

The Smart Way to Win the Vietnam War

Modern Guided Bombs Take on Ho Chi Minh

Fleming Saunders

Introduction

Wave the magic wand of history for a moment.

Suppose the United States had used 21st century smart bombs in the Vietnam War. Suppose that modern guided bombs destroyed the countless targets missed by millions of old-fashioned "dumb" bombs and artillery shells. Suppose that North Vietnam was stopped from capturing South Vietnam in 1975. In other words, could America have won the controversial conflict?

Quite possibly. Modern bombs-guided by satellites and lasers—can quickly win battles with fewer US and civilian deaths. Unlike in Vietnam, we can strike quite accurately through darkness and bad weather. Targets requiring hundreds of bombs in the 1960s could be demolished with one or two today. In a 2003 test, a B-2 bomber dropped 80 satellite-guided bombs on multiple targets in 22 seconds.¹

A smarter, less painful war would have enlisted more support from the American people. As the leading economy in the world churned out smart bombs, the patience and resources of the communist bloc would have been sorely tested. The Cold War sponsors of North Vietnam—China and the Soviet Union—may have turned their attention elsewhere. The tiny Third World country, left on its own, was not likely to conquer its neighbor.

A Technologically Feasible Scenario?

It is easy to refight old wars with new technology. Suppose that Napoleon had used battle tanks at Waterloo. Imagine the shock and awe on the face of the Duke of Wellington. We could wave the magic wand again and smarten up other weapons in the Vietnam War—on both sides. Modern self-propelled missiles-guided by infrared, lasers, and satellites—could have wrecked many aircraft, helicopters, tanks, and trucks. America, the economic superpower, would surely have dominated the more sophisticated contest as well.

But for the sake of simplicity, let us focus on the premier guided weapon of the modern era. American smart bombs unleashed four times more destruction (in total tonnage) than missiles in the Iraq campaign of early 2003. Five times more guided bombs were dropped than missiles launched.² Guided bombs are more costly than dumb bombs, but cheaper and more versatile than long-range cruise missiles. Smart artillery rounds, little used in Iraq, are still in their infancy.

The notion of modern guided bombs in Vietnam is not entirely far-fetched. Bombs with television cameras in their noses debuted in 1967 and laser-guided bombs a year later. The rudimentary devices struck many valuable targets and helped stop an invasion of South Vietnam

in 1972. All told, slightly less than 30,000 guided bombs (mostly laser) fell in Southeast Asia out of roughly 65,000 guided bombs dropped from World War II to the present.³

But the novel bombs were neither numerous nor sophisticated enough to change the course of the eight-year war. Both lasers and television cameras needed clear, sunny skies in oft-rainy Southeast Asia. Few guided bombs were usable after sunset—a distinct handicap against an enemy who traveled at night and hid by day. While not flying as dangerously low as many traditional bombers, aircraft with guided bombs could still be vulnerable to anti-aircraft artillery and fighter jets.

The satellite-guided bomb—released at up to 70 miles from the target—was still decades away. Unlike laser beams, radio signals from Global Positioning Satellites (GPS) glide easily through clouds, smoke, and dust. Although the all-seeing bomb did not emerge until the late 1990s, the underlying technology was well understood in the 1960s, found now in everything including computers, atomic clocks, satellites, laser range finders, radio, radar, gyroscopes, reconnaissance drones, ground sensors, and navigational beacons. The ingredients were simply not compact, compatible, or computerized enough for an all-weather guided bomb.

Perhaps smart bombs in Vietnam would have been a quantum leap like repeating rifles in the Civil War, steel cannon in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, and even nuclear bombs at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Those revolutionary weapons carried the day by inflicting massive casualties. In Southeast Asia, guided bombs could have hit small, high-value targets and vulnerable chokepoints while posing less risk to civilians and our own troops.

Unlike Iraq, Vietnam Had Many Targets

A reader might reasonably inquire: If bombs are so smart, why have we not won the wars in turbulent Afghanistan and Iraq? The arid plains and frigid peaks have no tropical rain forests to hide the enemy. How could the dense jungles of Vietnam be any easier to conquer?

Actually, despite the terrorism and ethnic strife, guided bombs are crucial to our efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq. In late 2001 and in early 2003, America and her allies overturned two distant regimes and crushed two standing armies with little collateral damage to civilians and buildings. Even the mobile, elusive militants in Afghanistan suffered heavy losses when guided bombs sailed through clouds. Smart bombs struck caves in mountains—an inconceivable feat with dumb bombs.

