

# Johnson and Vietnam: Decision Making during Operation Rolling Thunder

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*The name of Lyndon Baines Johnson, 36<sup>th</sup> President of the United States, has practically been tied together with the Vietnam War, which raged on during the entirety of his presidency. The Johnson Presidency could have been remembered after the numerous and admirable domestic policy steps he took, yet it is Vietnam, which overshadows his historical legacy. Both the Gulf of Tonkin Incident and the longest campaign of the Vietnam War, Operation Rolling Thunder took place during his terms in office. This latter was harshly criticised by his peers, especially from military leadership circles, thus it is worth re-examining this period of the war using now publicly available sources. This article aims to examine how President Johnson and his inner circle of advisors made their decisions during the period in question.*

**Keywords:** Vietnam War, Johnson, decision making, Rolling Thunder, Southeast Asia

## Introduction

More than fifty years have passed since the President of the United States, Lyndon Baines Johnson authorised the launching of Operation Rolling Thunder. The air campaign launched on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of March 1965, became one of the largest and longest aerial operations in history. The context in which it was initiated, namely the Vietnam War, is a fascinating and really complex topic. Since the official end of hostilities in 1975, huge amounts of materials have been written about the war. It has been extensively documented, researched and reviewed since the conclusion of the war. There are libraries literally filled with books about Vietnam, and research institutes focusing on it. It is a great subject to examine precisely because of the very “grey” nature of the conflict. Nothing was black or white in Southeast Asia and due to the relative closeness of the events and because they happened at the advent of live television coverage, researchers have a wide array of materials to work with. The relative abundance of materials and the interesting, as well as controversial nature of the war are all part of the fact that there is so much research going on.

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Time, more specifically the passing of time, also aids this work. Although it becomes more and more difficult to research a topic as time passes and some resources fade away or get lost, in a unique way this does not happen with the Vietnam War. The passing of time seems to aid research in this case. There are probably two reasons for this contradictory phenomena. One is the fact that the dividing factors fade away. This means, that the questions and problems can be examined and answered without bias towards or pressure from certain groups. The bad side-effects of controversy fade away leaving only the fascinating topics. The second reason, why the passing of time aids research, is simply the fact that some documents have been declassified and are available now to all interested in reading them. It is natural that some documents get classified when the military operations take place and they remain so, as long as the declassification of them would harm the national security interest of countries.<sup>2</sup> As more than half a century has passed since the beginning of Operation Rolling Thunder, and more than forty years since the end of hostilities, the disclosing of these documents is not considered a national security threat anymore.

Although the passing of time helps in researching this topic, one would be certainly wrong to consider the Vietnam War just a colourful but bygone page in the book of history. Lessons learnt from the hard way on the soil, in the sky and around the diplomatic tables of Southeast Asia are all still relevant. In fact, with constant troubles in the Middle East, and a really Vietnam-like situation brewing in Syria, these lessons are more relevant today than they have ever been. Most of the key political figures of the Vietnam War are long gone by now, but some military policies, surprisingly even some military hardware – such as the famous B-52 bombers – still remain in use and they might be put to the test one more time in the Middle East. As the saying goes, “history repeats itself” and this also underlines the fact that studying the Vietnam War era is still very relevant these day.

Operation Rolling Thunder remains relevant and a topic worth a closer look. The analysis of the events and forces in this essay also supports the latest requirements of military science research, which finds it essential to process and incorporate the lessons of military history into both officer training and education.<sup>3</sup> This essay aims at taking a look at the decision making process at the lead up to and also during the period of the air campaign. To provide a balanced view of things, after the civilian decision making process is presented, some space will be allocated to the opposing ideas of the military services, especially the United States Navy. There are obviously also limitations of this work. The relatively short amount of time available and the set number of characters make it impossible to have a more detailed representation. Thus, to limit explanations, the knowledge of certain terms and figures is taken for granted.

