Coercion from Above: The Failed Compellence of Nixon's Linebacker II Bombings

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COERCION FROM ABOVE: THE FAILED COMPELLENCE OF NIXON’S LINEBACKER II BOMBINGS

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INTRODUCTION

In the field of international politics, one of the most studied and analyzed topics is the notion of coercion, or the attempt by an international actor to use either the threat or actual use of force to compel an adversary to change its behavior.\(^1\) Some versions of coercion are relatively easy to understand—diplomatic coercion, for example, seeks to compel an actor to change its behavior using only threats, or all-out war, which uses any force necessary to change an actor’s behavior. Other versions of coercion, on the other hand, are less straightforward. Perhaps the most amorphous type of coercion is when states or other actors seek to use limited use of force to change behavior—often referred to as compellence.

In the winter of 1972, President Richard Nixon sought to coerce the North Vietnamese to accept concessions at the peace table using compellence in the form of a massive bombing campaign known as Linebacker II.\(^2\) This campaign targeted the large North Vietnamese cities of Hanoi and Haiphong for the first time during the war in an attempt to intimidate the North into accepting three main concessions desired by South Vietnam and proposed by Henry Kissinger and the United States. In the end, however, these three concessions—involving the makeup of a post-war tripartite commission, the strength of the DMZ separating North and South, and the issue of Communist troops in South Vietnam—were not met, and the United States instead chose to accept an agreement less friendly to South Vietnam and then pushed this agreement on the South.

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2. Linebacker I was another large-scale bombing campaign conducted by Nixon and the United States in the spring and summer of 1972. The Linebacker II bombings are also often known as the “Christmas bombings” due to their occurrence during the Christmas holiday season in December—even though no bombs were actually dropped on Christmas itself.
and its premier Nguyen Van Thieu until they too accepted. While the United States did secure some ancillary benefits such as credibility in the region, its main goals were not reached and thus its attempt at compellence cannot be considered a success.

Why did the United States fail to achieve any major concessions through compellence? This paper will posit two main reasons: the United States did not possess the requisite capabilities to sufficiently affect North Vietnamese morale, and it also failed to possess enough credibility to convince the North Vietnamese the bombing would continue long-term. Because of these deficiencies in two fundamental areas of compellence theory, the United States was unable to achieve its goals and its actions stand as an important lesson for those considering compellence.
Chapter 1: Compellence Theory

Since this paper will seek to explain Nixon’s Linebacker II bombing campaign as an example of successful compellence, it is necessary to first address the issue of compellence itself: what it is, when it is used, and how it can fail or succeed. Only once these questions have been answered can one examine in detail the specific case of the Christmas bombings.

What is Compellence?

The first and most obvious question is a simple one: what is compellence? Although the question itself is simple, the answer is much more complicated. Classically, compellence is one half of the double-sided coin that is a threat of force. As Thomas Schelling notes in his landmark work *Arms and Influence*, compellence is “a threat intended to make an adversary do something,” whereas the other side of the coin, deterrence, is “a threat intended to keep him from starting something.” In this way, then, compellence becomes much harder than deterrence, since compellence requires a definite action, whereas deterrence requires an action only if the adversary refuses to back down.¹ Although this action is usually military in nature, it can sometimes apply to economic or other fields of international politics.² Further, as noted by Alexander George and Williams Simons in their book *The Limits of Coercive Diplomacy*, compellence can range from “threats of a nonviolent break in negotiations” to, as was the case with the Linebacker II bombings,

In general, however, compellence can be said to be a limited use of force aimed at a particular aspect of the adversary, whether it be military or otherwise. This idea of a limited use of force designed to compel an opponent to change its actions is at the heart of the reasoning behind the Linebacker II bombing campaign.

This definition, of course, still leaves much room for differing tactics and types of compellence. Alexander George, for example, differentiates between “strong” and “weak” versions of compellence, with the “weak” variant being one in which the compeller takes a “wait-and-see” approach and the “strong” variant being one where the compeller sets a “tacit ultimatum” that the adversary must act by or risk increased hostility and punishment. Robert Art also makes a distinction, this time between “demonstrative use of force”—i.e. compellence—and “full-scale use of force”—i.e. war. As Art himself notes, of course, “the line between limited use and war is not easy to draw, and it depends to a degree on the situation at hand.”

Robert Pape makes another distinction when he classifies examples of compellence as either “punishment” or “denial.” For Pape, the punishment form of compellence occurs when a state attempts to raise costs and risks to civilian population, either by direct attacks on civilian centers or by killing enough military personnel to

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weaken the resolve of civilian populations.\textsuperscript{7} As Pape notes, however, although there are a number of instances of states attempting to compel using this method, they are rarely successful, thanks to a number of mitigating factors including the separation between the government and the people and the hardening of wills during wartime.\textsuperscript{8} On the other hand, compellence by denial “operates by using military means to prevent the target from attaining its political objectives or territorial goals.”\textsuperscript{9} As will be seen, the strategy of the Linebacker II bombing campaign contained elements of both Pape’s denial and punishment versions of compellence. Indeed, some authors, like Alexander George, simply do not make any distinction, simply stating that the goal of compellence is to “affect the enemy’s will,” whether it is the will of the adversary state’s population or military.\textsuperscript{10} Since in Vietnam the civilian population and the military—whether Viet Cong or army regulars—were so inextricably linked, it makes sense that the United States would seek to compel both spheres.

Yet another strategy within the umbrella of compellence is the issue of brinkmanship and risk. Schelling, long considered the originator of what would later become known as “madman theory” under Nixon, notes that “sometimes we can get a little credit for not having everything quite under control, for being a little impulsive or unreliable.”\textsuperscript{11} In other words, it is to the advantage of a state to behave irrationally from time to time in order to produce doubt in the adversary’s mind. With this doubt planted in the adversary’s head, they will never know for sure what response their actions will

\textsuperscript{7} Robert A. Pape, \textit{Bombing to Win} (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 13. For a further discussion of the distinction between denial and punishment strategies, as well as an incorporation of risk strategy, see Art, “Coercive Diplomacy,” 362-365.
\textsuperscript{8} Pape, \textit{Bombing to Win}, 21-27.
\textsuperscript{9} \textit{Ibid.}, 13.
\textsuperscript{10} George, \textit{Laos, Cuba, Vietnam}, 18.
\textsuperscript{11} Schelling, \textit{Arms and Influence}, 38.
garner, and, as such, will refrain from doing anything overly bold in case the “madman” across from them decides to respond in an irrational way. This idea forms the traditional, deterrence model of brinkmanship and madman theory. As Schelling makes abundantly clear, however, this theory can just as easily be applied to compellence, especially compellence in the form of limited use of force. “The danger of major war,” Schelling posits, “is almost certainly increased by the occurrence of a limited war.” As such, limited war has two goals. One goal “is to inflict costs directly on the other side,” while the other is “to expose the other party, together with oneself, to a heightened risk of major war.”

In this way limited war compels doubly: by inflicting actual costs in the present and threatening to inflict much higher costs in the future. By doling out equal risk to both the compeller and the adversary, the threat becomes that much more genuine, thus becoming stronger. As will be discussed, Nixon and his government made full use of this double compellence to convince the North Vietnamese to return to the negotiating table in the winter of 1972.

**When is Compellence Used?**

Besides knowing what compellence is, it is also important to understand when and in what context compellence is undertaken as a strategy in international politics. As noted above, compellence seeks to make “the value of resistance appear worse than the value of compliance” to an adversary. States generally use compellence to achieve one of three objectives: to either make the adversary start—or, in some cases like those surrounding Linebacker II, restart—an action, stop an action, or change their action in some other

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12 Ibid., 105.
In many ways, compellence is a highly desirable tactic for a state seeking to change an adversary’s actions without spending as much—in both blood and treasure—as would be spent during an all-out war. Quite simply, no state, even a superpower, has the means to fight a war every time it wishes another state to change its behavior. By using compellence, a state can avoid war yet still achieve most if not all of its foreign policy goals vis-à-vis a given adversary country. Further, because many commitments are interdependent, compellence becomes a tool to show resolve and bolster credibility both in the theater where the compellence is taking place, and, potentially, on the world stage as well.¹⁵

Compellence on the whole, then, is an oft-used tool for any state or other actor that has sought to alter the actions of another state without descending into all-out war. However, there are a number of factors states must consider before beginning compellence, and thus it is not the easy option it may at first seem. If a state does in fact choose a compellence strategy, of course, it cannot then simply sit back and wait for the opposing state to change its behavior. Once again, there are a number of factors that determine whether or not compellence will succeed. First, of course, a state must define what it considers to be successful compellence. In general, according to Gary Schaub, “compellence can be said to have succeeded when the target actor bends to the wishes of the initiating actor, and to have failed if the target actor successfully ignores the initiator’s threats.” Schaub goes on to point out, however, that compellence can also fail if the “initiator” is made to use more force to achieve its goals.¹⁶ In other words, if a state

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¹⁵ See Schelling, Arms and Influence, 55.
¹⁶ Schaub, Jr., “Compellence,” in Strategic Coercion, 44.
is forced to move from threat to actual force, or, in Schelling’s scenario, if major war breaks out, this, too, constitutes compellence failure. When choosing whether to pursue a compellence strategy, there are three central factors that any state must consider and address to achieve success: capability, credibility, and the clarity of the state’s demands.

**Attributes of Compellence**

1) **Capability**

A necessary factor in any compellence strategy is the requirement of a certain level of capability to achieve the desired result. When deciding whether to compel, a state must first determine if it has the capability to compel its adversary in a given manner. This is not, as David Johnson points out, the sum total of the state’s “raw military power,” but instead “the capability that the [compeller] can realistically bring to bear in a particular situation.”

Further, a state mulling a compellence strategy must also determine whether compelling in the manner chosen will be effective. Again, David Johnson sums up the issue nicely: “The milder a threat is, the more willing the target state may be to take a chance that it cannot actually be carried out.”