Planting a fragile democracy among fierce Afghan tribes cost less than four hundred American deaths in six years.⁴ Fighting without smart bombs in the same rugged country, the Soviet Union lost 13,000 to 26,000 men from 1979 to 1989 (the "Russian Vietnam").⁵ With few guided bombs, America lost more than 58,000 (47,000 due to hostilities) troops in Southeast Asia.⁶ Our combat forces have spent more than 11 years in Afghanistan and Iraq combined—longer than in Vietnam alone. But our battle losses are less than one thirteenth of the Vietnam toll.⁷

Aided by nearly 17,000 modern guided bombs,⁸ coalition forces ended the 24-year reign of Saddam Hussein in a month and a half. After watching US precision weapons strike nearby

targets, terrified Iraqi troops hastily abandoned buildings and equipment. Even in remote deserts and high mountains, insurgents have difficulty massing for attacks.

But "smart" does not mean perfect. Bombs are more suited for toppling tyrants than building a democracy. Troops on foot and in vehicles can better handle shadowy criminals, insurgents, and terrorists in crowded neighborhoods. Smart bombs can be given the wrong targets, derailed by technical errors, or delayed by communications problems between ground and air. In an *Army Times* article in September of 2002, an Army general complained that aircraft took "anywhere from 26 minutes to hours" to strike targets in Afghanistan. The general blamed Air Force rules and procedures rather than technological drawbacks to smart bombs.⁹

But the ground-air coordination soon got better. In early 2003, Iraqi troops and tanks advanced on American positions in a blinding sandstorm near Najaf. After a US artillery barrage failed to halt the attackers, three satellite guided bombs fell unerringly through grit-filled skies and stopped the armored column in its tracks. Then in the spring of 2006, an Air Force jet made perhaps the most successful smart bomb raid in American history. Called in by Special Forces on the ground, an F-16 broke off from a routine patrol and demolished the rural safe house of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the leading insurgent in Iraq.

After releasing the first bomb, the circling F-16 pilot examined the smoking ruin with a telescope for 30 seconds and decided a second bomb was necessary.¹⁰ Imagine the same scene in the Vietnam War: A jet closely inspecting the battlefield, taking radio requests from soldiers and Marines, and dropping an accurate bomb every minute or so. Ground-air coordination is hardly easy in big or fast-moving clashes. But smart bombs entail far fewer pilots, aircraft, and bombs to manage.

Unlike present-day Iraq, Vietnam offered many targets for bombs. Unlike itinerant terrorists, the communists permanently occupied an entire country—North Vietnam. Land cannot hide or run away. The nation of 16 million people covered about as many square miles as the state of Georgia. Key roads, rivers, structures, and military and economic locations were clearly seen by American pilots, radar, and infrared (heat) detectors.

North Vietnam built a formidable, visible war machine because her target was not going to fall apart by herself. The population of South Vietnam did not seethe with the deep sectarian hatreds of the Middle East. The insurgents of the day, the Viet Cong, could not win the war alone. Guerrillas lacked the heavy weapons to capture Saigon and other cities. When the guerrillas finally ventured *en masse* from the jungle during the Tet Offensive in early 1968, they were blasted by allied firepower.

Fully equipped communist armies—with Soviet-made tanks, artillery, and as many as 120,000 soldiers—exposed themselves to the air. In one struggle against a dug-in foe, US troops "did not have any trouble finding targets because they were everywhere. Hitting them proved to be much more difficult."¹¹ During the siege of Khe Sanh, a Marine officer noted, "from the tops of the bunkers, we can see communist trucks moving along Route 29 . [I]t looks like a little Los Angeles freeway." Lamented another officer: "[T]hey drove lighted trucks, with headlights, and the vaunted A-6 [American fighter bomber] could no more catch them than I can fly."¹²

Flaws of Dumb Bombs in Vietnam

Old-fashioned unguided bombs-free-falling, wind-blown canisters of high explosives-helped win many battles in Vietnam. The so-called "iron bombs" were earth-shattering, ear-drum splitting, and utterly demoralizing. Vast numbers crushed rail yards, airfields, supply depots, tunnel networks, and collections of troops under jungle canopy. Dumb bombs and artillery (miniature dumb bombs) twice saved South Vietnam from possible extinction—during the battle of Tet in 1968 and the Easter Offensive in 1972.

Most unguided bombs, however, missed their targets. Stray munitions sparked political and diplomatic backlashes-including the accidental bombing of a Hanoi hospital that killed 30 people in December 1972.¹³ An American bomb killed and injured dozens of US troops in the central highlands of South Vietnam. A radio miscommunication between air and ground was blamed. The pilot flew north to south instead of northwest-southwest.¹⁴ Today, he would receive the GPS coordinates of the target rather than hazy verbal instructions such as "add two ridgelines, left half a mile."¹⁵

Because bombs missed so often, airmen undertook many risky and predictable return missions. Large formations of bombers were spotted by North Vietnamese radar more than one hundred miles away. The enemy would summon fighter jets, loose an anti-aircraft barrage, or lie low as the bombs fell harmlessly nearby. To get closer to targets, pilots dove heroically into the teeth of ground fire. Anti-aircraft guns-most accurate at altitudes under ten thousand feet—caused the vast majority of air casualties.¹⁶ More than 3,200 American flyers perished in Southeast Asia from 1961 to 1973. Several hundred more men became prisoners of war¹⁷ in North Vietnam and were held up as living proof that massive bombing could not subdue a small, backward nation.

