On March 30, 1972 the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) launched a conventional offensive, dubbed the Easter Offensive, against South Vietnam. In response to this act President Richard Nixon ordered the United States Air Force (USAF) and Navy (USN) to resume bombing North Vietnam. For the next nine months, USAF conducted offensive operations against the whole of the DRV in an attempt to accomplish four major objectives. First, USAF units sought to interdict sufficiently the North Vietnamese Army's (NVA's) supply lines to preclude continued conventional operations in South Vietnam. Second, President Nixon had directed the Air Force to inflict sufficient punishment on North Vietnam in order to deter further aggression against its southern neighbor. Third, as implied by the Nixon Doctrine, USAF was to establish convincingly its ability to conduct conventional operations in support of an allied nation during a major conflict. Finally, with the introduction of B-52 bombers in December 1972, the Air Force was to maintain the credibility of manned strategic aircraft as part of American nuclear deterrence policy.

Historically, the United States Air Force and many civilian observers have maintained that the United States Air Force succeeded in all four tasks. However, the evidence strongly indicates that the United States Air Force not only failed to achieve all but the interdiction objective during the course of operations against North Vietnam, but that this defeat stemmed from the decision not to develop a comprehensive Suppression of Enemy Air Defense (SEAD) doctrine from 1968 through 1972. In choosing this course of action, USAF's military and civilian leaders guaranteed that American forces would be unable to bring sufficient force to bear to achieve President Nixon's goals. Furthermore, by choosing this course of action and, in addition, refocusing the Air Force on nuclear delivery rather than enhancing USAF's capability to penetrate an integrated air defense (IADS), these same leaders ignored the results of Operation Rolling Thunder. The consequence of this choice, as will be shown in the following pages, was an outcome that had serious implications for the United States' Cold War conventional and nuclear military policy.

Keywords: SEAD; United States Air Force; Vietnam; Linebacker; Lyndon Johnson; Wild Weasel

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Young illustrates just how dangerous the Air Force’s failure to nurture its SEAD capability was during this period of the Cold War. Relying primarily on Air Force archival documents, memoirs, and contemporary doctrinal publications, Young illustrates just how dangerous the Air Force’s failure to nurture its SEAD capability was during this period of the Cold War. During Operation Rolling Thunder, the United States Air Force was unprepared for the introduction of the SA-2 Guideline surface-to-air missile system into the North Vietnamese integrated air defense system (IADS). Following a series of aircraft losses in the summer of 1965, the USAF identified an emerging time critical requirement for a dedicated SAM suppression capability. This thesis will provide background for USAF air operations during Rolling Thunder. Next this thesis will use the Find, Fix, Finish, Exploit, and Analyze (F3EA) targeting methodology as an interpretive model for analyzing USAF air staff. The United States Air Force Air staff. Chief of Staff Gen. Carl A. Spaatz. Vice Chief of Staff Gen. Hoyt S. Vandenberg. Asst. Vice Chief of Staff Brig. Like the other services, the Air Force had a problem known as “grade suppression.” The average enlisted member made E-7 by the 12th year of service and could progress no further. In many cases, a master sergeant supervised several other master sergeants. In 1958, two new enlisted grades, the “supergrades,” were created. The Air Force decided to name them senior master sergeant (E-8) and chief master sergeant (E-9). Two percent of the force could be promoted to E-8 and one percent to E-9. The first Air Force promotions to E-8 were in September 1958, and the first to E-9 were in December 1959.