

**When Culture Eats Strategy:
Examining the Phoenix/Phung Hoang Bureaucracy in the
Vietnam War, 1967-1972**

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Dedicated to my family: Carolyn, Jim, and Melly; and to Mr. O'Connor of F.A. Day Middle School, for teaching me that nothing is cooler than being obsessed with history.

Abstract

The Phoenix Program (1967-72) was a concerted US-GVN effort to identify and “neutralize” members of the political infrastructure of the National Liberation Front (referred to as the Vietcong Infrastructure) through intelligence collation and targeted killing, capturing, or rallying operations. Many historians have previously treated the program as a successful CIA-MACV hybrid program which utilized the intelligence assets of the civilian intelligence agency to support the ample military resources available for kinetic operations. My research has shown that the Phoenix Program was in fact dominated by MACV from its inception, and that MACV’s strategic approach to the conflict in South Vietnam was disproportionately influenced by US Army doctrine. As I argue, in the 1960s, US Army culture and doctrine were ill-suited for conducting counterinsurgency warfare, the result of the DoD’s strategic prioritizations at the height of the Cold War. MACV—and thus Army—control of Phoenix had several discernible and detrimental effects on the program’s effectiveness. Principally, the Army’s tour of duty system, the lack of institutional experience in intelligence operations relevant to COIN, the rigid, vertical hierarchy which MACV brought to Phoenix, and conventional military metrics for success all precluded the program’s effectiveness.

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PREFACE

I regret to admit that what first piqued my interest in Phoenix was the same aspect of the program which has so often contributed to its misunderstanding: the name. “Phoenix” sounds sinister, and after finding cursory mentions of the “covert CIA assassination program” in various secondary sources while in high school, I thought I had discovered something along the lines of Treadstone, the fictitious CIA program in Robert Ludlum’s *Bourne* novels. Through my undergraduate studies, I quickly came to realize that CIA operations are not as diabolical, conspiratorial, or exciting as I had previously believed. My adolescent fixation on CIA operations with alluring names and controversial reputations gave way to an earnest fascination with counterinsurgency and aspirations to apply our misadventures in Vietnam to the conflicts of my generation. I therefore chose this topic for my thesis junior year because at the time I remained under the impression that Phoenix had been a covert CIA program of targeted killings. Against the backdrop of heated debates over drone strikes and the blurred lines between Title 10 and Title 50 operations in the Global War on Terror, I hoped to examine how the Agency managed what appeared at first glance to be a prolific program of enemy elimination during the Vietnam War.

When I discovered through the course of my research that Phoenix had not, in fact, been a CIA program in practice and that targeted operations accounted for only a minority of enemy “neutralizations,” I realized that the lessons I would draw from my thesis would be significantly different from my initial assumptions but no less significant to today’s counterinsurgencies. By focusing on how a supposedly civil-military hybrid institution functioned in practice, I have sought to understand the enduring challenges nations face in determining which institutions

ought to assume command of the multifarious facets of counterinsurgency. Most significantly, through my research I have reaffirmed the significant role institutional culture plays in military affairs and gained a better understanding of the complex interplay between grand strategy, institutional culture, and regional strategy, as well as the disconnect between counterinsurgency theory and practice. While I am hardly the first to make these observations, I hope my research may serve as a valuable case study of the force with which military culture percolates from the highest levels of strategy-making to shape the minutiae of warfare even in instances when such culture works to the detriment of strategic progress.

As an undergraduate historian with no experience in any challenge as complex as waging a counterinsurgency, I am initially hesitant in passing judgement on the institutions and individuals at the center of this thesis. I have applied the philosophy of the renowned Prussian theorist Carl von Clausewitz in my approach to this thesis to overcome my hesitance. Military historian Jon Sumida notes that Clausewitz's approach to studying history teaches us "to come to an understanding of why decisions were difficult rather than whether they were good or bad."¹ I ultimately hold the Government of Vietnam (GVN) and Military Assistance Command-Vietnam (MACV) largely responsible for the failures of the Phoenix Program. Such is the logical conclusion, as these two institutions (the former being an amalgamation of several organizations sharing common cultural characteristics and strategic approaches) were effectively in control of the Phoenix Program (referred to as the Phung Hoang program in Vietnamese) and the Phoenix Program, as I explain, was largely ineffective. In keeping with Clausewitz's approach to the study of history, I find it necessary to note that neither MACV nor the South Vietnamese lacked personnel competent and motivated enough to manage the tasks at hand. Both institutions faced

¹ Jon Sumida, *The Clausewitz Problem*. Army History Magazine. Fall 2009. p. 21

uphill battles, however. As I explain in chapter seven, the US military at the time of the Vietnam War made strategic choices, as all institutions do, to tailor their organization to combat the most serious and pressing threats to national security. In the 1960s, the possibility of war with the USSR pushed the US military to overwhelmingly focus its efforts on retaining an edge as a conventional fighting force. I certainly believe that the Army's decision to build a strong conventional fighting force was based on sound logic and probably helped deter a conflict with the Soviet Union in Europe. The Army's prowess in conventional warfare, however, came at the expense of its ability to effectively conduct pacification on a national scale in South Vietnam, as the strategic situation required. Coordinating an effort against the enemy's insurgent political infrastructure was difficult for the American military because it had not faced anything resembling the irregular aspects of the Vietnam War for decades, in which period it had adopted a strategy which required a staunchly conventional mindset.

The Government of Vietnam, meanwhile, has frequently been the villain in histories of the war. To many anti-war activists, the GVN was a corrupt regime unworthy of the South Vietnamese people's support. To many defenders of America's intervention in Vietnam, the GVN was a corrupt regime unworthy of America's support. While corruption certainly plagued the GVN from its inception, it is important to recognize that South Vietnam was a nascent post-colonial state with no traditional institutions of governance on the national level. Added to this were the pressures of an adversarial neighbor to the north and a budding insurgency within its borders. It requires no stretch of the imagination to determine why nation-building in Vietnam proved so difficult. While the GVN certainly deserves its share of the blame for the failure of Phoenix/Phung-Hoang, the notion that the United States would have achieved victory in Vietnam but for the incompetence of the GVN has always struck me as something of a myopic and self-

contradicting argument and it is one I avoid in this thesis. If the GVN had been able to handle the multifarious threats it faced on its own, there would have been little need for any US presence in Vietnam.

The history of the Phoenix Program offers much in the way of lessons to contemporary politicians, strategists, and rank-and-file soldiers alike. Less than thirty years after the withdrawal of American combat units from Vietnam, the United States entered Afghanistan to begin the arduous process of combatting the Taliban, targeting Al-Qaida Central, and building the Afghan state. Afghanistan saw Special Forces Alpha teams operating on horseback, and Marine Captains found themselves attempting to navigate the tribal customs of the Pashtun. The parallels to Phoenix are striking: Officer training offered insufficient preparation for American advisers to understand Confucianism or Vietnamese village politics and a state-of-the-art helicopter gunship was frequently less effective than a small squad of lightly armed locals. It is no surprise then that the difficulties we immediately faced in conducting counterinsurgencies in Afghanistan and later Iraq brought a flurry of renewed interest in the Vietnam War. It is indeed encouraging, as one of the fatal mistakes of the US military in Vietnam had been its failure to appreciate its own history of “small wars.”

Some proponents of counterinsurgency seem so passionate in their advocacy that they risk hyperbole, arguing under the assumption that when properly executed, counterinsurgency is somehow the paragon of moral warfare. While I have never argued that warfare cannot achieve just ends, there is nothing inherently good about even the most effective counterinsurgency. Yes, the ideal counterinsurgent—so most contemporary proponents argue—stresses population protection and civic action programs, rejecting a strategy of indiscriminate and high-volume firepower that characterizes conventional warfare. But counterinsurgencies, like all wars, can

ultimately only be won through violence. While I hope that my thesis may help dispel some of the oft-heard polemics that treat Phoenix as a campaign of mass atrocities, I believe that it is critical to stress at this early stage that any effort to win “hearts and minds” requires separating the population from violent insurgents, an effort which invariably requires both defensive and offensive kinetic operations. This task is neither straightforward nor enviable, especially when the success of the counterinsurgency in the long term is equally contingent upon the counterinsurgent’s use of force minimizing collateral damage. Those who conceived Phoenix had no desire to damage the South Vietnamese countryside any more than absolutely necessary, but the program nonetheless contributed to arbitrary detentions, torture of prisoners, and deaths of innocent Vietnamese in the scale of the hundreds if not thousands. Central to my thesis is the argument that Phoenix was a more imprecise instrument in practice than in theory, but, as I note in the conclusion, even the far more effectively targeted precision air strikes and JSOC “night raids” of the Global War on Terror inevitably cause collateral damage. Those who participated in Phoenix would have undoubtedly preferred to arrest every suspected enemy cadre without firing a shot, but unfortunately the enemy always gets a say. To call counterinsurgency a “moral way” of warfare is therefore ludicrous because it implies either that victory can be achieved through some means other than violence or that there is nothing inherently repugnant about killing, no matter how justified the ends.

It is my belief that histories of the Phoenix Program should not be confined to the bookshelves of counterinsurgency practitioners or academic theorists. Clausewitz’s trinity describes three forces which drive the events of war: the government, the army, and the people. In the United States, the people have a significantly greater say in whether or not their nation goes to war than in the European states of Clausewitz’s era, an era which saw only the first

instances of truly national armies. When I entered university in 2012, Americans seemed as wary as ever of engaging in protracted conflicts overseas. With the graphic execution of American hostages at the hands of the Islamic State and other such atrocities, it seems that a significant portion of the public has quickly shifted towards favoring a more aggressive military policy against IS and related sub-state threats. I have no doubt, therefore, that counterinsurgencies will play a role in the future of our national security. An intelligence-driven program along the lines of Phoenix—as its architects *intended* it to operate—will be prerequisite to any potential COIN success.

The American public would thus do well to hear an even-handed account of Phoenix, one which argues for the necessity of an anti-political-infrastructure program but also details the incredible complexity of waging a counterinsurgency and the difficulties and terrible costs inherent to such warfare. While I do not consider government victory in such low-intensity conflicts to be invariably impossible, I recognize that the recent historical record suggests such conflicts pose a challenge far more significant than many would like to admit. At the time of this writing, I remain an ideological college student, and I am perhaps foolish in believing that if democratic citizens better understand the nature of counterinsurgency warfare, our nation will be reluctant to partake in military endeavors which are unnecessary, unwinnable, or require a sacrifice incommensurate with the benefits of victory. Men from Augustine of Hippo to Caspar Weinberger have hoped for society to achieve a similar understanding of war, but world politics have always been complicated, and it is rarely clear at the onset of conflict what the stakes and costs of war will prove to be. With this in mind, for those who are interested enough to read this thesis, I hope only to offer a small contribution to the literature on America's history of counterinsurgency, or, as President Lyndon Johnson called it, "the other war."

List of Acronyms and Terms

COIN: Counterinsurgency
GVN: Government of (South) Vietnam
MACV: Military Assistance Command--Vietnam
MAAG: Military Assistance Advisory Group (predecessor to MACV)
CORDS: Civil Operations for Rural Development Support
ICEX: Intelligence Coordination and Exchange Program
Phung Hoang: The GVN counterpart to Phoenix
Neutralization: the act of taking an enemy combatant off the battlefield by killing, capturing, or rallying them to your side
RF/PF: Revolutionary Forces/Popular Forces (also referred to as territorial forces)
NPFF: National Police Field Forces
PSDF: People's' Self Defense Forces
PSB: Police Special Branch
PRU: Provincial Reconnaissance Unit
RD: Revolutionary Development
DIOCC: District Intelligence and Operations Coordination Center
PIOCC: Province Intelligence and Operations Coordination Center
POIC: (CIA) Province Officer in Charge
ROIC: (CIA) Regional Officer in Charge
USMC: United States Marine Corps
ARVN: Army of the Republic of Vietnam
NVA: North Vietnamese Army
NLF: National Liberation Front (Vietcong)
VCI: Vietcong Infrastructure
PSYOPs: Psychological Operations
CTZ: Corps Tactical Zone (also known as Military Region or MR)



An unofficial badge worn by GVN Phung Hoang officials (photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)

INTRODUCTION

If one wishes to gauge what the public understands of a matter, it can be quite useful to consult Wikipedia. Millions of Americans use the online, crowd-sourced encyclopedia every day to read brief summaries of just about anything worth summarizing. It has been the author's experience that despite the lack of any rigorous fact-checking or review, articles often receive the status as semi-official sources in everyday discussion. Wikipedia is particularly useful in understanding how the majority of Americans who are familiar the Phoenix Program view the subject. In the case of Phoenix, Wikipedia displays and thus perpetuates many of the time-worn misconceptions of the Phoenix Program. In the span of just three paragraphs, a reader will come to believe that Phoenix was executed first and foremost by the CIA, that the program was consciously designed to neutralize the Vietcong political infrastructure through "terrorism, torture, and assassination," that the Provincial Reconnaissance Units were the most significant component of Phoenix, that the program intentionally targeted innocent civilians for torture, and that the program accounted for as many as 41,000 deaths. The authors also claim that Phoenix was implemented in 1965, two years before its predecessor's creation.²

I will not waste the reader's time debunking most misstatements made about Phoenix. The truth about Phoenix, unflattering as it is, can be easily discerned from the available archives as well as the testimonies of the many Phoenix veterans who have spoken on the subject. Though this fact has evaded many authors and commentators, Phoenix was in fact more limited in scope than Wikipedia would have us believe. The Phoenix Program (1967-1972) was in fact nothing more than a coordination effort to promote collaboration between existing intelligence

² *The Phoenix Program*. Wikipedia the Free Encyclopedia. Accessed April 12, 2016
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phoenix_Program

agencies and operational units in the identification and elimination of the Vietcong political infrastructure (VCI) or “shadow government” that operated within the rural villages and hamlets of South Vietnam. While the program was conceived by a CIA analyst and employed former CIA employees at its highest levels, it was *in theory* a CIA-military hybrid program and in practice—as my central argument states—an almost exclusively military program. Furthermore, the manpower behind Phoenix was overwhelmingly South Vietnamese. The rural pacification effort, of which Phoenix was a small part, remained primarily the responsibility of the GVN and its armed forces (ARVN), police units, and local militias throughout the war. Through their Phung-Hoang program—the Vietnamese counterpart to Phoenix—the GVN furnished most of the intelligence used to identify the VCI and conducted most of the operations responsible for the neutralization (capturing, killing, or rallying) of VCI cadre.

If any readers suspect that this thesis is an attempt to whitewash the Vietnam War they may rest assured that it is not. As I will explain in depth, Phoenix was a poorly executed program that often led to the arbitrary detention of innocent civilians, some of whom who were tortured, and, in much rarer cases, to the killing of innocent civilians. Nevertheless, the damage which Phoenix caused, both to the enemy and to innocent Vietnamese civilians, has been greatly overstated in many accounts. As detailed in the fifth chapter, most of those Vietcong suspects neutralized as part of Phoenix were actually the victims of routine security operations unrelated to the program. While recognizing that it is impossible to know the exact scope of the abuses that occurred under Phoenix, it is important to note that when abuses occurred they were usually the result of bureaucratic ineptitude rather than willful, systematic malfeasance.

Given the sheer volume of Vietnam War historiography available, this thesis inevitably relies on the work of many secondary sources. Two scholars in particular are worth noting, as

they have produced what are to my knowledge the only two academic volumes to date dedicated solely to Phoenix and related programs. Dale Andrade's 1990 book, *Ashes to Ashes: The Phoenix Program and the Vietnam War*, provides the most authoritative narrative of Phoenix and offers a good understanding of how Phoenix looked on paper. Andrade does his best to show the good, the bad, and the ugly with regard to the program, concluding that Phoenix was ultimately a qualified success. Mark Moyar's 1997 book, *Phoenix and the Birds of Prey: Counterinsurgency and Counterterrorism in Vietnam*, offers a more critical look at Phoenix. While disagreeing with much of the conventional Vietnam counterinsurgency historiography to date, Moyar argues that Phoenix was a failure, but that other attempts to disrupt the VC shadow government proved more successful.

Both histories, as well as this thesis, suffer from the fact that the CIA's archives related to the Provincial Reconnaissance Units and the Agency's other anti-infrastructure intelligence operations are not readily available to the public. Those documents remain either classified or accessible only through a lengthy Freedom of Information Act request, which would have been beyond the scope of this project. Veteran CIA operations officer Thomas Alhern made good use of his access to the Agency's archives in writing his 2010 history of CIA counterinsurgency operations during the war, *Vietnam Declassified*, but Phoenix and its relevant operational arms constitute only a short chapter.

While this thesis draws considerable influence from the aforementioned works, as well as numerous other works on the Vietnam War, intelligence, and counterinsurgency, I ultimately drew my conclusions from a reexamination of the available documents from CORDS (Civil Operations for Rural Development Support—the overarching pacification program in Vietnam) located in the National Archives, as well as through several interviews. While I am not the first

to argue that Phoenix was ultimately a failure or that the program was hampered by excessive bureaucracy, I hope to provide an understanding of the relationship between Phoenix's bureaucratic structure and its failure. While authors have previously treated Phoenix as a hybrid program in which the military and the CIA shared equal authority, these authors fixate on how Phoenix looked on paper rather than in practice.*

After reexamining the bureaucratic structure of Phoenix and identifying the institutional constraints which hampered Phoenix's performance, I conclude that Phoenix's failure lay in the fact that the program was in effect a military—and more specifically, Army—bureaucracy and that the American military never implemented an effective counterinsurgency strategy in Vietnam. This is not to say that America lost South Vietnam to the insurgents. In the words of a former Marine pacification adviser, “Like us, Hanoi had failed to win the “hearts and minds” of the South Vietnamese peasantry. Unlike us, Hanoi's leaders were able to compensate for this failure by playing their trump card—they overwhelmed South Vietnam with a twenty-two division force.”³ I argue instead that American military leaders failed to develop an effective strategy to decisively isolate the insurgents from the populace and that the failure to adopt such a strategy or even adopt a coherent counterinsurgency doctrine had profound implications on the Phoenix Program.

The military was the only institution that possessed the resources to conduct nationwide pacification operations, but under the tenure of MACV commander William Westmoreland

³ Stuart Herrington, *Stalking the Vietcong: Inside Operation Phoenix: A Personal Account*. p. 269

*Mark Moyer is something of an exception to this generalization, as he argues that once Colby handed control of Phoenix to MACV in 1969, the CIA largely abandoned the program. I argue, however, that since the program's inception, the effort was dominated by MACV, even in the early stages when the CIA retained nominal control over certain aspects of the program. Furthermore, my conclusions regarding the effects of military control of Phoenix are at odds with Moyer's assessment that MACV and ARVN adopted effective counterinsurgency tactics (Moyer, p. 333)

(1964-1968) the military committed relatively few resources to such operations. During this period therefore, individual civilian agencies carried out various pacification tasks with little coordination or discernible effect. By 1967, American civilian leaders and a growing number of military strategists began to understand the importance of pacification and created CORDS, of which Phoenix was one component, to coordinate pacification efforts. But despite the growing recognition of pacification as a key aspect of the war, the military proved incapable of adapting its traditional practices to suit the asymmetric environment of Vietnam. As the only institution in Vietnam with sufficient resources to conduct nationwide pacification, MACV immediately subsumed command of CORDS despite the latter theoretically being a civil-military hybrid organization. MACV consequently brought its personnel, and thus its culture, to CORDS and Phoenix while also continuing to divert much-needed resources from pacification efforts to support the big-unit war.

While the military's decision to divert resources from pacification and the overall lack of progress in state-building in South Vietnam hampered the counterinsurgency effort as a whole, US Army culture specifically affected the Phoenix Program in several discernible ways. First, CORDS developed a rigid, vertical hierarchy for Phoenix in the style of a military chain of command. This structure hampered horizontal communication between intelligence centers, retarding the dissemination of both innovative solutions to bureaucratic issues as well as timely intelligence on enemy movements. Second, Army officers viewed advisory roles as less prestigious than unit commands, limiting the number of top-echelon officers involved in Phoenix. Similarly, the Army's 12-month tour-of-duty system limited the time advisers had to build rapport with their Vietnamese colleagues and create positive momentum against the enemy before turning over their work to a new batch of inexperienced officers. The rapid turnaround in

advisors limited the institutional memory of the Phoenix Program and incentivized meeting meaningless bureaucratic benchmarks over making a concerted effort at long-term progress against the enemy infrastructure. Third, MACV brought its preferred metric for success to Phoenix, one which fit the conventional paradigms of Army thinking but which proved useless if not entirely counterproductive in counterinsurgency: the body count. Phoenix personnel recognized that the program's neutralization quotas, both official and implicit, created misleading figures, but the emphasis on numbers proved too central to the military's mindset to abandon and remained characteristic of the anti-infrastructure effort throughout the program's existence.