Bombs-eight million tons worth¹⁸-came to symbolize futility and mindless destruction. Chaos and carnage visited the television screen nightly with eruptions of smoke and fire, flattened towns, and lush jungles turned into barren moonscapes. Left behind was a deadly litter—"in 1966 alone, unexploded American bombs and shells provided the Vietcong enough explosives to kill as many as 1,000 men."¹⁹ Stray bombs and bullets from the massive allied forces caused untold casualties among innocent villagers. Four million South Vietnamese, about one fourth of the nation, were rendered homeless by the whirlwind.²⁰

Demonstrators chanted at the commander in chief, President Lyndon Baines Johnson, "Hey, hey, LBJ, how many kids did you kill today?"²¹ As recently as 2007, Russian President Vladimir Putin castigated his old Cold War rival (the U.S.) for "drop[ping] more bombs on a tiny country [Vietnam] than were dropped during the entire Second World War."²²

Popular or not, the deluge punished the enemy. Ten to twenty Viet Cong and North Vietnamese troops died for each US fatality.²³ By the late 1960s, the guerrillas were spent as a fighting force. Ninety percent of the countryside was deemed "secure or relatively secure"-a widespread calm ruefully acknowledged by captured enemy documents.²⁴ The communist armies, smashed during the 1968 Tet Offensive, would not launch another major assault on South Vietnam for four years.

But the American people had already lost heart. As historian Victor Davis Hanson wrote, "radical improvement in American tactics, weaponry, and know-how came too little, too late to deflate the public sense of defeatism and doom."²⁵ As Vietnam scholar Douglas Pike noted, while US troops "won all their battles, they did not win the war."²⁶ Contrary to the famous quip, America did not "declare victory and go home." We declared defeat and went home.

Modern Smart Bombs Demolish Key Targets in North Vietnam

Guided bombs could perhaps have stopped the war at the outset. President Johnson was reluctant to bomb North Vietnam while running on a peace platform in his 1964 campaign. Guided bombs may have warned off the enemy without making the candidate look like a mad bomber. Many airpower advocates also argue that heavy bombing could have humbled North Vietnam shortly after the American ground war began. After the war, a former colonel on the North Vietnamese Army General Staff conceded the possibility that "If all the bombing was concentrated at one time, it would have hurt our efforts. But the bombing was expanded in slow stages under [President] Johnson and it didn't worry us. We had plenty of time to prepare alternative routes and facilities."²⁷

Whether dumb bombs could have promptly ended the war is vigorously debated. But guided bombs would certainly make the task easier-*efficiently* demolishing almost every suspected bridge, railroad, electrical network, fuel depot, and airfield-plus countless troops, vehicles, artillery, radio and radar transmitters, and jammers. Surface-to-air missile sites-which took four hours to relocate-could be struck in a few minutes. Key targets could be disabled by a handful of bombs-as shown when coalition forces dropped a mere 606 bombs on 391 targets shortly before the 2003 invasion of Iraq.²⁸

Smart bombs can strike closer to politically sensitive targets without laying waste to whole neighborhoods. Because bombs fell so rarely in Hanoi, the capital city was considered "one of the safest places in Vietnam."²⁹ Secure in their downtown sanctuary, Ho Chi Minh and his fellow leaders won global prestige simply by surviving. Unlike the allies, the communists did not limit their targets. Their stunning attacks on the majestic former capital of Vietnam (Hue) and the American embassy in Saigon helped turn the tide in the war in early 1968. We were reluctant to hit anything in Hanoi, much less an embassy. But under guided bombs, the city would have been more like bunkered-down Baghdad where Saddam Hussein dared not go to a restaurant for fear of a precision air attack.³⁰ Not all symbolic, economic, government and military targets could be safely wedged next to foreign embassies and personnel. Smart bombs could also strike docks and anti-aircraft batteries around the Haiphong harbor without endangering nearby Soviet supply ships.