In other words, if a state is threatened with a risk it is willing to take, there is a good chance the compellence will fail. The relative military capabilities of a compelling state must therefore be high enough—and of the appropriate type—in relation to the adversary to allow for compellence that is directed at a particular area and strong enough to force the adversary to back down. To

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use an obvious example, if a given state is generally more powerful than its adversary but is separated by an ocean and has no planes or missiles, compellence by attacking population centers would clearly be off the table. Furthermore, a compelling state must factor in potential counter-compellence by its adversary, in which the adversary seeks to impose costs on the compeller by using countermeasures, whether these are as simple as SAM sites or as complicated as potential retaliatory use of nuclear weapons.\textsuperscript{18} In other words, the compelling state must seek to ensure not only that its target will eventually comply, but also that the costs inflicted upon the compelling state will not outweigh the gains derived from a change in the target state’s actions. This issue would crop up in the Linebacker II bombings when Nixon and some of his aides began to worry about high numbers of B-52s being shot down. If the North Vietnamese had made significant changes to the peace agreement, but at the cost of unacceptable losses of United States personnel and material, the compellence strategy would have turned out to be a net loss.

In general, a state must possess the necessary capabilities to compel its adversary to change its behavior in some way. What those necessary capabilities are, of course, depends heavily on the situation at hand.

2) **Credibility**

Issues of credibility, too, are important to consider when initiating a compellence strategy. One potential problem is that compellence requires a committed effort from a state, usually for a relatively long period of time. At the very least, the compelling state must show it has the “will to act with persistence” if the adversary does not change its behavior. This means that a state considering a compellence strategy has to factor in the

\textsuperscript{18} Art, “Coercive Diplomacy” in *United States and Coercive Diplomacy*, 369-370.
possibility that the compellence could last much longer than anticipated. Indeed, in an anarchic political world, just how easily the adversary will break is very hard, if not impossible, to determine beforehand. Once committed, of course, a state has to remain so or risk losing credibility not only in regards to its direct adversary but also to other actors in other theaters that will look upon the lack of commitment as weakness and potentially seek to exploit it—particularly if the state that shows such weakness is a great power competing for influence in a region.

What makes up a state’s credibility? For every state, some combination of a) a reputation for commitment and b) interests define how “credible” a state is in a given interaction.

**A) Reputation for Commitment**

By far the most important aspect of a state’s credibility is its ability to remain true to its commitments around the world, whatever they may be. The stronger a commitment, the stronger the committed state’s credibility is in the eyes of the other state. It is often difficult to determine just what makes a strong commitment, but Schelling suggests one way to ensure the world will see a state as committed to another is “to incur a political involvement, to get a nation’s honor, obligation, and diplomatic reputation committed to a response.”

Regardless of how this involvement occurs—whether it is an agreed-upon understanding between two countries, or one country maneuvering itself into a position where it the other has no choice but to be committed to it—it often takes a show of force to back up the commitment. Only in this way can a state reassure the state it is

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19 Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, 49.
20 Schelling uses the example of Chiang Kai-shek retreating to the island of Quemoy to force the hand of the United States to illustrate how a state can be roped into a commitment. *Ibid.*, 49-51.
committed to and simultaneously show its enemies that the commitment is a strong one. Some commitments need no show of force, however—it is generally assumed a state has an extremely strong commitment to defend its own territory, especially if it has held that territory for a long period of time. Either way, a state’s commitments are inextricably linked to its capabilities.

If a state credibly commits enough, it can develop a reputation for commitment—or show a lack thereof. For example, if a state often backs out of its commitments, an adversary state may choose to be bolder against one of the state’s allies, guessing that the state will hold true to form and not honor its commitments. If, on the other hand, a state is known for virulently defending even areas where it has little interests, other states will be less likely to challenge it and, if they do, more willing to back down in the face of compellence.

Because a reputation going forward is important, especially to great powers that will seek to garner allies in their region or across the globe, states seeking a better reputation will be much more likely to hold out to enhance their credibility. States will often hold out longer than they otherwise would, Robert Pape notes, “because they believe that a defeat or retreat on one issue is likely to encourage further demands on the state by its adversaries and defections from its allies.” Indeed, this was at least partly the rationale for the United States to remain in Vietnam as long as it ultimately did.

B) INTERESTS

21 Pape, Bombing to Win, 35.
For both the initiators and targets of compellence, the interests at stake also factor into their credibility. In the compelling state’s case, if it has little real interest in forcing a change in the adversary’s actions, the adversary will know it only needs to hold out for a short while before the compeller will give up. On the other hand, if the compelling state desperately needs its opponent to change its behavior and the target state knows this, it will be more likely to give in rather than face a long struggle.

Likewise, if a state is attacking a target that is not directly connected to the adversary state’s interests, the likelihood of the compellence strategy being successful diminishes, because the adversary state will be willing to give up the target without changing its actions. If the state sees its fundamental interests being targeted, however, it may refuse to back down to avoid major credibility losses. Thus, a compelling state must convey the notion that they are seeking to attack a key interest of the rival state, while still leaving enough leeway to ensure the target state does not actually become more hardened instead of less. In this way a state’s interests are also connected to how well the state conveys that interest—and the threat to that interest, as will be discussed more fully in the section below.

A compelling state must also realize that its adversary faces credibility issues as well. As Schelling notes, deterrence is relatively easy to comply to: all an adversary state must do is nothing. On the other hand, compellence requires the adversary to visibly back down from an engagement, endangering its own credibility in the process.\(^\text{22}\) This is why compellence is often referred to as a “contest of nerve and risk-taking, of pain and endurance,” bringing to mind the game of Chicken, where one side must back down

\(^{\text{22}}\) Schelling, \textit{Arms and Influence}, 82. Also see Johnson, \textit{Conventional Coercion}, 14.
eventually or both sides will be subjected to major costs.\textsuperscript{23} It is in these situations where Schelling’s so-called “madman” theory of seeming irrationality can be used to its greatest effectiveness—and, arguably, was used to great effectiveness by Nixon during the Linebacker II bombings, as is discussed below. Only if a state is willing to engage in this game should it seek to compel.

Compellence, then, will only be successful for the acting state if it has the ability to commit to its strategy long enough to outlast the credibility concerns of the adversary state. As with capability, how long “long enough” is depends largely on the particular situation the compelling country faces.

\textbf{3) Clarity of Goals}

Another oft-cited factor in the success or failure is the clarity of the goals of the compeller, and more specifically how those goals are communicated to the opposing state. At a basic level, this can come in the form of ultimatums to the adversary: we will inflict X amount of pain on you until you do Y. However, as Alexander George points out, a state “may not need to state a specific time limit or define the threat of punishment for non-compliance.”\textsuperscript{24} This was the case for the Linebacker II campaign, where no time limit was set on the bombing, although a clear goal—the return of the North Vietnamese to the peace talks—was stipulated. Going even further, no communication of any kind need be necessary so long as the compeller makes clear through actions—be they military movements or other tactics—that they have a goal in mind and will seek to achieve it.

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 33.
\textsuperscript{24} George, Laos, Cuba, Vietnam, 28.
through compellence. In general, the compeller must make clear its goals to its adversary in order to have successful compellence, but these goals need not be directly stated or have an absolute deadline, so long as the adversary knows what the purpose of the compeller’s actions are.

Another issue faced when creating compellence goals is how likely it is that the target state will eventually accede to the demands, thereby ensuring successful compellence. If there is simply no way the target state will comply with the demands, it follows that there is no way the compellence can be successful. One way in which the demands of compellence can more easily be met is if they are associated to some degree with “positive inducements,” which can take the form of “new resources” or “the discontinuance of a punitive action previously undertaken.” On the other hand, too many positive inducements at too early a point in time will only bolster the target state’s resolve by making the compeller look weak and less committed. More generally, a state that factors in both “sticks” and “carrots” into its compellence strategy—including “the possibility of bargains, negotiations, and compromises as well as coercive threats”—will have an easier time achieving successful compellence.

To fully understand why Nixon’s attempt at compellence failed, this paper will discuss each of these three areas—capability, credibility, and clarity of goals—and how Nixon, Kissinger, and other United States officials addressed each one. Before, however,

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26 Art, “Coercive Diplomacy” in United States and Coercive Diplomacy, 388.
a brief discussion of the foreign policy background leading up to the Linebacker II campaign is essential to putting this attempt at compellence in context.
Chapter 2: Background

Many historians covering the Paris peace talks and the subsequent Linebacker II bombings argue that the central purpose of Nixon’s bombing campaign in December of 1972 was to compel the North Vietnamese leadership to resume talks in Paris on a proposed peace agreement that would create a path for the United States to extract itself from all parts of Vietnam, both North and South. While this was certainly a goal of the bombing, there were many other components to the United States’ objectives. Jeffrey Kimball nicely summarizes the objectives of the United States: “The purpose [of the Linebacker II bombing campaign] was to make the North Vietnamese more conciliatory on the ambiguities of the agreement, which would both improve the October draft and put [President Nixon] in a better position to force Thieu’s acceptance of a settlement.” The Linebacker II bombing thus sought to achieve two objectives: first, it sought the limited goal of simply getting both sides back to the negotiating table; second, it sought the far more ambitious goal of gaining actual concessions from the North Vietnamese to placate the South’s demands for an agreement that would increase their security, not simply allow the United States an easy out.

With the benefit of hindsight, it is clear that, had the United States and South Vietnam taken slightly different approaches, the talks would never have broken down and the bombing would have been unnecessary. A brief description of how the talks stalled in the first place—and what the United States sought to achieve through its bombing

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1 For example, see Allen E. Goodman, The Lost Peace: America’s Search for a Negotiated Settlement of the Vietnam War (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1978), 164.
campaign—is helpful in understanding the context in which the United States turned to compellence to achieve its objectives.

By October 8, 1972, after years of negotiation—much of which was conducted behind the scenes in secret bilateral talks\(^3\)—Henry Kissinger, Nixon’s National Security Adviser, and Le Duc Tho, a member of the North Vietnamese politburo, reached an agreement that largely mirrored a previous proposed agreement made by the United States on May 8 of the same year. The October 8 agreement—which was altered slightly by October 22 by both sides but remained fundamentally the same—in Kissinger’s words, “conceded that the South Vietnamese government need not be overthrown as the price of a cease-fire,” and the “political structure of South Vietnam was left to the Vietnamese to settle [through elections that would appoint a new President and government in the South].”\(^4\) Later, on October 26, Kissinger remarked in a now-infamous speech that “peace is at hand” and that a signed agreement would soon be a reality.\(^5\) Although the October 8 agreement had been close to complete, disagreement between the three main players—the United States, South Vietnam, and North Vietnam—as well as ulterior motives for each of the three actors caused the peace talks to stall indefinitely, causing Nixon and the United States to resort to compellence tactics in the form of the Linebacker II bombing operation. As President Nixon himself wrote in his diary around the time that the peace talks broke down, “The North wants to humiliate the South and us as well…. The South wants to drive the North out of Vietnam and get us

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\(^3\) For a full description of the secret negotiations between the United States and North Vietnam from 1969 to 1972, see Goodman, *The Lost Peace*, 100-122.


