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THE PHOENIX PROGRAM
A Postmortem

ENS F.C. Brown

With the possible exception of My Lai, no aspect of the American involvement in South Vietnam has been the subject of more controversy than the Phoenix, or "Phung Hoang," Program.

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The roots of Phoenix go back to 1961 when Sir Robert Thompson, serving with the British Embassy in Saigon, urged the South Vietnamese Government to launch a coordinated effort to seek out and neutralize the Viet Cong Infrastructure (VCI). Thompson, who gained fame as a counterinsurgency expert during the Malaysian Emergency (1948-60), had correctly diagnosed the Communist infrastructure as being the crux of the South Vietnamese insurgency. Destroy the infrastructure, he maintained, and the insurgency would collapse. In illustrating Thompson's emphasis on a coordinated effort, it is of interest to note that there were 17 different Allied intelligence agencies in the Saigon area alone. Clearly, coordination of effort through a central intelligence bureau was drastically needed.

Unfortunately, little was done until 1966, when U.S. officials realized that a campaign against the VCI was long overdue. Furthermore, they began to stress this in reports to Washington. High-ranking officials in Saigon were convinced that the bulk of the populace would never be won over to the government's side unless they could be protected against the reprisals of the clandestine VCI apparatus. As Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge noted at that time, "Getting at the VCI is the heart of the matter."

Some initial reorganization was carried out and the intelligence picture improved slightly with the development of the Intelligence Coordination and Exploitation Program (ICEX), the forerunner to Phoenix. ICEX personnel were, in part, trained by U.S. Army special forces and they worked closely with the "Green Berets" and with U.S. Navy SEAL (sea-air-land) teams.

However, the vital need for closer coordination of intelligence was amply demonstrated by the Communist Tet Offensive of 1968. When this nationwide assault was launched in late January, South Vietnamese, as well as U.S. intelligence agencies, were caught almost completely unaware—despite various indicators pointing to a Communist build up. The Tet Offensive dramatically illustrated that coordination of intelligence resources, particularly at the sector and sub-sector level, was of paramount importance.

Following the Tet Offensive, President Nguyen Van Thieu was persuaded to adopt a more coordinated intelligence program in which the South Vietnamese would have complete control from top to bottom. The U.S. role would be limited to providing advisors and support, with the approximate ratio of Vietnamese to American participants at 500 to 1. The U.S. officials associated with the planning and organization of this undertaking were Robert W.

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Komer, U.S. Ambassador to South Vietnam; William E. Colby, then director of the Central Intelligence Agency; and the late John Paul Vann, senior civilian advisor.

The result was the Phoenix Program, called "Phung Hoang"by the Vietnamese for the mythical bird that brings tidings of peace. Ambassador Komer and President Thieu launched the program prior to Tet, but it had not developed any momentum due to the offensive. Consequently, the program was restarted, amid considerable publicity, on 1 July 1968. Many media accounts, unaware of the program's pre-Tet genesis, date Phoenix from 1 July 1968.

Despite the inherent dangers in the creation of a new bureaucracy, Phoenix was seen as a step in the right direction. All intelligence would now be collated and analyzed by a joint Vietnamese/U.S. team at each province and district level headquarters, known as Province Intelligence Operations Coordination Center (PIOCCs) and District Intelligence Operations Coordination Center (DIOCCs), respectively.

The goal of Phoenix was to neutralize the VCI, which included certain members of the National Liberation Front's (NLF) local organization, just as the Front had systematically destroyed the government's local apparatus beginning a decade earlier. If successful, Phoenix would allow the South Vietnamese to break the endless cycle, whereby NLF main force units were consistently rebuilt through the efforts of the "shadow government" working among the populace. It would likewise have denied the NLF the vital intelligence and other related components essential to the insurgency environment.



Members of the local Viet Cong apparatus somewhere in the Mekong Delta strike a convincing pose in this mid-1960's photograph. An aggressive and determined foe, they routinely employed terror as a means of eliminating the opposition.

As the great majority of U.S. personnel were unable to read or converse fluently in Vietnamese, let alone identify members of the infrastructure, U.S. planners correctly felt that Phoenix should be a Saigon-directed and administered program. The 400-500 advisors provided by the U.S. were primarily young and relatively low-ranking military intelligence officers, along with a small number of CIA personnel.