Under guided bombs, the enemy could no longer conveniently rebuild during lengthy monsoon seasons what was destroyed during dry, clear weather. No longer would nearly 300 risky sorties be sent over the same stubborn target. In March 1967, six American aircraft were lost over the Thai Nguyen ironworks-the "show piece of North Vietnamese industrialization." Today, one jet could have leveled the blast furnaces and power plant.³¹ With modern bombs, pilots can fly higher, safer, and in far fewer numbers. During thousands of missions, no American in a fixed

wing aircraft died from hostile fire over Kosovo (1999), Afghanistan (2001) or during the invasion of Iraq in 2003.³² Although North Vietnam had far heavier air defenses, the recent survival rate is still quite remarkable.

Piercing the Jungle—Small Patrols, Accurate Bombs

The Vietnam War is notorious as a deadly quagmire in the jungle. To roust the enemy from hiding places, American units went on noisy, mechanized search and destroy missions. The elusive adversary often ambushed the searchers and vanished before helicopters, artillery, and aircraft found their range. The enemy "hid" under clouds that sharply limited bombing. He brazenly crawled into no-man's land (where we were reluctant to bomb) and raked American troops with gunfire. His booby traps alone caused 11 percent of US deaths in the war.³³

American firepower inflicted far more casualties than American troops suffered—but still not "efficiently" enough to satisfy the home front. Thousands of low-flying US aircraft and helicopters fell to ground fire and accidents. Bombing raids could be highly destructive, but were also episodic and short. From ten or fifteen miles away, artillery could apply steady pressure for a long time. But shells were smaller than bombs—and less accurate than guided bombs.

Modern guided bombs combine the best of all worlds: the persistent all-weather threat of artillery, the accuracy of close-up guns, and the explosive force of traditional bombs. Most battles in Vietnam were brief, with many lasting only a few minutes. That would probably be long enough for a jet to obtain GPS locations and start bombing. With fewer aircraft needed for large bombing formations, jets could cover a wide range of trouble spots across Vietnam. They could bomb accurately through clouds and strike near no-man's land with small bombs. A new 250-pound class bomb, introduced in Iraq and Afghanistan in 2006, hits within four to six feet of targets. The winged satellite-guided weapon can glide 70 miles to a target, dramatically increasing the striking range and availability of bombers.³⁴

"We had limited visibility in the jungle," recalls Kenn Miller, who saw combat as an Army Ranger in Vietnam. "You wouldn't often see an individual soldier long enough to draw a bead on him. But we usually could tell where the enemy was as a group—see muzzle flashes, vegetation moving, hear shots."³⁵ Bombs and shells aimed at the forest were often muffled by heavy vines, leaves, bushes, and tree trunks. Darol Walker, who served with Miller in the Rangers, notes that "unguided bombs fell in long strings with no two landing in the same place in the jungle. A bomb might blast open the triple canopy but fail to disturb the target below."³⁶ Today, two guided bombs could quickly strike the same spot and destroy the target. With a 30-foot deep crater, a bomb could cause "a local earthquake that collapsed the sturdiest of tunnel walls."³⁷ Just about every enemy soldier—from treetop to bunker to cave—would be vulnerable.

In October 1967, a U-shaped ambush killed 61 US soldiers about 50 miles north of Saigon. Close-up Viet Cong fired from tree-tops and machine gun bunkers. For a crucial half-hour during the battle, American officers stopped artillery fire and debated whether to drop bombs near friendly positions. An enemy battalion advanced during the pause and sealed the third side of the

ambush. Apparently seeking to inflict heavy casualties on the Viet Cong (he succeeded), the American commander did not order a full withdrawal before he died two hours into the fight.

Today commanders would presumably pull back more quickly and let guided bombs do the work. Every possible location of the enemy would be shredded, including near friendly positions. Instead of marching a conspicuous 142-man battalion into the jungle, scouts would more likely have crept ahead and called in smart bombs. In a briefing before the ill-fated foray, an operations officer proposed sending out a reconnaissance platoon first. Although he was overruled,³⁸ his idea was hardly unusual. Elsewhere in the war, stealthy teams of Special Forces and Army Rangers discovered hidden bases, supply dumps, gunboats, bunkers, trucks, and caves. Former enemy guerrillas also led US troops to enemy caches, camps, and pathways.

But, unlike a terrorist farmhouse in rural Iraq, remote targets in the Vietnam wilderness were not easy to destroy. Unlike powerful battalions with big barreled guns, six-man patrols were too small and lightly armed for sustained combat. If detected, the isolated men had to be immediately "extracted" by helicopter. A larger ground and air force might follow up-but with much risk and cost.