In short, anti-infrastructure operations and pacification more generally swung from one extreme to another: Prior to Phoenix and CORDS, anti-infrastructure operations existed in a bureaucratic vacuum without any coordination or centralized authority. Following the creation of Phoenix, anti-infrastructure operations became highly bureaucratized, but the bureaucracy which assumed authority brought an institutional mindset that—as a result of Cold War strategic priorities—was incompatible with the nature of the operations it would need to conduct. At the same time, the overarching American military authority in Vietnam continued to place pacification on the back burner.

A Note on Terminology and Scope

There has been a well-warranted debate in academic circles over whether it is appropriate to use the term Vietcong when referring to the South Vietnamese insurgents. As I explain in the first chapter, the term is a rather crude simplification of a complex phenomenon, that of the

National Liberation Front. As the second reader on this thesis, Professor Paul Pope, noted during the review of the initial draft, terminology is tremendously important in warfare, as it is an inextricable aspect of “knowing the enemy,” to use the old adage of Sun Tzu. If American officials had used the term NLF rather than Vietcong during the war, perhaps they would have better understood the complex post-colonial nature of the war. Nevertheless, as this thesis focuses primarily on the American and South Vietnamese perspectives of the war, it is more convenient to use the term Vietcong, for such is the way the enemy is described in American documents.

The reader will notice that while this thesis focuses on the US military in Vietnam, much of my discussion of military doctrine relates solely to the US Army. I in no way mean to diminish the accomplishments of the US Marines, who operated under the command of MACV throughout the duration of the war. The Marines showed laudable initiative in the creation of their Combined Action Platoons, while a limited number of Marines proved themselves competent counterinsurgents as advisers to the Provincial Reconnaissance Units. But these were two relatively small contributions to the overall pacification effort. For the most part, Marines were geographically limited to I CTZ, and while they were involved in several key battles including Khe Sanh, pacification was overwhelmingly the realm of Army personnel. Furthermore, Army doctrine was crucial to shaping MACV’s strategy, while Marine doctrine failed to take hold on the strategic level. With this in mind, I limit this study of counterinsurgency strategy to that of the Army.

CHAPTER ONE

Know Your Enemy: Understanding the VCI

“Infrastructure” and the Vietnamese Villager

The term Vietcong Infrastructure (VCI) was not one which the South Vietnamese guerrillas chose for themselves. *Vietcong* was an abbreviation coined by the GVN for “Vietnamese communist.” The Vietcong called themselves the National Liberation Front (NLF); the People’s Liberation Armed Forces (PLAF) referred to the military wing. *Infrastructure*, meanwhile, was an American descriptor first used by the CIA in the early 1960s. A Department of the Army pamphlet from 1967 describes the *infrastructure* as “a complex of organizations designed to generate or support various facets of the total insurgent effort, and it counts among its membership a substantial majority of the personnel engaged in one way or another in activities conducted by the movement.” The Vietcong themselves never referred to their organization as “infrastructure,” preferring to use the term “party organization” instead.⁴ Regardless of the term one uses—bureaucracy, infrastructure, party organization—both the Americans and the Vietnamese on both sides of the DMZ agreed that the communist political cadre were instrumental in the conduct of the insurgency.

Vo Nguyen Giap, commander of the North Vietnamese Army, hero of Dien Bien Phu, and renowned guerrilla-warfare theorist, understood the vital role of political officers in maintaining connections to the populace in an insurgency. In his seminal series of 1961 essays, Giap proclaims “political work still bears upon the correct fulfillment in the army of the programmes of the Party and Government, and the setting up of *good relations with the population*. . . . The Vietnam People’s Army has always seen to establishing and maintaining

⁴ Department of the Army. *The Communist Insurgent Infrastructure in South Vietnam: A Study of Organization and Strategy*. Pamphlet No. 550-106, March 1967. p. 20

good relations with the people.”⁵ Giap’s doctrine was key to the insurgency in South Vietnam, and called for a political cadre separate from the guerrilla forces to rally support for the NLF revolution. These cadres constituted the VCI.

During the war, successive US administrations pushed the narrative that the Vietcong were merely puppets of Hanoi, while critics of the war portrayed the Vietcong as an independent, homegrown nationalist movement. As Robert Brigham explains in his volume on the Vietcong, the truth was, of course, more complicated. The Vietcong were no broad front alliance of nationalists as the Viet Minh had been during the Second World War and First Indochina War. The Vietcong were members of the Lao Dong, the communist party of Vietnam, as were the communists in the north. Nevertheless, many Vietcong saw communism primarily as a means of overthrowing the GVN and reforming South Vietnamese society and were distrustful of Hanoi, whose strategic goal was to reunite Vietnam under communism. The northern communists always managed to maintain a presence at the highest echelons of the Vietcong, however, influencing Vietcong guerrilla doctrine and ensuring close coordination between the Vietcong and NVA. Brigham argues that, “throughout the war, the Lao Dong and the NLF shared a strategic culture,” with major disagreements over strategy only coming to the fore after the fall of Saigon in 1975.⁶

Following the signing of the Geneva Accords and partitioning of Vietnam in 1954, the Viet Minh began purging non-communist nationalists from its ranks.⁷ At the same time, Ho Chi Minh sought to conduct a campaign of limited political terror in South Vietnam to ensure a communist victory in the nationwide elections scheduled for 1956. Hanoi ordered some 5,000

⁵ Vo Nguyen Giap, *People’s War, People’s Army*. pp. 55-56

⁶ Robert Brigham, *Guerrilla Diplomacy: The NLF’s Foreign Relations and the Viet Nam War*. pp. 127-130

⁷ Douglas Pike, *Viet Cong: The Organization and Techniques of the National Liberation Front of Vietnam*. pp. 53-55

armed communist guerrillas and 3,000 political cadre to remain in the South to agitate, form political cells, and assassinate GVN officials.⁸ By virtue of the nature of their missions, the guerrillas operated remotely from the populace and in loosely organized cells, while the political cadre maintained a strong presence in numerous strategic villages. Upon taking power, GVN President Ngo Dinh Diem quickly established himself as head of an authoritarian regime and refused to allow communist participation in South Vietnamese politics. Realizing there would be no popular communist take-over through the ballots, in 1959 Ho Chi Minh ordered the southern communists, heretofore engaged in a limited political terror campaign against the GVN, to begin an insurgency in earnest. Hanoi did not announce the formation of the National Liberation Front, however, until January 1961.⁹

As in any insurgency, the Vietcong relied upon the population for material support, protection, and intelligence. North Vietnam supplied the Vietcong with military hardware and fighters through an extensive logistical network that ran through Laos and Cambodia and through the porous South Vietnamese border. The main-force Vietcong units, many of which were based near or across the Laotian and Cambodian borders, received a significant amount of their food and medical supplies through these networks as well. The Vietcong guerrillas, however, tended to rely on the local population for food, clothes and other necessities.¹⁰

Villagers also offered the guerrillas protection. This often came in the form of hiding guerrillas and weapons caches within the village, but it could also be as passive as simply withholding information related to Vietcong operations from US-GVN forces. Similarly, villagers could provide intelligence to guerrillas regarding US-GVN operations. The Vietcong

⁸ Dale Andrade. *Ashes to Ashes: The Phoenix Program and the Vietnam War*. pp. 5-6

⁹ Lien-Hang Nguyen. *Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam*. pp. 45-46

¹⁰ Mark Moyar, *Phoenix and the Birds of Prey: Counterinsurgency and Counterterrorism in Vietnam*. pp. 29-30

frequently did not have to employ their own soldiers for reconnaissance operations, as seemingly innocuous villagers could locate and identify enemy units and report to the local Vietcong. Similarly, villagers sometimes identified GVN officials to the Vietcong, who then targeted officials for extortion or assassination.

Most Vietcong guerrillas and all main-force units operated out of the wilderness on the fringes of settled areas, generally emerging from hiding at night to relocate their camp or attack enemy positions. Many of the VCI, on the other hand, hid in plain sight, earning the term “legal cadre” in US and GVN documents due to their possession of government identification. Low-level cadre were recruited from their villages where they stayed and served as the Vietcong’s base of contact within the community. Mid-level cadre generally lived in the wilderness with other Vietcong military forces, but they frequented the villages more than the guerrillas as they moved independently of any unit and sought to maintain strong ties with the local populace. Top-level cadre lived in small units in the wilderness and rarely visited the villages, using the mid-level cadre to liaise with the populace.¹¹

The VCI, therefore, were key to maintaining the three aforementioned forms of vital Vietcong-villager support: supplies, protection, and intelligence. Low-level VCI collected taxes, stockpiled and transported supplies, arranged for Vietcong guerrillas to be quartered within the village, stockpiled medicine and provided medical care for guerrillas, and ran local informant networks for gathering intelligence. Between these operations and the political activities of the cadre, which included organizing rallies, distributing propaganda leaflets,

¹¹ Melvin Gurtov, *Viet Cong Cadres and the Cadre System: A Study of the Main and Local Forces*. The Rand Corporation. pp. 52-53

holding village assemblies, and providing “revolutionary education” to schoolchildren, the VCI could consider themselves the “shadow government” of the NLF.¹²

While the exact nature of VCI operations varied from village to village, the division of labor for cadre could be quite specialized. District-level Phoenix neutralization data, though frequently flawed, (see chapter seven) nonetheless paints a picture of the VCI as a relatively bureaucratic organization. Taking titles from captured VCI documents, a single Phoenix neutralization report from Bien Hoa province lists VCI as holding positions as diverse and specific as “commo-liaison agent,” “political education cadre,” “VC finance/economy cadre,” “tax collector,” “VC supplier,” “member of the twelfth rear service team” (responsible for supplying Vietcong units), as well as the mysterious title of “VC civilian agent.”¹³ CIA analyst Sam Adams, who taught a class on the Vietcong to Agency officers, remarked, “Infrastructure was a word George Allen pulled out of his ass. The VC didn’t have an infrastructure; what they had was bureaucracies.”¹⁴

One of the most significant challenges the Vietcong faced in enlisting villager assistance was the lack of communist zeal among Vietnam’s rural population. As one high-level Vietcong defector from Long-An province explained, “[The peasants] live close to the land and are concerned with nothing else. . . . Thus they do not have the time or the concern for large matters like the future of communism—such matters are of no concern to them. . . . Party cadres are instructed never to mention [communism].”¹⁵ Marxist-Leninist rhetoric, while ubiquitous in

¹² Thomas Alhern, *Vietnam Declassified: The CIA and Rural Pacification in South Vietnam*. Center for the Study of Intelligence. pp. 26-27

¹³ CORDS. *Coordinated Monthly Progress Report of Attack on VC Infrastructure*. National Archives Record Group 472, Entry A1 735, Container 1742

¹⁴ National Security Archive. *Douglas Valentine Collection*. Box 3. “Sam Adams”

¹⁵ Jeffrey Race, *War Comes to Long An: Revolutionary Conflict in a Vietnamese Province*. p. 98

internal Vietcong documents and Hanoi's propaganda, was far less prevalent in VCI propaganda used at the local level.¹⁶

VCI rarely spoke of the communist society they hoped to achieve. In fact, there was little talk at the village level about what sort of government the NLF would provide following the insurgent victory. Rather, the VCI sought to gain support for the insurgency by appealing to the villagers' pressing grievances against the GVN, promising that the post-GVN society would be more prosperous and equitable without delving into details.¹⁷ The central tenets of Vietcong propaganda were economic equality, remedying the abuses of the GVN, and offering a sense of identity to young Vietnamese. The GVN was slow to tackle the issue of land reform, which continued to be a source of discontent among the rural population. A captured Vietcong document from the Kien Phong province stated, "The Party in [redacted] village always used the subject of land as a means of propagandizing the people and indoctrinating the masses."¹⁸ In a survey conducted by CORDS personnel in 1970 throughout Military Region I, anywhere between 44% and 61% of respondents said they were most concerned about economic issues in the community, while no more than 32% ever said that security was their primary concern.¹⁹

The Vietcong sought to exploit the GVN's human rights record in parts of the country where the government was frequently abusive of the rural population. A 1962 NLF Central Committee document issued to top-level VCI nation-wide pronounced, "Daily the masses are oppressed and exploited by the imperialists and feudalists and therefore are disposed to hate them and their crimes. But their hatred is not focused; it is diffuse. . . . It is necessary to change

¹⁶ David Elliott. *The Vietnamese War: Revolution and Social Change in the Mekong Delta 1930-1975*. pp. 249-250

¹⁷ CORDS. *VC Propaganda*. National Archives Record Group 472, Entry A1 735, Container 1745

¹⁸ Department of the Army. *The Communist Insurgent Infrastructure in South Vietnam*. p. 349

¹⁹ CORDS. *Pacification Attitude Analysis System (PAAS)*. CORDS MR1 Executive Secretariat-General Records 1970. National Archives Record Group 472, Entry 33101, Container 3

the attitude of the masses from a passive one to a desire to struggle strongly.”²⁰ The VCI were consequently most effective in their efforts to gain popular support when the Vietcong delivered land reform and presented itself as an alternative to the repressive GVN. As one VCI from the Dinh Tuong province explained, an estimated 90% of the population was sympathetic to the Vietcong by 1962 simply because “the Front had really taken care of the poor by giving them land, and the Front was more lenient toward the people than Ngo Dinh Diem’s regime.”²¹

In addition to appealing to Vietnamese desires for economic equality and political dignity, the VCI recognized the importance of identity in Vietnam’s tradition-bound society. Vietnamese Confucianism emphasized a hierarchical social order in which upward mobility was limited. Not unreasonably, the GVN believed that by respecting traditional Vietnamese values, they would offer a recognizable and welcome alternative to the radical sociopolitical change advocated by the communists; but this allowed the communists to tap into the frustrations of Vietnamese youth who filled the majority of the VC’s ranks.²² Andrew Finlayson, an adviser in Tay Ninh province, explained:

I interviewed dozens of Hoi Chanhs (VCI defectors) in Tay Ninh, and what I found time and again was that one of the biggest incentives for joining the communists was anti-Confucianism. Confucianism was very hierarchal. If you were born a farmer, you were going to be a farmer your entire life under that system. It was very frustrating for young people in particular. So the VCI would tell a young farmer, “You know, you’re very smart. You’ve got a lot of capability. The party will educate you and make you a leader.” And they’d give the kid a cool title like “secret cadre” or “village leader” and all of a sudden that kid wasn’t just a farmer any more. No one ever claimed he’d be part of a global revolution, but he meant something to his village now. He would help liberate Vietnam. He had a purpose.²³

²⁰ Douglas Pike, *Viet Cong*. pp. 122-123

²¹ David Elliott, *The Vietnamese War: Revolution and Social Change in the Mekong Delta 1930-1975*. pp. 200

²² Pike, *Viet Cong*. pp. 78-81

²³ Interview with Andrew Finlayson. February 17, 2016.

The sense of self-worth which the Vietcong offered young Vietnamese was compelling and is key to understanding the insurgency. Nevertheless, it is incorrect to posit that the VC's communism was at the heart of their proselytization efforts. There was nothing uniquely Marxist-Leninist about the VC's central propaganda points of economic reform, political dignity, and identity based in national liberation. Not surprisingly, passionate communists were therefore a minority among the VCI, the majority of cadre being no different from typical villagers in their lack of interest in Marxism-Leninism.²⁴ The initial Viet Minh cadre who had stayed behind in South Vietnam after the Geneva Accords had been some of the most dedicated, carefully vetted South Vietnamese communists who shared Ho Chi Minh's vision.²⁵ Beginning in 1959, the communists sought to recruit VCI in every village in order to support the increasing number of guerrilla and main-force Vietcong units in the countryside and proselytize the rural population. According to CIA estimates, the VCI constituted a "hard core" of between 75,000 and 85,000 individuals at their peak strength between 1967 and 1968.²⁶ To reach and maintain these numbers, the qualifications to be a VCI were necessarily relaxed.²⁷

The majority of Vietnamese joined the VCI at times when the Vietcong seemed to be winning the war in the countryside and the GVN had alienated the local population or failed to maintain a local presence.²⁸ Many joined the VCI because they had friends or family who were cadre, and many did so out of basic instincts for self-preservation. As a US adviser in Hua Nghia noted, several defectors explained that they had joined the VCI because they thought it would be

²⁴ Andrade, *Ashes to Ashes*. pp. 14-15

²⁵ Gurtov, *Viet Cong Cadres*. pp. 11-13

²⁶ CIA. *Capabilities of the Vietnamese Communists for Fighting in South Vietnam*. 13 November 1967, Special National Intelligence Estimate No. 14.3-67

²⁷ Moyar, *Phoenix and the Birds of Prey*. p. 12

²⁸ Elliott, *The Vietnamese War*. p. 161

safer than fighting in the Vietcong guerrilla or main-force units.²⁹ For the most part, the VCI were no different from any other South Vietnamese in that they all shared a loyalty to their community first and foremost. In general, South Vietnamese villagers, including VCI, either ceased working with the Vietcong or changed their allegiances because they feared US-GVN retribution more than Vietcong retribution, not because they particularly favored one side over the other. Indeed, the *Chieu Hoi* or “Open Arms” program received thousands of VCI defectors by the end of the war, with a noticeable trend of increased defections during periods when the Vietcong was on the retreat.³⁰

Counterinsurgencies are, in the words of Col. H.R. McMaster, “so damn complex,” and it is not my intention to purport to know the “quick and easy way to win Vietnam.”³¹

Nevertheless, the VCI were an integral component of the insurgency in South Vietnam, making any successful counterinsurgency dependent in part on the ability of the US and GVN to target and eliminate the Infrastructure in some manner or another. In a counterinsurgency, in which the support of the people is paramount, there would be any number of ways to successfully attack the enemy’s political infrastructure while inflicting collateral damage to such an extent that the attack becomes entirely counterproductive. Carpet bombing in the style of the 1945 Tokyo raids, for example, would be dangerously wanton and inappropriate in a counterinsurgency. With this in mind, the US and GVN had the unenviable task of finding an equilibrium between the need to ensure the people’s safety and, by extension, political support, and the need to isolate the population from the political infrastructure through kinetic force. As I explore in the following chapters, many Americans and South Vietnamese within both the military and political

²⁹ Herrington, *Stalking the Vietcong*. p. 54

³⁰ Moyer, *Phoenix and the Birds of Prey*. pp. 299-302

³¹ George Packer, *The Lesson of Tal Afar*. The New Yorker. April 10, 2006

establishments recognized from an early stage the need to take a balanced and concerted approach to target the VCI. Fortunately for Hanoi, Washington and Saigon were slow in taking up the task.



