air campaign as a required measure—an effort to swiftly conclude the war and contain the spread of communism, aligning with the broader imperatives of the Cold War. At the same time, growing public dissent within the United States exerted considerable pressure on democratic institutions to accelerate conflict resolution. In this context, President Lyndon B. Johnson faced intense political and strategic demands, leading to decisions whose long-term consequences were not fully anticipated, including the escalation of conventional bombing without a clear understanding of its strategic limitations. As General Maxwell Taylor's deputy in Saigon recalled, "the pressure from the president was intense" (Krepinevich, 1990, p. 135). According to Krepinevich (1990, p. 56), this urgency fostered selective information processing: "feedback to the brass indicating that MACV's methods were working was eagerly accepted; reports portraying a picture of failure were, for the most part, ignored," thus distorting perceptions of the battlefield reality.

As political instability in Saigon worsened—culminating in the fall of the civilian government—U.S. leaders perceived a deteriorating situation. Consequently, "the military operations authorized for the remainder of 1965 were hurried, makeshift affairs lacking a central direction other than preventing ARVN's immediate collapse" (Bergerud, 1991, p.

90). Under such pressure, conventional bombing appeared to offer the only plausible short-term option to regain control and pursue a rapid victory. Yet, as Handel (1996, p. 205) observes, "it is no simple task to quantify the costs and benefits of a war… the original political objects can greatly alter during the course of the war and many of them vary completely since they are influenced by other events and their probable consequences." This reflects the broader challenge of adapting strategy to shifting political and military conditions. As Henry Kissinger pointed out, "The real distinction is between those who adapt their purposes to reality and those who seek to mold reality in the light of their purposes." (Kissinger, as cited in Lord, 2019, p. 124)

Part of the failure, then, can be traced to a deeper imbalance between ends and means, which led to the misapplication of conventional force in an environment that demanded a fundamentally different approach. In retrospect, U.S. foreign policy lacked sufficient clarity regarding intervention objectives, and its application of the "Foreign Internal Defense" framework was inconsistent. Ironically, American involvement—intended to bolster South Vietnam—often undermined its legitimacy by overshadowing its sovereignty. President Johnson, operating within a complex fog of war, made decisions under intense personal and political pressure, often without full visibility into the evolving character of the conflict.

These internal contradictions became even more evident as the war escalated. As CIA Director John McCone warned, the deployment of large troop numbers risked entangling the U.S. in a protracted and unwinnable conflict: "the United States would get mired down in a war that could not win" (Krepinevich, 1990, p. 146). When Johnson ignored these recommendations, McCone resigned in protest—highlighting growing divisions within the national security establishment.

During these struggles, one of the most critical turning points was the Tet Offensive. As North Vietnam transitioned toward a more conventional military posture, the United States and the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) lost the strategic opportunity to confront a weaker, insurgent-based adversary. From that moment onward, the American war effort demanded escalating resources, while conventional bombing campaigns became increasingly misaligned with the evolving character of the conflict and the complex sociopolitical realities of Vietnamese society. In this context, the ancient strategist Sun Tzu offers a relevant reminder: "Strategy without tactics is the slowest route to victory. Tactics without strategy are the noise before defeat" (Sun Tzu, trans. 1963, p. 83).

In essence, the Vietnam case offers enduring strategic lessons. It illustrates the dangers of applying conventional force to complex political problems in unfamiliar operational environments. As Cohen and Gooch (2006, p. VIII) note, "upon reflection, that we were indeed dealing with failures born of incompetence rather than misfortunes." These failures underscore the critical need to integrate all instruments of national power, ensuring coherence across strategic, operational, and tactical levels. Effective decision-making requires not only clear objectives and proper tools but also the flexibility to adapt in real time to shifting circumstances and adversaries.

Equally important, it is necessary to recognize the extraordinary determination of North Vietnamese and Viet Cong forces. Despite suffering heavy casualties, they leveraged terrain, ideology, and hybrid tactics to offset U.S. technological superiority.

Today, their example offers valuable insight into the character of hybrid warfare, where conventional and irregular forces combine with political, informational, and legal tools. In these ambiguous contexts—often below the threshold of open or hot war—conflict becomes a contest of influence, resilience, and adaptation. Understanding these dynamics is essential for anticipating future conflicts shaped by geopolitical interdependence, blurred legal norms, and asymmetrical capabilities.

Therefore, Operation Rolling Thunder exemplifies the inherent difficulties of applying traditional military power in conflicts where political will, asymmetric strategies, and ideological commitment exert decisive influence. This case reinforces the importance of aligning strategic objectives with available

means and understanding the broader system in which war occurs. In such environments, leaders must combine critical thinking, agility, and reflective learning to bridge the gap between policy and execution—and to respond intelligently to the uncertainty of modern conflict.

Finally, the experience of Rolling Thunder and its disconnection from the hybrid reality of the Vietnam conflict offers a lasting warning for contemporary strategists. In today's operational environments—such as Ukraine, where conventional forces are interwoven with information operations, cyberattacks, and irregular warfare, or Gaza, where non-state actors combine armed coercion with political narratives and international mobilization—the errors of Vietnam reemerge in new forms. Similarly, in the Indo-Pacific, where tensions in the Taiwan Strait and South China Sea risk escalation amidst strategic ambiguity, legal coercion, and cognitive warfare, the danger persists of applying conventional solutions to conflicts defined by political, cultural, and technological complexity. Thus, the study of Rolling Thunder not only revisits a historical failure but also provides current strategic lessons for those charged with designing, directing, and adapting national power in an era of ambiguous and multidimensional conflict.

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"So the art is to make your judgment at a moment when you have enough facts to be able to interpret what will turn out the correct way, not so soon that you overthrow everything, and not so late that you are stagnating." (Kissinger, as cited in Lord, 2019, p. 67).

CONCLUSION

Operation Rolling Thunder offers a compelling illustration of the strategic pitfalls that arise when the character of a conflict is misunderstood. The campaign failed not because of insufficient military power, but due to a fundamental misreading of the war's character. U.S. leaders, influenced by past doctrinal success during WWII, applied conventional logic to a hybrid and politically driven conflict, underestimating both the adaptability and ideological commitment of their adversary.

Strategic bombing, while overwhelming in scale, proved ill-suited to an environment shaped by guerrilla tactics, decentralized networks, and the exploitation of terrain and cross-border sanctuaries. Tactical actions remained largely disconnected from coherent political objectives, and efforts to signal resolve through sustained airpower did not produce the intended strategic effects. The limitations of the campaign reflect not only operational constraints but also the challenges of decision-making under conditions of uncertainty, urgency, and conceptual rigidity.

As Beatrice Heuser notes, the Western tendency to compartmentalize war has often hindered effective strategic thinking in conflicts that defy linear categorization. In Vietnam, this compartmentalization contributed to a doctrinal inflexibility that prevented U.S. planners from fully grasping the fluid and nonlinear dynamics of hybrid warfare.

Finally, the Vietnam case reinforces the enduring imperative of aligning military means with clearly defined political objectives. It demonstrates that success in contemporary conflict pivots not only on material superiority, but also on strategic clarity, cultural awareness, adaptability, and the effective integration and synchronization of national power instruments—diplomatic, informational, military, and economic (DIME). These lessons remain highly relevant today, as modern states continue to navigate conflicts that blur the lines between conventional and irregular warfare, political and military domains, and the distinctions between war, warfare and peace.

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"After a battle, when not exist uncertainty and chaos, everyone is a general."