Miller, author of the second book in the *Six Silent Men* trilogy about Ranger missions in Vietnam, "went on more patrols than I can remember." During a routine five-day mission, a team would pass up valuable targets for fear of aborting the mission too soon. Calling in artillery would immediately alert the enemy to their presence. "After a few minutes, a spotter round would arrive," said Miller. "That gave the enemy time to take cover. We had to watch where the first shell landed and guide in the next shells. But when the first one landed, the enemy would immediately look around the hills for spotters—us. Our cover was blown." He added, "too often, we brought back target information to headquarters and there was no apparent follow-up. I guess they didn't think the target was worth a big effort."³⁹ Said Darol Walker, "the intelligence the patrols got was extremely perishable. You couldn't wait too long to strike."⁴⁰

"A guided bomb attack would be almost instantaneous," Miller said, "they might have no idea what hit them."⁴¹ A pilot could quickly follow up on new or damaged targets—just as the F-16 inspected the battered Iraqi farmhouse and bombed again in only thirty seconds. The "silent men" could find several targets and escape long before the bombs hit. With destruction more easily accomplished, ambitious missions could go beyond the reach of friendly artillery and deeper into enemy territory. Pursued relentlessly, Viet Cong guerrillas and North Vietnamese soldiers would have trouble finding supplies and plotting deadly ambushes.

Winning Key Battles Faster and Changing the Course of the War

Smart bombs could have made famous Vietnam battles less traumatic and painful. Here are five historic clashes (or broad offensives) that boosted-or curbed-American enthusiasm for the cause in South Vietnam. By the early 1970's, when laser guided bombs finally made their mark, the war was almost over.

(1963) South Vietnamese Falter at Ap Bac

Our key ally suffered her first major defeat more than two years before US ground troops arrived. In January 1963, a South Vietnamese division was hard hit by the Viet Cong at the hamlet of Ap Bac 40 miles from Saigon. Due to lack of coordination between US Army and Air Force advisers, air strikes arrived too late to save the lives of 65 South Vietnamese and three American advisers.⁴² Viet Cong foxholes were sheltered by trees and dug so deep that occupants could stand up inside. Only direct hits from shells or bombs could kill them. As an observer reported, "We got a fix on one machine gun position and made fifteen aerial runs on it .Every time we thought we had him, the damned gunner came right back up, firing."⁴³

One jet with guided bombs could have quickly taken out the entrenched gunner and many of his comrades. Coordination between Army and Air Force would hopefully have been simpler and easier. Had South Vietnam convincingly won at Ap Bac, the regime of Ngo Dinh Diem might have garnered more support in the United States and survived longer. Less than a year after the debacle, Diem was overthrown by a coup. The communists increased their attacks and the Marines arrived at Da Nang in March 1965.

(1965) Shocking Losses at Ia Drang

By November of 1965, large North Vietnamese and Viet Cong units threatened to cut South Vietnam in half. A US Army division clashed with an enemy division in the Ia Drang Valley in the middle of the long, narrow country. Instead of the precise GPS locations of today, American soldiers tossed colorful smoke grenades so that jets would not bomb them (but the enemy then knew where the Americans were). A low-flying pilot might have *one* second to make a decision. Releasing dumb bombs too early or late could kill friendly troops.

When high-flying B-52s approached the Ia Drang valley, US troops were ordered to get a safe two miles away from the target area. In a horrible twist of fate, some 150 Americans died in a jungle ambush while fleeing-according to some accounts-the notoriously inaccurate B-52 bombs.⁴⁴ Our firepower finally overwhelmed the adversary. But alarmed by the presence of the communist forces in the heart of South Vietnam and the harshness of jungle combat, the United States eventually sent in more than a half million troops.

The enemy at Ia Drang was supplied via tree-covered sanctuaries in the rugged, virtually roadless region. Untouched by bombs, the foe could store supplies, operate hospitals, carry out training exercises, manufacture and fix arms, and operate a base for combat troops. Aggressive scouting and guided bombs could have put pressure on the hidden "cities in the jungle" and perhaps stopped a bloody battle from taking place. Ia Drang-featured in the Mel Gibson movie, *We Were Soldiers Once. And Young*-could have been less tragic and costly.

(1968) Climactic Tet Offensive

Smart bombs might also have prevented or greatly softened the biggest American "defeat" of the war. Early in 1968, the enemy assaulted cities and military bases across South Vietnam, including Khe Sanh, Hue, and Saigon. During two months, 1,100 Americans died in combat while the enemy lost an estimated 45,000.⁴⁵ The Tet Offensive broke the back of the Viet Cong guerrillas-but also the will of the American people. The faraway struggle seemed no longer

worth the cost. President Johnson, a once-dominant president, declined to seek reelection. His successor, Richard Nixon, promised to bring the troops home. A long retreat began.