\(^5\) Ibid., 1399.
to stick with them. As far as we are concerned, we must bring the war to an end on an honorable basis.” As will be shown, Nixon was not entirely correct in his assessment of the three sides’ interests—North Vietnam was clearly more concerned with getting the United States out of the country than with “humiliating” them. Nonetheless, Nixon realized each side had its own interests it was trying to reach in the period leading up to the Linebacker II bombings. This section will describe how the conflicting goals of the three parties Nixon described led to the breakdown of the talks and the start of bombing.

**South Vietnam: Security Before Peace**

Perhaps the most difficult position of any actor in the months leading up to the Linebacker II bombings was held by South Vietnam and its president, Nguyen Van Thieu. One the one hand, Thieu and his supporters in the South had to be forceful with the United States vis-à-vis the North in order to obtain concessions that ensured the South could survive as a political entity following a US withdrawal. On the other hand, if Thieu pushed too hard, the United States could accuse the South of being overly uncooperative and sign a separate peace with the North, leaving South Vietnam virtually alone and facing a slowly strengthening North Vietnam. Thus, Thieu had no choice but to walk a tightrope between strong demands and complete capitulation to US interests. This back-and-forth contributed strongly to the delays and breakdowns in talks, although in the end it is likely Thieu would have had to sign the agreement to avoid abandonment by the United States.

Although Thieu and the South Vietnamese government voiced complaints on many facets of the proposed agreement, in general they had three main problems with the

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The first was the issue of a tripartite election committee that would conduct investigations and eventually design and run new elections in South Vietnam. The three parties involved in the commission were to be the government of South Vietnam (GVN; i.e. Thieu), the rival South Vietnamese Communists (PRG), and a third group of supposedly disinterested civilians who would act as a moderating force. Thieu and his advisors, however, believed that the Communists would quickly subsume the “third force,” giving them a majority on the committee. As one of Thieu’s advisors predicted, “Kissinger was saying not to worry because the [election committee] could operate only on the basis of unanimity. But if our side continually vetoed…we and not the Communists would appear to be the real obstacles of peace.”

The second and third key complaints Thieu and his government had with the Paris talks were that the proposed agreements left unanswered the issue of the demilitarized zone (DMZ) between North and South Vietnam, and, more troubling, implicitly recognized the PRG by including them on a list of signatories. In both cases, Thieu sought to limit the effects of Communist forces. In regards to the DMZ, Thieu saw a strong one as necessary for both protection and to ensure continued sovereignty of the South as a separate entity. In regards to the PRG, Thieu had consistently maintained they were not a legitimate government and did not want to bestow this recognition on them. More crucially, the proposed agreement between the United States and North

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7 For a quick summation of Thieu’s objections, see Nixon, *Memoirs*, 703. For a more in depth discussion, see Goodman, *The Lost Peace*, 147-151.
8 Goodman, *The Lost Peace*, 148. As Goodman notes, subsuming the “third force”—and then making Thieu look like the real obstacle towards peaceful reconciliation—was exactly what the Communists had in mind. For more on Thieu’s objections to the tripartite commission, see Porter, *A Peace Denied*, 126.
Vietnam allowed PRG troops—i.e., the Viet Cong—to remain in the South, thus directly threatening Thieu’s hold on the government.\textsuperscript{10} It is easy to see why in both cases Thieu saw South Vietnamese security as heavily threatened.

Thieu and the GVN also worried that after the agreement had been signed, the United States would simply leave South Vietnam unprotected and vulnerable to Communist attack both from the North and from within the country. As such, Thieu was extremely reluctant to sign any agreement without guarantees from the United States for future protection, or at least large amounts of aid.\textsuperscript{11} To some extent the United States attempted to quell these fears with large shipments—especially of military supplies—like the huge “Enhance Plus” operation that occurred shortly before talks were suspended.\textsuperscript{12} Still, the GVN worried—in hindsight, with reason—that a peace accord would mean the end of American aid to their country.

In general, then, the South Vietnamese government had a number of legitimate security concerns it wanted addressed before it would consent to signing a peace agreement. As noted above, however, it could only push so far before risking a separate peace signed solely by the United States and North Vietnam. Regardless, it pushed its objections hard enough that Kissinger himself commented—as early as October—that “it is hard to exaggerate the toughness of Thieu’s position” and that “his demands verge on insanity.”\textsuperscript{13} Further, the lack of a South Vietnamese representative intimately involved in

\textsuperscript{10} Schulzinger, \textit{A Time for War}, 303.
\textsuperscript{11} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{12} See Jeffrey J. Clarke, \textit{Advice and Support: The Final Years, 1965-1973} (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 1988), 491, 500. Also see Nixon, \textit{Memoirs}, 697 for a discussion of how this operation was timed to give the GVN as much war materiel as possible before a cease-fire.
\textsuperscript{13} Nixon, \textit{Memoirs}, 702. Kissinger, as well as many others in Nixon’s administration, never possessed a high regard for Thieu. See Kissinger, \textit{White House Years}, 1363, 1366-1374, 1378-1392 and Clarke, \textit{Advice and Support}, 491.
the talks only furthered delay. It is safe to assume that, had Thieu not raised the objections he did at the times he did, an agreement would have been signed by the United States and North Vietnam and then presented to Thieu to sign himself. Instead, as discussed below, his objections forced the United States to suggest changes to what the North Vietnamese already thought was an agreed-upon peace document—which in turn convinced the North that stalling and waiting out the United States Congress would prove more fruitful. In the end, Thieu’s delays and complaints helped to cause a breakdown in talks that would be the impetus for the Linebacker II bombings—even though, after the bombing, the agreement remained virtually the same and Thieu had no choice but to sign it.

**The United States: Peace with Honor**

Upon the stalling of the Paris peace talks in the middle of December, the United States attempted to put the blame for the breakdown solely on the North Vietnamese. In reality, however, the United States was perhaps the main contributor to the breakdown of the talks due to domestic political concerns, a lack of clear overall goals, and—most importantly—an overly strong desire to placate President Thieu and the South Vietnamese government.

Throughout the latter stages of the Paris peace talks, the specter of the upcoming United States presidential election was lurking in the background. As the chances for a completed agreement increased, Nixon, Kissinger, and other United States diplomats

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14 This strategy was largely designed to mitigate the political fallout of a perceived failure on the part of Nixon and Kissinger to achieve peace before 1973. Upon breakdown of the talks, Nixon cabled to Kissinger that “if the negotiations are to be broken off, it must be absolutely clear that they were responsible for breaking off…rather than me.” Nixon, *Memoirs*, 730.
faced the question of whether to sign the agreement before or after the election.\textsuperscript{15} Kissinger strongly advised completing the agreement before November, thus honoring the deadline of October 31 that he and Tho had set at the beginning of the talks. Delaying until after this point meant risking North Vietnamese accusations of stalling.\textsuperscript{16} In early October Nixon had agreed, but as the election drew nearer the President “concluded that a settlement which takes place before the election…has a high risk of severely damaging the US domestic scene” by making it look as if the settlement was rushed in order to bolster support before the voting booths opened.\textsuperscript{17} In the end, Nixon and the United States chose to wait until after the presidential election to attempt to complete a peace agreement. These delays only served to increase North Vietnamese stubbornness and South Vietnamese uneasiness.

After the election, Nixon, Kissinger, and other American officials were still greatly concerned with South Vietnamese complaints—as discussed above—regarding the proposed agreements coming out of the negotiations between Kissinger and Le Duc Tho in Paris. One of the main reasons the United States broke off talks was because the South Vietnamese objected to many fundamental aspects of the proposed agreement that the North Vietnamese were likewise unwilling to compromise on. These included aspects three of the four main objections raised by the South Vietnamese over the agreement—the fourth, South Vietnam’s worries that the United States would simply abandon it, could not be addressed by North Vietnam but only by the United States itself. To that

\textsuperscript{15} The question of losing the election was rarely if ever discussed, since most polls showed the country strongly in favor of Nixon. Indeed, the actual results were some of the most decisive in United States history. See Nixon, \textit{Memoirs}, 716-717.

\textsuperscript{16} Schulzinger, \textit{A Time for War}, 298.

end, the United States sent a number of envoys to persuade the South it would not abandon it, and also used aid programs like Enhance Plus to signal this commitment as well. To mollify Thieu’s other fears, Kissinger proposed a large number of modifications to the informally agreed-upon treaty that had been virtually finalized by October 22 in his November 20 meetings with Le Duc Tho. Some sought to eliminate the third, “neutral” party in the tripartite commission—thus destroying the purpose for such a commission to begin with. Kissinger also attempted to limit North Vietnamese troops and their movements in South Vietnam, as well as eliminating any specific mentioning of the PRG (the rival South Vietnamese Communist government) in the agreement. Other changes included post-agreement elections for both South and North Vietnam, speeding up the cease-fire process in Cambodia and Laos, and eliminating lower-level administrative elections that could have been used to put communist officials in power.\(^\text{18}\)

Clearly, these demands were tied directly to the complaints of Thieu and South Vietnam discussed in the previous section and were attempts to make it feel it had a voice in the negotiations—thus increasing the chances Thieu and his government would sign on to the treaty when it was finalized. Still, presenting all Thieu’s desired changes at once was a “major tactical mistake,” as even Kissinger himself would come to realize in the future.\(^\text{19}\)

To somewhat make up for this “mistake”, Kissinger removed some of the more minor of Thieu’s demands from the table—but stuck by some of the most important. By the end of November 22 the United States’ list of new demands included:

- Clearing up the translation of the phrase “administrative structure” to describe the National Council [i.e. the tripartite commission];

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\(^{19}\)Kissinger, *White House Years*, 1417.
strengthening the provisions on respect for the DMZ; [and] finding some solution to the problem of North Vietnamese forces in the South.