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<sup>2</sup> Good examples of current and still ongoing research on the Vietnam War are: Michael Swanson: *Why The Vietnam War? Nuclear Bombs and Nation Building in Southeast Asia, 1945–1961*. Danville, Virginia, Campania Partners LLC, 2021; Michael G. Kort: *The Vietnam War Reexamined*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2017. A highly anticipated book is also going to be published in late 2022 building on previously classified documents and little-known archives: Michael E. Weaver: *The Air War in Vietnam*. Lubbock, Texas, Texas Tech University Press, 2022.

<sup>3</sup> József Boda et al.: Fókusz és együttműködés. A hadtudomány kutatási feladatai. *Honvédségi Szemle*, 144, no. 3 (2016). 3–19.

## President Johnson and Vietnam

Similarly to the whole Vietnam War, analysing the decision making process of Lyndon B. Johnson and his advisors is a hugely complex task<sup>4</sup>. Many factors have to be considered and in some cases these factors contradict each other to make matters more confusing. One has to consider the domestic political situation Johnson inherited from Kennedy. Then the foreign policy commitments already taking place at the time. The personality and knowledge of the President's advisors is a key element, too. Furthermore, there is the personality of the President himself, his leadership style and previous political experience which all have to be taken into account in solving this equation. Finally, to complicate matters even more, there are certain outside events that neither Johnson nor his advisors could anticipate or influence.

One of these is – for example – the political and propaganda savvy ways of General Vo Nguyen Giap, the North Vietnamese commander in chief of the People's Army of Vietnam. He was not only a theoretical and a practical follower of Mao Ze Dong as far as national uprising were concerned, but also understood how to use propaganda to make the greatest military gains of Operation Rolling Thunder look bad in the media.<sup>5</sup>

To decipher this seemingly very complicated matter, the best way is to organise the timeline of actions and influencing factors into groups. The first of such groups can be Johnson's personality and political experiences on his road to the White House. The second group can be his actions while being President and before the launch of Operation Rolling Thunder, and the third group can be the decision making process during the actual conduct of the aerial campaign.

### *Johnson's road to the White House*

Since the focus of this essay is on the decision making process during Operation Rolling Thunder, the biography of Lyndon B. Johnson cannot and will not be discussed in detail. On the other hand, there are certain aspects of his personality, certain traits he gained during his long political career that need to be taken into consideration to understand how decisions were made. It is a section, that is lacking in many academic works about this subject. While it is absolutely understandable to analyse National Security Council meeting transcripts, the Pentagon Papers and all these materials, one cannot forget that the decisions written down in those documents were taken by a human being. In the following paragraphs only a few traits of Johnson will be mentioned, without delving into psychology.

However, one has to consider that as a southern Democrat, in the times when segregation was still part of everyday life in America, Johnson had to be a politician of

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<sup>4</sup> Further readings on military decision making: Gregory A. Daddis: *American Military Strategy in the Vietnam War, 1965–1973*. In Jon Butler (ed.): *Oxford Research Encyclopedias. American History*. New York, Oxford University Press, 2014; Michael H. Hunt: *Lyndon Johnson's War: America's Cold War Crusade in Vietnam, 1945–1968*. New York, Hill & Wang, 1996.

<sup>5</sup> Balázs Forgács: Mao and Giap on Partisan Warfare. *AARMS*, 18, no. 2 (2019). 31–38.