The Tet Offensive was supplied by a vast network of roads (widely known as the Ho Chi Minh Trail) winding through neighboring Laos. Without supplies hauled by truck, the Viet Cong and North Vietnam regulars could not have kept up their military operations in South Vietnam nor the siege of Khe Sanh and the Tet Offensive.⁴⁶ On the eve of Tet, in late January, US pilots reported seeing nearly seven thousand trucks on the trail.⁴⁷ Colonel Bui Tin, a former North Vietnamese staff officer, noted that if the US ground troops had "block[ed] the Ho Chi Minh Trail, Hanoi could not have won the war."⁴⁸

However, Laos was considered a neutral country, off-limits to an American ground invasion. Only aircraft could strike at the heavily forested mountains in Laos. Over much of the trail, thick jungle canopy blocked the view. Other parts were bare and vulnerable, including key mountain passes. Canopy could be burned away by napalm but high explosive bombs could not reliably hit open roads or stop traffic. A 1967 Defense Department study found that one hundred bombing sorties destroyed an average of only 1.5 trucks or watercraft.⁴⁹ In the hours or days between raids, the enemy had plenty of time to repair or build new roads.

American "gunships" were the most lethal weapon against the supply trail. While an F-4 jet could linger for less than two hours per night, the converted cargo planes hovered over the trail for as long as seven hours. Their radar could spot moving trucks as far as twenty miles away. In clear weather, trucks under trees were detected by infrared sensors. Spitting thousands of bullets and shells per minute, the indefatigable gunships made trucks catch fire and explode. However, flying low and slow at about 3,000 feet, the propeller driven planes were vulnerable to ground fire. The gunships needed jet escorts to bomb and silence the ever-improving enemy guns. Numbering only a few dozen at most, the precious gunships were often relegated to safer but less traveled parts of the trail.

Late in the war, a new bomb showed promise against the trail. In February 1971, laser-guided bombs destroyed a 37-mm gun and two trucks.⁵⁰ Today, smart bombs could combine the relentless coverage of gunships with the concentrated force of high explosives. A few jets could always be high above the trail-carrying scores of bombs and refueled by air tankers-a nonstop threat to trucks and artillery.

Guided bombs would pinpoint cloud-shrouded mountain passes. Early in 1966, about three-fourths of all truck traffic into Laos went through the Mu Gia Pass.⁵¹ After a massive B-52 attack on the pass in 1966, the enemy refilled 32 craters in 18 hours.⁵² Road-clearing crews knew the big bombers were unlikely to return soon and probably couldn't hit them, anyway. But smart bombs could threaten the same vulnerable points hour after hour. With half of them hitting within 16 feet of targets, 2,000-pound bombs can create overlapping craters as much as 50 feet wide and 36 feet deep. The shovelers would be dead or exhausted. Convoys of trucks would be constantly harassed, delayed, and forced into long, exposed back-ups.

In 1968, the trucks moved and the Tet Offensive stunned the world-especially television viewers. A quarter century earlier, an estimated 19,000 Americans perished in the Battle of the Bulge.⁵³

Snow-bitten troops suffered a harsh Christmas reminiscent of Valley Forge. Censored black and white newsreels of the "disaster in Europe" took weeks to get to movie theaters in America. But Tet reached living rooms in as little as 24 hours.

Millions of Americans watched grim young Marines fight block by block to recapture the city of Hue. Blocked by winter monsoon clouds, US bombers could not help much. For several weeks, the sun came out for only two hours in one day. Over at the battle of Saigon, a flier recalled the danger and frustration of bad weather, "there was about a 400-foot ceiling. If you got above the cloud cover, you wouldn't be able to see anything, and below it, you were in the kill zone."⁵⁴

Rushing to liberate Hue, a lone Army battalion was ordered to attack a North Vietnamese Army force 200 yards away on a field. Amid the chaos of Tet, artillery was not available. Rain and clouds prevented air strikes.⁵⁵ During the "naked" charge, more than fifty of the 400 soldiers were killed or wounded. Surrounded by the enemy, the bruised battalion engineered a daring nighttime escape to a nearby mountaintop.

An Army intelligence officer, Charles Krohn, wrote a book about the bloody charge he survived. Now a retired lieutenant colonel, Krohn told the author, "The NVA [North Vietnamese Army] was waiting for us in a tree line. Today, all-weather bombs would have torn apart their foxholes and bunkers."⁵⁶ Krohn and his comrades had accidentally collided with the command post of the enemy assault on Hue. Says Krohn, "if we had guided bombs, we could have overrun the NVA headquarters. The enemy would have been forced to withdraw from Hue sooner. With smart bombs, delivered in large numbers by planes flying above the low-lying cloud cover, many American lives would have been saved during Tet."⁵⁷ Once again, the dumb bomb was too late, too close, too far, too little, or too much. The ironic saying—"it became necessary to destroy the village in order to save it"—was coined during Tet.⁵⁸