Tho—while willing to accept some cosmetic changes, including the language of what weapons could be replaced by the United States on behalf of the South Vietnamese—refused to consider these major provisions, as they had already been informally agreed to in October. From there, the talks devolved to the point where each side was asking for a myriad of new changes and concessions.  

If the United States had taken a harder stance against South Vietnam, however, and threatened to sign a unilateral agreement with the North Vietnamese, it is highly likely Thieu and his government would have eventually agreed to the peace accords even if they were not ideal, since their choice would be between signing or being abandoned by the United States completely. Kissinger admits as much in his memoirs when he writes, “We failed early enough to grasp that Thieu’s real objection was not to the terms but the fact of any compromise. Conflict between us and Thieu was built into the termination of the war on any terms less than Hanoi’s total surrender.”  

Indeed, the United States did take a harder stance against South Vietnam, which quickly gave in and agreed to sign an agreement that did not fulfill close to all of its desires—but only after the bombing campaign had run its course. It is clear with hindsight that taking this path would have saved lives, money, and precious time for the United States.

More abstractly, Nixon was often ambivalent about United States goals at the peace talks. A peace agreement ending the war was the ultimate target, but Nixon also wanted to “humiliate” the North Vietnamese—on the battlefield, in the negotiating room,

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20 Ibid., 1418-1419.
21 Ibid., 1393 (author’s italics).
or both—to show the world that the United States had not been forced to end the war on less than ideal terms. As Robert Schulzinger points out, however, “the goal was impossible, given the patience of the North and Nixon’s own acknowledgement that Vietnam no longer mattered that much either to the US public or to US foreign policy.”

By waffling on just how to extract itself from the Vietnam conflict, therefore, the United States helped to extend and enhance the issues emerging from both North and South Vietnam that would ultimately derail the peace talks.

**North Vietnam: Delay and Wedge**

North Vietnam, although in the beginning truly bargaining to end the war, slowly became fed up with increasing United States demands and attempted to put pressure on the United States in order to reach a conclusion of some kind. The North Vietnamese first put pressure on the United States by releasing the text of the proposed agreement on October 26. This was due largely to North Vietnamese anger over United States stalling, which, as noted above, was due in large part to the wishes of Nixon that an agreement not be signed until after the election. Further, North Vietnam indicated that the agreement was close to being signed and implied that the United States had assured North Vietnam it would sign the treaty before the month was out. These North Vietnamese tactics cleverly put the onus on the United States to sign the agreement quickly or face hard questions both domestically and among their international allies. As John Smith notes, “The peace talks were viewed [by the North Vietnamese] as part of a propaganda offensive against the Americans.” Smith goes on to note that “the North Vietnamese had

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no intention of negotiating anything that would prevent them from achieving their long-term goals.”24 This was especially true once the United States began introducing new demands in November.

In October, as has been seen, the North Vietnamese were more than willing to negotiate in good faith to find a peace agreement that could be accepted by all. By December of 1972, however, the North Vietnamese had dramatically switched a negotiating tactic of giving in on some areas, but then bringing up other areas that had, from the American perspective, already been decided. As Kissinger explained in his press conference announcing the halt of peace talks, “The negotiations have had the character where a settlement was always just within our reach, and was always pulled just beyond our reach when we attempted to grasp it.”25 Why did the North Vietnamese make such a switch from good-faith bargaining to active intransigence? As mentioned above, this change in tactics was largely due to the demands put on the table by Kissinger on behalf of Thieu in late November. Tho saw these demands as betraying the implicit agreement the two parties had agreed to in October and decided to raise demands of his own in response.

In the words of Marshall Michel, North Vietnam “was willing to continue the war rather than yield on Nixon’s new points.”26 As such, it began to pull back from some previously agreed upon points, including “a change on civilian prisoners” as well as a demand asking for “the withdrawal of American civilians from South Vietnam, thus

25 Goodman, *The Lost Peace*, 158. For a day-to-day, detailed discussion of just how the North Vietnamese government operated at the negotiating table, see Kissinger, *White House Years*, Chapter 33, 1395-1470.
making the maintenance of the [South] Vietnam air force impossible.” These new
demands and changes, it seems, were not serious on the part of the North Vietnamese but
instead retaliation for the delays and new demands put in place by the United States.
Further, these new demands were a signal to Kissinger and his negotiating partners that
North Vietnam was willing to stall negotiations until Congress reconvened if that was
necessary to getting an acceptable agreement.

In effect, Le Duc Tho and the North were giving Kissinger and the United States
three choices: they could give up on South Vietnamese demands and return to the
October 22 agreement; they could continue fruitlessly negotiating with the South
Vietnamese demands still in place, thus paving the way for Congress to cut off funding in
January, or they could halt the talks in favor of a compellence strategy centered on
bombing. No matter what course the United States took, North Vietnam believed in
would win out in the end. If Kissinger agreed to jettison the South Vietnamese
demands—as, eventually, he implicitly did—the North would be left with a satisfactory
agreement. If Kissinger continued to push the South Vietnamese demands, the North
could stall until the United States Congress forced a stoppage of hostilities. Finally, the
North believed—correctly, as it turned out—that it could withstand a bombing campaign
carried out by the United States and come out stronger on the other side.28

Who then bears the brunt of the responsibility for letting the Paris peace talks die?
As might be expected, most in Nixon’s administration saw both the North and South as
overly intransient and petty, and the delays each side created were blamed for the

27 Kissinger, White House Years, 1429.
28 As will be discussed later, North Vietnam used this bombing to strengthen morale, referring to it as the
“Dien Bien Phu of the skies.” Further, Vietnamese officials believed the bad weather of the December
monsoon season would play in their favor. This, of course, turned out to be a faulty assumption, given the
all-weather capabilities of B-52s. See Michel, Eleven Days, 52.
temporary failure of the peace talks. “Both the North and South Vietnamese must share responsibility for the delay in reaching a settlement,” Nixon wrote to Kissinger. “Each side wants to gain advantages at the peace table it has not and cannot gain on the battlefield.” This analysis, while not altogether incorrect, is an easy one to make from halfway across the world. For both North and South Vietnam, their direct security was at stake, and both were clearly willing to do whatever necessary to survive, even if that meant, paradoxically, extending the war.

Many of the scholars that wrote about the war shortly after it ended placed the blame for the failure of the talks on Nixon and the United States, and argued that he should not have waited until after the November elections to make a firm commitment to signing, or that he was too easy on Thieu and the GVN. This argument, too, has some merits, most notably the idea that if Nixon had pressed harder on Thieu to revoke many of his complaints before initiating the bombings, Thieu would eventually have capitulated, as he did a month later after the talks resumed.

The initiation of the Linebacker II bombings, then, can largely be explained as a consequence of the strained relationship between the United States and South Vietnam. South Vietnam distrusted its ally enough to fervently push for unrealistic concessions, while the United States failed to convince South Vietnam to do otherwise. All North Vietnam had to do was sit back and let the two allies bicker while it waited it out at the negotiating table—simply stalling until the United States signed a separate peace. The Linebacker II bombings, then, were America’s attempt to change North Vietnam’s position from observer to active participant.

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30 A good example of this analysis is found in Porter, *A Peace Denied*, 125-135.
Chapter 3: Capability

The most obvious aspect of any compellence strategy is the ability of the compelling state to possess the requisite capabilities to successfully change the actions of the state it is trying to compel. On the surface, this seems a fairly easy analysis to make: the compeller either does or does not have the capabilities required. In reality, however, the issue of capabilities is much more complex. Just because a state has more capability overall, for example, does not mean it will be able to bring those capabilities to bear in any given situation. Thus, in many compellence examples it is only a certain type of capability that matters.¹ In the case of the Linebacker II bombings, this section of capability is air power.

It is obvious, even without any prior knowledge of the situation, that the United States Air Forces had a huge advantage over North Vietnam anti-air defenses. In this sense American forces had a distinct capability advantage over their opponent. The main threat of the Linebacker II bombings, however, was not that the United States would conduct one massive strike on Hanoi or Haiphong but instead keep up the bombing indefinitely until North Vietnam began to once again negotiate in good faith. This meant that the United States not only had to possess a clear advantage in the skies, but also the ability to maintain this advantage indefinitely.

The notion of how long the United States could keep up bombing was clearly worrisome for Nixon and his aides. Alexander Haig—then a military adviser to Kissinger and Nixon in Vietnam—worried that the bombings would “be tough [on the

North Vietnamese] initially, but I don’t think we’re going to be able to keep it up.”²

Even after the bombing had begun, Nixon himself worried that the North Vietnamese would hold out to the point where the United States would have no choice but to agree to a total withdrawal in exchange solely for return of American POWs, with no peace agreement in place.³ Military leaders directing the bombing runs also possessed worries about an unending bombing campaign. Besides the obvious concerns over losing men and materiel, leaders also fretted over the possibility of upsetting the Chinese. “During missions near the Chinese border,” a former general remarks, “an inadvertent violation of the border could readily happen.”⁴

These legitimate concerns about the longevity of the bombing were not enough, in the end, to change Nixon’s tactics. For many in Nixon’s administration, a compellence strategy centered on bombing was viewed as the only remaining way forward. One American official noted, “Hanoi had refused to negotiate seriously by December, and the bombing was the only means we had left to get the negotiations going again.”⁵ Kissinger echoes this sentiment in his memoirs when he writes, “We had only two choices: taking a massive, shocking step to impose our will on events and end the war quickly, or letting matters drift into another round of inconclusive negotiations…and mounting casualties. There were no other options.”⁶ Likewise, at the conclusion of the bombings, Kissinger

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⁵ Goodman, The Lost Peace, 164 (emphasis added).
⁶ Henry Kissinger White House Years (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1979), 1448 (emphasis added).
reiterated to Nixon in a telephone conversation that “no other method” could have achieved the same results in the same amount of time.\(^7\)

What these planners did not anticipate, however, was the failure of the North Vietnamese to capitulate. Indeed, “North Vietnamese morale did not break in any major way,” and “even after the heavy bombing the will of the Northern leadership had not been broken. It seemed to be prepared to accept further bombing rather than give way to the Americans.”\(^8\) Many North Vietnamese officials and civilians began calling the bombing campaign “Twelve Days of Dienbienphu in the Air,” harkening back to their landmark victory against the French almost two decades earlier. Once it became clear that bombing, while affecting the fighting capability of the North Vietnamese, would do little to affect their morale, Nixon and Kissinger sought to resume talks in Paris as soon as possible.\(^9\)

Another reason the United States changed course and began advocating for a return to the negotiating table was the threat of increased losses of B-52 bombers. The B-52s that would take part in the Linebacker II bombings were flying over arguably the most heavily defended area in the world,\(^10\) and Nixon’s chief of staff H.R. Haldeman makes clear the President greatly worried that many would be lost. “The \(P\)resident kept coming back to the B-52 loss problem,” Haldeman writes, “saying we can’t back off, but

will we get three losses every time? If so, it’s going to be very tough to take.”