A Provincial Reconnaissance Unit poses with captured enemy weapons in Hoi An district, Quang Nam province (photo courtesy of Fred Vogel)

CHAPTER TWO

“Everyone’s business, and no one’s”: Pacification Efforts Prior to Phoenix

Prior to US involvement in Vietnam, the French had nine years of experience in pacification in Indochina. The French strategy for quelling the insurgency relied on the “oil spot” pacification model, in which French troops would enter an area with relatively minimal Viet Minh presence and establish a base of operations. From this area they would both launch attacks against the Viet Minh and begin to establish themselves as the legitimate governing authority of the region, collecting taxes, maintaining roads, and so on.³² The French stressed pacification, but their preferred method of counterinsurgency, the “oil spot” (*tache d’huile*) method, emphasized the establishment of fortifications in strategic villages and the elimination of Viet Minh guerrilla units. The French recognized the enemy infrastructure as an integral component of the insurgency, but they relegated the task of rooting out Viet Minh political cadre to lower-quality troops or local police. In 1950, when the Viet Minh began a conventional campaign in the north of the country, the French placed pacification on the back burner as they focused the majority of their manpower on combatting the expanding conventional threat.³³

Before 1950, the French had had inconsistent success eliminating the enemy political infrastructure. The French arrested and executed Viet Minh cadre by the thousands, but through their harsh tactics the French increasingly alienated themselves from the population. Unwilling to amend their repressive system of colonial administration, the French suffered widespread opposition from the population. The Viet Minh, then still a broad-based coalition, expanded rapidly as villagers flocked to the cause faster than French tactical victories could neutralize Viet Minh cadres. As historian Dale Andrade explained, “The French never equated pacification with

³² Douglas Porch, *Counterinsurgency: Exposing the Myths of the New Way of War*. pp. 164-165

³³ Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History*. p. 199

the long-term reforms that later experience in Vietnam—and elsewhere in the Third World—would show were necessary for any sort of lasting suppression of communist insurgency.”³⁴

When the Americans first began their involvement in Vietnam as advisers, they were averse to using the word *pacification*, as it carried the stigma of the brutal French colonial repression with which they hoped to avoid being associated.³⁵ The GVN under Ngo Dinh Diem, President from 1955 to 1963, on the other hand, had no such qualms about the widespread use of force. Diem’s attempts at pacification were sincere and, in the words of historian Edward Miller, relied heavily on “coercion, punishment, and intimidation.”³⁶ Diem’s initial efforts to thwart the communists in the countryside came in the form of the Anti-Communist Denunciation Campaign and Mutual Aid Family Groups. The former were rallies held by GVN officials in which villagers were encouraged to denounce Viet Minh and later Vietcong atrocities and swear allegiance to the Saigon government. The Mutual Aid Family Groups, meanwhile, were cells of several families who were instructed to report on the activities of the other families in their cells. There is little evidence to indicate the Family Groups produced much intelligence of any real quality. Rather, the groups bred resentment for the GVN as the government created a climate of fear and distrust in the community.³⁷

Diem’s boldest plan to pacify the countryside was his Agrovillage Program of 1960, which proved to be an abject failure. The plan called for the relocation of villagers from hamlets with high Vietcong presence to new, government-designed hamlets that would hypothetically be easier to monitor and protect. The government advertised the new hamlets as modern upgrades of the villagers’ traditional hamlets, but in reality the new settlements lacked the same basic

³⁴ Andrade, *Ashes to Ashes*. p. 19

³⁵ Porch, *Counterinsurgency*. p. 211

³⁶ Edward Miller, *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the Fate of South Vietnam*. p. 187

³⁷ Alhern, *Vietnam Declassified*. pp. 20-22

infrastructure as the traditional hamlets. The GVN also failed to provide even the most basic security to the Agrovillage settlements. The GVN appeared to believe that Vietcong presence in the traditional hamlets had been the result of some innate characteristic of those hamlets rather than a lack of GVN security presence.³⁸ The program was cancelled within several months after the Vietcong burned an Agrovillage settlement in Vinh Long province. The only clear affect the program had was to anger South Vietnamese villagers who had been forced to relocate from their ancestral homelands.³⁹

Apart from the Agrovillage program, Diem's regime made progress against communist insurgents throughout the country between 1956 and 1963, but differing perspectives on state-building within the GVN and between Diem and his American patrons precluded the national development needed to effectively counter the nascent communist insurgency.⁴⁰ In November 1961, Diem implemented another hamlet reorganization program, called the Strategic Hamlet Program. The Strategic Hamlet Program was the brainchild of Ngo Dinh Nhu, the younger brother and chief political adviser of Diem, who had been skeptical of the relocation of villagers required in the Agrovillage program. Nhu's plan called for special teams of GVN counterinsurgency and development cadre to identify hamlets that were at risk of enemy infiltration, root out the communists through interrogation of the population and police action, and then reorganize the hamlets to make them more compact and surround them with defensive perimeters including in some cases wooden walls and moats. Nhu believed that the fortified hamlets would isolate the Vietcong from the community, thus allowing the hamlets to provide

³⁸ Miller, *Misalliance*. pp. 182-184

³⁹ Andrade, *Ashes to Ashes*. pp. 35-36

⁴⁰ Mark Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965*. p. 83
Miller, *Misalliance*. pp. 324-326

support to ARVN units operating outside the defensive perimeters.⁴¹ In addition to being a costly endeavor, the Strategic Hamlet program failed insofar as Nhu's idea stressed the self-sufficiency of the Vietnamese villagers. While self-sufficiency is theoretically an important stage in counterinsurgency theory, it proved premature in the case of the Strategic Hamlet. The lack of ARVN or National Police units within Strategic Hamlets made it easy for Vietcong to reestablish a presence within the community through the support of the VCI.⁴²

Diem was never able to dedicate the full strength of GVN resources to pacification. Governing a nascent post-colonial state rife with sectarian and political division had been no easy task. Nevertheless, his administration's nepotism and corruption had failed to win him the support of significant sectors of the population and key power brokers within the GVN establishment. Diem's primary concern had always been internal stability, but following an attempted coup by elite ARVN paratroopers in November 1960, he increasingly began to fear for the security of his regime and consequently focused his efforts on weakening his political enemies and containing the opposition of religious minorities from the Buddhist Cao Dai and Hoa Hao sects. Diem's fears of instability were prescient. By 1963, Diem found himself facing powerful rivals within the military and without the support of the US embassy in Saigon. The State Department under Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge in particular quietly advocated Diem's removal. In November 1963, following months of massive Buddhist protests throughout the country, Diem was deposed and executed in a coup orchestrated by ARVN generals with the tacit support of the Kennedy administration. What followed the collapse of the Diem regime was nearly two years of constant instability and subsequent Vietcong resurgence as three successive

⁴¹ Miller, *Misalliance*. pp. 233-235

⁴² Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie*. P. 124
Andrade, *Ashes to Ashes*. p. 85

military rulers fell to coups. Finally, in 1965 a military junta consolidated control and established a figurehead government with President Nguyen Van Thieu and Prime Minister Nguyen Cao Ky. In September 1967, the junta came to an end as Thieu won presidential elections with Ky as his Vice President and began to install himself as the autocratic head of state.

The years of post-Diem military rule saw the GVN shift away from Diem's early focus on the countryside. As the GVN was now working hand-in-hand with a significantly larger US presence on security issues, they tended to follow MACV's reasoning that the Vietcong main-force units and, most of all, the possibility of a conventional NVA invasion posed the only appreciable threats to security. This emphasis on the big-unit war, as well as the lack of political stability in South Vietnam, meant that from 1963 to 1967 pacification efforts were diffuse, disorganized, and neglected. Robert Komer, future director of the Phoenix Program's umbrella agency and chief of pacification operations, explained that in the absence of an overarching organization to oversee efforts, pacification had fallen through the cracks, so to speak: "It was everyone's business, and it was no one's."⁴³ There were as many as 50 US and GVN pacification programs operational in this period, few of which coordinated with one another but some of which were quite innovative.⁴⁴ The CIA began training the Civilian Indigenous Defense Groups, often comprised of individuals from the Montagnard minority, in the Central Highlands in 1961, handing over control of the program to 5th Special Forces Group in 1963. Under both CIA and Special Forces leadership, the CIDG proved to be a cost-effective quick reaction force.⁴⁵

⁴³ Robert Komer, *Bureaucracy Does Its Thing: Institutional Constraints on US-GVN Performance in Vietnam*. p. 12

⁴⁴ Randall Woods, *Shadow Warrior: William Egan Colby and the CIA*. p. 249

⁴⁵ Mark Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War 1954-1965*. p. 183

The US Marine Corps' greatest innovation, meanwhile, was the Combined Action Platoon, first deployed in 1965. The CAPs were static forces consisting of a squad of Marine riflemen and two squads of Popular Force militiamen that provided hamlet security.⁴⁶ In his book *The Village*, Bing West recounts how a CAP that spent nearly two years embedded in a village in the Quang Ngai province managed to gain the trust of some 6,000 Vietnamese in a region of high Vietcong activity. But MACV and the GVN never gave the CAPs or CIDGs sufficient resources or implemented them on a nationwide scale. As such, the programs remained localized anomalies, achieving tactical successes but doing little to turn the tide of war. At the beginning of 1967, there still remained no sufficiently funded, nationwide, inter-agency, US-GVN pacification effort.

Prior to 1967, the CIA was the only US agency to have specifically targeted the VCI for intelligence collection or engaged in anti-infrastructure operations. Despite the CIA's interest in the VCI, the Agency did not have the resources to fight the enemy infrastructure alone. Their biggest contribution was not in operations but in developing a system to collect, assess, and catalog intelligence related to the VCI on a local level. Whereas MACV did not even explicitly include numbers of VCI in their estimates of Vietcong strength (see chapter seven), by 1965 the CIA had developed Province and District Intelligence Coordination Centers (PICCs and DICC)s to collect and collate intelligence on the VCI.⁴⁷ The PICCs served as operation centers for the CIA's anti-infrastructure effort and as collection centers for all intelligence collected in the

⁴⁶ Komer, *Bureaucracy Does Its Thing*. pp. 108-109

⁴⁷ Sam Adams, *War of Numbers*. p. 89

province. The PICCs would divide intelligence on VCI into relevant districts and then send that information to the DICC which would maintain the list of VCI in their respective districts.⁴⁸

That the CIA only had around 400 personnel in South Vietnam in 1964 made running the PICCs difficult, as only one Agency employee was generally stationed in each of Vietnam's 44 provinces. The establishment of DICC's entailed maintaining an Agency presence in each of South Vietnam's 250 districts. Where DICC's existed, they were maintained by a staff of only a handful of GVN personnel and local US advisers whose responsibility it was to maintain the documents on local VCI in case US or ARVN forces requested such intelligence. As both the flow of VCI-related intelligence and the personnel involved in anti-infrastructure operations increased under Phoenix, the top-down intelligence-sharing system would come under strain and be replaced by a more orthodox bottom-up, district-to-province intelligence coordination system.⁴⁹

The DICC's and PICCs were a step in the right direction, but they were novel programs untested in Vietnam—not to mention the fact that they were understaffed. There were numerous deficiencies in the system, chief among them a disconnect between the PICCs and the CIA station in Saigon. It seems that both in Saigon and in Langley, the CIA lacked sufficient personnel dedicated to studying the Vietcong to put all the PICC and DICC intelligence to proper use. For example, prior to Phoenix, the CIA never compiled a master list of Vietcong defections in South Vietnam, despite the fact that each PICC had maintained been tasked with maintaining precise, detailed lists of all local defectors since the Centers' creation.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ CIA. *Intelligence Memorandum: The Intelligence Attack on the Viet Cong Infrastructure*, 23 May 1967. LBJ Library. Case # NLJ 98-132, Document #6

⁴⁹ Andrade, *Ashes to Ashes*. pp. 42-43

⁵⁰ Adams, *War of Numbers*. p. 39

As a matter of necessity, the CIA relied on the GVN to collect most of the intelligence on the VCI. In the pre-Phoenix days this was especially problematic, as at the time ARVN were tasked with pacification operations rather than the national police. ARVN consisted of conventional army units lacking training in intelligence collection or exploitation, which was more similar to the training the National Police received. As such, the CIA sought to train their own units outside the ARVN chain of command to conduct anti-infrastructure operations. In 1964 the CIA developed the Counter Terror Teams (CTTs), which generally consisted of half a dozen to two dozen Vietnamese who received specialized intelligence and counter-insurgent training.⁵¹

The CTT program was loosely coordinated and thus varied greatly across provinces, but in nearly every case the teams were better trained for anti-infrastructure operations than their ARVN counterparts. They also operated with less than complete CIA oversight, an inevitability given the lack of CIA personnel at the province level. In addition to collecting intelligence, the CTTs were tasked with “neutralizing” VCI, which meant killing, capturing, or convincing the VCI to defect through the *Chieu Hoi* (“open arms”) program. For legal and practical reasons, the CIA stressed the importance of the latter two options.⁵² After all, a dead Vietcong cannot talk. The CTTs, however, were generally recruited from communities where the Vietcong had been especially brutal with the population. This was the double-edged sword: While many CTT members were very dedicated to the anti-Vietcong crusade, they were often merciless in their treatment of suspected VCI.⁵³

⁵¹ Moyer, *Phoenix and the Birds of Prey*. p. 38

⁵² National Security Archive. *Douglas Valentine Collection*. Box 2. “Church Senate hearings 1973”

⁵³ Woods, *Shadow Warrior*. p. 252

Prior to Phoenix, the CIA did not keep national-level statistics of VCI neutralizations, but in many provinces the CTTs had a de facto preference for killing VCI even if the CIA's de jure emphasis was on capturing and rallying. Despite Agency efforts to keep the units in line, CTTs quickly earned a reputation for brutality. In 1965, the chief of the CIA's Far Eastern Division, William Colby, aware of the negative impact of the CTT's reputation on American relations with the public (the CIA's connection to the CTTs was common knowledge in South Vietnam), changed the name of the teams to Provincial Reconnaissance Units (PRU). Their operations, however, remained essentially unchanged for the duration of the war.⁵⁴

By 1967, both US and GVN attitudes towards pacification began to change. President Thieu took power on the promise of providing his people security from Vietcong terror. Influential members of the Johnson administration, including Secretary of Defense McNamara, similarly began to recognize the need to shift America's strategy towards the "other war." The CIA, having advocated such a strategic shift for several years reemphasized its position in a May 23 intelligence memorandum. "The Communist insurgency in Vietnam is basically a triumph of organization," it begins.

The success of the insurgency depends directly on the performance, morale and effectiveness of the cadre who compromise the district and provincial level committees. . . . An attack aimed at this target group, to be effective, requires a reciprocal, painstaking organizational effort on our part. Stated simply, we require a) the collection of precise, timely intelligence on the targets, b) the ability to collate and process rapidly the exhaustive data that we do acquire and, c) the means to take prompt, direct action commensurate with the identified target.⁵⁵

Two months later, the authors of this memorandum would have the beginnings of the program they sought in the form of Phoenix's direct predecessor, ICEX.

⁵⁴ Andrade, *Ashes to Ashes*. p. 44

⁵⁵ CIA. *The Intelligence Attack on the Viet Cong Infrastructure*

CHAPTER THREE

Making an Effort: ICEX and Phoenix, 1967-1972

The first signs of change in attitudes towards pacification came in February 1966 when President Johnson met in Honolulu with his national security team and the heads of the South Vietnamese government, including President Thieu and Vice President Ky. Despite the influx of US troops in 1965, the situation in South Vietnam was precarious and particularly dire in the countryside. The conference yielded mixed results but was nonetheless an important step in the right direction. The GVN agreed to renew focus on rural development in an effort to win hearts and minds, but questions remained as to who would take charge of anti-infrastructure efforts. The main success of the Honolulu conference was the reaching of a consensus that pacification efforts to date were disorganized and ineffective.⁵⁶

Despite the consensus, it took over a year to implement the first coherent and overarching pacification effort. This program, created on May 9, 1967, was labeled Civil Operations for Revolutionary Development Support or CORDS⁵⁷ and at its helm was former CIA analyst and National Security Council veteran Robert Komer. As Deputy in charge of CORDS (DEPCORDS), Komer was immediately beneath MACV commander Westmoreland (COMUSMACV) in the chain of command, placing the organization under military jurisdiction. CORDS, however, was to be “supported with funds, personnel, and other requirements by the civil agencies involved, such as State, AID, USIA, CIA, and Department of Agriculture.”⁵⁸

Despite its subordination to MACV, CORDS was nominally a civilian agency that oversaw rural development projects in areas as diverse as harvest planning, animal husbandry,

⁵⁶ Karnow, *Vietnam*. p. 500

⁵⁷ The acronym was later changed to mean Civil Operations for *Rural* Development Support

⁵⁸ National Security Council. *National Security Action Memorandum 362: Responsibility for US Role in Pacification (Revolutionary Development)*. National Security File, LBJ Library and Museum
Accessed online at (<http://www.lbjlib.utexas.edu/johnson/archives.hom/NSAMs/nsam362.asp>)

fishery conservation, and primary school education.⁵⁹ From its inception, however, CORDS was much more than a civilian development agency. If its name suggested that it represented the carrot of pacification—the development programs meant to win hearts and minds—its practice was more like that of the stick—anti-VCI operations. Of the 7,601 CORDS advisers in 1969, the height of its operations, military advisers outnumbered their civilian counterparts by more than five to one.⁶⁰ Just two months after CORDS' inception, Komer implemented the Intelligence Coordination and Exploitation (ICEX) program, the war's first concerted, nationwide anti-VCI effort, and placed it under the umbrella of CORDS.

ICEX was the brainchild of CIA Saigon analyst Nelson Brickham and had been in *de facto* operation for several months before its official creation with MACV Directive 381-41 on July 9. Komer, himself a CIA man, had felt that the biggest problem the US faced in their pacification efforts was a lack of coordination on vital village and district-level intelligence. He had believed that the CIA, with its decade of experience in Vietnam, its flexibility relative to other US agencies, and its focus on the VCI would be the best suited to take up the mantle of anti-infrastructure intelligence and operations.⁶¹ Komer enthusiastically embraced Brickham's plan, which called for organizing anti-infrastructure operations locally around the still rather nascent intelligence centers, the Province Intelligence and Operations Coordination Centers and

⁵⁹ CORDS. *Management Survey—New Life Development Division*. CORDS HQ General Records 1970 (Spring Review-various province briefs) National Archives Record Group 472, Entry 10096, Container 8

⁶⁰ Jeffrey Clarke, *Advice and Support: The Final Years, 1965-1973*. p. 373

⁶¹ MACV. *Directive 381-41*. Accessed online via Internet Archive—Phoenix Program Documents (https://archive.org/stream/PhoenixProgramDocuments/Phoenix%20Program/5%20MACV%20381-41%209%20July%2067_djvu.txt)

District Intelligence and Operations Coordination Centers (as the PICCs and DIOCCs were now called).⁶²

ICEX was conceived as a decentralized intelligence collection and exploitation program that relied on officials at the district and province levels to take the initiative in identifying and neutralizing VCI. The DIOCCs in particular were the crux of ICEX. As Brickham imagined it, each district would have a GVN official (called the Phung Hoang Committee chief) in charge of collecting intelligence on the VCI and organizing anti-VCI operations among the various local units based on timely and precise intelligence. The American presence would be limited to a district adviser whose duties would consist of assisting the Phung Hoang Chief and GVN personnel at the DIOCC in compiling intelligence reports and drawing up blacklists of VCI in the district. Neither the GVN Phung Hoang Chief or the American adviser commanded military units, but both were responsible for coordinating anti-infrastructure operations with local units. For the Phung Hoang coordinator, this entailed furnishing local GVN units with the identities of VCI and, when possible, providing timely intelligence on VCI locations or movements for the purpose of launching targeted neutralization operations. The American adviser, meanwhile, could request US military units when available to support anti-VCI operations.⁶³ ICEX was organized in a similar structure on the province level and furnished with more personnel. In a reversal of the previous PICC-DICC relationship, the idea behind ICEX was that the DIOCCs would funnel their intelligence up to the PIOCC to collate while the DIOCCs would take the

⁶² Nelson Brickham. *A Proposal for the Coordination and Management of Intelligence Programs and Attacks on the VC Infrastructure and Local Irregular Forces*. Accessed online via Internet Archive—Phoenix Program Documents (<https://archive.org/stream/PhoenixProgramDocuments/Phoenix%20Program/4%20Brickham%20Proposal%20June%2067#page/n0/mode/2up>)

⁶³ Dale Andrade and James Willbanks, *CORDS/Phoenix: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Vietnam for the Future*. *Military Review*. March-April 2006. p. 19

initiative in planning anti-VCI operations.⁶⁴ As we shall see, in practice the PIOCCs played a much greater role in Phoenix than the DIOCCs. By coordinating efforts at the district and province level, Komer hoped to bring precision to the war against the enemy infrastructure and put the reins in the hands of local Vietnamese officials who would theoretically have the greatest incentive to eliminate the local VCI. As such, ICEX was, in the words of its charter, to be “marshalled and concentrated to permit a ‘rifle shot’ rather than a shotgun approach to the real target—key, important political leaders and activists in the Vietcong infrastructure.” Similarly, attacking the enemy infrastructure was to be “fundamentally a Vietnamese responsibility, employing essentially police-type and other special resources and techniques.”⁶⁵

In fact, intelligence and operations were two sides of the same coin in ICEX, and both were ultimately Vietnamese responsibilities. As I will further explain in the next chapter, the majority of Phoenix intelligence came from interrogations and informants. Though the CIA and in some instances the US military maintained some informants in the countryside, the overwhelming majority of informants were run by GVN outfits. This was a practical necessity given the very limited number of Americans in the countryside, their lack of experience there, and the significant linguistic difficulties in US-Vietnamese communication. Similarly, while American advisers were expected to be present for all interrogations of captured VCI, in practice GVN officials conducted many interrogations on their own. Even if an American adviser was present for an initial interrogation at the DIOCC, he would quickly lose jurisdiction over the prisoner as the suspected VCI would then be transferred to the Provincial Interrogation Center

⁶⁴ Brickham, *A Proposal for the Coordination and Management of Intelligence Programs*.