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The U.S. decision to limit the war to South Vietnam posed additional problems, as the enemy freely took advantage of the sanctuaries available in Cambodia, Laos, and North Vietnam. This greatly interfered with Phoenix efforts to monitor and curtail VCI activity, particularly in the border regions. A number of VCI at the province committee level even left the country and operated from Cambodia.

Additionally, the Allied intelligence agencies possessed no order of battle on the VCI; thus, the key element of the insurgency was virtually unknown.

Accordingly, the first task of Phoenix was to identify individuals belonging to or sympathetic to the VCI, estimated to number between 65,000 and 80,000. At the same time a central reporting system was implemented. If a VCI operative was killed, captured, or defected in Quang Ngai or Can Tho, for example, Saigon would be informed.

The actual implementation of the Phoenix Program gen-

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erally fell to the national police, the police field force, and the provincial reconnaissance units (PRUs).

The national police were usually found in the cities and larger towns throughout South Vietnam. They maintained a list of local VCI members and sympathizers and, when possible, kept them under surveillance.

The police field force was a special component of the regular police, numbering 11,000 at peak strength. Roughly comparable to light infantry platoons, they wore brown camouflage uniforms and berets and usually worked locally and semi-covertly. They were occasionally used in conjunction with the PRUs and other units.

The PRUs were the principal action arm of Phoenix, although their existence actually pre-dated the Phoenix Program. While the majority were Vietnamese, the PRUs also contained ethnic minorities, such as Nungs or Cambodians from the border areas. Some were deserters from the Army of Vietnam (ARVN), attracted by the PRUs' higher pay, while others had formerly served with the special forces "Mike Force" or civilian irregular defense group (CIDG). Still others were defectors from the Communist ranks who had come over to the Saigon side through the "Chieu Hoi" or "Open Arms" Program. All were volunteers.

The PRUs constituted a highly trained and mobile force intended for use against the Communist apparatus on the basis of "hard" or confirmed intelligence. Generally organized into small teams of 10 to 20 men, they carried the war into the Communist bases in the countryside. They used a variety of Communist and U.S. weapons and usually operated at night. Moving stealthily through enemy territory, they took prisoners, set ambushes, abducted prominent VCI, gathered intelligence, and maintained agent networks. At times they operated under the tutelage of U.S. special forces and SEAL advisors who accompanied them into the field.



Vietnamese soldier from Regional Force Company demonstrates captured B-40 rocket.

When necessary, PRUs were consolidated into company-size units and used for regular military tasks. Each PRU contingent in the various provinces had their own distinctive insignia; however since many of the patches depicted a skull, PRUs were often tagged with the nickname "Skull and Crossbones." Additionally, correspondents and authors have referred to them as "CTs," or "Counter-Terrorists," something of a misnomer.

Of all the South Vietnamese military and paramilitary components, the PRUs were among the most effective and suffered the lowest casualties. Additionally, the type of target attacked by the PRUs was, considering the nature of the war, strategically the most significant.

Phoenix rapidly gained momentum and proved to be so successful that the Communists launched a concerted effort in late 1969 to reverse the program's progress. Still recuperating from the massive casualties they had incurred in the Tet Offensive some 18 months earlier, the Communists now found their position further imperiled by the loss of numerous operatives to Phoenix, forcing them to react against the government's pacification of the countryside.

In January 1970, President Thieu, in an interview with the West German magazine, Der Spiegel, asserted that great progress had been made in pushing the Viet Cong out of their rural strongholds. Independent observers in Saigon

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at this time concurred that the VCI had been seriously weakened, and their influence had waned considerably.

However, while Allied intelligence had improved greatly under the aegis of Phoenix, some impediments still existed in the parallel U.S. and Vietnamese chains of command. Some lack of cooperation and aggressiveness was noticed in some local officials. But, in reflecting on the program as a whole, it was certainly more productive than earlier efforts.

Unfortunately, the exploits of Phoenix are suffused with a combination of color and excitement — elements which not only germinate myths, but perpetuate them as well. The popular media stereotype of a CIA "spook" running a string of indigenous murder squads has been firmly implanted in the public mind, and this erroneous concept has proven most difficult to eradicate. Indeed, it may never be eradicated.

Why then has there been such an outcry against the Phoenix Program? How did these tales of assassination, torture, and internal corruption gain such widespread circulation in the media?

John Paul Vann explained that, "As a reporter goes through, he looks for the unusual. When you are looking into the Phoenix Program, the normal course of operations does not make news, and is not worthy of separate analysis. Therefore, there is a tendency to report the extremes."