Nixon, in his own memoirs, goes so far as to label B-52 losses, not domestic and international criticism, as his “major concern.” Indeed, as Mark Clodfelter points out, “a heavy loss of B-52s…would create the antithesis of the psychological impact that Nixon desired.”

Despite these concerns, the bombing campaign saw relatively few losses—except for one deadly day when 6 B-52s were shot down. Still, the fear of increased casualties on the part of Nixon and the United States only furthered their willingness to break off bombing and return to negotiations.

Why did the Linebacker II bombing raids fail to significantly affect Vietnamese morale? One argument would be that the United States focused too heavily on hitting military targets and not enough on hitting civilian ones. In any bombing campaign, the bombing country has basically two choices: to focus on targets they deem militarily valuable to the enemy—like bases, SAM sites, roads, etc.—or to focus on civilian targets to cause terror and, theoretically, to lessen morale. Given the factual record and accounts by the principal planners, it is clear the Linebacker II campaign was almost solely devoted to hitting targets that held military value. Robert Schulzinger describes how the main targets of the bombing campaign were “bridges, power plants, railroad lines, and industrial installations.”

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civilians. While hitting these targets would of course have a detrimental effect on the lives of civilians in the area, this was not the primary concern of United States planners.

Undeniably, civilians were killed—over 1,000 of them, in fact. But when American planners did bring up the issue of civilians, it was almost always to warn against killing them. This general mindset of avoiding civilian casualties can be seen from the highest levels of government in the United States down to the bomber pilots themselves. During the planning phases of the war, Nixon himself advised Admiral Moorer—the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff—to hit as many targets as possible, but “without taking out too much civilian stuff.” The orders clearly made their way down the chain of command, with one Air Force planner observing that “we were not allowed to bomb many targets much more lucrative because of [possible] civilian casualties.” The actual order of strike targets cabled to military leaders in Vietnam and in the air bases that would participate in the attacks likewise specifically mentions that “necessary precautions [should] be taken to minimize the risk of civilian casualties.” A witness to the briefings given to the bomber crews shortly before the attacks began made it even clearer that civilian casualties were to be limited. “The instructions to the [navigators] were that if they were not 100 percent sure of their aiming point, ‘then don’t

16 Ibid.
18 Quoted in Clodfelter, The Limits of Air Power, 190.
drop; bring the bombs back.” At all levels, then, it could not be clearer that avoiding civilian casualties was high on the list of priorities. An argument could thus be made that, had the United States instead focused on targeting civilian areas, North Vietnamese morale would have been more greatly affected.

Of course, there are major problems with targeting civilian centers as well. As Robert Pape points out, these attempts to “manipulate civilian vulnerability” often do little to lessen morale and in many cases actually strengthen the enemy’s resolve among both civilians and military personnel alike. This is one of the main reasons, scholars like Robert Jervis and Benjamin Lambeth argue, why Lyndon Johnson’s air campaigns earlier in the war—targeted as they were against civilians and guerilla fighters who were easily able to hide in the jungle—were mostly failures. The terror bombings of major cities like Tokyo, London, and Dresden in World War II are further examples of civilian targeting that actually hardened morale among the target populace. There is little doubt that a bombing campaign aimed at North Vietnamese civilians would have done the same.

Indeed, the United States did obliquely try to affect the morale of the North Vietnamese. In general, the goal was to avoid actual civilian deaths while simultaneously creating explosions and reverberations that would disorient and scare both average civilians in Hanoi and Haiphong as well as members of the North Vietnamese leadership.

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20 McCarthy, A View from the Rock, 50.
22 Benjamin S. Lambeth, The Transformation of American Air Power (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000), 52. Lambeth quotes Jervis’ remarks that “the American conventional offensives that worked well when the North Vietnamese thought they could win by large-scale battles failed when the latter reverted to guerilla warfare.”
Admiral Moorer summed up this strategy when commenting, “I want the people of Hanoi to hear the bombs…but minimize damage to the civilian populace.”\(^{23}\) Nixon, too, noted that “the [B-52s] will shake them, won’t [they]?” with Kissinger smugly noting that the bombing would “break every window in Hanoi.”\(^{24}\) Further, the sheer number of missions was designed not only to hit as many targets as possible in a short time, but also to awe the Vietnamese into submission.\(^{25}\) As might have been expected given historical precedent, the bombing actually helped strengthen, not weaken, North Vietnamese morale. Marshall Michel describes how “the bombing served to unify a population that was beginning to chafe under years of unending war, because this battle was not fought on some distant battlefield but in the hear of the country.”\(^{26}\) Pape, too, argues that “there was no general panic” and that “none of the available evidence suggests that civilian vulnerability contributed” to a return to negotiations.\(^{27}\) Again, given historical examples like the ones mentioned above, it is likely the morale of Vietnamese civilians would have been hardened all the more if the United States had sought to directly attack civilians instead of indirectly attempting to scare them.

Further, directly attacking civilian targets would have spelled doom for Nixon and Kissinger domestically. Nixon already was faced with a dovish Congress that would likely vote to suspend funding for the war once it began its session in January. Even in the actual case, when Nixon attacked mainly military targets, many Congressmen lambasted the bombing, calling it “disastrous” and insisting that “this should outrage the

\(^{23}\) Quoted in Clodfelter, *The Limits of Air Power*, 184.
\(^{27}\) Pape, *Bombing to Win*, 209.
conscience of all Americans.” Likewise, newspapers as renowned as the New York Times and the Washington Post described the bombing with editorials like “Terror from the Skies” and “Terror Bombing in The Name of Peace.”²⁸ Had Nixon actually gone after civilians, the outcry would have been even worse than it was, and Congress would have grown even more determined to end the way by any means at their disposal.

Clearly, then, a bombing campaign targeted at civilians was not a viable option for Nixon. Yet what actually happened shows that targeting military aspects of North Vietnam was likewise ineffective in affecting North Vietnamese morale. Thus, the only conclusion to be drawn is that the capabilities used by the United States in this instance—i.e., bombers—were not appropriate for their compellence goal of getting the North Vietnamese to accept the changes proposed by Kissinger on behalf of Thieu and the South Vietnamese. Going further, it is questionable whether the United States had any capability to affect North Vietnam short of nuclear weapons. As noted, bombing could not succeed, and a ground offensive was unlikely as well given both the tactics employed by Communist Vietnamese fighters as well as domestic resistance to increased American casualties. A nuclear weapon drop may have been effective—as it was with Japan in 1945—but given the global ramifications of such an event a bombing of this kind was more or less completely off the table as well. In sum, the United States simply did not possess the requisite capabilities to affect North Vietnam in the manner they wished, but nonetheless tried a bombing campaign that only hardened the morale in the North while angering critics at home.

²⁸Kissinger, *White House Years*, 1453.
Chapter 4: Credibility

Another important facet of compellence is the maintenance—and in many cases heightening—of the compelling state’s credibility. At a basic level, this means the compelling state must seek to convince its adversary that it will either carry through its threats or—if the compellence takes the form of actual force—that the use of that force will be sustained until the adversary changes its behavior in a way that suits the wishes of the compeller. Of course, no interactions between states take place in a vacuum, so often the compelling state and the target of compellence must both weigh how their choices will affect their overall credibility in their region and throughout the world. Certainly, this was the case during the Linebacker II bombings, when both North Vietnam and especially the United States not only sought to bolster their credibility with each other, but also had to factor in the repercussions their actions would cause among both allies and enemies across the world.

The Linebacker II bombing campaign was, in fact, a way for the United States to uphold its credibility with North Vietnam and thus make its coercive diplomacy effective. As discussed above, Le Duc Tho and the North Vietnamese negotiators were clearly stalling by December of 1972, and in the view of Kissinger and other negotiators in Paris were attempting to call the United States’ bluff—hoping they would not have the political support necessary to engage in another bombing campaign like the first Linebacker bombings, which the United States had initiated earlier in the year, and instead sign a separate peace, thus leaving South Vietnam especially vulnerable to a later North
Vietnamese invasion. In this way, North Vietnam was challenging the credibility of the United States, and a response was called for to avoid losing face—both in terms of negotiating position once talks resumed as well as in terms of America’s credibility on the world stage for any potential future conflicts. Further, the United States had to deal with how coercive diplomacy would affect its specific allies—like South Vietnam and other pro-American states in the region such as Thailand—as well as its enemies, notably Russia, China, and North Vietnam itself.

Most importantly, Nixon and the United States had to retain credibility with North Vietnam. Previously, Nixon had rejected earlier drafts of the agreement due to complaints from Thieu, and returning to these agreements now would make the United States appear weak and vacillating, as well as angering their South Vietnamese allies. The North Vietnamese leadership was excellent at sensing weakness at the negotiating table, and would become emboldened to push for still more changes that would tilt the post-war balance of power between North and South Vietnam in the favor of the Communists.

The target selection for the Linebacker II bombings was also largely due to concerns about American credibility vis-à-vis the North Vietnamese going forward. Besides being militarily valuable targets, Hanoi and Haiphong were major population centers and had long been off limits to American bombers. As noted above in Chapter 3,

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1 See Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1979), 1430. Late in the negotiations, Kissinger sent a message to Nixon noting that the North Vietnamese were “gambling on [the United States’] unwillingness to do what is necessary,” i.e. begin another bombing campaign.