⁶⁵ MACV. *Directive 381-41*. p. 2

(PIC), a GVN-run prison, and would from then on be subject to the GVN's *An Tri* laws for Vietnamese accused of being "command echelon VCI and Communist Party members."⁶⁶

For the Americans and Vietnamese involved in Phoenix, former Vietcong who voluntarily rallied through the Chieu Hoi ("Open Arms") program, called Hoi Chanh, were the best source of intelligence.⁶⁷ Chieu Hoi had actually begun during the Diem regime, the one successful program of an era of otherwise ill-fated pacification schemes. Chieu Hoi was open to all VC, and only about nineteen percent of Hoi Chanh were VCI, but this still constituted some 30,000 individuals throughout the life of the program.⁶⁸ According to Maj. General Philip Davidson, chief of intelligence for MACV, "[the] Chieu Hoi rate goes up not as a result of sweeps, but as a result of getting in an area and staying in it."⁶⁹ While those who voluntarily rallied were quite willing to divulge their knowledge of the Vietcong and VCI to the government, their intelligence value was generally limited, as the Hoi Chanh represented the younger, lower-echelon and less ideologically motivated segments of the VCI. As such, Hoi Chanh provided valuable intelligence on hamlet and village-level VCI activities, but little to no intelligence on upper-echelon VCI.

On the operational side, South Vietnamese police and militia units were predominantly responsible for VCI neutralizations. While ARVN and less frequently US tactical units did neutralize VCI in more conventional cordon-and-sweep and even search-and-destroy operations, these did not account for anything near the majority of VCI neutralizations. The Regional

⁶⁶ CORDS. *Phung Hoang Advisor Handbook, 1970*. pp. 16-18
Accessed online via [survivablebooks.com](http://www.survivablebooks.com)
(<http://www.survivablebooks.com/free%20manuals/1970%20US%20Army%20Vietnam%20War%20Phung%20Hoang%20advisors%20handbook%2037p.pdf>)

⁶⁷ Moyer, *Phoenix and the Birds of Prey*. pp. 250-251

⁶⁸ Andrade, *Ashes to Ashes*. p. 4

⁶⁹ Lewis Sorley, *A Better War*. P. 76

Force/Popular Force (RF/PF, or “Ruff Puffs” as the Americans called them) were the greatest contributor to VCI losses, accounting for 39.3% of all ICEX/Phoenix neutralizations.⁷⁰ The RF/PF were local militias and were generally not very well trained. They had no specialty in offensive operations and they were not the most trust-worthy of units, in several instances defecting en masse to the VC. But they had the largest presence in the countryside and operated within a relatively small area around their own villages. As such, they were the closest thing to a static defense force in the countryside, and by manning checkpoints and performing short-range patrols they inevitably came into contact with many low-level VCI whom they could identify from their own villages.⁷¹

In addition to the RF/PF, the GVN organized another militia, the People’s Self Defense Force (PSDF). The PSDF eventually consisted of 1.5 million armed individuals, but it played only a marginal role in ICEX/Phoenix operations until the end of the program when militia forces were given a greater role in local security as part of Nixon’s Vietnamization policy. Rather, the PSDF’s main contribution to Phoenix was intelligence. Like the RF/PF, the PSDF were locally organized units whose members could offer insight into the insurgent infrastructure in their villages or hamlets.⁷² The National Police also raised a paramilitary unit for operations in the countryside called the National Police Field Force (NPF). The unit was intended to be a hybrid military/police force that would both target VCI through intelligence collection and direct action as well as provide a static security presence in the villages. In practice, NPF’s training

⁷⁰ Andrade, *Ashes to Ashes*. pp. 136-137

⁷¹ Race, *War Comes to Long An*. pp. 220, 231

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 268

Moyar, *Phoenix and the Birds of Prey*. pp. 161-162

and effectiveness varied greatly by province, and the best units were generally given tasks beneath their abilities.⁷³

Under ICEX and Phoenix, The PRU remained the tip of the spear in the neutralization of VCI, just as they had when they had been the CTTs. Among units involved in pacification, the PRU could be considered the only true Phoenix “assets,” insofar as they were specifically trained first and foremost to identify and neutralize Vietcong and VCI. Interestingly enough, however, the PRU were not explicitly part of the Phoenix Program. That is to say, the PRU generally operated outside the purview of the program, working exclusively with their CIA adviser and utilizing their own intelligence rather than that of the DIOCCs and PIOCCs.⁷⁴

In some provinces, however, PRU engaged in operations not commensurate to their caliber. In provinces in which the GVN Province Chief exercised strong authority, the PRU were subordinate to the Chief and found themselves engaged in routine security work such as manning checkpoints rather than special operations.⁷⁵ Alternatively, sometimes the Province Chief understood the roles of the PRU better than the District Chiefs who would request PRU missions. A 1968 report from the Bien Hoa chief complains of sub-sector commanders using PRU “for route clearing, ambushing, guarding bridges etc.” and admonishes his subordinates “Especially to use them in covert operations to collect enemy information, in exploiting

⁷³ Thomas Alhern, *Vietnam Declassified*. p. 258
Moyar, *Phoenix and the Birds of Prey*. pp. 163-164

⁷⁴ Moyar, *Phoenix and the Birds of Prey*. p. 170

⁷⁵ CIA. *Memorandum for the Secretary of Defense re The Phoenix/Phung Hoang and Provincial Reconnaissance Units (PRU) Programs*.

Accessed online via Internet Archive

(<https://archive.org/stream/PhoenixProgramDocuments/Phoenix%20Program/17%20b%20Memo%20for%20Sec%20Defense%20re%20Phoenix%20PRU#page/n0/mode/2up>)

information provided by DIOCCs to eliminate (*sic*) leading cadres and enemy structures, or using them in cross-checking intelligence for operational units.”⁷⁶

The PRU continued to receive training from the CIA, but their advisers were military personnel, either Army or Marine officers on loan to the Agency or, in some cases, members of the Navy SEALs, America’s newest special operations unit. Working within the CIA chain of command, PRU advisers from the Army and Marines also found themselves with more operational flexibility than they did under the MACV system. PRU advisers were unique in their closeness with their Vietnamese counterparts, actually leading the PRU on operations. According to former Marine and PRU adviser Fred Vogel, “We refer to ourselves as advisers, but we were in fact commanders.”⁷⁷

Shortly before its creation, Komer had pegged CIA analyst Evan Parker, a veteran of the OSS’s Burma operations in the Second World War, to head up ICEX. There was never any illusion, however, as to who held real authority.⁷⁸ While Parker served as Director of ICEX and then Phoenix, it was the DEPCORDS, first Komer and then future Director of Central Intelligence William Colby, who oversaw the anti-infrastructure effort. In December 1967, ICEX was renamed Phoenix. The change was intended to evoke the GVN’s name for the anti-infrastructure effort, Phung Hoang, the mythical bird whose arrival brought peace and prosperity.⁷⁹ Phoenix was no different from ICEX, however, though the new name would remain until its disbanding in 1972.

⁷⁶ CORDS. *PRU 1968*. Bien Hoa (Provincial Advisory Team 98) Administrative and Operational Records 1964-1973. National Archives Record Group 472, Entry A1 735, Container 1742

⁷⁷ Interview with Fred Vogel. February 29, 2016.

⁷⁸ National Security Archive, *Douglas Valentine Collection*. Box 3. “Evan Parker”

⁷⁹ Andrade, *Ashes to Ashes*. p. 73

The long-overdue anti-infrastructure operations of Phoenix were delayed in taking flight by the Tet Offensive, which began on January 30, 1968, just months after Phoenix's inception. Pacification efforts were put on hold as MACV and ARVN threw tens of thousands of soldiers at the Vietcong-NVA onslaught. During Tet, the Vietcong seized many parts of the countryside that had previously been considered "pacified," demonstrating to Saigon and DC that the activities of the VCI "shadow government" had in fact been expansive. In the process of the offensive, however, many undercover VCI, "legal cadres," surfaced in the countryside as they called their fellow villagers to arms in the hopes of delivering a decisive knock-out to the US forces and GVN "puppets." Among the more than 100,000 Vietcong and NVA casualties of Tet were thousands of VCI, while many more cadres had become dangerously exposed to their neighbors and local GVN forces in the course of the offensive.⁸⁰ More importantly, however, Tet heralded the beginning of the end of America's involvement in Vietnam.

The US and GVN spent the rest of 1968 reconsolidating areas of the countryside they had lost during Tet. In July of that year, Johnson replaced General Westmoreland with General Creighton Abrams as commander of MACV. Abrams had been a decorated and innovative commander of a tank regiment in Patton's Third Army in World War II. Always something of a maverick, despite his background in conventional warfare did he understood the sociopolitical nuances of counterinsurgency warfare better than his predecessor. Under his command, all of MACV—not just CORDS—would make a greater effort at pacification, though as we will see in subsequent chapters, this was easier said than done.

1969 was the first year US and GVN forces were able to focus their attention on rural pacification and anti-infrastructure operations as they had intended with Phoenix prior to Tet.

⁸⁰ CORDS. *Province Reports—Monthly Sep 68-Dec 69*. Kien Phong (Provincial Advisory Team 84) Administrative and Operational Records 1962-1973. National Archives Record Group 472, Entry A1 726, Container 1426

1970 was the height of the anti-infrastructure effort, with 706 Phoenix advisers operating throughout the country at the province and district level. By 1971, however, Nixon's Vietnamization was in full swing and American advisers began vacating their positions for local Phung Hoang officials to fill. Furthermore, in response to sensationalized reporting on Phoenix, a series of congressional hearings in 1970 and 1971 had focused on US pacification efforts. Each time, DEPCORDS William Colby had been forced to answer to critics in the Senate on questions of assassination and torture and the operations of the notorious PRU.⁸¹ Congress had little interest in supporting resource-intensive pacification efforts in a conflict the American public had grown weary of, and there was even less support for a program like Phoenix that had received such negative publicity. In FY1972 Phoenix was allocated fewer resources than ever before, just \$110,000—less than ten percent its initial budget. By early 1972, nearly all Phoenix advisers had left the country. It was at precisely this time of American withdrawal that the US would have been wise to make a final push against the enemy infrastructure before handing the reins to the GVN. This was not the case. The last province advisers left in July 1972 at the same time that the GVN officially abandoned the Phung Hoang program in favor of a national “anti-terrorism” campaign called POPAT—Protection of the People Against Terrorism. POPAT was a short-lived and unspectacular campaign which ceased to have any practical application once the last CORDS support staff (primarily logistics specialists and accountants) left Vietnam in December 1972, in essence heralding an unobtrusive end to US pacification efforts in Vietnam.⁸²

Between its inception as ICEX in 1967 and its dismantling in 1972, Phoenix accounted for 33,358 VCI captured and 26,369 VCI killed, while 22,013 VCI had rallied in the same

⁸¹ National Security Archive, *Douglas Valentine Collection*. Box 2. “Senate Hearings”

⁸² Andrade, *Ashes to Ashes*. pp. 250-251

period.⁸³ The Vietnam War’s architects such as Robert McNamara and the rest of the “Best and the Brightest” had managed an increasingly complex war in Vietnam with the belief that statistics were necessary and largely sufficient to understanding and thus winning the war. In the case of Phoenix, the statistic that mattered was the 81,740 individuals neutralized in the span of five years. To the detractors of Phoenix, including a number of contemporary American journalists such as Seymour Hersh, this was evidence of a cold-blooded program that systematically perpetrated atrocities against civilians.⁸⁴ To the supporters of Phoenix, this statistic was evidence of the program’s undeniable success, which had begun to pave the way for victory before domestic political considerations had compelled the president to withdraw.⁸⁵ Both interpretations are incorrect. The former is farthest from the truth, as targeted killings played only a minor role in Phoenix. To call Phoenix a successful program would also be an overstatement, however, as success in the case of Phoenix would have entailed targeting and eliminating the enemy’s political infrastructure on a national scale. The US and GVN never managed this feat, as successes within the Phoenix system were inconsistent and localized phenomena.

⁸³ *Ibid.* Appendix, Table A-1: Phoenix/Phung Hoang Neutralization Results

⁸⁴ Seymour Hersh, *Moving Targets*. The New Yorker. December 15, 2003 edition.

⁸⁵ Sorely, *A Better War*. p. 385



A PRU prepares for an operation in Quang Nam province in 1969 (photo courtesy of Fred Vogel)

CHAPTER FOUR

The Myth of the Secret Assassin, the Reality of the Corrupt Cop

One of the greatest misconceptions of Phoenix was that it was a CIA program to the bone and a covert one at that. This is an appealing notion to some, as it makes the already ominous-sounding operation seem even more mysterious and, in the eyes of many, deplorable. But the truth is more complicated. The CIA certainly provided the foundation in the PIOCCs and DIOCCs on which Phoenix was built. Furthermore, the PRU were CIA-trained, but though they were the most notorious unit to conduct anti-VCI operations (and certainly the most effective per-man) they only accounted for 11,814 of the 81,740 neutralizations with which Phoenix is credited, a rate of a little less than fifteen percent. The Revolutionary Forces/Popular Forces, on the other hand, accounted for some forty percent of all neutralizations.⁸⁶

CIA personnel never constituted more than a fraction of Phoenix advisers, being outnumbered by military advisers sixty to one in 1967, after which the ratio only increased in late 1969 as CIA officers began leaving their rural posts.⁸⁷ The CIA maintained some control over region-level Phoenix operations in the first two years of its existence. The first two deputies of CORDS, Komer and William Colby, had both been with the CIA prior to taking the assignment (Colby more recently than Komer), and the CIA Regional Officer in Charge (ROIC) controlled appropriations to the provinces. The CIA also provided one third of the funding for Phoenix operations, while MACV provided the rest. Not surprisingly, multiple financiers led to multiple chains of command. The CIA insisted that its administrative support entitled it to a say in operational matters, but the majority of district- and province-level advisers, almost exclusively military men, balked at the notion of answering to civilians, preferring instead to report directly to their MACV superiors. The lack of a coherent chain of command proved

⁸⁶ Andrade, *Ashes to Ashes*. p. 185
Andrade and Willbanks, *CORDS/Phoenix*. p. 20
Moyar, *Phoenix and the Birds of Prey*. p. 247

⁸⁷ Andrade, *Ashes to Ashes*. p. 65

confusing and counterproductive. In July 1969, Colby eliminated the CIA from the CORDS chain of command and gave all funding authority to MACV. Nearly all CIA personnel left the program and those who remained were subordinate to MACV.⁸⁸

If there was one thing Phoenix was not, however, it was covert. By necessity, individual anti-VCI operations were covert, but the existence of the Phoenix Program was not hidden. Quite the contrary, in fact, as the US and GVN went to great lengths to publicize it throughout Vietnam, albeit under the Vietnamese title of Phung Huang. Phoenix advisers were well-known not only to their GVN counterparts but often to the villagers in their district or province, and by extension the local VC, as well. Phoenix advisers worked with GVN province and district chiefs to disseminate propaganda that denounced Vietcong atrocities and called on villagers to identify VCI to the local Phoenix Operation Committee.⁸⁹ Other Phoenix propaganda publicly identified known VCI and called on them to surrender to the Chieu Hoi program in return for clemency.⁹⁰ Despite all the negative press Phoenix would get in the US, US-GVN attempts to publicize the program in Vietnam often garnered no attention. Monthly Pacification Attitude Analysis Surveys (PAAS) from Military Region I in 1970 show that *at best* only 47.3% of respondents had any notion of the Phung Hoang program while as many as 63% of respondents in any month were completely unaware of the program. Most villagers, however, knew only that it was an operation against the VC.⁹¹

The other great misconception of Phoenix is that it was an assassination program. While numerous articles and several books—generally of a polemical nature—have been written in

⁸⁸ Andrade, *Ashes to Ashes*. pp. 133-134

⁸⁹ Valentine. *The Phoenix Program*. Addendum I: *Psyops Comic Book: "Phung Hoang Campaign"*

⁹⁰ Herrington, *Stalking the Vietcong*. p. 18

⁹¹ CORDS. *Pacification Attitude Analysis System (PAAS)*. CORDS MR1 Executive Secretariat-General Records 1970. National Archives Record Group 472, Entry 33101, Container 3

debate over the subject, it suffices to say that this is a gross misunderstanding of the nature of the program, though anti-VCI operations were often very bloody and abuse of suspected VCI was rampant. 55,371 VCI, two-thirds of all neutralizations (excluding those who rallied through Chieu Hoi), were captured as opposed to killed. It was understood by most US and GVN forces that a dead VCI could not identify his friends. Nevertheless, abuse was all too frequent, though this usually did not entail killing. Colby himself was concerned by instances of “illegal killings” carried out by the PRU, which he recognized as a troubling characteristic of the nature of the units. Not only had many PRU members lost family to the VC, but they also had the most reason to fear the VC. Since the units operated locally, captured VCI suspects would be able to identify PRU members to the Vietcong who would then identify and arrest or kill the individual’s family. PRU often felt it was safer therefore to eliminate VCI rather than capture them only to see them frequently released from the corrupt and poorly managed *An Tri* legal system (see chapter five).⁹²

Nevertheless, in all their operations, the PRU captured 68% more individuals than they killed, though that ratio is more heavily tilted towards killing than any other unit involved in Phoenix.⁹³ Importantly, these PRU statistics include not just identified VCI but also Vietcong guerrillas. As the elite, CIA-trained force in the countryside, the PRU spent as much time engaged in other forms of counterinsurgency warfare as they did in targeted neutralization operations, including hit-and-run operations against Vietcong units and interdiction of supply lines. These operations were by nature bloodier than typical targeted Phoenix operations. For example, documents from the Gia Dinh province from December 1969 to February 1970 list four ambushes by Vietcong guerrillas on PRU checkpoints and defensive positions as well as two

⁹² Woods, *Shadow Warrior*. p. 132

⁹³ Andrade, *Ashes to Ashes*. p. 184

PRU assaults on Vietcong squads, each confrontation killing upwards of three VC.⁹⁴ While there is no disputing that PRU frequently engaged in extrajudicial killings, it is difficult to claim that this constituted systematic abuse as there is no indication that it was the official policy of the PRU.⁹⁵

The Phoenix policy which many have claimed contributed most directly to abuse was the neutralization quota, but even in this case the reality is not straightforward. David Galula, one of the leading theorists of modern counterinsurgency, warned against the use of quotas in his seminal work, *Counterinsurgency Warfare*. Quotas for arrests and/or killings, which had been a mainstay of the colonial counterinsurgencies in Algeria and Kenya, “may well prove disastrous” Galula warned.⁹⁶ Evan Parker understood this much. Once he first took charge of ICEX, Parker said he had “resisted like the hell the idea of quotas.”⁹⁷ And yet from its inception, CORDS officially sanctioned and in some provinces encouraged the use of neutralization quotas. The logic was that since the effectiveness of Phoenix relied so much on the individual GVN official and his team at the province and district level, and since many of these district chiefs were in fact quite incompetent, recalcitrant, or downright corrupt, incentives would be needed to prod the GVN in the right direction. Quotas were not implemented in every province and district nor were the quotas equal throughout all provinces and districts in which they were implemented. Rather, the GVN adopted quotas for their province and district chiefs in regions in

⁹⁴ CORDS. *PRU Operational Reports*. Gia Dinh (Provincial Advisory Team 44) Administrative and Operational Records 1968-1973. National Archives Record Group 472, Entry A1 702, Container 592

⁹⁵ Alhern, *Vietnam Declassified*. pp. 327-329

⁹⁶ David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice*. p. 66

⁹⁷ National Security Archive, *Douglas Valentine Collection*. Box 3. “Evan Parker”

which the Phoenix adviser believed the neutralization statistics reflected a very low percentage of the suspected VCI population.⁹⁸

The GVN certainly abused the quota system. CORDS officials admitted as much when they abolished the quota system in September 1971 in their Phung Hoang Reexamination Study (PHREEX). The authors stressed that quotas were counterproductive, as “the goal is to neutralize each and all *properly confirmed* VCI.” (emphasis added)⁹⁹ One could easily imagine that GVN forces killed innocent Vietnamese civilians to meet the quotas, and in at least several provinces, corrupt chiefs were known to have used Phoenix as a pretext to assassinate political or personal rivals.¹⁰⁰ It appears, however, that innocent civilians were much more likely to be arrested rather than killed. A study conducted by Clark University professor Allan Goodman in 1969 and 1970 found that 40% of all villager complaints to deputies in the Lower House of the South Vietnamese National Assembly related to abuses of the Phoenix Program. (However, as Mark Moyar points out, it was Goodman himself who determined whether the abuse was related to Phoenix, as the majority of Vietnamese villagers did not understand what Phung Hoang was. We may question whether Goodman really understood what operations constituted Phoenix.)¹⁰¹ Goodman recorded numerous complaints of illegal and arbitrary arrests as well as torture, but he never mentioned complaints of targeted killing of innocent civilians.¹⁰²