compromise. Some of his actions as president mentioned in the following subsection will further support this claim. Him being a successful domestic politician of compromise, it is important to understand how those final decisions were taken during the Vietnam War years. One other factor that needs to be considered is his management style. Illustrating Johnson's management style is possible using two different approaches. One is an anecdotal style presented in many works about the American presidency, including William E. Leuchtenburg's book about the presidents. In it, he mentions about the so-called "Johnson Treatment" writing: "He moved in close, his face a scant millimeter from his target, his eyes widening and narrowing, his eyebrows rising and falling. From his pockets poured clippings, memos, statistics. Mimicry, humor, and the genius of analogy made the Treatment an almost hypnotic experience and rendered the target stunned and helpless."<sup>6</sup> Further on the same page, Leuchtenburg gives another very illustrative description of the "Treatment" by quoting the editor of Washington Post: "You really felt as if a St. Bernard had licked your face for an hour, had pawed you all over." It is vital to mention this phenomenon, the so-called "Johnson Treatment" to understand what and how his advisors felt during the period they worked for him. This talent was developed by Johnson probably out of necessity as a southern Democrat and it most certainly helped him in achieving so much on the front of domestic policy.

However, it is possible that – simply due to the fact that his advisors felt intimidated by him –it hindered him when he dealt with foreign policy, a topic he was not as accustomed to be dealing with than domestic policy. A different, but equally useful approach to analyse Johnson's management style is to look at the more scientific analysis of Thomas Preston. In Chapter 7 of the book entitled *Presidential Power. Forging the Presidency for the Twenty-First Century*, Preston talks about the personality and leadership styles of presidents as far as foreign policy decision making is concerned. In his theory Johnson is categorised as a "Maverick". He defines the foreign policy Maverick as "leaders characterized by both low complexity and limited prior policy experience are less sensitive, independently minded and often unorthodox".<sup>7</sup> During his detailed definition of a "Maverick" he also mentions that "Mavericks tend to be very aware of their shortcomings in policy experience and, as a result, are more receptive to (and often dependent upon) the advice of expert policy advisers – despite their tendency to possess relatively closed information processing-systems".<sup>8</sup> This definition could highlight one of the shortcomings of the advisory system of Lyndon B. Johnson. As he indeed knew of his own limited foreign policy experience, he relied on the advice of experts. However his well-educated experts, or "those Harvards" as he sometimes referred to them, were unable to tell him their own ideas as they were overwhelmed by the charismatic "treatment" or as they tried to avoid confrontation and subsequently take face saving actions.

<sup>6</sup> William E. Leuchtenburg: *The American President. From Teddy Roosevelt to Bill Clinton*. New York – Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015. 430.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Y. Shapiro et al. (eds.): *Presidential Power. Forging the Presidency for the Twenty-First Century*. New York, Columbia University Press, 2000. 123.

<sup>8</sup> Shapiro et al. (2000): op. cit. 124.

## *The pre-Rolling Thunder years*

The time between Lyndon B. Johnson taking the oath of office aboard Air Force One after Kennedy's assassination and the start of Operation Rolling Thunder can be considered this period of time. There are two domestic issues to consider during this period, which both influenced his later decisions during the Vietnam War. One of these is simply the fact that he became President of the United States under unfortunate circumstances. Johnson himself did not like this, and until the election of 1964 postponed every major foreign policy decision to focus on his election campaign. This in no way means that the situation in South Vietnam was under control. In fact, it was deteriorating and rather chaotic. General Khanh, the leader of the military junta in Saigon taking over after Diem's death, started circulating the idea of "marching North" against the Democratic Republic of Vietnam.

With the deep involvement the United States already had in the region, this obviously caused concerns amongst the leadership of the U.S. As cover intelligence gathering operations were going on since President Kennedy authorised them, a critical incident appeared on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of August 1964. North Vietnamese torpedo boats attacked the American destroyer USS Maddox in the Gulf of Tonkin, 30 miles off the coast of North Vietnam. Although the destroyer did not get damaged, all American forces in the region went on alert and the Maddox was accompanied by another destroyer, the USS Turner Joy. Two days later, a supposed other attack happened by the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV). Later on, it turned out to be a false claim and in reality no second attack took place. Even LBJ said that "for all I know, our Navy was shooting at whales out there". Yet, following this "attack", the President launched a punitive air campaign using aircraft of the U.S. Navy stationed aircraft carriers in the Gulf of Tonkin. The operation named Pierce Arrow was of limited scale and only against coastal targets. However, only three days after the supposed second attack, the United States Congress passed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution that authorised the President to take whatever actions necessary in Vietnam. Although large scale escalation still did not happen, due to the reasons mentioned above, this act of the Congress proved to be a turning point in American and Vietnamese relations.