2 Although not specifically referring to any country, Kissinger made these credibility concerns clear in a phone call to Nixon, when he noted that the only other alternative to bombing, going back to one of the October agreements, would make the United States appear “impotent.” Nixon White House Tapes, Tape 34 (White House Telephone), Conversation 114, accessed at <http://www.nixonlibrary.gov/forresearchers/find/tapes/tape034/tape034.php>, 25 January 2010.
B-52 targets were solely military, but a large aspect of the bombing was the effect it would supposedly have on North Vietnamese morale—not by killing civilians outright, but instead by scaring them and the North Vietnamese government into capitulating. By attacking these cities, Nixon was showing he “was not to be trifled with,” as Kissinger put it to Nixon during one of their many phone conversations during this period. Nixon himself alluded to similar ideas when he wrote to Kissinger, “If we renew the bombing, it will have to be something new, and that means we will have to make the big decision to hit Hanoi and Haiphong with B-52s. Anything less will only make the enemy contemptuous.”

In both cases, Kissinger and Nixon realized a small-scale attack would not only fail to achieve their compellence goals, but would also embolden the North Vietnamese in the future to try further stalling tactics and other measures to increase their share of any eventual settlement. From the American point of view, a line had to be drawn to avoid risking loss of credibility both at the time and down the road.

Interestingly, although the Linebacker II bombings were initiated largely to save the credibility of the United States, once they had begun the United States’ credibility was on the line again. This time, the issue was whether or not the North Vietnamese could withstand the bombings long enough for the United States to give up, either due to lack of support from Congress at home or to unacceptable bomber losses from Vietnamese anti-air and SAM fire. While outwardly the United States never considered ending the Linebacker II bombings early, in actuality the situation was much more tense. As discussed in the previous section, Nixon and some of his aides were quite concerned over the loss of B-52s and how long they could keep up the high volume of bombing.

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runs. At the same time, Nixon “remained just as anxious to demonstrate his own icy resolution,” as Robert Schulzinger points out. Still, once it became clear that the North Vietnamese were willing to wait out the United States, even though they had exhausted almost all of their ammunition for both anti-air artillery and SAM sites, he had no choice but to advocate for a return to negotiations. Largely, however, the United States was able to paint the return to the talks as a North Vietnamese concession, and could point to the levels of destruction on the ground as evidence—even though, as discussed earlier, North Vietnamese morale did not break. The lesson for those choosing a compellence strategy is thus that a compelling state must factor in the potential credibility gains or losses if they were to attempt to compel and fail, as well as if they simply avoided compellence altogether. It is likely that in many instances not compelling at all would actually cause less of a credibility loss than attempting to compel and failing.

As has been shown, credibility factored into American strategizing both before and during their compellence action. Credibility concerns did not stop here, however. Even after the United States returned to the negotiating table, it continued bombing at a reduced level below the 20\textsuperscript{th} parallel—i.e. in the more traditional areas the American military had been bombing since the beginning of hostilities. While in theory this allowed the threat of yet another large-scale bombing campaign to hang over the resumed negotiations in the case of more North Vietnamese intransigence, the fact that the Americans had returned to the table without directly affecting North Vietnamese morale

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was a clear signal that they had no intention of resuming bombing on the scale of Linebacker II.

Of course, many both at the time and in retrospect have argued that the massive bombing campaign affected the following round of peace talks. In the words of one American negotiator, “The threat of renewed and effective bombing…was implied in all that we signed with Hanoi.” Likewise, Henry Kissinger suggested that by ordering Linebacker II and then maintaining a lower—but still intense—level of bombing, Nixon was “making the peace enforceable.” If this was true, however, the United States would have pressed for much more sweeping changes than the small, cosmetic ones they were able to secure. Indeed, some students of the Vietnam War argue the United States did in fact have more credibility in the eyes of the North Vietnamese then the Americans themselves realized. Ulysses S. Grant Sharp, a retired admiral, argues that “the terms of the peace settlement were much less than what could have been achieved had we [explicitly] threatened with a resumption of bombing on the scale used in those eleven days.” On the other hand, scholars like Robert Pape argue that while “Linebacker II…damaged the North’s ability to carry it out its conventional military strategy for overrunning the [South Vietnamese army]…it did not seriously impair its ability to defend already-held territories.” Further, the bombing did not damage the North’s morale, either—meaning the North was ready for more bombing if necessary. The argument that the threat of renewed bombing was important in the negotiations is defeated simply by the fact that the United States was the actor that first made overtures

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9 Sharp, Strategy for Defeat, 255.
to resume talks and, once at the table, did not push for any but the most cosmetic of concessions. As a US diplomat wryly put it: “We bombed the North Vietnamese into accepting our concession.”

In general, compellence strategies must take into account this notion: that the adversary faces similar credibility concerns to the compeller. This idea—discussed in more detail in the following section—means that compelling states must at least to some degree factor in the credibility concerns of their adversary to avoid a situation where the adversary “would never…accept the international loss of face” associated with giving in to compellence, and as a result would become even more intransigent than before.

Even in the Linebacker II case, where the United States made a number of attempts to help North Vietnam accept the United States’ demands without appearing weak, the North still sought to bolster its credibility vis-à-vis the United States. Allan Goodman points out that “North Vietnamese accounts of the final days leading to the Paris Agreement stress that it was Washington, not Hanoi, that had to be persuaded to return to the October draft.” This example illustrates how it is important for a compeller to realize that both sides have credibility concerns that must be addressed to at least some degree.

Obviously, a compelling state must factor in both the credibility of its threats and how its credibility will be affected by its compellence strategy, regardless of whether it

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12 Nixon, Memoirs, 736. See also Kissinger, White House Years, 1449. As noted in the text, see the “Clarity of Demands” section of this paper for more detail on just how the United States sought to ease the North’s acceptance of its demands.
fails or succeeds. However, these considerations are never limited to simply what its compellence target thinks and will think of it. A state can also use a compellence strategy to affect its credibility in the eyes of third parties, whether ally or enemy. On the other hand, a failed compellence strategy can hurt its credibility with these parties, so extra care must be taken.

In the case of Linebacker II, the United States had to consider many different audiences. In terms of its adversaries, the United States was mainly focused, of course, on North Vietnam, but the impact of the bombing campaign on China and the Soviet Union—basically North Vietnam’s benefactors—was also an issue. In the period shortly after the bombing, many critics of Nixon argued that the Linebacker II campaign had failed to plan for the fact that China and the Soviet Union would take this as a sign of unnecessary American aggression and treat America as such—exactly what Nixon was trying to avoid with his policies of détente.\(^\text{14}\) Behind the scenes, however, the United States was ensuring that China and the Soviet Union would not change their view of the United States due to the bombing. The State Department conducted personal meetings with the Chinese behind the scenes to explain their rationale for cutting off talks, and Kissinger instructed his aides in Washington to contact Soviet officials and do the same.\(^\text{15}\) In both cases, the United States showed little concern over the reaction from the two countries, given that intelligence had shown they were already pressuring North Vietnam.

\(^{14}\) For example, see Gareth Porter, *A Peace Denied* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1975), 163.

to end the war as soon as possible.\textsuperscript{16} While it is true that both China and the Soviet Union publicly condemned the Linebacker II bombings, it is fairly clear that these actions were designed mostly to protect their own credibility with their allies, instead of legitimate criticisms of American tactics.

The United States also had to worry about its credibility in the eyes of its allies. Although it was not trying to directly influence its allies through compellence, it did have to take the effects of its compellence on allied countries into consideration. Those allies in Europe—the countries of NATO—were some of the most vociferous in their criticism of the bombing, but what was left unsaid was that the United States was still the sole protector of those countries against the Soviet Union and, as such, the NATO countries could talk as much as they wanted but would never carry out any major actions that went against the will of the United States.\textsuperscript{17}

More important in the eyes of the leaders of the United States was the reaction of its allies in the region—and this reaction, at least according to American officials, was almost solely positive. In the words of Henry Kissinger, “The countries that had contributed troops to our effort, like Thailand and South Korea, applauded; those in the direct line of Communist advance, like Indonesia and Malaysia, expressed no opposition to our action publicly, while supporting it privately.”\textsuperscript{18} These countries, which relied upon the United States for their preservation, saw the bombing as reassurance that American power could be called upon when they were threatened. As Kissinger remarked to Nixon, the bombing helped to “shore up the courage of others in the


\textsuperscript{17} See Kissinger, \textit{White House Years}, 1453-1454.

\textsuperscript{18} \textit{Ibid.}, 1454.
Of course, American allies were in for a rude shock when the United States removed itself entirely from Southeast Asia and the Communists conquered all of Vietnam, but the bombing itself only helped to strengthen American credibility in the eyes of its allies in the region. Still, while this reaction was helpful to United States interests in the region, it is clear this was only an effect of the Linebacker II bombings and by no means a goal.

The effect of the Linebacker II bombings to the credibility of the United States in the eyes of the South Vietnamese presents a special case. A number of scholars have argued that the central purpose of the Linebacker II bombings was to increase credibility with the South Vietnamese by reassuring them that American power was still able to protect them. The facts of the situation, however, simply do not support this claim. In fact, by the end of 1972, Kissinger was referring to Thieu, the leader of South Vietnam, as “a complete SOB” and “this idiot in Saigon.” Because of Thieu’s stubbornness—discussed in more detail above—the United States had reached a point where they considered signing a separate peace with the North Vietnamese. Clearly, then, reassuring South Vietnam was at most only a secondary objective, since they were considering going on without them anyway.

Although the reassurance of the South Vietnamese was by no means the main goal of the Linebacker II bombing, it did provide this reassurance as a secondary effect. Mark Clodfelter describes how “Linebacker II gave credibility to both the promise of

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20 Pape, Bombing to Win, 202.
continued American support and Nixon’s willingness to use air power to uphold an agreement.” In general, the bombings helped give Thieu the assurance he needed to sign on to the peace agreement crafted by the United States and North Vietnam; even though he almost certainly would have done so anyway—his country could not function without American aid—the safety blanket of the bombings helped to convince him and his cohorts that intransigence over the peace treaty was not necessary.22

Thus credibility was an issue at all stages of the Linebacker II bombings: in the decision to begin the bombings, during the attacks themselves, and after the fact going forward into renewed negotiations. The decision to bomb was largely made to protect American credibility, and during the bombings American credibility was at stake if the North Vietnamese held out. So, from a credibility standpoint, was the Linebacker II bombing campaign a success? Overall the answer is no. While the United States’ credibility was arguably enhanced vis-à-vis its allies in the region, it actually lost credibility in the eyes of its main target, North Vietnam. In essence, the United States had shown to the North that it lacked the commitment necessary to exact the substantial concessions demanded by the South, thus weakening, not strengthening, its overall credibility and its bargaining position at the peace table. Further, while this loss of credibility was never explicitly admitted by Kissinger or other members of the negotiating team, it was implicitly signaled by the fact that the United States sought only minor concessions upon their return to Paris in January of 1973—instead of the major ones they had sought beforehand.