Vann, a legendary figure among U.S. advisors in the Delta, was one of the very few at the top who really understood the nature of the war. Forthright, aggresive, and never afraid to admit he was wrong, his untimely death in the Central Highlands in 1972 was a tragic loss for the Republic of Vietnam as well as the U.S. He was posthumously awarded the Medal of Freedom.

Former Phoenix advisors are quick to point out that, contrary to popular belief, approximately 85-90 percent of the VCI operatives who were "neutralized" in the course of Phoenix operations either died or were captured on the battlefield, rather than being garroted in their sleep or dispatched with a silenced pistol shot to the head. A number of former Phoenix advisors were unanimous in their belief that small unit firefights and ambushes accounted for the great majority of VCI casualties.

Speaking before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in 1970, John Paul Vann noted that "the overwhelming majority (of VCI) are killed in war and later identified as having been a member of the enemy's clandestine apparatus." To provide a more graphic example, a former Army Phoenix advisor who served in the "Seven Mountains Region" of the Western Delta told of a VCI operative who was killed in an ambush just outside a district town in 1968, and subsequently identified as an employee of the local bus company who regularly sold tickets in the marketplace. To say that the townsfolk, many of whom were his regular customers, were surprised that he was a VCI operative would be a gross understatement. No one, including his closest associates, had any inkling of his Viet Cong sympathies.

While neither Colby nor Vann contended that there were no abuses within the program, both emphatically stressed that it was not U.S. policy to participate in or condone such activity. Indeed, both men had worked hard to prevent abuses and had protested loudly when they found them. As for allegations of assassination, neither knew of a single documented case.

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During his 1970 testimony, Colby emphasized that the main objective of Phoenix was to capture rather than kill. Since dead men tell no tales, it stands to reason that the objective of any intelligence program would be the procurement of information which would lead in turn to the capture or elimination of additional enemy operatives.

One measure of the overall success of Phoenix may be seen in the Communist Easter Offensive of 1972, when large contingents of South Vietnamese troops were withdrawn from the Delta and sent further north to stem the tide of the North Vietnamese advance. This was due in large part to the accomplishments of Phoenix — especially in the Delta areas — in the nearly four years since its inception. In some provinces,

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like Hau Nghia, the infrastructure had practically ceased to exist.

Pham Van Thao, leader of the people's organization in My Tho and political commissar of that city, remarked to a Western journalist shortly after the collapse of South Vietnam in 1975 that, for the VCI, "...the worst period was during the Phoenix campaign." Thao's assignments had included the selection and training of clandestine Communist cadre in My Tho, and many of his operatives had been caught up in the Phoenix dragnet. Thao's statement regarding Phoenix is quite different from that of many journalists and commentators, who have consistently labeled Phoenix as "ineffective."

Although U.S. involvement in Phoenix ended in 1972, the program continued until the collapse of the Saigon Government in the spring of 1975. When it became apparent that Saigon would fall, Vietnamese who were involved in government intelligence activities—particularly those who worked in Phoenix — were ostensibly accorded priority for evacuation. A number of officials who were instrumental in the implementation and operation of Phoenix were in fact evacuated, but a large number of the "smaller fry" were left behind, or "abandoned," as one embittered former PRU advisor noted.

Congressional critics, correspondents, and self-professed "humanitarians" have termed Phoenix "...an indiscriminate murder program," charging that in the course of operations thousands of innocent civilians were murdered, tortured, or otherwise victimized. Casualty figures run the gamut from a low of 20,000, which the CIA acknowledges, to a high of some 40,000.

Supporters of Phoenix, however, have been equally adamant in their defense of the program. Military intelligence officers and CIA operatives with experience in Phoenix maintain that such a program was not only long overdue, but also an essential part of the war effort. As one young captain with 18 months service in the Delta put it, "Phoenix was necessary to destroy the clandestine infrastructure which the Communists had so meticulously built up over the years."

Ensign F.C. Brown is a cum laudae graduate of Pepperdine University with a BA degree in History. As a Navy enlisted man he served in Vietnam with Advisory Team 64, Naval Advisory Group, and 1st Air Naval Gunfire Liaison Company. He received his commission under the auspices of the Medical Service Corps [MSC] In-Service Procurement Program and is currently stationed at the Naval Regional Medical Center, Philadelphia, PA.



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