At Saigon, "there were spectacular fires and great palls of smoke as [aircraft] bombed those neighborhoods where guerrillas held out like termites amid the densely packed houses."⁵⁹ Senator Robert F. Kennedy, whose popular antiwar candidacy jolted President Johnson, lamented the wanton destruction of a "tiny land." Kennedy demanded, "If it becomes 'necessary' to destroy all of South Vietnam in order to 'save' it, will we do that, too?"⁶⁰

With smart bombs, the heavily televised siege of Khe Sanh could have been mercifully shorter. For 77 days around the time of Tet, 6,000 Marines were pinned down on a red dirt plateau in a far corner of South Vietnam. An estimated four hundred Marines were killed by shells, mortar rounds, rockets, and ground fire from the surrounding hills.⁶¹ During a "miserable" February, clouds shut down US aircraft and artillery while the enemy fired away. No Marine could feel safe-high speed shells from enemy artillery deep in Laos could penetrate any bunker. The big guns, embedded in mountains, were beyond the reach of the smaller Marine artillery and could not be knocked out by dumb bombs.

Some 10-15,000 North Vietnamese died from US firepower during the siege.⁶² But until the battered enemy faded into the jungle in early April, many Americans feared the isolated base was doomed. As Peter Braestrup wrote in his classic media study, *Big Story*, reporters often

compared Khe Sanh to the ill-fated French garrison at Dienbienphu that fell to the communists in 1954. *Time* magazine noted that Khe Sanh could be overwhelmed by human wave attacks.⁶³

The brazen foe built trenches to within twenty five meters of the Marine perimeter. A top advisor to the White House lamented in a letter to *The Washington Post*, "the closer the enemy gets to our men, the less we can bomb, because we will be killing our own troops as well as the enemy."⁶⁴ Until halfway through the battle, B-52's were not allowed to bomb within about two miles of friendly lines. "One hiccup" said an Air Force commander, "and we would have decimated the [Marine] base."⁶⁵

Accurate bombs could have put heavy pressure on the numerous besiegers. Satellite-guided bombs could have hit the North Vietnamese guns during the bad weather in February. Open trenches at Khe Sanh would have been blasted just like trench lines filled with Taliban fighters in October 2001. Laotian caves sheltering artillery could crumble like Afghan caves today. Smart bombs could have quickly hit the "up to 150 targets a day" found by American radar, infrared, seismic, and acoustic sensors at Khe Sanh.⁶⁶ Our devices located "every company and battalion of the two North Vietnamese divisions besieging Khe Sanh."⁶⁷ In one fell swoop, we could have struck the whole enemy army.

The US military crushed the Tet Offensive in less than three months—but not soon enough for a restless American public. Victory did not come before the commercial break. According to Braestrup, nine-tenths of all words spoken or written about Tet were devoted to the harrowing dramas at Khe Sanh, Hue, and Saigon. He noted that "In terms of media treatment, the fighting in [the three battles] became the whole war."⁶⁸

Modern bombs could have more quickly won the trio of public contests. The Viet Cong flag that flew defiantly over Hue for 25 days could have been toppled with one pass of a jet. We could have liberated Hue like the city of Fallujah in Iraq, where satellite guided bombs and other precision munitions efficiently supported our ground forces.⁶⁹ We could have saved perhaps thousands of Hue residents from methodical execution by the communists. With guided bombs, the whole war would not have seemed so futile after all.

(1969) "Hamburger Hill" Causes U.S. to Cease Major Offensive Operations

Modern smart bombs could have transformed another pivotal battle the next year. In May of 1969, a gruesome struggle on "Hamburger Hill" caused uproar in the Congress. Seventy US troops were slaughtered by men crouched in bunkers, trenches, "spider holes," and tree-tops.

American firepower failed to hit visible North Vietnamese bunkers on Hamburger Hill. As an Army historian noted, the "bunkers were well built, with substantial overhead cover that withstood days of pounding. Over time, bombs and napalm stripped away the foliage and exposed the NVA's bunkers. But they were so numerous and so well-constructed that they could not be destroyed by indirect fire [artillery] alone."⁷⁰ After US troops finally reached the top of the mountain, their commanders were ordered to not make any more big assaults in Vietnam.

Troops were to fight only when threatened by the other side. The communists, still exhausted from the losses at Tet, had more time to recover.

To avoid accurate bombs in Vietnam, the resourceful foe could have burrowed deeper into the jungle. He could have carried more supplies on small boats, carts, bicycles, and on foot, and stretched out an already primitive economy. North Vietnam could have routed more aid through Cambodia instead of Laos and pleaded for more trucks, weapons, and technology from her communist allies.