22 Clodfelter, The Limits of Air Power, 200.
Chapter 5: Clarity of Goals

A third area of importance when analyzing compellence strategies is how well the compelling actor conveys its goals to the group it is attempting to compel. As noted previously, the most obvious way these goals are presented is through what Alexander George calls a “tacit ultimatum:” a clearly stipulated demand, a time limit for that demand to be acceded to, and a threat or actual use of force to convince the actor that giving in to the compeller’s demands is the best option from a cost-benefit standpoint.¹ Of course, in the real world the demands of compellers are often more obscured. This can happen for in number of instances, writes Gary Schaub Jr. For one, a compeller can choose to obfuscate to at least some degree its compellence goals because the compeller itself is unsure of just what is a sufficient action for the rival state to take. In other scenarios, a compelling country might make its goals more vague to help the adversary state avoid a major loss of prestige, thus reducing costs of acceding to the state’s compellence.² Regardless, the ability of a compelling state to in some way make its goals known to the state it is attempting to compel is crucial. If the target state does not know what it is supposed to do, no amount of force or international pressure can cause it to act in the way desired by the compelling state.

As such, any analysis of Nixon’s compellence strategies must take into account the United States’ ability to successfully convey its demands in a way that would get the point across while avoiding backing the North Vietnamese into a situation where they would have no choice but to hold out. In other words, Nixon had to both convey what

would be viewed as acceptable on the part of the North Vietnamese and ensure that they would be able to comply without overly damaging their international position. It is safe to say that in both these areas Nixon and the United States were successful.

The first step for Nixon and his administration was to make sure that the North Vietnamese knew what was expected of them, and what the price would be if they failed to meet those expectations in the eyes of the United States. As Gareth Porter points out, “since the beginning of 1969 Richard Nixon had used the threat of unprecedented destruction of North Vietnam for a variety of purposes.” Indeed, in some cases—most notably the first Linebacker bombing campaign in the spring of 1972—actual force was used as well to compel. For these reasons, it is safe to assume that the North Vietnamese would have realized the Linebacker II bombings of December 1972 were simply yet another attempt at compellence.

Of course, just knowing that the United States was attempting compellence was not enough for North Vietnam—the responsibility was on Nixon and his aides to convey why they were attempting compellence and how the North Vietnamese should respond. The United States made sure to do this through a number of channels. The most vital method of communication, of course, was direct contact between the United States and members of the North Vietnamese government. By December 14—four days before the start of the bombing—the United States “sent a cable to Hanoi warning that grave consequences would follow if serious negotiations did not resume within seventy-two hours.” Of course, it was the United States that had, for all intents and purposes, called off the talks, so this message was really more of a final request for the North Vietnamese

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to give in on some of the South Vietnamese demands. After this threat of force had failed, the United State resorted to actual use of force, once again laying out the peace agreement it wanted to the North Vietnamese before the bombings even began. As Henry Kissinger described to Nixon on the morning before the bombing campaign started, he had sent a letter to Le Duc Tho advising that “the only way to settle is to go back to November 23”—i.e. a proposal that the United States could more easily convince the South Vietnamese to sign. Of note here is that Kissinger did not suggest going back to the October 26 agreement—which would have been acceptable to the North but had already been rejected by the Thieu and the South. Nixon conveyed the United States’ compellence goals more publicly as well. Ron Ziegler, Nixon’s press secretary, made it clear that the campaign would continue “until a settlement is arrived at.” Because of the past history between the two countries, direct communications from the United States to North Vietnam, and more public press conferences from member of Nixon’s administration, there is little doubt that Le Duc Tho and his politburo brethren in Hanoi did not grasp what was being asked of them in return for a cessation of heavy bombing of the Hanoi and Haiphong areas

Making sure the enemy understands the demands of compellence, however, is only one side of the coin when it comes to successfully conveying demands to an adversary. The other side—making sure the enemy has room to back down without losing too much face—is often much harder. A successful compellence strategy must

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6 Of course, South Vietnam would eventually sign an agreement virtually the same as the October 26 draft, but at this point the United States still believed it could extract better concessions from the North.

thus find a balance between negative and positive inducements to change the actions of
the adversary—what Alexander George calls “the carrot-and-stick approach.”8 Once
again, the United States was overall quite successful at mixing in positive inducements—
“carrots”—with the more negative “sticks” described above. As was the case at the
beginning of the campaign, Nixon, Kissinger, and the United States used a variety of
channels to convey proposed “carrots” to the North Vietnamese side. Some of these took
the form of leaving wiggle room for the North Vietnamese to save face in the
international system. For example, only five days after Ziegler’s statement that bombing
would continue until a settlement was reached, the Nixon administration changed their
tune slightly, demanding only that Hanoi indicate it was willing to negotiate “in a spirit of
good will and in a constructive attitude.”9 This change served two purposes: it allowed
the United States to paint the Linebacker II bombings as a success, while simultaneously
allowing the North Vietnamese to return to substantive negotiations without seeming to
completely break under the pressure of the United States’ massive bombing campaign.

More direct communications were once again used as well. In this case,
Kissinger, in a communiqué to Le Duc Tho himself, proposed ending the bombings
within 36 hours of a return to substantive negotiations.10 Just as the United States had

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8 Alexander L. George, “Coercive Diplomacy” in The Use of Force: Military Power and International
throughout his book—views this change in message as allowing Nixon to save face by letting him stop
bombing without seeming to bow to domestic and international pressure. With the benefit of historical
hindsight, however, this shift in message seems designed to allow the North Vietnamese, as well as the
United States, to save face.
10 Nixon White House Tapes, Tape 35 (White House Telephone), Conversation 19, accessed at
Also see Kissinger, White House Years, 1458-1459, and Richard Nixon, RN: The Memoirs of Richard
Nixon (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1978), 738. In this conversation Nixon repeatedly seeks
confirmation from Kissinger that these offers are “private, nothing public,” showing just how important
threatened force if negotiations were not resumed earlier, they were now offering to stop using force if the North Vietnamese would start once again seriously negotiating a peace settlement. It is this combination of threats and offerings that is vital to successfully completing a compellence strategy in a manner benefiting the compelling state. Put more broadly, communication—both directly between parties and indirectly through third parties like the press and allies—is absolutely essential when attempting compellence and, in this facet at least, the United States and President Nixon succeeded quite readily.

This is not to say that the Nixon administration did not suffer communication problems during the Christmas bombing period. Ironically, the area where Nixon and his aides stumbled most obviously was in communicating with the groups that should have been easiest to communicate with—his own constituents and other allies across the world. Further, it is clear that this lack of clear communication was not an accident but a deliberate tactic by Nixon. H.R. Haldeman, Nixon’s chief of staff, notes in his diary of the period that Nixon specifically told Kissinger “to be nonspecific on the details” of the bombing campaign when announcing the breakdown of the talks in a national press conference.11 This decision seems to have been Nixon’s own, as Kissinger clearly opposed the idea of describing in detail the reason for and the timing of the Linebacker II bombings. “Nixon was determined to take himself out of the line of fire,” Kissinger writes in his memoirs. “I was asked to give a low-key briefing of the reasons for the

credible...
recessing of the Paris talks; how to be low-key about such a dramatic event was no more apparent to me in Washington than it had been in Paris.”

Normally, Nixon’s obfuscation of his true goals to his allies and to the United States public would matter little in regards to the actual compellence strategy. But Nixon saw an announcement of United States goals—even in the United States to a domestic audience—as having a direct effect on North Vietnam by appearing to be an implicit ultimatum that would only strengthen the resolve of the North. “The President believed,” Mark Clodfelter notes, “that such a proclamation would delay talks by appearing as an ultimatum and making their resumption a matter of prestige.” Nixon himself confirms this in his own memoirs, noting that North Vietnamese “national pride and their ideological fanaticism would never have allowed them to accept the international loss of face involved in caving to such an ultimatum.” If Nixon had in fact pursued a course that kept all notions of the bombing out of public sight, this rationale would not only make sense, but would actually be a wise tactic, acting as a “carrot” to allow the North Vietnamese room to maneuver. Instead, Nixon’s explanations do not coincide with the facts of the period. If Nixon truly wanted to avoid the notion of the United States giving an ultimatum to the North Vietnamese, he would not have allowed Ziegler and others in his administration to make relatively clear statements—in public—regarding just what was expected of the North Vietnamese. By allowing these statements yet failing to succinctly address the rationale behind the bombing, Nixon created a lose-lose situation.

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for himself. On the one hand, the North Vietnamese were to some extent still losing prestige by returning to the negotiating table, thus eliminating any advantage Nixon would have gained had he kept the rationale for the bombing completely out of the public sphere. On the other hand, the rationale was obfuscated enough that critics of Nixon, both within and without the United States, were able to accuse him of blindly bombing with no end in sight.

Why would Nixon go down such a seemingly irrational and inconsistent road when communicating the rationale for the bombing campaign to his enemies and allies? Kissinger suggests lack of will; from his point of view, Nixon wanted to get back to the negotiating table no matter what and was willing to suffer domestically to achieve this goal.\textsuperscript{15} Of course, this explanation also fails to explain why Nixon would then allow members of his administration to go public—to at least some degree—with his expectations regarding a resumption of talks by the North Vietnamese. It seems far more likely, then, that this seemingly irrational course of action was actually made by Nixon for larger foreign policy purposes—what became known as “madman” strategy. As discussed earlier, this strategy hinges on the notion that a war could escalate at any time due to the seeming irrationality of a leader or administration. In this instance, then, Nixon was sacrificing popularity in his country and among his allies to advance this strategy towards both the North Vietnamese and their larger, more important allies like Russia and China. Behind the explicit notion that bombing would severely damage the North’s capability to fight was the implicit notion that the longer bombing continued, the greater the chances for the relatively contained bombing campaign to spin off into a

\textsuperscript{15} Kissinger, \textit{White House Years}, 1449.
resumption of all-out hostility leading, perhaps, to a spill-over into other countries as well. Although Nixon remained generally coy about this overarching threat, he did remark to the columnist Richard Wilson that the bombing might make the North Vietnamese—along with the Russians and Chinese—“think they were dealing with a madman and so had better [reach] a settlement before the world was consumed by a larger war.”