The other issue in this period that needs to be considered to understand the decision making is the domestic policy of the Johnson Administration. Many studies on decision making during the Vietnam War completely neglect this, which is a major deficiency in many works. Although both foreign and domestic policies are separate entities, they do not exist in a bubble. In fact, they influence each other more than many scholars admit it. Even just thinking about the financial costs of waging a war makes one immediately connect it to domestic policies as well. In Lyndon B. Johnson's case, it was not only the fact that war had to be financed, but that this had to be done from the same budget as domestic spending. As LBJ came from humble origins, and witnessed poverty first hand, social issues played a big role in his agenda. He was also an expert in these issues and he had greater experience with them than in foreign policy. Johnson devoted his 1964 first State of the Union message in January on domestic issues. Vietnam was brewing, National Security Councils dealt with the problem and limited action was taken, yet the main focus was on matters inside the United States. In his Address in January he said: "Let

this session of Congress be known as the session which did more for civil rights than the last hundred sessions combined; as the session which enacted the most far-reaching tax cut of our time; as the session which declared all-out war on human poverty.”<sup>9</sup> All his actions were a war waged on poverty, inequality, segregation and unemployment. It is clear to see, and in fact Johnson is said it have declared it himself, that his “true love” was his Great Society program. Leuchtenburg quotes Johnson explaining his feelings in his own colourful language, saying “I was bound to be crucified either way I moved. If I left the woman I really loved – the Great Society – in order to get involved with that bitch of a war on the other side of the world, then I would lose everything at home...”<sup>10</sup> All these insights into the domestic agenda, and in a way, even into the mind of Lyndon B. Johnson, help explain his decisions regarding the Vietnam War later on. Great Society was still not finished, when he had to decide whether or not to get further involved in Southeast Asia.

None of his grandiose domestic policy dreams had been fulfilled when he had to commit money, soldiers and other resources into a war on the other side of the Globe. With his Great Society program Johnson set out, in his own words, to “feed the hungry and shelter the homeless” and to “provide education and medical care to the browns and the blacks and the lame and the poor”.<sup>11</sup> As far as concrete action is concerned, Johnson introduced some twenty major bills in this program to broaden civil rights, eliminate poverty, expand educational opportunities, improve health care for the elderly, protect consumers, as well as introducing new conservation and environmental-protection measures among others.<sup>12</sup> These factors must be considered, especially when discussing such a strong character as Johnson. Obviously they do not appear in any transcript of any meetings with the Joint Chiefs of Staff, or the National Security Council, but they are looming in the background and undoubtedly influence the way certain actions were decided upon.

### ***Johnson and Operation Rolling Thunder***

Having briefly mentioned the domestic plans and agenda of President Johnson, one is now able to focus on Operation Rolling Thunder. The air campaign itself was conducted between the 2<sup>nd</sup> of March 1965 and the 2<sup>nd</sup> of November 1968. Even with the frequent bombing pauses, this make it one of the longest aerial operations in the history of warfare. Objectively judged, the campaign failed to achieve the desired results and on this all scholars agree. On the other hand, when discussing the reasons why the Operation failed, there seems to be a disagreement between scholars. This is especially visible when taking a closer look at what military researchers think about the conduct of aerial operations, and when examining what political scientists or historians think about the reasons of failure. In this subsection of this work, the aim is to provide an insight into the decision making system of the Johnson Administration and how they chose the path they ended up with.

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<sup>9</sup> American Rhetoric: *Lyndon Baines Johnson, First State of the Union Address*. 08 January 1964.