Indeed, the most common abuse of the quota system appears to have been through the falsification of body counts. It was quite simple. There were far more guerrillas than VCI and far more dead guerrillas than dead VCI, but dead VCI were more important to the Phung Hoang

⁹⁸ Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie*. p. 732

⁹⁹ Andrade, *Ashes to Ashes*. p. 236

¹⁰⁰ Valentine, *The Phoenix Program*. p. 162

¹⁰¹ Moyar, *Phoenix and the Birds of Prey*. pp. 181-182

¹⁰² Allan Goodman, *Politics in War: the Basis of Political Community in South Vietnam*. p. 212

committee than dead guerrillas. Phoenix advisers were often not present during anti-VCI operations though they were expected to corroborate every report of a KIA VCI. In the aftermath of a GVN firefight with guerrillas, a Phoenix adviser would accompany several Vietnamese Phung Hoang representatives to the scene to determine if any VCI had been killed. Being a foreigner, the Phoenix adviser would have to trust his Vietnamese counterparts on their identification. A dead guerrilla could easily be identified as a VCI on the district black list; the Phoenix adviser would have to take the identification at face value, and the Vietnamese would get closer to reaching their quota. While it is impossible to know to what extent neutralization reports were inflated by false counting, it was certainly the easiest way for any dishonest or lazy Phung Hoang representatives to get their paycheck without going through the effort of good intelligence work. Numerous Phoenix advisers admitted that they suspected their GVN counterparts of consistently misleading them in this regard.¹⁰³

CHAPTER FIVE

The Meaning of “Neutralization” and Standards of Intelligence

One of the most jarring statistics related to Phoenix shows that between January and October 1968, nearly 66% of all 20,394 people arrested in South Vietnamese prisons were

¹⁰³ Moyer, *Phoenix and the Birds of Prey*. pp. 183-184

released within the year. Crucially, of those 13,520 Vietnamese released, roughly 2,100 escaped, roughly 4,660 were released in general amnesties, and 6,760 or were released for unknown reasons within ten months of their arrest. In other words, one third of all people arrested in South Vietnam at this time were released within a year of their capture.¹⁰⁴ This rate of 66% includes all prisoners, not just the VCI, of whom 9,924 were captured in this time.¹⁰⁵ The authors of this 1968 study were unsure how many of those released were suspected VCI apprehended under Phoenix, but they suggested that the “Civil Defendants” label given to those who were released were “mostly VCI.” The report concludes that, “the GVN prison system almost certainly released more VCI during this period than were ‘eliminated’ by the Phoenix System.”¹⁰⁶

Though it represents only ten months of Phoenix’s early history, these statistics nonetheless call into question the accuracy of the term “neutralization,” the efficacy of the An Tri legal system, and indeed the utility of the program as a whole. First, if two thirds of all VCI neutralized throughout the span of Phoenix were captured and two thirds of all those captured in a given year were released that same year, half of them without sentencing, then how could one consider a “neutralized” VCI alone an indication of actual progress against the Vietcong insurgency? Paul Woodruff, a junior Phoenix adviser in Chau Doc from 1969-1970, understood this problem. “I began to suspect that we weren’t doing what we said we were doing. It seemed to me that the level of VCI activity wasn’t the least bit inhibited. We’d detain the village chief of An Hu village four or five times in a couple months and send him a way for good, and he kept

¹⁰⁴ Thomas Thayer, *A Systems Analysis View of the Vietnam War 1965-1972*. Volume 10. p. 71. accessed via Defense Technical Information Center (<http://www.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a039317.pdf>)

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.* p. 65

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.* p. 73

coming up in the intel reports.”¹⁰⁷ Senior CORDS staff were similarly concerned, at least in private. The authors of the 1968 prisoner study stated that, “On October 25, 1968 [Phoenix staff] tried to locate 127 district or higher level VCI “eliminated” during August and September. As of late November, the GVN was unable to determine if or where more than five out of the 127 were being held.”¹⁰⁸

Mark Moyar notes that, beginning in 1970, only VCI sentenced to one year or more were considered captured in neutralization statistics. This was undoubtedly official CORDS policy, but I have found only one document from this period that mentions the change in policy. That document, a December 1969 memo to the Phoenix adviser for IV CTZ, suggests that the Vinh Binh province adviser “call to the attention of the DIOCC” the new policy.¹⁰⁹ Other than this brief mention, there is no indication of the policy’s actual implementation in any of the documents I have examined from the district, province, or Corps-level Phoenix committees between 1969 and 1970. While neutralization statistics do show a decrease in neutralizations by capture and an increase in neutralizations by killing between 1969 and 1970, the change in the ratio is not as significant as we would expect. Excluding Hoi Chanh, in 1969 there were 1.38 VCI captured for every VCI killed. In 1970, there were .78 VCI captured for every VCI killed. That is a 43% decrease in the ratio of captured to killed VCI. We may assume that if in 1968 two-thirds of all neutralized prisoners were released the rate would be roughly the same in 1969 and 1970, as An Tri remained corrupt and the prisons overcrowded with no significant improvement throughout the duration of the Phoenix Program.¹¹⁰ Similarly, US and GVN forces

¹⁰⁷ Interview with Paul Woodruff. January 25, 2016

¹⁰⁸ Thayer, *A Systems Analysis View of the Vietnam War*. Volume 10. p. 75

¹⁰⁹ CORDS. *DIOCC Advisers Meeting*. Vinh Binh (Provincial Advisory Team 72) Administrative and Operational Records 1966-1972. National Archives Record Group 472, Entry A1 721, Container 1253

¹¹⁰ CORDS. *An Tri Observations and Recommendations*. September 20, 1972. pp. 1-4
Accessed via Internet Archive

did not significantly alter their anti-infrastructure tactics at this time in such a way that would have accounted for a greater number of VCI captured.¹¹¹ If CORDS had been earnest in only counting VCI sentenced to one year as “neutralized,” we would expect to see a greater decrease in the captured-killed ratio between 1969 and 1970, a decrease closer to 66%.

By necessity, this statistical analysis is based in part on speculation given the scarcity of information. It is quite possible that there are hidden variables that account for the relatively marginal decrease in the capture-kill ratio between 1969 and 1970. Furthermore, simply because the one-year sentencing policy is not mentioned in any of the district- or province-level documents to which I had access does not mean it was not in fact implemented. Nevertheless, these statistical discrepancies are worth noting and raise the question of whether or not CORDS ever truly resolved the issue of what it meant to be “neutralized.”

It would appear that many of the “neutralized” VCI were released in large part due to An Tri’s corruption and inefficiencies. Paul Woodruff began to suspect that “those detained were just people who hadn’t bribed the right police.” The author of the 1968 rural pacification report was under no illusions, either:

“These releases happen for a variety of reasons. First, high level or wealthy VC can often bribe the National Police to release them after arrest but prior to detention. Second, while the physical capacity of [GVN’s] prison system is greater than the number of prisoners, its administrative capacity to handle cases is not. Roughly 50% of prisoners in jail at any time are awaiting sentence. . . . Frequently, prisoners who can’t be handled administratively are released—even if they are VC.”¹¹²

(<https://archive.org/stream/PhoenixProgramDocuments/Phoenix%20Program/33%20An%20Tri%20Sept%2072#page/n1/mode/2up>)

¹¹¹ Moyar notes that in 1966, the CIA began a major transition in their training of PRU that emphasized capturing VCI over killing them. (*Phoenix and the birds of Prey*. p. 38) Neither Moyar nor any other historians mention US or GVN forces shifting tactics in such a way between 1969 and 1970

¹¹² Thayer, *A Systems Analysis View of the Vietnam War*. Volume 10. p. 73

Clearly, many VCI managed to elude justice this way. But one must also ask, how many of those who were arrested and released were in fact innocent? There is no way to determine with any certainty as the GVN hardly ever gave justifications for the release of prisoners, but it is clear from Allan Goodman's study that complaints of arbitrary arrest were common throughout Vietnam. One might quickly dismiss such claims by noting that any real VCI captured would likely claim innocence, and any analysis of Phoenix must certainly take that into account. But closer examination of the collection, analysis, and exploitation of the intelligence that drove anti-infrastructure operations reveals that in identifying VCI, the standards for intelligence were low. Indeed, it is from the bare-bones intelligence reports that the historian may glean the best understanding of Phoenix.

If quantity of reporting defined good intelligence, then Phoenix would have been an indisputable success. Each month the DIOCCs and PIOCCs collectively produced and collated thousands of intelligence reports on VCI identities and activities.¹¹³ Unfortunately, depth, context, and precision define good intelligence, and the available archives show that these characteristics were generally lacking in the reports produced by DIOCCs and PIOCCs. Despite the implication of *intelligence coordination* in the acronyms, American DIOCC and PIOCC staff seldom performed any semblance of intelligence analysis. Paul Woodruff explained his role in the PIOCC as follows:

Under my nose would pass a document saying that Nuc Bon Tru in An Phu hamlet is suspected of being a supply cadre or something like that. I would see thousands of such notices a month, but I had no way of evaluating the sources of such things. And indeed that didn't seem to be my job. I mostly just kept notes and collated everything.¹¹⁴

¹¹³ CORDS. *'Big Mack' Stat Reps*. Kien Phong (Provincial Advisory Team 84) Administrative and Operational Records 1962-1973. National Archives Record Group 472, Entry A1 726, Container 1426

¹¹⁴ Interview with Paul Woodruff. January 25, 2016

The DIOCCs and PIOCCs were not analytical hubs, but warehouses of mostly unverified Vietnamese reports from which the American advisers drew up VCI blacklists.

Similarly, if the Vietnamese ever performed anything more than perfunctory intelligence analysis, it seldom found its way into the American DIOCCs and PIOCCs. This is not to say that all Vietnamese intelligence on the VCI was poor. On the contrary, Americans and Vietnamese involved in anti-infrastructure operations could rely on two reputable sources of intelligence: The PRU and the Hoi Chanhs. Col. Andrew Finlayson and Captain Fred Vogel, CIA advisers in Tay Ninh and Quang Nam provinces respectively, believe that after the Hoi Chanhs, the PRU were the best source of intelligence.¹¹⁵ For all the reasons that they were the most effective anti-VCI units, the PRU were also the best intelligence collectors. The PRU knew the communities in which they operated as well as any VCI and, given their CIA training, were in a prime position to cultivate informant networks. According to Col. Finlayson:

The communists never used their real names in their communications, made it real difficult. Everyone had a party name, but that didn't tell you much. So you had to do a lot of detective work to figure out who this party name belonged to. You could do that with penetrations and informants, or you can do it with normal detective work. It might say on the document that they were gone from work for a month so we'd go to the place of work and ask who was missing for a month. . . . Whether you did it one way or the other depended on the province, who the CIA adviser was, who the Vietnamese in charge was.¹¹⁶

The contribution of the PRU and Hoi Chanhs should not be overstated, however. The PRU, never numbering more than 4,000 men, were always stretched a bit thin and could never operate in every district.¹¹⁷ Similarly, in many provinces there were very few Hoi Chanhs, and of all those who defected nationwide, the majority were from the lowest echelons of the VCI.

¹¹⁵ Interview with Andrew Finlayson. February 17, 2016.

Interview with Fred. Vogel. Monday March 29, 2016

¹¹⁶ Interview with Andrew Finlayson. February 17, 2016.

¹¹⁷ Andrade and Banks, *CORDS/Phoenix*. p. 19

Hoi Chanh rarely provided valuable intelligence on VCI above the village level. As such, US and GVN forces enjoyed greater success in disrupting village-level VCI activities; they faced much more difficulty identifying or targeting the higher echelons of the VCI.¹¹⁸

A more consistent source of reporting was the Provincial Interrogation Center (PIC), though PIC intelligence varied greatly in quality. PIC interrogators, all GVN officials, would have to record such information as the detainee's physical features, date of capture, hamlet, family information and Vietcong activities. PIC reports ranged anywhere from two pages of basic biographical information to 30+ pages of detailed, chronological histories of the source's activities and the structure and operations of their unit. All began with a disclaimer: "This is an unevaluated interrogation report." Some reports ended with the interrogator's evaluation, a simple sentence stating "reliable information."¹¹⁹ Some reports undoubtedly included very solid intelligence, especially the longer reports and those from Choi Hans. (If a VCI rallied the PIC staff conducted an "interview." If a VCI was captured it was called an interrogation.)¹²⁰

Despite the occasional lengthy interrogation report, PIC intelligence was more often than not of questionable veracity. There is little dispute that at many PICs, the GVN systematically tortured suspects. Torture was certainly not official Phoenix policy, and whether or not PIC interrogators employed it depended almost solely on the integrity of the local GVN commander. GVN torture greatly frustrated American advisers, both military and CIA, whose training stressed the unreliability of information extracted under torture.¹²¹ Nevertheless, a considerable

¹¹⁸ Moyer, *Phoenix and the Birds of Prey*. p. 251

¹¹⁹ CORDS. *PRU Operational Reports*. Gia Dinh (Provincial Advisory Team 44) Administrative and Operational Records 1968-1973. National Archives Record Group 472, Entry A1 702, Container 592

¹²⁰ CORDS. *Chieu Hoi*. CORDS MRII Executive Secretariat—General Records 1969. National Archives Record Group 472, Entry 33200, Container 3

¹²¹ Andrade, *Ashes to Ashes*. pp. 210-211

Moyer, *Phoenix and the Birds of Prey*. pp. 90-91

number of Vietnamese endured various forms of torture—though our estimates will always remain vague—which calls into question the legitimacy of many PIC reports. One on the hand, there would be little disputing the quality of the lengthier, detailed reports that could only be written with the full cooperation of the suspect. The historian must look with greater skepticism, however, at the numerous two-page PIC reports that list little more than a suspect’s biographical information and supposed VCI position.

Even the most incomplete PIC reports contained far more detail than most of the documents in DIOCCs and PIOCCs. CORDS mandated that Phoenix advisers regularly draft blacklists of all “verified” VCI operating in a district or province. These lists, drawn directly from the PIOCC Phung Hoang files and translated into English, often listed more than 1,000 individuals, including their names, VCI position titles, and village—but little else. Seldom did the lists provide the physical details, dates of birth, or parents’ names for more than half of those listed. In several provinces, 90% of individuals listed lacked these details.¹²² Because these blacklists included only active VCI, most of the individuals listed would not have been captured and interrogated at PICs.¹²³ Therefore, most VCI listed would have never had the opportunity to have confessed, which was the preferred method of verifying a suspect’s VCI affiliation. Other than confession, enemy documents were the surest way to confirm an individual was VCI. Such discoveries were tremendously valuable, but very rare. The Phoenix coordinator in Vinh Binh province had unusual success in identifying a total of nine VCI from captured enemy documents

¹²² CORDS. *VCI Lists from Phung Hoang Ctr Files*. Kien Phong (Provincial Advisory Team 84) Administrative and Operational Records 1962-1973. National Archives Record Group 472, Entry A1 726, Container 1426

¹²³ Given that more than half of the VCI captured by Phoenix were released within a year, it is quite plausible that a significant number of the VCI on any given blacklist had in fact been interrogated previously, though there is no way to statistically determine this percentage with any precision.

in the first six months of 1969, despite launching nearly 600 operations in a province with more than 2,300 suspected VCI.¹²⁴

The majority of the names on PIOCC black lists would have come from either informants or third parties through the course of interrogations. While the GVN did sometimes score valuable intelligence through these means, in general, neither source was particularly reliable. American DIOCC and PIOCC never listed the names of informants or their respective handlers as a matter of operational security. Given the relatively minimal PRU and CIA presence throughout the country, however, in most provinces the National Police handled the majority of informants and agents. The National Police were trained as criminal police and generally received the least capable of draft-age men from the recruiting pool. In provinces where the Vietcong were active in criminal enterprises such as drug smuggling and extortion—which they often were—the National Police were sometimes able to provide intelligence on VCI. For the most part, however, the National Police were incompetent. Finlayson believes National Police agent reports were “worthless if not dangerously inaccurate.”¹²⁵

In 1954, The National Police had developed a counterintelligence/counterterror wing called the Police Special Branch that the GVN had hoped would be more adept at intelligence work. The CIA played an advisory role in the training of the PSB, but a lack of funds, poor training, neglect from the highest levels of GVN officials, and misuse of personnel continuously hampered the PSB’s development in its two decades of existence. Frequently, the PSB failed to

¹²⁴ CORDS. *Phoenix-Phung Hoang Progress Reports*. Vinh Binh (Provincial Advisory Team 72) Administrative and Operational Records 1966-1972. National Archives Record Group 472, Entry A1 721, Container 1253

¹²⁵ Interview with Andrew Finlayson. February 17, 2016

Col. Andrew Finlayson, *A Retrospective on Counterinsurgency Operations: The Tay Ninh Provincial Reconnaissance Unit and its Role in the Phoenix Program*. Center for the Study of Intelligence: Studies in Intelligence. Vol. 51, No. 2.

(Accessed via cia.gov (<https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/csi-studies/studies/vol51no2/a-retrospective-on-counterinsurgency-operations.html>))

coordinate with their counterparts in the NPPF, the National Police's paramilitary rapid-reaction force. The NPPF received frequent criticism from American observers over a perceived lack of initiative, but the NPPF were useless without PSB intelligence to target specific cadres or even determine which hamlets had significant VCI presence. Dale Andrade claims that, "the real weak link in the anti-infrastructure chain was the PSB. It simply failed to generate the intelligence necessary to target individual VCI."¹²⁶ In addition to the PSB, the RF/PF sometimes collected intelligence, but it was generally of minimal value. Being local militias, the RF/PF knew the territories in which they operated quite well, and they were often able to identify VCI operating within their communities. But unlike the PRU, the RF/PF never received any intelligence training. Their primary objective was to provide hamlet and village security through predictable checkpoints and static defenses. The RF/PF had little interest in pursuing intelligence leads or targeting VCI, and their relationship with Phoenix advisers was often fraught with difficulties and miscommunication.¹²⁷

Many suspected VCI appear to have landed on black lists through the interrogations of other suspects.¹²⁸ If a suspect claimed that Le Tan Tho was a member of the Thu Duc district committee, then the GVN interrogator recorded it in the PIC report. The subject might know a great deal about Le Tan Tho or they might not even know from which village he hailed; either way, the interrogation constituted a piece of evidence against Le Tan Tho in Thu Duc.¹²⁹

Theoretically, in keeping with official An Tri laws, Phoenix/Phung Hoang personnel would need

¹²⁶ Andrade, *Ashes to Ashes*. p. 168

¹²⁷ Andrade, *Ashes to Ashes*. p. 47 & p. 92

Interview with Richard Armitage. February 9, 2016.

¹²⁸ CORDS. *VCI Lists from Phung Hoang Ctr Files*. Kien Phong (Provincial Advisory Team 84) Administrative and Operational Records 1962-1973. National Archives Record Group 472, Entry A1 726, Container 1426

¹²⁹ CORDS. *Provincial Interrogation Center Reports*. Gia Dinh (Provincial Advisory Team 44) Administrative and Operational Records 1968-1973. National Archives Record Group 472, Entry A1 702, Container 592

three such reports to verify a suspect's VCI affiliation.¹³⁰ Yet in documents from five PIOCCs which I examined, as many as half of all "verified" VCI do not appear to have received this courtesy.¹³¹ In June 1970, the Vietnam Special Studies Group, a team of experts ordered by the National Security Council to review the situation in the countryside, determined that the DIOCC and PIOCC staff often disregarded protocol for identifying a suspect as VCI: "It is a recognized problem that although a suspect's card file may be supported by limited information from only one or two outdated reports, there has been a tendency to count the individual in the estimated VCI strength."¹³²

Regardless of whether they were interrogated or offered intelligence voluntarily, it would appear that Phoenix's human sources were not particularly knowledgeable about the individuals whom they identified as VCI. That the province VCI lists rarely included physical or familial details of the supposedly verified VCI indicates that Phoenix sources did not personally know or even recognize the individuals they identified. Such a lack of detailed intelligence on suspected VCI invariably caused problems. American adviser Peter Scott summed up his experience corroborating GVN neutralizations of suspected VCI: "[The Vietnamese soldier] would say, 'Well I'll be damned if it isn't Nguyen Van Dang. . . . I'd look on the VCI list and there'd be a Nguyen Van Dang. Of course there was. Every village had a Nguyen Van Dang.'"¹³³ While a

¹³⁰ Department of State. *Memorandum to Ambassador Colby, re: National Security Laws*. pp. 8-12. July 16, 1971. Accessed via Internet Archive (<https://archive.org/stream/PhoenixProgramDocuments/Phoenix%20Program/26%20National%20Security%20Law%20July%2071#page/n0/mode/2up>)

Moyar, *Phoenix and the Birds of Prey*. p. 119

¹³¹ CORDS. *Provincial Interrogation Center Reports*. Gia Dinh (Provincial Advisory Team 44) Administrative and Operational Records 1968-1973. National Archives Record Group 472, Entry A1 702, Container 592

¹³² CORDS. *Phoenix Comments—VSSG*. CORDS HQ General Records Spring 1970 (Various Province Briefs). National Archives Record Group 472, Entry 10096, Container 8

¹³³ Moyar, *Phoenix and the Birds of Prey*. p. 185

name and a title is prerequisite to targeting enemy cadre, without more specific details Phoenix operations were far less precise than the rifle shot metaphor would have us believe.