16 Kissinger, too—although never mentioning this strategy in his own memoirs—is noted as having suggested “brutal unpredictability” as Nixon’s best course.

If this was in fact Nixon’s true intention behind his seemingly inconsistent actions, he succeeded on the home front but failed where his strategy mattered most—in Vietnam. Many in the United States did in fact accuse Nixon of behaving irrationally, with Senator Saxbe going so far as to say Nixon had “taken leave of his senses.” Newspapers, too, inadvertently furthered Nixon’s strategy, detailing how the Linebacker II bombings were a “new madness” and “beyond all reason.”

18 This outcry and the seeming madness behind Nixon’s actions, while eating away at Nixon’s popularity at home, did little to make Russia and China more eager to see the Vietnam War settled on a basis unfavorable to their ally. While it true that Kissinger describes how “Hanoi was being told by its patrons, [i.e. Russia and China] subtly but unmistakably, to settle,” it is also true that this settlement would be one that saw the United States—not North Vietnam—abandoning some of their strong concessions they had demanded before the

16 Porter, A Peace Denied, 158.
17 Haldeman, The Haldeman Diaries, 557.
18 Kissinger White House Years, 1453.
bombing. In other words, Russia and China clearly desired an end to the hostilities in Southeast Asia, but only with an agreement satisfactory to the North. Had Russia or China truly been cowed by Nixon’s apparent irrationality, they would have pushed North Vietnam to settle on any terms, even if that meant humiliation for the North and strengthening the South. Since they did not do this, it is safe to assume they were not sufficiently worried by Nixon’s actions to warrant any major detours from their normal stances on the war.

In a final analysis of Nixon’s communication of the compellence goals of the United States’ Linebacker II campaign, it is clear Nixon partially succeeded and partially failed. He was able to discreetly advance a program of first sticks, then carrots that allowed North Vietnam to understand what was expected of them while still allowing them at least some face-saving measures. The fact that these measures were largely pointless thanks to the United States’ unwillingness to bomb long-term does not change the fact that, had the North been sufficiently compelled, it could have accepted concessions without appearing overly weak. On the other hand, Nixon failed to appear irrational enough to pressure North Vietnam and its allies to be more conciliatory than they otherwise may have been. Although most scholarly works on this period focus on the public outcry against these bombings and Nixon’s handling of how they were presented, it is likely Nixon himself was, at least to a certain extent, willing to sacrifice popular support to advance his larger madman strategy, both in the short-term and, perhaps more importantly, in the long-term. Unfortunately, his strategy backfired and Nixon was left in a position of sacrificing popular support without gaining anything in

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19 Ibid., 1454.
20 It is unclear how far Nixon would have gone to further this strategy, since in less than a year his administration would be focused on the Watergate scandal rather than foreign policy.
return. In this way, Nixon failed in implementing the “rationality of irrationality” that Schelling had theorized about years before.
Conclusion

Is the Linebacker II bombing campaign an example of successful compellence? The answer is almost completely no. It did help convince South Vietnam the United States was willing to back up its support with air power, although, as discussed in Chapter 4, this was at most a secondary concern when planning the bombings. Looked at from a longer perspective, the bombing failed to achieve anything concrete with regards to the final Paris Agreement—the central reason the United States had chosen to attempt to compel North Vietnam. The main reason the talks had broken down in the first place was that the United States had sought to revise the agreement by working a number of South Vietnam’s complaints into the agreement, thus alienating and angering the North Vietnamese negotiators. In a truly successful compellence case, one would expect to see the North Vietnamese concede at least some of these points after the bombing was halted. In fact, the opposite happened—the United States returned to the position it had held before the new demands had been raised. As noted in Chapter 2, the United States’ proposed changes were threefold: ensuring the tripartite commission (NCRC) would be structured in a way that would not doom South Vietnam; making the DMZ a neutral barrier; and getting North Vietnamese troops out of the South. The changes actually made to the agreement—when there were any—simply did not resolve any of these three problems. The NCRC retained its original three-part formulation (although its title was slightly changed), the DMZ continued to be controlled by the North, and Communist troops were allowed to remain in the South. North Vietnam did agree to some minor cosmetic concessions, but no more than they would have done in the normal course of
negotiation.\textsuperscript{1} In other words, North Vietnam was never “compelled” to do anything—the changes they agreed to in the final peace accords were not due to the American bombing campaign but instead to the North’s own desire to end its conflict with the United States.

Further, the fact that Nixon, Kissinger, and their aides quickly changed their attitude from one demanding a signed agreement before ending the bombing to one that simply called for a return to talks suggests that Kissinger and Nixon both realized soon after the bombing campaign began that it would not succeed in compelling the North to the degree they had hoped. Neither of them admits this in their memoirs—nor, in fact, do they reference this notion of failure in their private phone conversations during the period. Of course, this makes sense: neither would want history to see them as “giving up,” and even that the time the two were engaged in something of a political struggle for power—one in which neither would have wanted to suggest defeat. Instead, their subtle but definite change in goals heavily suggests they realized their goals at the outset had been much too stringent for North Vietnam to ever accept.

Robert Pape argues the Linebacker II bombing campaign was successful because North Vietnam was “compelled to accept cosmetic changes that placated South Vietnam.”\textsuperscript{2} If this had been the case, then Linebacker II would have been at least partially successful—but the facts refute this finding in two ways. First, as touched upon in Chapter 2, North Vietnam was always willing to accept cosmetic changes, including replacements of weapons and minor concessions on the wording of troops in the DMZ.\textsuperscript{3}

More essentially, it is illogical to suggest that one of the most extensive bombing

\textsuperscript{1} Jeffrey Kimball, \textit{Nixon’s Vietnam War} (Lawrence, KN: University Press of Kansas, 1998), 367.


\textsuperscript{3} Henry Kissinger, \textit{White House Years} (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1979), 1345. Also see Kimball, \textit{Nixon’s Vietnam War}, 352, which describes a few other cosmetic concessions agreed to by Thọ before the Linebacker II bombings.
campaigns of the entire war was required to force North Vietnam to make “cosmetic changes.” If the changes were truly cosmetic, it is safe to assume Le Duc Tho and North Vietnam would not have required a massive bombing campaign to sway them.

Second, and more importantly, after the bombing, Thieu and South Vietnam still stubbornly refused to accept the treaty without the major changes the United States had introduced earlier. Obviously, then, the small changes that were agreed to did not “placate” Thieu. This time, however, the United States simply called Thieu’s bluff and created a final draft of a peace treaty that Thieu could either sign—giving his country at least a chance of surviving—or refuse, leaving him mostly powerless against a much stronger North Vietnamese army. Nixon wrote in his diary that “Thieu’s choice is simply whether to commit suicide or go along with a settlement that could save his country as well as himself.” As expected, Thieu eventually chose to accept the agreement when it was clear there was no way to improve it.

Thieu’s eventual acceptance of the agreement seems to suggest that the Linebacker II bombings were unnecessary. If the United States had simply pressured Thieu harder in November, it is highly likely he would have signed the agreement then as well—a refusal to do so would have been as much “suicide” in November 1972 as it was in January 1973. Of course, this is a historical counterfactual and as such can never be completely proven. It is possible that Thieu needed the reassurance of American air power before he was willing to sign an agreement, and that the Linebacker II campaign served this purpose. Regardless, the United States sought to compel North Vietnam to accept major changes in the peace agreement and failed to get any of these changes. As

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such, the Linebacker II bombings cannot truly be called an example of successful compellence, even if the bombing did advance some of the goals of the United States as byproducts.

Why did the North Vietnamese not accept these changes in the agreement? The answer lies in the fact that, as noted in Chapter 3, North Vietnam believed it could withstand American bombing campaigns—especially given the very public knowledge that the United States Congress wanted to cut off funding for the war as soon as politically possible. In other words, North Vietnam did not put any significant weight on the threat that the United States would continue large-scale bombing if Le Duc Tho and the other North Vietnamese officials did not accept major changes. The American negotiators obviously realized this as well and as such did not press for these changes to be accepted with much force. This was a clear credibility failure on the part of the United States. While its interests were real, it lacked the first and most important aspect of successful credibility: commitment. By 1973 it was obvious to the entire world that the United States sought to extricate itself from the Vietnam situation in any way possible, and as such the threat of renewed, long-term bombing held little weight.

The United States suffered a capability failure as well by not succeeding to effectively hurt North Vietnamese morale. Pape argues that Linebacker II “damaged the North’s ability to carry out its conventional military strategy for overrunning the ARVN [i.e. the South Vietnamese army],” but this was by no means the primary goal of the bombing.\footnote{Pape, \textit{Bombing to Win}, 205.} Instead, as evidenced by what American planners said both at the time and in their memoirs after, the central goal was to convince the North Vietnamese that it was
better to accept major changes in the agreement than to subject their citizens and military personnel to further bombardment. The bombing failed to convince them of this, however, and it is described in Chapter 3 how the bombing was actually a galvanizing force for North Vietnamese morale. This means the United States chose the wrong method—air attack—for affecting their enemy’s will. Choosing the right methods for compellence is a key attribute of the capability area of compellence and an area in which the United States failed.

Thus the United States failed to some degree both in terms of credibility—by lacking the commitment to the region necessary for a prolonged bombing attack—and in terms of capability—by choosing ineffective means to negatively affect North Vietnam’s will to fight on. What is perhaps most notable about these failings is that both, with slightly more foresight, should have been foreseeable by United States planners. The ultimate lesson to draw from the Linebacker II campaign and its aftermath is that planners in both political and military sectors must be sure that all aspects of compellence—capability, credibility, and clarity of demands—will work together to achieve success. If even one of these three areas falters, the entire strategy will crumble as well.