<sup>10</sup> Leuchtenburg (2015): op. cit. 453.

<sup>11</sup> Doris Kearns: *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream*. New York, Harper and Row, 1976. 251–252.

<sup>12</sup> Hunt (1996): op. cit. 83–84.

Since the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution of 1964, the legislative ground for military escalation was placed entirely into the hands of the President. Congress approved “all necessary actions”. It was the task of Johnson and his closest advisors to determine what those necessary actions are and how to manage them. It is ancient wisdom that bad decisions are better taken than no decisions at all, and good leaders are ready and able to make decisions in a timely manner.<sup>13</sup>

To aid President Johnson in this daunting task, his inner circle of confidential colleagues included Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, Secretary of State Dean Rusk, National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy (Walt Rostow after 1967), Press Secretary Bill Moyers, William Bundy and George Ball, among others. Naturally the opinion of the United States Ambassador to Vietnam was also taken into consideration as well the recommendations and needs of General Westmoreland, Deputy Commander of Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) and the effective leader of ground operations in Southeast Asia. It is interesting to note that although Rolling Thunder was an aerial campaign, and the Joint Chiefs were heard in some occasions, the decision making process involved mostly civilian experts. During the process of deciding the policy, the advisors unintentionally divided themselves into two groups. One of “hawks”, who preferred escalation, and one of “doves” who preferred withdrawal and cutting losses. Although initially both sides had many members, during the escalation of the war in 1965, only one “dove” was left. He was George Ball, who played the devil’s advocate and consequently advised the president on withdrawal and disengagement from Indochina. Although Ball’s memorandums were considered, his recommendations were not taken. It was Robert McNamara who provided options that the president could utilise the most. In Bergman’s work, the three broad policy options are: “1) Get out with loss of honor and prestige – a tactical withdrawal based on the fact that US forces could not win an Asian land war.”<sup>14</sup> This obviously was neither Johnson’s style, nor in accordance with the policy of previous presidents. The next option, “2) A limited commitment with option selection to follow a summer test period – test of military effectiveness as well as public opinion acceptance”.<sup>15</sup> This option provided the most flexibility and was recommended by the civilian advisors. Finally, the last option was “3) A military buildup to save South Vietnam from collapse and deny Hanoi a victory – based on the fact that South Vietnam was central to US strategic interests”.<sup>16</sup>

Although this last option was later also implemented, it is clear to see that the most flexible and “Johnson-like”, compromise seeking option was the second one. When it came to choosing a policy, Johnson always chose the middle way. The same can be said to the exact process of the planning of Operation Rolling Thunder. As this was a military undertaking, the Joint Chiefs of Staff were heard and presented their plan. According to Leslie H. Gelb, when confronted with the “hawkish” opinion of the Joint Chiefs, and the “dovish” opinion of the civilian advisors “LBJ rather tentatively chose the compromise

<sup>13</sup> József Padányi: A hadtudomány örök érvényű törvényei a vezetésről. In Éva Margit Kovács (ed.): *Ünnepi kötet a 65 éves Imre Miklós tiszteletére*. Budapest, Ludovika Egyetemi Kiadó, 2020.

<sup>14</sup> Larry Berman: *Planning a Tragedy. The Americanization of the War in Vietnam*. New York, Norton, 1982. 91.

<sup>15</sup> Berman (1982): op. cit.

<sup>16</sup> Berman (1982): op. cit.

course”.<sup>17</sup> The great negotiator used his skills and tried to navigate in a way that would not alienate either of the sides from him. In a way, that would fight a war and still keep the Great Society going. The way that would make America keep its promise in fighting communism, but not going on an all-out assault and provoke either China or the Soviet Union. “For Johnson the logic of the compromise course was both politically pragmatic and intellectually pragmatic.”<sup>18</sup> It is possible to assume that amongst many influencing factors, Johnson chose to take the middle way and play safe because as a “Maverick” he was very aware that he lacked personal expertise in foreign affairs and he was also confronted by disagreements among the experts.