But hiding and diverting requires time, money, and manpower. A truck on the Ho Chi Minh Trail carried 300 times more than a man. To "blind" guided bombs, the foe could try to jam radio signals from satellites. Should signals be lost to a bomb, back-up guidance systems include gyroscopes, lasers, and infrared sensors. Airborne radio relay stations can also boost the strength of the signals to bombs.

Enemy jammers give off conspicuous radio signals of their own. According to StrategyPage.com, a military affairs website, "GPS does have the advantage of using up to 7 satellites at a time, each coming from a different direction, so any jammer must be powerful enough to block at least 3-5 of them at a time. This fact means that effective GPS jammers should be easy to spot and attack."⁷¹ In the 2003 invasion of Iraq, a would-be jammer was quickly (and ironically) destroyed by a satellite guided bomb. The United States enjoys certain advantages in the punch and counter-punch of electronic warfare.

(1972) Guided Bombs Succeed—But Too Late

In the spring of 1972, a rebuilt North Vietnamese army came south yet again. By then most American combat forces had left South Vietnam, but American bombing was more potent than ever. New laser-guided bombs blasted Soviet-made tanks, dropped key bridges, and helped stop the invasion cold. Guided and dumb bombs "cut" 800 mountain roads and started landslides near the Chinese border.⁷² Smart bombs silenced well-fortified artillery pieces—the previously unhittable guns that killed thousands of American soldiers and fliers during the war. After six decades of dumb bombs, the "laser-guided bomb became the weapon of choice for the air-to-ground mission."⁷³

Smart bombs could have helped "win" the Vietnam War—had the bombers only stayed around. Max Boot wrote "[i]f the U.S. had continued to support Saigon with a small troop presence and substantial supplies, there is every reason to believe that South Vietnam could have survived."⁷⁴ Professor Robert Farley noted that "heavy U.S. air support and the deployment of relatively small numbers of U.S. ground troops could hold off conventional North Vietnamese offensives."⁷⁵

But the superpower left the field. Cruising down a fresh black-top highway on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, the persistent North Vietnamese finally took over in 1975. One could only wonder what might have happened had smart bombs been available at the beginning of the war, not just before the denouement.

Conclusion—10,000 Americans Dead Instead of 58,000?

The spectacular fall of Saigon in 1975 was followed, coincidentally or not, by stepped-up communist aggression in the "Killing Fields" of Cambodia and many other regions. Vietnam herself had manifold horrors—forced re-education camps, boat people perishing at sea, harsh collectivization, no free elections, and a decade of stagnation before the end of the Cold War. Meanwhile, South Korea—protected by American troops since the failed North Korean invasion in 1950—prospered as an "Asian Tiger."

Modern guided bombs in Vietnam would have brought more logic to "that old crazy Asian war."⁷⁶ US troops would have won major battles more quickly and searched out guerrillas more efficiently. There would likely have been fewer deaths due to land mines, ambushes, close combat, and accidents—and fewer South Vietnamese victims of friendly fire.

Perhaps 10 or 15,000 Americans would have died instead of 58,000. That would have been a more tolerable cost during the peak of the Cold War, even with the unpopular military draft. Polls did not shift against the Vietnam War until deaths approached 20,000 in late 1967—on the eve of the Tet Offensive. Americans stoically accepted a similar toll at the Battle of the Bulge since Hitler was clearly doomed. But the dark days of Tet extinguished the promised "light at the end of the tunnel."⁷⁷

Hounded by smart bombs, North Vietnam might have finally given up her dreams of conquest. Guided bombs could have protected South Vietnam just as coalition air patrols and smart bombs sheltered pockets of Kurds and Shiite Muslims from Saddam Hussein after the Gulf War in 1991. Later, guided bombs rescued the Albanian population in Kosovo from Slobodan Milosevic and his brutal Serbian forces.

An onslaught of American smart bombs would probably not have sparked radical moves by China or the Soviet Union. Had large foreign armies entered the fray, all bets would have been off. But China was wracked by the Cultural Revolution and keenly remembered her own heavy losses in the Korean War. The Soviet Union showed no taste for direct military confrontation with the United States over Vietnam and would later be distracted by her own designs on Afghanistan.

While pursuing détente with President Nixon, savvy Chinese and Soviet leaders may have tolerated US smart bombs "carefully" hitting North Vietnam. That was less provocative than dumb bombs accidentally sinking Russian ships in the Haiphong harbor or straying over the Chinese border.

Who knows? But clearly, the nature of war changed. In 2001, a little known militant witnessed the awesome power of US laser-guided bombs in Afghanistan. As the Taliban crumbled, al-Zarqawi fled to Iraq and took over terrorist operations. Avoiding the skies, the wily radical resorted to suicide bombs, videotaped beheadings, and global websites. But in the end, he could not escape the smart bomb.

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