It also appears that despite the great emphasis CORDS put into writing province blacklists, those who were identified as VCI after their capture or death had often been previously unknown to Phoenix/Phung Hoang personnel. Gia Dinh PIC lists document 152 interrogations and interviews from December 1970 to February 1971. Not a single one of those interrogated or interviewed was listed as having a “report to date,” in other words a prior DIOCC or PIOCC report.¹³⁴ Between these PIC lists and the lack of detail on “verified” VCI in the Phung Hoang province lists, one would have to conclude that either the Phoenix/Phung Hoang staff were horrendous record-keepers or their intelligence was of poor quality. Phoenix documents make clear that, in fact, both conclusions are valid. The Province Senior Adviser in Vinh Binh was harsh in his criticism of the DIOCCs. In June 1969, he wrote to his MACV superiors in IV CTZ:

While visiting the districts I have made several observations which I would like to pass on for your information and guidance: a) [District Phoenix Coordinators] are not sufficiently familiar with their Phoenix/Phung Hoang Programs. b) Some DIOCC coordinators are not spending enough time in the DIOCC—they do not devote enough time to Phoenix duties. c) DIOCC operations are not being targeted against specific individuals. d) Requirements are not being levied to fulfill intelligence gaps. e) DIOCCs are not reacting to or exploiting intelligence on a timely basis. f) Phung Hoang SOPs are not being followed when maintaining records within the DIOCC. g) Some police-chiefs, S2s and S3s are not taking an active part in the DIOCCs, and have little or no knowledge of its operations.

The adviser concluded by stating, “I would find it difficult to justify the existence of a DIOCC or Phung Hoang Program on the basis of their operational results.”¹³⁵ Komer himself admitted in

¹³⁴ CORDS. *Provincial Interrogation Center Reports*. Gia Dinh (Provincial Advisory Team 44) Administrative and Operational Records 1968-1973. National Archives Record Group 472, Entry A1 702, Container 592

¹³⁵ CORDS. *Phoenix/Phung Hoang Progress Reports*. Vinh Binh (Provincial Advisory Team 72) Administrative and Operational Records 1966-1972. National Archives Record Group 472, Entry A1 721, Container 1253

July 1970: “Judging from the incredibly poor dossiers at most PIOCCs and DIOCCs I visited, there is all too little prior evidence available in most cases as to whether a man killed, captured, or rallied really is a VCI.”¹³⁶

In summation, the intelligence that drove Phoenix was of mixed quality. Hoi Chanh offered intelligence rich in detail but generally regarding only the lowest echelons of the VCI. The PRU received proper intelligence training and ran legitimate informant and penetration networks, but they were few in numbers and alone were unable to identify and target the enemy political infrastructure on anything resembling a national scale. The PICs, meanwhile, were capable of producing very precise and actionable intelligence, but more often than not, the reports were lacking in detail and of questionable quality. Finally, the sources that provided the majority of DIOCC and PIOCC reports, namely the National Police and RF/PF, appear to have generally been uninterested in intelligence work and may have in fact contributed to the detention of more innocent Vietnamese than legitimate VCI. With the exception of the PRU and their CIA advisers, the Vietnamese alone were responsible for intelligence collection, leaving the Americans to simply take their GVN counterparts at their word. When asked if he ever engaged in anything resembling intelligence analysis, Paul Woodruff responded, “No. I mostly just read Jane Austin novels.”¹³⁷

¹³⁶ Robert Komer, *The Phung-Hoang Fiasco*. p. 3

Accessed via Internet Archive

(<https://archive.org/stream/PhoenixProgramDocuments/Phoenix%20Program/19%20Komer%20Fiasco%2030%20July%2070#page/n0/mode/2up>)

¹³⁷ Interview with Paul Woodruff. January 25, 2016.

CHAPTER SIX

“One of the Greatest Failures of the Vietnam War”:

Phoenix’s Contribution to Pacification

It would be tempting to judge the effectiveness of Phoenix based simply on the final results of America’s involvement in Vietnam. Douglas Valentine, in his book *The Phoenix Program* assumes the mantle of the previous generation’s anti-war authors and writes a scathing, politically charged analysis of the program. Valentine’s conclusion is that Phoenix was so inhumane that it irrevocably alienated the South Vietnamese people from the GVN and US, thus

precluding any successful counterinsurgency. Valentine's account, however, is, to put it mildly, rather sensationalist if not outright inaccurate and would not meet most academic standards. Furthermore, Valentine is mistaken in assuming the South Vietnamese people were unanimously hostile to the US and GVN by war's end. Surveys of the South Vietnamese population are flawed and imprecise, but by the time of American withdrawal the population hardly embraced the communist cause in anything resembling a popular revolution.¹³⁸ After all, it was not Vietcong guerrillas but North Vietnamese armor that overran the country in the 1975 Ho Chi Minh offensive.

Conversely, some authors have argued that because the Vietcong insurgency was damaged at the end of the war and because the Saigon regime fell to conventional forces, Phoenix was a success. The fallacy that correlation equates with causation underlies this belief. Indeed, there are several possible explanations for the lack of a massive Vietcong presence in the countryside at the end of the war.¹³⁹ For one, the Vietcong suffered tremendous losses in both the Tet and later Easter offensives, both large-scale, conventional confrontations (for the most part). Similarly, in many provinces the decreased level of Vietcong activity could best be attributed to a combination of continuous Vietcong brutality and a greater US-GVN presence in the countryside under the leadership of Abrams and Thieu.

Having said that, the possibility of alternative causes which would explain the relative passivity of the countryside in 1972 does not preclude any arguments about the effectiveness of Phoenix. Several scholars and numerous Phoenix veterans have argued that Phoenix played a

¹³⁸ Moyer, *Phoenix and the Birds of Prey*. pp.316-317

¹³⁹ As with all matters in the Vietnam War, scholars continue to debate to what extent the countryside was pacified. There is no denying that South Vietnam continued to face insurgent violence in the final years of the war without a significant reduction in the number of Vietnamese killed by VC. On the other hand, numerous metrics, such as percentage of roads or hamlets secure from VC attacks for one week, two weeks, one month, etc., increased to pre-1963 levels beginning in 1970 (Moyer, p. 74. Sorely, p. 223)

role in weakening the enemy, though such arguments are largely anecdotal. Furthermore, there is no consensus among those who have judged Phoenix favorably as to what extent the program contributed to pacification. Stanley Karnow, in his Pulitzer-Prize-winning *Vietnam: A History*, briefly mentions that Phoenix, along with US bombing raids, decreased morale among the Vietcong and caused many to flee or rally to the GVN, though he offers no explanation why he believes Phoenix played a part in such defections.¹⁴⁰ Andrew Finlayson also had a very positive impression of the Phoenix Program in Tay Ninh and the surrounding provinces during his time in Vietnam from July 1969 to March 1970.¹⁴¹

Dale Andrade, meanwhile, contributes a well-researched, even-handed volume on the program—one of two authoritative accounts. Andrade arrives at the conclusion that Phoenix was something of a qualified success: it was inconsistent in its effectiveness throughout the provinces, but overall, Andrade claims, “the Americans made the Phoenix program work” insofar as the program caused irreparable damage to the GVN shadow government.¹⁴² In defending his thesis, Andrade relies heavily on case studies of successful Phoenix operations in individual provinces, while acknowledging that such operations were not the norm. Andrade makes good use of captured Vietcong documents and post-war Vietcong and NVA testimonies in an attempt to show that Phoenix caused the communists trouble. Beginning in 1968, captured communist documents do indeed begin to show increased concern over pacification efforts in general, but Phoenix was only one aspect of the pacification effort. Similarly, while it is true that Vietcong often questioned their detainees about Phoenix, this does not necessarily imply that the program had significantly hurt them or that they even knew what it was. Given the notoriety

¹⁴⁰ Karnow, *Vietnam*. p. 618

¹⁴¹ Interview with Andrew Finlayson. February 17, 2016.

¹⁴² Andrade, *Ashes to Ashes*. p. 284

Phoenix received in Western media, it is quite plausible that even despite their numerous informants within the GVN, the Vietcong suspected Phoenix of being much more sinister than it really was.¹⁴³

Mark Moyer, author of the other authoritative account of Phoenix, argues strongly against the traditional narrative that the US tried to wage a counterinsurgency with conventional methods. “Most allied tactical choices [throughout the course of the war] were appropriate,” Moyer argues. “The Allies ultimately foiled the Communists’ revolutionary warfare and lost the war because the ARVN’s main forces could not stop the NVA’s conventional attacks in 1975.”¹⁴⁴ Despite his positive assessment of US-GVN pacification efforts, Moyer argues that Phoenix was ineffective. Relying heavily on captured documents, interviews with former NVA and Vietcong officials, and South Vietnamese public opinion polls, Moyer concludes that the PRU and, to a lesser extent, the RF/PF were generally effective in identifying and neutralizing the VCI, while the PIOCCs and DIOCCs of Phoenix were of little practical use to US-GVN forces in identifying and attacking the VCI.¹⁴⁵

In any assessment of Phoenix, the historian would be remiss to ignore the assessments of those with the “eye of command,” the topCORDS officials. In July 1969, Colby told General Earle Wheeler, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, regarding Phoenix that, “Frankly, we can’t report any great success.”¹⁴⁶ In July 1970, a year after Colby’s assessment and a full three years after the creation of ICEX, Komer decried the lack of progress with Phoenix, stating, “In my

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 256-264

¹⁴⁴ Moyer, *Phoenix and the Birds of Prey*. p. 333

¹⁴⁵ Moyer, *Phoenix and the Birds of Prey*. p. xviii

¹⁴⁶ Sorely, *A Better War*. p. 144

view, the continued lack of an adequate effort to neutralize the Vietcong politico-administrative apparatus is one of the greatest GVN and U.S. failures of the entire Vietnam War.”¹⁴⁷

Many of those on the ground in the province and district level were similarly unimpressed with the Phoenix Program. Stuart Herrington, an Army Intelligence officer in Hua Nghia province, was so unimpressed with the program that after two weeks of Phoenix training he decided to effectively vacate his position as Phoenix adviser and set about performing his own intelligence advisory work with the local National Police commander.¹⁴⁸ Herrington states that “the facet of pacification that most typified the frustrations and inadequacies we faced as advisers was the Phoenix Program. . . . It was a forthright, simple, and typically American, direct approach to the problem and no single endeavor caused more grief and frustration for American advisory personnel.”¹⁴⁹ Paul Woodruff believed that Phoenix was a sound concept but that it had little impact on the war in his province, where the majority of the population was vehemently anti-Vietcong as a result of their religious affiliation.¹⁵⁰ He explained:

We were winning the counterinsurgency in Chau Doc, but Phoenix had nothing to with that. That is, I don’t think we were effectively eliminating the VC shadow government, which turned out—and I only learned this some thirty years later when I visited Vietnam—it turned out they were functioning quite well in a set of caves outside the

¹⁴⁷ Robert Komer, *Phung Hoang Fiasco*. p. 1

Accessed online via Internet Archive—Phoenix Program Documents
(<https://archive.org/stream/PhoenixProgramDocuments/Phoenix%20Program/19%20Komer%20Fiasco%2030%20July%2070#page/n1/mode/2up>)

¹⁴⁸ Herrington, *Stalking the Vietcong*. p. 21

¹⁴⁹ Herrington, *Stalking the Vietcong*. p. 256

¹⁵⁰ The Hoa Hao are a sect of Buddhism prevalent in Southern Vietnam. The founder of their religion, Huynh Phu So, was a Vietnamese peasant from Tay Ninh who gained tens of thousands of followers through his preachings as a young man in the 1940s. Having been persecuted by the French for his anti-colonial message, Huynh Phu So drew the ire of the Viet Minh, who feared that he might become the leader of the independence movement. In 1947, the Viet Minh assassinated So, dissected his body, and spread the pieces throughout the country to prevent his followers from establishing a shrine. The Hoa Hao were consequently among the staunchest anti-communist Vietnamese. (Joseph Buttinger, *The Smaller Dragon*. pp. 457-458)

villages. But we were, by the time I left in 1970, controlling the violent activities of the insurgency.¹⁵¹

Several scholars of South Vietnamese society state a similar position, that when the counterinsurgency succeeded it was not necessarily due to Phoenix operations. Contrary to conventional (American) COIN doctrine, David Elliott found in his study of Vietnamese villagers in the Mekong Delta that it was not precise intelligence or Phoenix operations, but rather the incessant and largely indiscriminate bombing and shelling of the countryside that caused the most damage to the shadow government. Elliott reasons that by forcing much of the population to flee their villages for the safety of GVN refugee camps, the VCI lost the support they had cultivated for years.¹⁵² Elliott's argument is supported by the analysis of CORDS personnel in Kien Phong province, who noted that the majority of Hoi Chanh in 1968 and 1969 claimed that an increase in B-52 raids in the region was the determining factor in their decisions to defect.¹⁵³ Jeffrey Race, in his study of Long An province, argues that while Phoenix was a necessary aspect of the counterinsurgency, in practice it accounted for very little intelligence. It was, in Race's experience, the greater MACV-ARVN troop presence in the province between 1968 and 1969 that was crucial to weakening the insurgents.¹⁵⁴

Keeping in mind the contrary conclusions of these scholars and veterans, my own research suggests a rather unimpressive and inefficient program, at least with regards to the operations of the PIOCCs and DIOCCs. It is clear that Phoenix was neither a resounding success nor an abject failure. Nevertheless, as a whole, the program was unsuccessful. Several provinces certainly enjoyed success under the Phoenix program. These provinces tended to

¹⁵¹ Interview with Paul Woodruff. January 25, 2016.

¹⁵² Elliott, *The Vietnamese War*. p. 256

¹⁵³ CORDS. *Province Reports—Monthly Sep 68-Dec 69*. Kien Phong (Provincial Advisory Team 84) Administrative and Operational Records 1962-1973. National Archives Record Group 472, Entry A1 726, Container 1426

¹⁵⁴ Race, *War Comes to Long An*. pp. 237-242

share common characteristics that were outside the control of CORDS bureaucracy: relevant GVN personnel (namely the Province Chief) and American advisers who were wholeheartedly committed to the program and to collaboration with one another, who sought to build relationships with the local community, and who enjoyed the flexibility to innovate and sufficient resources commensurate to the strength of the local VCI. In conclusion, based on the available documentary evidence and several firsthand accounts, Phoenix and related operations significantly weakened the VCI in roughly one-fourth of South Vietnam's 44 provinces. Examined as a comprehensive system, however, Phoenix failed to replicate its local successes on a national scale. In other words, Phoenix's shortcoming was its failure to scale, a failure that, as we shall see, was born of bureaucratic constraints within MACV.



A General from the U.S. Marine Corps inspects PRU in Quang Nam province (photo courtesy of Fred Vogel)

CHAPTER SEVEN

Inflexible Response:

The US Army and Counterinsurgency in Vietnam

Counterinsurgency Historiography

The adage that generals fight the previous war is a rather hackneyed phrase, but it rings true in the case of Vietnam. The prevailing narrative on the Vietnam War states that in the early years of the US advisory role in Vietnam, MAAG (Military Assistance Advisory Group, 1955-1964) equipped and trained ARVN in the model of the US Army, a conventional fighting force based around battalion and brigade-sized units deployed in offensive operations and capitalizing on significant advantages in firepower. With the advent of large-scale American combat operations following the Gulf of Tonkin incident, the narrative goes, the US Army conducted itself in largely the same way, neglecting population-centric approaches to the war in favor of search-and-destroy and large cordon-and-search operations.¹⁵⁵ MACV's philosophy was best captured by the adage, "Send a bullet instead of a man."¹⁵⁶

With America's renewed interest in counterinsurgency in the 21st century, a growing number of scholars have argued that MACV began pursuing an effective counterinsurgency strategy after the Tet Offensive, a period which had previously received less attention in the Vietnam historiography. Lewis Sorley's 1999 book, *A Better War*, set the stage for this narrative, arguing that with the promotion of Abrams to COMUSMACV in June 1968, "The

¹⁵⁵ Search-and-destroy operations, as the name implies, involved infiltrating hostile territory (often by helicopter), searching for enemy guerrillas, destroying them—often with tactical air strikes, helicopter gunship support, and/or artillery—and then quickly exfiltrating the area. Cordon-and-search operations involved surrounding a hamlet, rounding up all the citizens for questioning, and searching homes for hidden weapons. MACV considered both sets of operations ideal for counterinsurgency warfare, but the former frequently led to significant civilian casualties without offering clear operational victories and the latter greatly inconvenienced the Vietnamese and frequently led to abuse. (Woods, *Shadow Warrior*. pp.303-304) (Gregory Daddis, *No Sure Victory: Measuring U.S. Army Effectiveness in the Vietnam War*. p. 10) (Andrade, *Ashes to Ashes*. pp. 96-97)

¹⁵⁶ John Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam*. p. 200

tactics changed within fifteen minutes,” to quote General Fred Weyand.¹⁵⁷ US Army Colonel Gian Gentile, extreme and largely unfounded in his criticism of prevailing American counterinsurgency theory, nonetheless describes the “better war” narrative of US counterinsurgency in Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq with epigrammatic accuracy:

The first theme is of armies starting off in the wrong boot, fumbling and failing. A second theme, extending from the first, depicts an army that learns and adapts—from its lower ranks, surely, but mostly because a better general is put in command. The tide of a war is turned, hearts and minds are won, and victory is achieved.¹⁵⁸

With this in mind, we can see that while General Abrams and the new cadre of pacification proponents, chief among them William Colby and US Ambassador to Vietnam Ellsworth Bunker, attempted to navigate US-GVN pacification efforts out of dire straits, American military strategy between 1968 and 1972 nevertheless remained overwhelmingly conventional. In the case of Phoenix, the creation of the program in 1967 was a testament to the Johnson administration’s increasing recognition of pacification as a key aspect of the Vietnam War. Its continued underperformance in the years of the supposed “better war,” however, was indicative of institutional inertia within the US military effort that even Abrams and the pacification aficionados were unable to overcome.

The Army Under Kennedy and Johnson and Counterinsurgency Doctrine

Army Manual 3-0 defines doctrine as “a body of thought on how Army forces intend to operate as an integral part of a joint force. Doctrine focuses on how to think—not what to

¹⁵⁷ Sorley, *A Better War*. p. 17

¹⁵⁸ Gian Gentile, *Wrong Turn: America’s Deadly Embrace of Counter-Insurgency*. pp. 5-6

think.”¹⁵⁹ Army doctrine in the Vietnam War proved to be far less flexible than this definition would have us believe. The Cold War saw a growing disconnect between the types of warfare which the armed forces were predisposed to wage and the strategic objectives set forth by America’s leaders.