The extremely complex and confusing situation in Southeast Asia at that time meant that technically both ends of the spectrum had some rights in what they were proposing. Seeing this, and choosing the middle way, Johnson was relying on his previous experience in politics. The problem with this course of action was that what sounded acceptable in the language of diplomacy and seemed like a good way to buy time was militarily not possible to implement. Due to this reason, Operation Rolling Thunder was doomed from the start as far as achieving victory was concerned. Mark Clodfelter, who analysed Rolling Thunder by looking at the limits of airpower, identified the various ways victory was meant during the campaign.

Clodfelter examines the two different ways victory can be interpreted. The positive and the negative political goals. The positive political goal is really easy to determine. This meant creating a stable, independent, non-communist South Vietnam. It was clear for Johnson and all of his advisors. “Definitions of victory were only partial definitions of the term. They defined the positive political objectives sought – those that could be achieved only by applying military force” – according to Clodfelter.<sup>19</sup> “Equally important, though, were the negative political goals – those achievable only by limiting military force. To achieve true victory in Vietnam, both the positive and negative objectives had to be obtained.”<sup>20</sup> The work of Clodfelter also supports the remark previously presented on these pages that the love of the Great Society was a limiting factor in Johnson’s will to get involved further in Vietnam. He identifies the Great Society as a negative goal stating that: “Achieving the Great Society became an important negative objective for Johnson, one that would prevent him from applying extensive military force. Doing so, he feared, would cause the American public to turn away from the Nation’s disadvantaged...”<sup>21</sup> The second negative goal he identifies is one that the civilian advisors refer to in many cases, but the Joint Chiefs seem to neglect. It is the fear of intervention by either the Soviet Union or communist China. Considering the great conflict these two communist nations had with each other during this period of time, and also the fact that in supplying North Vietnam they were more or less competing with each other instead of working together,

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<sup>17</sup> Leslie H. Gelb – Richard K. Betts: *The Irony of Vietnam. The System Worked*. Washington, D.C., Brookings Institution Press, 2016. 109.

<sup>18</sup> Gelb–Betts (2016): op. cit.

<sup>19</sup> Mark Clodfelter: The Limits of Airpower of the Limits of Strategy. *Joint Forces Quarterly*, 78 (2015). 111–124.

<sup>20</sup> Clodfelter (2015): op. cit.

<sup>21</sup> Clodfelter (2015): op. cit.



the joint participation of these two nations cannot be taken seriously. On the other hand, the provocation of either of them was a real threat and the advisors were right in trying to avoid that. Although the Sino–Vietnamese relations were really far from friendly, and history proved this later in the end of the 1970s, foreign policy experts in the United States still remembered the lessons of the Korean War and how little was needed to provoke China there.

As Clodfelter writes, “Johnson further feared that applying too much force against North Vietnam would cause its two large allies, China and the Soviet Union, to increase their assistance to the North, possibly even with overt intervention”.<sup>22</sup> His third and last negative goal is identified as: “Finally, Johnson was concerned about America’s worldwide image, with the globe seemingly divided into camps of communism and capitalism.”<sup>23</sup> These negative objectives and the positive goal all contributed to the gradual response nature of the air campaign. In a way, the goals themselves limited the effectiveness of the Operation. The Johnson Administration’s way leading up to and during Rolling Thunder was the same: trying to find a compromise. Unfortunately it turned out to be an unsuccessful policy since when it comes to waging war, there are only two options, not three.

