



Air Power's Lost Cause: The American Air Wars of Vietnam by Brian D. Laslie.

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Familiar images of airpower in the American war in Vietnam range from helicopter gunships to fighter-bombers dropping napalm and B-52s raining death from miles up in the air. Aircraft were used for reconnaissance, combat support, transportation of men and materiel, interdiction of enemy supply lines, engaging enemy aircraft and anti-aircraft defenses, and demoralizing the enemy. These operations were carried out by Air Force, Army, Navy, Marine Corps, and Strategic Air Command aircraft. Missions, equipment, and tactics changed regularly between 1961 and 1975 in response to both military and political considerations. The various aspects of aerial warfare in Vietnam have been well studied, but historian Brian Laslie (US Air Force Academy) is the first to attempt an overall description and assessment of what he rightly calls the air "wars" of Vietnam. In the process, he thoroughly debunks a key aspect of the Lost Cause mythology that grew out of the American failure in Vietnam: the claim that air power, if properly employed, could have won the war.

As deputy command historian for the North American Aerospace Defense Command and the US Northern Command and author of *The Air Force Way of War*,¹ Laslie is highly qualified to undertake such a task. He structures his present work thematically, examining the diverse uses of air power by different service branches within South Vietnam; these include (a) various bombing efforts against North Vietnamese supply lines, (b) strategic bombing campaigns against North Vietnam itself, (c) suppression of enemy anti-aircraft defenses, and (d) air-to-air combat.

Laslie's thesis is that there was no overarching strategy behind the air wars in Vietnam. Specific service branches and commands developed their own strategies and tactics without coordinating effectively with one another and even at times operating at cross purposes. Interservice rivalries in Vietnam impeded collaboration between the Army and Air Force in particular, while the Strategic Air Command, which had authority over the B-52s, wanted little to do with either. The Army generals of Military Assistance Command Vietnam never fully controlled US air assets, aside from the Army's. Some officers and commands cooperated better than others, but the basic problems were never resolved. To make matters worse, the various branches and commands often pursued their own agendas regarding equipment and tactics. They rarely chose to learn from each other's experiences, and no one tried seriously to train or equip the South Vietnamese air force to take over when the Americans left.

Efforts to strike enemy supply lines and infrastructure within and outside North Vietnam suffered from obsolete doctrine. The US military had been designed to fight the Soviets in a conventional war; this affected the strategies, tactics, and equipment of the assorted American air arms. Strategic bombing doctrine in particular reflected the experiences of World War II, when heavy bombers shut down the German fuel transportation system, crippling the Nazi air and mobile forces in the last year of the war. Laslie cites a 1966 CIA and Defense Intelligence Agency report

1. Subtitle: *U.S. Tactics and Training after Vietnam* (Lexington: U Pr of Kentucky, 2015).

that drew negative conclusions about efforts to repeat that success in the first year of American engagement in Vietnam. It stressed the disconnect between a strategy designed for an industrialized enemy and the situation in North Vietnam, with its agricultural economy (72–73). Laslie steps back at this point and poses a larger question:

If a bombing program of heavier strikes against North Vietnam's industrial base had been employed, would it have had a different impact in 1965 or 1966? The answer is an unequivocal no. North Vietnam had only a limited number of industrial targets, and even if these had been bombed into oblivion, the bulk of North Vietnam's war-fighting logistics came into the country from China and the Soviet Union, and these targets were never considered as possible opportunities to hit for the justifiable fear of the war spilling over into an East vs. West conflict. It was a war fought with imports, but the United States only attacked domestic targets. (73)

Political considerations here outweighed military ones, a leitmotif of Laslie's case against Lost Cause narratives that cherry-picked evidence and omitted inconvenient context.

Much of the book concerns equipment and tactics. Laslie criticizes the United States' inappropriate use of aircraft and weapon systems and outmoded or ineffective tactics. In some cases, commanders were slow to adapt to new situations, notably the introduction of surface-to-air-missiles (SAMs). They also had their aircraft repeat the same maneuvers so often that the North Vietnamese could anticipate their actions and use their missile defenses more effectively. This was a particular problem for the lumbering B-52 bombers.

Laslie also discusses the mistake of ordering newer aircraft and weapon systems into action before their operators had learned how to use them most effectively. Even skilled Air Force and Navy fighter pilots, for instance, often fired their air-to-air missiles too early, missing targets they should have brought down.

American efforts in the air were further hampered by disagreements over how to equip and employ available aircraft. The F-4 Phantom fighter jet, for instance, was designed for both surface and aerial attack, but not both at once. Should the F-4s have been equipped with guns? Purists insisted that missiles were the way of the future, but once the planes had fired their missiles they were vulnerable to being shot down. Yet many officers rejected the idea of adding machine guns or cannons to the F-4's armaments.

Laslie does, however, give credit where it is due, pointing out temporary successes like the adjustment of aerial tactics to deal with SAMs, the development of the Navy's "Top Gun" school to better train pilots for air-to-air combat, and the introduction of new precision weapons that could destroy previously invulnerable targets. But most of the real improvements were postwar.

Air Power's Lost Cause has some serious limitations, including a lack of firsthand accounts by veterans. One suspects that many veteran pilots might have a more sanguine view of their successes than Laslie. He could have done more to strengthen his arguments regarding various military personnel involved in specific aspects of the air wars. Nor does he not spend enough time assessing the kind of evidence used by Lost Cause advocates. Overall, however, the book constitutes an excellent starting point for anyone seriously interested in the air wars of Vietnam.