The national security policy of the fiscally conservative Dwight Eisenhower, dubbed the “new look,” rested heavily on the concept of massive retaliation. Instead of spending exorbitant sums maintaining a large army that could match the Soviets man-for-man and launch ambitious operations in any corner of the globe, Eisenhower believed it was sufficient and economical to scale down the size of the Army in favor of maintaining a strong nuclear deterrent.¹⁶⁰ Colonel Harry Summers, in his well-regarded work, *On Strategy* states:

In justifying strategy in civilian strategist terms, the Army surrendered its unique authority based on battlefield experience. . . . Instead of concentrating attention on military strategy which had become unfashionable after World War II (and, to many, *irrelevant in the nuclear era*), there was an increased emphasis on technical, managerial, and bureaucratic concerns. . . . We became neophyte political scientists and systems analysts and were outclassed by the civilian professionals who dominated national security policy under Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara after 1961.¹⁶¹

As management consultant Peter Drucker famously noted, “Culture eats strategy for breakfast.”¹⁶² When Kennedy entered the Oval Office in 1961 he adopted a markedly different strategy than Eisenhower had, that of “flexible response” in which the US armed forces would be capable of responding to communist threats across the warfare spectrum and around the world. A shift in military culture did not accompany this shift in strategy, however. As they had in the Eisenhower era, generals left strategy to the civilians, namely the “Whiz Kids” in the DoD and

¹⁵⁹ Department of the Army, *Field Manual 3-0, Operations*. Appendix D-1. Accessed via (<http://downloads.army.mil/fm3-0/FM3-0.pdf>)

¹⁶⁰ John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy During the Cold War*. pp. 133-134

¹⁶¹ Col. Harry Summers, *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War*. pp. 43-44

¹⁶² Shep Hyken, *Drucker Said ‘Culture Eats Strategy For Breakfast’ and Enterprise Rent-A-Car Proves It*. Forbes Magazine. Dec. 5, 2015.

NSC who largely retained their positions under both the Kennedy and Johnson administrations.¹⁶³ The military focused instead on developing doctrine based on their current abilities—waging total wars of annihilation in the spirit of the Second World War and limited wars of attrition like the Korean War—and based on countering what they perceived as the most pressing and existential threat, that of the Red Army. Both WWII and Korea had been conventional wars in the purest sense of the term and depended on high-volume and indiscriminate firepower, large-scale operational maneuvers, and an identifiable adversary. With the notable exception of Maxwell Taylor, Kennedy’s Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, military officials were unenthusiastic about Flexible Response. As part of the strategy, Kennedy envisioned armed forces that could maintain the strategic nuclear deterrent, fight “small wars” in third-world jungles, and defend the Fulda Gap against Soviet armor.¹⁶⁴ Given the institutional experience of the armed forces in the Second World War and Korea, their increasing focus on operational minutiae, and the relative weight policymakers gave to countering the Soviets first and foremost, it should come as no surprise that the armed forces found themselves much better suited for the third task at the expense of the “small wars.” It would be an uphill battle when Kennedy tasked the Army in 1961 to begin including components of counterinsurgency theory in its doctrine.¹⁶⁵

Counterinsurgency is hardly a 20th-century phenomenon. Historian Max Boot traces the roots of insurgency to ancient Mesopotamia, when rebellious cities rose up against the Akkadian king Sargon only to be crushed by brute force.¹⁶⁶ Be they the Romans in Judea or the *Grand Armee* in Spain, throughout history, states have found themselves confronted with non-state

¹⁶³ Summers, *On Strategy*. p. 45

¹⁶⁴ Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*. p. 213

¹⁶⁵ Gregory Daddis, *Westmoreland’s War: Reassessing American Strategy in Vietnam*. p. 21

¹⁶⁶ Max Boot, *Invisible Armies: An Epic History of Guerrilla Warfare from Ancient Times to the Present*. pp. 11-13

adversaries who have sought to achieve political objectives through irregular warfare. Beginning in the late 19th century, the US Army began to increasingly subscribe to the writings of Napoleonic-era military theorists such as Clausewitz and Jomini, who recognized the importance of the people and socio-political dimensions in war, but considered conflicts involving only insurgent tactics to be anomalous.¹⁶⁷ The US Army of the early Cold War understandably did not take doctrinal prescriptions from Sargon or Vespasian—and probably for the best. More significant is the fact that the US Army entered Vietnam without any apparent desire to implement the lessons of the contemporary and numerous anti-communist counterinsurgencies which the US and its allies had experienced since 1945. In 1949, the world watched as Chinese communists, after years of protracted insurgency, put Mao’s theory of revolutionary warfare into practice and achieved a conventional *coup de main* against Chiang Kai-Shek’s Nationalist armies in the Huai Hai campaign. America’s closest ally, the UK, achieved (qualified) military successes against insurgents in Kenya and Malaya in the 50s and early 60s. The US Army itself had advised and equipped the Greek army in their fight against communist partisans between 1947 and 1949, and had similarly supported the Philippine government in their defeat of the “Huk” (Hukbalahap) communist insurgents between 1950 and 1953. The French, meanwhile, had waged two bloody (and ultimately unsuccessful) insurgencies in Algeria and, of course, Indochina by the time the US began combat operations in Vietnam.

None of these insurgencies perfectly mirrored the situation in South Vietnam. Even in Vietnam, the Vietcong insurgency which the US and GVN faced was different from the Viet Minh’s war against the French, where a broad-based coalition of insurgents had faced a single, foreign colonial power. The Huks did not have the ideological training of the Lao Dong nor the

¹⁶⁷ Russell Weigley, *The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy*. pp. 82-84
Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife*. pp. 16-19

external support of the Vietcong, and Philippine society was generally more equitable than South Vietnamese society.¹⁶⁸ Whereas South Vietnam had extensive land borders through which guerrillas could smuggle men and materiel, Malaya had only one short border. Furthermore, the communists in Malaya and the ethnic Kikuyu insurgents in Kenya had no external powers to support them and, as a result of their societies' respective ethnic divisions, neither insurgency managed to gain the support of the majority of the population.¹⁶⁹ Nevertheless, America's top brass could have consulted any of the several experienced counterinsurgents within their own ranks and those of their close allies had they felt the need.

The desire was not present, however. Kennedy had wanted to make Edward Lansdale, the maverick Air Force intelligence officer who had advised the Philippine government during the Huk rebellion, ambassador to Vietnam, but the Army convinced McNamara to dissuade the president; the Pentagon felt Lansdale was too political as a consequence of his CIA connections, which was sufficient cause to nix the appointment.¹⁷⁰ Robert Thompson, defense adviser to the Malay government during the Emergency, received invitations from Diem and later Kennedy to advise the GVN and US pacification efforts respectively. He had more success in the former, but any influence he had he lost in 1963 with Diem's assassination. In his capacity as head of the British Advisory Mission (BRIAM), he was frustrated by the unwillingness of MAAG and subsequently MACV to implement his sweeping suggestions.¹⁷¹ As for seeking French advice in counterinsurgency: "The French haven't won a war since Napoleon," one US official remarked. "What can we learn from them?"¹⁷²

¹⁶⁸ Boot, *Invisible Armies*. pp. 403-405.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 380-388, 391-392

¹⁷⁰ Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife*. p. 127

¹⁷¹ Andrew Krepinevich, *The Army in Vietnam*. pp. 66-68, 86

¹⁷² Daddis, *No Sure Victory*. p. 23

During the Kennedy-Johnsons years what the US Army, or rather the defense community at large, did possess was something of a theoretical understanding of counterinsurgency. Case studies in irregular warfare covering the campaigns of such figures as TE Lawrence and Geronimo fill several Army Field Manuals on counterinsurgency printed in the early 1960s.¹⁷³ In addition to internal DoD think pieces and analytical writings from RAND and other think tanks, the field manuals constitute a somewhat superficial counterinsurgency doctrine. These writings make clear that complex sociopolitical dynamics underlie counterinsurgency efforts and that the counterinsurgent must respect the dignity of the population. Army field-manuals in particular stress that the role of the United States in third-world counterinsurgencies must be limited: “There are many ways in which we can help,” states the introduction to a 1966 compilation of readings on counterinsurgency published by the Army Infantry School, “and we are searching our minds and our imaginations to learn better how to help; but a guerrilla war must be fought primarily by those on the spot.”¹⁷⁴

With the benefit of hindsight, we can see that American counterinsurgency writings of the 1960s ominously lacked detailed prescription for effective counterinsurgency operations. US Army FM 31-15, printed in 1961, states that “Operations are planned to be predominantly offensive operations,” while failing to emphasize population security as one of the five principles of operation, listing it under “police, combat, and civic action operations” instead.¹⁷⁵ Furthermore, while acknowledging that counterinsurgencies are dependent on sociopolitical change as well as military victory, contemporary writings frequently reduced complex societal dynamics to propagandistic bromides. The US military cannot, of course, be blamed for

¹⁷³ United States Army Infantry School, *Selected Readings in Guerrilla and Counterinsurgency Operations*. August 1966.

¹⁷⁴ United States Army Infantry School, *Selected Readings in Guerrilla and Counterinsurgency Operations*. p. 32

¹⁷⁵ Department of the Army, *Field Manual 31-15: Operations Against Irregular Forces*. May 1961. p. 4

incorporating a dimension of righteousness into their doctrine, as inculcating a sense of purpose in troops is key to morale. With that said, American counter-insurgency writings pushed a strong narrative that the Vietnamese people were simply terrified victims of the Vietcong and that they were or would soon be sympathetic to the Americans and the GVN. Such notions were understandable, as the Vietcong indeed terrorized thousands of Vietnamese and the Americans were right to state that they possessed no colonial ambitions in Vietnam; but such optimism was also naïve. Understanding how the populace will view the presence of foreign soldiers is crucial knowledge which a counterinsurgent must possess prior to entering the insurgent environment, but it appears to have been lacking in the literature of the time.

American counterinsurgency theory of the early 1960s was also beset by the problem of translating concepts of irregular warfare into terms familiar to armed forces accustomed to conventional warfare. Analogies between irregular and conventional warfare could be useful in bridging this theoretical disconnect, but they could also be counterproductive if the connection were tenuous. In a 1963 speech to Air Force personnel, RAND analyst James Farmer states “I would like to point out the similarity between [the counterinsurgency] environment and the environment conceived by tacticians for tactical nuclear warfare; the concept of defended strong points with a sort of “no man’s land” between.”¹⁷⁶ Farmer is clever in attempting to draw an analogy to nuclear warfare, a subject about which the Air Force in 1963 was significantly more knowledgeable than it was about counterinsurgency. But in tactical nuclear warfare both parties are on even footing. Not so in a counterinsurgency. What the counterinsurgent may consider “no man’s land” is of inherent advantage to the insurgent who can afford to remain in the shadows. An effective counterinsurgency strategy seeks to eliminate such “no man’s lands” by

¹⁷⁶ James Farmer, *Counter-Insurgency: Viet-Nam 1962-1963*. Transcript of speech to U.S. Air Force audience on May 24, 1963 at Inglewood, California. p. 15

increasing government presence throughout hostile territory. By focusing only on strong points, the counterinsurgents put themselves in the same untenable situation as the French in the First Indochina War, who, as Vietnam expert Bernard Fall noted, “only [control] Vietnam to the extent of 100 yards on either side of all major roads.”¹⁷⁷

The US Army officer arriving in Vietnam had a superficial but flawed theoretical understanding of irregular warfare and no personal experience in the subject. None of his colleagues would likely have any previous experience in such warfare either. The American Indian Wars had long since faded from institutional memory, replaced by the seemingly more relevant American experience in World War II and Korea, in which combined infantry and armor offensive operations had brought devastating firepower to bear upon the enemy at the loss of what was considered at the time to be generally few men, relative to other nations’ armies. Regarding the preparedness of US Army officers for waging counterinsurgency, West Point historian Gregory Daddis states that “Missing was not an appreciation for balancing political and military action in a counterinsurgency environment. Rather, officers had yet to define a system for evaluating their efforts when engaging irregular forces and insurgents.”¹⁷⁸

MACV and Counterinsurgency in Practice

MACV failed to apply the core tenets of the counterinsurgency doctrine espoused by such literature, superficial as it was, in its actual conduct of the war under the command of either Westmoreland or Abrams. It is true that in the years of the “better war,” clear-and-hold operations in line with counterinsurgency theory gained prominence, but search-and-destroy

¹⁷⁷ Andrade, *Ashes to Ashes*. p. 16

¹⁷⁸ Daddis, *No Sure Victory*. p. 20

operations persisted while the frequency of largely ineffective cordon-and-search operations increased.¹⁷⁹ Indiscriminate, overwhelming firepower remained characteristic of the conflict. The 9th Infantry Division's Operation Speedy Express, launched six months into Abrams' tenure as COMUSMACV, was a massive search-and-destroy operation that in the course of five months claimed the lives of 10,899 Vietnamese in the Mekong Delta, of whom between 5,000 and 7,000 were estimated to have been civilians, according to the Army inspector general's 1972 report.¹⁸⁰ The 9th Infantry's operational report for the first two months of Speedy Express states that the division's operations supported the civic action and PSYOPs of the Accelerated Pacification Campaign, but the same operational report outlines the strategic objective as "eliminating VC/NVA main-force elements" and suggests a singular focus on body count to measure progress.¹⁸¹ In fact, William Colby believed that Speedy Express undid much of CORDS' limited progress in the Delta.¹⁸²

Speedy Express is just one extreme example of an overwhelmingly conventional response to the asymmetric Vietcong threat during the tenure of Abrams. The strategy of indiscriminate and overwhelming firepower of Westmoreland persisted throughout the tenure of the American presence in South Vietnam. MACV doctrine continued to stress the importance of imprecise forms firepower such as indirect artillery fire hunter-killer helicopter patrols. Regarding such helicopter patrols, Paul Woodruff remarked, "We weren't hunting and killing,

¹⁷⁹ Andrade, *Ashes to Ashes*. p. 96

¹⁸⁰ Headquarters U.S. Military Assistance Command Vietnam. *Monthly Summary: May 1969*. The Virtual Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University. Bud Harton Collection. p. 63

Patricia Sullivan, *Obituary of Julian J. Ewell, 93*. Washington Post. August 5, 2009.

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/08/04/AR2009080403187.html>

¹⁸¹ 9th Inf. Div.: *Operational Report for Quarterly Period Ending 31 January 1969*. The Virtual Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University. Michael Sloniker Collection. p. 8

¹⁸² Woods, *Shadow Warrior*. pp. 302-303

we were waiting for someone to shoot at us so we could shoot back.”¹⁸³ Summaries of significant enemy engagements nationwide between July and October 1969 show that in one third of all engagements involving American artillery and/or helicopter gunship support, the Americans were unable to verify that they had killed any Vietcong or NVA.¹⁸⁴ Fred Vogel, a PRU adviser in Quang Nam province in 1969, similarly felt the Army operated in an overly conventional manner in I Corps: “My only experience was with the Americal (23rd Infantry) Division. . . . I was not impressed with them. They had big tanks and APCs (armored personnel carriers), and from what I saw they tended to favor large-scale, conventional operations.”¹⁸⁵

Vietnamization did not spell the end to American firepower, either. The 17th Cavalry Regiment, for example, actually increased its frequency of hunter-killer missions in support of GVN forces beginning in 1970 as Nixon dramatically reduced overall US numbers in Vietnam.¹⁸⁶ Abrams himself was most aware of the difficulties even a senior officer faced in attempting to redirect the Army’s institutional inertia with regard to its strategy in Vietnam. In 1967, while still serving as Deputy to Westmoreland, Abrams acknowledged to then-commander of III Corps General Bruce Palmer that he felt “it was really too late to change U.S. strategy. As for any major changes within MACV, the pattern was set in concrete. . . . Abrams did say that

¹⁸³ Interview with Paul Woodruff. January 25, 2016.

¹⁸⁴ Headquarters U.S. Military Assistance Command Vietnam. *Monthly Summary: July 1969*. The Virtual Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University. John M. Shaw Collection

Ibid., *Monthly Summary: August 1969*

Ibid., *Monthly Summary: September 1969*

Ibid., *Monthly Summary: October 1969*

¹⁸⁵ Interview with Fred Vogel. March 29, 2016.

¹⁸⁶ 17th Cavalry Regiment, *Operational Report 1971*. The Virtual Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University. John M. Shaw Collection p. 16

he too was dismayed by the U.S.-Vietnamese organizational and operational setup that had evolved.”¹⁸⁷

MACV’s failure to modify conventional offensive practices and implement a successful counterinsurgency highlights two important elements of the American effort in Vietnam. First, the Vietnam War was not merely a counterinsurgency. Both Westmoreland and Abrams pushed the notion that the US had one strategic objective in Vietnam (maintaining a non-communist South Vietnam) and one enemy (the communists) and was therefore fighting “one war.”¹⁸⁸ Both generals were essentially correct—although, as discussed in the first chapter, the relationship between the Vietcong and North Vietnamese Lao Dong was complex—but the Vietnam War had at least three very distinct dimensions: pacification in South Vietnam, the main-unit war against the NVA and VC, and the air war against North Vietnam. Dale Andrade explains

Westmoreland’s neglect of pacification as a question of priority:

The VCI, he said, were ‘termites’ that slowly gnawed away at the foundation of the GVN. Waiting in the wings with crowbars poised to demolish the weakened structure were the ‘bully boys,’ the Viet Cong and NVA military units. Westmoreland believed that ‘only by eliminating the bully boys—or at least harrying them so as to keep them away from the building—was there a possibility of eliminating the termites.’¹⁸⁹

The 1975 Ho Chi Minh offensive proved that Westmoreland had been, in fact, correct in his assessment that the conventional NVA and Vietcong units posed the greatest threat to maintaining a non-communist Vietnam. This does not exonerate MACV for its negligence vis-à-vis pacification, but it highlights the inherent difficulties the United States faced in Vietnam. America had to both wage a limited war against a conventional enemy and quash an insurgency while building up the capacities and legitimacy of the South Vietnamese state. The enemy,

¹⁸⁷ Bruce Palmer, *The 25-Year War: America’s Military Role in Vietnam*. pp. 63-64

¹⁸⁸ Sorley, *A Better War*. p. 18

¹⁸⁹ Andrade, *Ashes to Ashes*. p. 13

meanwhile, could engage in either conventional and/or insurgent warfare depending on which tactics proved contemporarily advantageous, and possessed an immediate objective far simpler than that of the US: destroying rather than building a state.

Second, and more central to the issue of the Phoenix Program, the US military as part of the strategy of flexible response had been tasked with conducting operations for which it was ill-suited. Kennedy had expanded the mission of the Army, charging with preparing for both conventional warfare with the Soviets and third-world counter-revolutionary warfare. Giving Army officials more and diverse tasks did not ensure that they would effectively complete them, however. Even POTUS could not compel the Army to alter a conventional doctrine born out of the Second World War and Korean War when the most pressing threat to the security of the “free world” was indeed conventional—that of the Soviet army surging through Europe. The Army paid lip service to developing and implementing counterinsurgency doctrine, per the President’s request, but they remained rigid in their practice. As one senior Army officer put it, “I’ll be damned if I permit the United States Army, its institutions, its doctrine, and its traditions to be destroyed just to win this lousy war.”¹⁹⁰ Had the US Army destroyed and recreated itself as a purely counterinsurgent fighting force it would have indeed been detrimental to America’s grand strategic aims. American conventional forces were needed in Berlin, South Korea, and, in fact, South Vietnam to defend against communist conventional forces; but the officer’s quote presents a false dichotomy between maintaining a conventional army and maintaining an army purely capable of fighting “small wars.” The US Army could have better achieved national objectives in South Vietnam and around the globe if it had been able to chart a middle path between these

¹⁹⁰ Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife*. p. 172

ends of the military spectrum. Unfortunately, the Army remained staunchly conventional in its approach to asymmetric warfare.

The tactics that had proven effective in the Second World War and Korea and the weapons which had been designed to devastate Soviet armies frequently proved useless if not counterproductive in a counterinsurgency. These tactics and weapons were familiar and available to the Army, however, and they suited the Army's primary purpose of preparing for a conventional war with the Soviets. The Army therefore continued to employ such tools throughout the war, often to the detriment of strategic progress. In the words of Robert Komer, "It was a classic use of the availability of capability driving us to use it."¹⁹¹ No substantial contingent of the US Army, meanwhile, had fought against guerrilla forces since American forces had left Nicaragua in 1933. This doctrinal inflexibility and lack of institutional knowledge of counterinsurgency beyond the most superficial level ultimately explains the failures of the Phoenix Program.