### *The other side of the argument*

For the sake of completion and to present opposing ideas, the aim of this section is to provide a quick insight into the military side of Operation Rolling Thunder. As time and space constrains are both placed on this work a full presentation of the Joint Chiefs’ idea about conducting the air campaign cannot be shown here. While politically speaking, one can find many reasons explaining why Rolling Thunder failed, when it comes to the military, one key concept appears over and over again. This is “Rules of Engagement” (ROE). “Johnson monitored it (Rolling Thunder) closely and tightly constrained actions that American aircrews could take over the North” writes Clodfelter on this topic. “His negative objectives led to a long list of rules of engagement that did everything from preventing flights through the airspace over Hanoi or Haiphong without his personal approval to limiting how closely aircraft could fly to the Chinese border.”<sup>24</sup> The targets of the bombing operations were micromanaged by the White House. Johnson and his advisors met on Tuesdays, after lunch, to discuss each target. This was problematic for many reasons. First of all, this meant targets chosen by individuals many thousand miles removed from the battlefield.

Secondly, it meant that certain vital targets were not allowed to be destroyed, while other targets were hit multiple times thus exposing airmen to unnecessary danger. Finally, the third reason was that next to the targets being chosen so far removed from the action, they were entirely chosen by civilians. “Not until October 1967 – after Rolling Thunder had

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<sup>22</sup> Clodfelter (2015): op. cit.

<sup>23</sup> Clodfelter (2015): op. cit.

<sup>24</sup> Clodfelter (2015): op. cit.

been underway for more than 2½ years – did a military officer sit in regularly on the lunch sessions, when Johnson asked Army General Earle Wheeler, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, to begin a steady attendance.”<sup>25</sup> The ROE restrictions also included such fundamental violations of successful combat operations as: “no pre-strike photography was permitted”, “no follow-up secondary strike could be authorized”, “unexpended ordnance could not be used on a target of opportunity” and even air-to-air combat was restricted “where the rule saw laid down that enemy aircraft had to be positively identified before engaging”.<sup>26</sup>

In a modern combat environment where the closing speeds of aircraft were in many cases over one thousand miles per hour, positive visual identification was not only problematic but outright dangerous to those airmen. Since the enemy did not play along these set of rules, they could engage American pilots sooner and have a significant advantage in aerial combat. Although many other smaller restrictions can be listed, and indeed as the Operation progressed and political leaders slowly realised that results were not coming, some of these restrictions were eliminated. However, there was one more factor, that according to the military, significantly contributed to the failure of the campaign. Those were the frequent bombing pauses. These were part of Johnson’s “carrot and stick” diplomacy with which he tried to force the North Vietnamese to negotiate. However, the North Vietnamese used this mostly to buy time, repair the damaged infrastructure and strengthen the air defence.

## Conclusions

When it comes to Operation Rolling Thunder, it is generally assumed by most of the scholars that the Operation failed to achieve its objectives. However, as one can see, the decision making process used by Johnson was working as intended. Indeed, the system worked throughout America’s involvement in Vietnam as it was intended, yet the whole war ended in defeat.

Rolling Thunder, the longest running operation of the war, is no exception to that. Certain criticism of the Rules of Engagement is certainly right. Militarily the failure can be blamed on the rules. On the other hand, these rules might have prevented further escalation, a Chinese involvement and an even bigger quagmire. The personal characteristics of President Johnson – always trying to find the middle ground –, his domestic policy considerations and especially his unwavering love for the Great Society certainly influenced both his decision making process and eventually, the outcome of the Vietnam War. There are still questions left to answer in this topic and it can still provide a fertile ground for further research. Additionally, it is also quite relevant these days and the result gained can be and will be used in future conflicts, as well. This topic shows clearly that studying the Vietnam War is as relevant today as ever. It was a conflict where many lives were lost and by studying the war, learning from it and applying this

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<sup>25</sup> Clodfelter (2015): op. cit.

<sup>26</sup> Peter B. Mersky – Norman Polmar: *The Naval Air War in Vietnam*. Annapolis, MD, Nautical and Aviation Publishing Company of America, 1981). 27.

knowledge to avoid mistakes, one can honour their death and give a meaning to their ultimate sacrifice.

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