CHAPTER EIGHT

From Nobody's Business to the Army's Business:

Examining the Phoenix Bureaucracy

Prior to ICEX/Phoenix, MACV had preferred to leave anti-VCI operations to the GVN, who, after the failure of the Strategic Hamlet Program in 1962, paid little attention to pacification until the consolidation of the Thieu-Ky regime in 1966. The American agencies primarily

¹⁹¹ Komer, *Bureaucracy Does Its Thing*. p. 9

involved in pacification had been the State Department, USAID, and USIA, but their operations were generally limited to the “carrot,” the building of roads and schools, distribution of medicine, etc.¹⁹² Lacking was a “stick” strong enough to smash the VCI. Only the CIA, through its work with the CTT/PRU, made a concentrated effort to eliminate the VCI, but its operational capacities were limited. More importantly, the CIA closely guarded its sources, retaining the best intelligence on the VCI for itself. The CIA was understandably wary of sharing valuable intelligence with GVN units that were frequently victim to enemy penetration, though these units—whether ARVN, PSB, RF/PF, or PSDF—maintained a far stronger presence in the countryside.¹⁹³ American military units, meanwhile, had little interest in CIA intelligence on the VCI. MACV’s interests lay in the big-unit war and in eliminating VC/NVA men and materiel. A constant source of friction between the CIA and MACV throughout the war was the latter’s demand for intelligence on the enemy’s order of battle despite the Agency’s protests that more focus be given to identifying the guerrilla infrastructure.¹⁹⁴

At the 1966 Honolulu conference, Johnson and McNamara as well as Thieu and Ky officially recognized the significance of pacification and committed to making a new effort on that front, though it remained unclear whether MACV and ARVN would shoulder the new burden as opposed to US and GVN civilian agencies. It took over a year before Komer attempted to bridge this divide with the creation of CORDS, a nominally civil-military hybrid. In the interim, the Office of Civil Operations (OCO) had consolidated the fledgling pacification efforts of US civilian agencies under the control of one civilian official, the deputy ambassador to Vietnam. The OCO had been unable to claim any success to its name. Comprised of State

¹⁹² Andrade, *Ashes to Ashes*. pp. 56-57

¹⁹³ Alhern, *Vietnam Declassified*. pp. 261-262

¹⁹⁴ Woods, *Shadow Warrior*. p. 287

Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie*. pp. 694-696

and AID personnel, the OCO lacked the manpower and resources to conduct a nationwide pacification effort even as it limited itself to “carrot” operations. It took an average of eighteen months for AID supplies to reach Saigon, and the number of civilian advisers in 1966 involved in pacification was well under 1,000.¹⁹⁵

When Komer arrived in Vietnam in May 1967 to assume command of the nationwide pacification efforts, he quickly came to realize that the OCO’s failure had been the result of it lacking any US military component. Granted, there existed a kinetic component of pacification prior to Phoenix. The PRU operated almost exclusively against the VCI, while the NPFF and RF/PF provided village and hamlet security, the latter accounting for nearly 40% of all Phoenix neutralizations after 1967. But these units were essentially civilian, outside the command structure of ARVN and thus MACV. The CIA trained and advised the PRU while AID assumed responsibility of the territorial forces—the RF/PF—as well as the NPFF prior to the creation of CORDS. AID lacked resources and manpower to effectively support such paramilitary forces and were primarily concerned with macroeconomic issues such as war-related inflation.¹⁹⁶ These units were already disadvantaged. Subscribing to MACV’s view of the war as one of predominantly big-units, ARVN received the lion’s share of GVN resources and the best recruits. The NPFF and territorial forces consisted of generally illiterate, inexperienced Vietnamese in poor health. Their facilities were frequently decrepit, their weapons often outdated, and their training inadequate.¹⁹⁷ In short, the OCO managed both kinetic and non-

¹⁹⁵ Andrade, *Ashes to Ashes*. pp. 54-56

Andrade and Willbanks, *CORDS/Phoenix*. p. 16

¹⁹⁶ Komer, *Bureaucracy Does Its Thing*. p. 11

¹⁹⁷ CORDS. *Management Survey*. CORDS HQ General Records 1970 (Spring Review-various province briefs) National Archives Record Group 472, Entry 10096, Container 8
Moyar, *Phoenix and the Birds of Prey*. pp. 163-164

kinetic pacification efforts poorly, failing to provide sufficient resources or oversight to the diffuse organizations tasked with the paramount job of counterinsurgency.

Komer made the conscious decision, therefore, to place CORDS under the command of MACV. In his mind, the existing civilian agencies were inadequate to support nationwide pacification efforts. After the war, Komer recalled, “If you are ever going to get a program going, you are only going to be able to do it by stealing from the military. They have all the trucks, they have all the planes, they have all the people, they have all the money—and what they did not have locked up, they had a lien on.”¹⁹⁸ CORDS was therefore officially a “civil-military hybrid,” consisting of both military and civilian personnel but with a unique chain of command that went through DEPCORDS to COMUSMACV, the commander of all military forces in Vietnam. Of the civilian agencies involved in CORDS, the CIA was the only organization with any substantial role and its work was primarily concerned with the PRU and ICEX/Phoenix. Nelson Brickham had conceived of ICEX not as a radical new system for anti-infrastructure operations but as a method of consolidating existing intelligence and operations against the VCI under one roof. This centralized bureaucracy took the form of the DIOCCs and PIOCCs, to which the CIA, Brickham and Komer hoped, would contribute personnel and intelligence while also coordinating PRU and RD operations with the other US-GVN institutions involved in Phoenix/Phung Hoang. As Brickham imagined it, the CIA’s Regional Officer in Charge (ROIC) and his MACV deputy would serve as the senior ICEX/Phoenix adviser and chair the Corps ICEX/Phoenix committee, while at the province level, the Province Officer in Charge (POIC) would hold a similar position with regards to the ICEX/Phoenix framework. According to Dale Andrade, “This hierarchy did not mean the CIA held total sway over the fledgling anti-

¹⁹⁸ Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam*. p. 217

infrastructure program, but rather that there was a lack of personnel outside the CIA capable of handling the job.”¹⁹⁹

In practice, the CIA’s role appears to have been more limited. After-action reports of PRU and RD Cadre, the CIA’s primary sources of intelligence in the countryside, are far from ubiquitous in the archives, appearing sporadically in documents from a mere four of the fourteen PIOCCs examined for this thesis.²⁰⁰ Given the continuous stove-piping of intelligence among US and GVN units involved in pacification that persisted throughout the war, it is unsurprising that references to CIA intelligence should appear infrequently in the available CORDS archives. ROICs and POICs had numerous tasks besides coordinating or participating the Phoenix/Phung-Hoang committees, namely collecting strategic intelligence on COSVN (Central Office for South Vietnam), the overarching communist political-military organization in South Vietnam.²⁰¹ Fred Vogel, a Marine PRU adviser in Quang Nam province in 1969 stated, “The relationship between the PRU and the PIOCCs wasn’t that close. . . . I never really operated with them. There was always a separation.”²⁰² Evan Parker, the CIA officer who first directed the Phoenix Program, also made clear in a post-war interview, “Phoenix was not a CIA program. We provided some resources, but that’s all.”²⁰³

After the war, Komer acknowledged that US-GVN pacification efforts had become excessively militarized under CORDS. Komer stated,

¹⁹⁹ Andrade, *Ashes to Ashes*. p. 64

²⁰⁰ PRU or RD Cadre after-action reports list whether or not the units discovered any intelligence in the course of their operations. The after-action reports do not list the intelligence itself, as several CIA veterans with whom the author has spoken suggested that the Agency is liable to withhold such information from the public for 50 years in order to protect sources. With that said, the author only found PRU after-action reports in the archives for Gia Dinh province and found RD cadre reports pertaining to three provinces in the CORDS General Records for CTZ I

²⁰¹ Alhern, *Vietnam Declassified*. pp. 262-267

Col. Andrew Finlayson, *Marine Advisors with the Provincial Reconnaissance Units, 1966-1970*. History Division, United States Marine Corps. p. 13

²⁰² Interview with Fred Vogel. March 29, 2016.

²⁰³ National Security Archive, *Douglas Valentine Collection*. Box 3. “Evan Parker”

As military considerations became ever more prominent [later in the war], the GVN and U.S. military largely took over the reins of power in Vietnam. . . . On the U.S. side, MACV overshadowed the civilian agencies, just as the military effort dwarfed the civilian effort. Civilian officials in Saigon played little role in military decision-making, despite recognition that political and military factors were wholly intertwined in this type of conflict.²⁰⁴

John Cook, a Phoenix District adviser in Di An district, was witness to the civil-military divide in pacification and the military's predominance in the Phoenix Program specifically. Lt. Cook recalls the CORDS PSA for Bien Hoa saying during orientation: "Military advisors, like me, have a free hand in areas that are strictly military. The civilians are reluctant to tread on shaky ground, trying to keep themselves busy with such matters as food, education, and building hospitals."²⁰⁵

The predominance of the military in pacification is best seen in the personnel records, which show that at the peak of US pacification efforts, 6,464 CORDS advisers were military, of whom 95% were Army, while only 1,137 were civilian.²⁰⁶ In Phoenix this ratio was even more dramatic, ranging between 21:1 and 397:1 military advisers to civilians throughout the duration of the program.²⁰⁷ The ratio is probably somewhat exaggerated, as the CIA has been unwilling to give precise figures, but the numbers provide a sense of the extent to which military personnel outweighed civilian personnel in Phoenix. The District Senior Advisers who ran the DIOCCs were, with few exceptions, all MACV personnel while the CORDS Province Senior Adviser (PSA) was generally from MACV or, in rare cases, the State Department. (If the PSA was MACV his deputy was civilian and vice-versa.)²⁰⁸ Thus, Colby's elimination of the CIA POICs and ROICs from the Phoenix chain of command in July 1969—just as the program was

²⁰⁴ Komer, *Bureaucracy Does Its Thing*. p. 40

²⁰⁵ John Cook, *The Advisor: The Phoenix Program in Vietnam*. p. 36

²⁰⁶ Andrade and Willbanks, *CORDS/Phoenix*. p. 16

²⁰⁷ Andrade, *Ashes to Ashes*. Appendix A-2: Resource Allocations

²⁰⁸ Interview with Paul Woodruff. January 25, 2016.

Cook, *The Advisor*. p. 36

beginning to build its own momentum and pay its first dividends, according to scholars such as Andrade—did not, in fact, signal a significant restructuring of the program. MACV was simply subsuming what had in effect been a military institution since its inception.

Phoenix: A Question of Command

The root of Phoenix's failures lay in MACV's subsuming command of the anti-infrastructure bureaucracy despite the Command's continued belief that pacification was a GVN responsibility. In May 1967 when Komer first arrived in Vietnam, he assured an assembly of senior MACV officials including Westmoreland that, "pacification is a GVN responsibility, with the U.S. providing advice and resources."²⁰⁹ MACV was to some extent correct that pacification would ultimately be a GVN effort. The GVN would have lost all legitimacy, making an insurgent victory far more likely, if the United States had served as the sole or even primary counterinsurgent force in the Vietnamese. Nevertheless, MACV's efforts in the realm of pacification, even after the creation of CORDS, were relatively minimal. At its height in 1969, CORDS maintained a force of 7,601 advisers while Washington committed 550,000 US troops to military operations in Vietnam that same year. In Fiscal Year 1968, the US spent nearly \$14 billion on bombing and offensive operations and only \$850 million on pacification efforts, a disparity which caused little concern among either MACV or the civilians in DoD.²¹⁰

Consequently, Phoenix faced two significant challenges. The first and most obvious was a lack of sufficient resources. CORDS undoubtedly received more funding and personnel as a part of MACV than it would have had it remained a civilian organization, and such was Komer's reasoning for placing pacification under military command; but resources were scarce

²⁰⁹ Daddis, *No Sure Victory*. p. 115

²¹⁰ Alain C. Enthoven and K. Wayne Smith, *How Much Is Enough?: Shaping the Defense Program 1961-1969*. RAND Corporation. p. 294

throughout the history of Phoenix. South Vietnam consisted of 2,000 villages subdivided into 13,000 hamlets. District advisers, never numbering more than 250, were each responsible, on average, for coordinating and monitoring pacification efforts in 37 hamlets.²¹¹ Jeffrey Race notes that in Long An province, Phoenix special reaction forces (PRU and NP) only constituted 5% of the entire GVN armed strength in the province.²¹² The Assistant to the Chief of Staff of CORDS in Saigon determined in September 1970 that “There are two reasons that the present Phung Hoang program is inadequate to destroy the enemy: insufficient time and troops available.”²¹³

Similarly, District advisers in Vinh Binh province, to take one example, complained that a lack of personnel to oversee the Revolutionary Development cadre and Census Grievance officials precluded any intelligence contribution to local DIOCCs by these “crucial” sources.²¹⁴ Another report from Vinh Binh in March 1969 highlights the lack of funding available for even the most proven intelligence programs. “This sounds very familiar to some of you,” the author states, addressing the Province Phung-Hoang committee, “but the fact remains that Phoenix/Phung Hoang inspections have turned up remarkably few DIOCCs where VIP (volunteer informant program) funds were available. They have long since proven their worth, and they should be used more widely.”²¹⁵

²¹¹ Daddis, *No Sure Victory*. pp. 118-120

²¹² Race, *War Comes to Long An*. p. 238

²¹³ CORDS. *Security Planning—1971*. CORDS HQ General Records 1970 (Spring Review-various province briefs) National Archives Record Group 472, Entry 10096, Container 8

²¹⁴ CORDS. *DIOCC Advisers Meeting*. Vinh Binh (Provincial Advisory Team 72) Administrative and Operational Records 1966-1972. National Archives Record Group 472, Entry A1 721, Container 1253

CORDS. *DIOCC Inspection Results*. Vinh Binh (Provincial Advisory Team 72) Administrative and Operational Records 1966-1972. National Archives Record Group 472, Entry A1 721, Container 1253

²¹⁵ CORDS. *Phoenix Program*. Vinh Binh (Provincial Advisory Team 72) Administrative and Operational Records 1966-1972. National Archives Record Group 472, Entry A1 721, Container 1253

The second and most significant challenge the Phoenix Program faced was that of coordination with the GVN. Phoenix was, after all, an advisory effort. While MACV could and should have diverted more resources to the program, the heart of the anti-infrastructure effort would always have to be Vietnamese. In the minds of CORDS staff, the biggest reason for Phoenix's underperformance at all levels was the failure of their Vietnamese counterparts. Many American advisers found their GVN counterparts to be competent individuals of integrity, but the CORDS archives are nonetheless replete with complaints about the behavior of GVN officials at the district, province, and national levels: The District Adviser in Tra Cu was a liability due to his "ruthless" and "brutal" treatment of his fellow soldiers; the Province Chief in Vinh Binh was a "nitpicker, and antagonistic to those under him who show any signs of competence;" the DIOCC in Thanh Binh failed to produce results because local GVN officials "are trying to place the responsibility of the DIOCC on one another's shoulders;" the ROIC was exasperated by Vietnamese "recalcitrance" in Kien Phong where it took over a year before all Province and District Senior Advisers were able to meet their GVN counterparts together under one roof.²¹⁶ Such are but a few examples of the Vietnamese supposedly failing to pull their weight. Granted, there was a natural tendency for Americans to misunderstand Vietnamese behavior due to an ignorance of local culture or political dynamics; but the frustration of the advisers is indicative of a problem which lay at the heart of Phoenix, that of ensuring results from the GVN counterparts shouldering the greatest burden in the anti-infrastructure effort.

²¹⁶ CORDS. *IV Corps-Variou Province Briefs*. CORDS HQ General Records 1970 (Spring Review-various province briefs) National Archives Record Group 472, Entry 10096, Container 8

Ibid.

CORDS. *Phung Hoang Activities—Sep. 68-69*. Kien Phong (Provincial Advisory Team 84) Administrative and Operational Records 1962-1973. National Archives Record Group 472, Entry A1 726, Container 1426

Ibid.

According to Komer, some American civilians in Vietnam suggested a unified MACV-ARVN command to wage both the main-unit war and conduct pacification, just as the United States had taken charge of a unified multi-national command in Korea. Such a possibility was a pipe dream in Vietnam. For one, MACV and American civilian agencies jealously guarded their autonomy and authority in typical bureaucratic fashion. Politically minded American officials in Saigon and DC feared the Vietnamese would view a unified command as American neocolonialism.²¹⁷ Most importantly, the GVN would have been unequivocally opposed to such an arrangement. The ARVN held significant political authority in South Vietnam and it is difficult to imagine a situation in which they would have consented to subordination to an American commander.

The option that remained for CORDS, therefore, was to attempt to effectively leverage military assistance to the GVN to incentivize higher standards of performance in the Phoenix program. Throughout the war, US civilian agencies generally utilized their leverage better than MACV, but even civilian agencies had fewer opportunities to leverage their GVN counterparts after 1963. In the chaotic years following the overthrow of the Diem government, America's primary strategic concern was stability in South Vietnam. Any attempts at withholding aid or assistance that might further destabilize the fragile South Vietnamese state or make the GVN appear even more the puppet of the Americans were off the table. As America's role in South Vietnam escalated and became more militarized, the options for leverage further diminished as MACV took over greater responsibilities.²¹⁸ As Komer put it, "So long as we were willing to

²¹⁷ Komer, *Bureaucracy Does Its Thing*. p. x

²¹⁸ Leslie Gelb and Richard Betts, *The Irony of Vietnam: The System Worked*. p. 145

use U.S. resources and manpower as a substitute for Vietnamese, their incentive for doing more was compromised.”²¹⁹

MACV initially felt little need to leverage their assistance to ARVN in part because they did not see much value in the South Vietnamese as partners. Westmoreland argued for an ARVN troop buildup in 1965, but he made this request in tandem with a plea for “more of everything,” a call to take control of the war from a South Vietnamese army he deemed inadequate and hand it to US forces.²²⁰ Relations between MACV and the GVN improved under the tenure of Abrams. According to ARVN Lieutenant General Dong Van Khuyen, “From 1968 on [the US advisory relationship] tended to be more relaxed, more open and more sincerely devoted to genuine cooperation.”²²¹

CORDS, in fact, tended to better utilize leverage than the rest of MACV. CORDS advisers had to tread a very fine line, however. If an adviser complained to his superior about a GVN official and word got back to that official, then the adviser would have just lost the trust of his counterpart.²²² Furthermore, CORDS, being a small institution relative to aggregate US forces in Vietnam, was very limited in its ability to leverage their GVN counterparts. From the perspective of the GVN, CORDS officials were rather insignificant. The Americans the GVN needed to appease were in the top echelon of MACV. Komer explained in July 1970 that a GVN commander had explained to him that:

‘Province and district chiefs are still graded mostly on how many enemy KIA, how many weapons captured etc. If you want to change their attitude on Phung Hoang, Saigon and Corps must give them a real feeling that it is top priority. They must change

²¹⁹ Komer, *Bureaucracy Does Its Thing*. p. 33

²²⁰ Robert Brigham, *ARVN: Life and Death in the South Vietnamese Army*. pp. 84-88

²²¹ Sorley, *A Better War*. p. 182

²²² Komer, *Bureaucracy Does Its Thing*. p. 31

their whole philosophy as to priorities.’ He’s dead right. Apathy is more prevalent than not.²²³

Even if CORDS staff themselves felt it necessary to influence their GVN counterparts, the larger institution to which they belonged, MACV, was unwilling to exercise its leverage. MACV’s concern was the main-unit and anti-guerrilla war, not the anti-infrastructure war. Given their perennial disinterest in anti-infrastructure operations, it made little sense for senior MACV officials to push for the replacement of GVN officials who similarly neglected Phoenix but otherwise made progress in the war against the Vietcong and NVA. Thus in practice, making an effort to implement a successful Phung-Hoang program was not necessarily a requirement for being a GVN Phung Hoang official.²²⁴ This of course contributed significantly to the program’s inconsistency throughout South Vietnam’s districts and provinces.

Another central issue underlying the Phoenix Program was MACV’s misapplication of systems analysis and the drive for numbers which defined the Vietnam War. The “whiz kids” of the Kennedy-Johnson national security establishment were fixated on numbers. Equipped with Harvard MBAs and led by Robert McNamara, who had made a name for himself implementing cost-saving systems analytics as president of Ford Motor Company, the civilian analysts in the Department of Defense sought the answer to nearly every issue of national security through scrupulous statistical analysis.²²⁵ Such methods were highly effective in maintaining a cost-effective military, but their effectiveness stopped there. Reflecting on the dominance of these methods during his tenure as National Security Adviser, Henry Kissinger noted:

There was a truth which senior military officers had learned in a lifetime of service that did not lend itself to formal articulation: that power has a psychological and not only a technical component. Men can be led by statistics only up to a certain point and then

²²³ Komer, *Phung Hoang Fiasco*. p. 5

²²⁴ Moyar, *Phoenix and the Birds of Prey*. p. 196

²²⁵ Summers, *On Strategy*. pp. 44-48

more fundamental values predominate. In the final analysis the military profession is the art of prevailing, and while in our time this required more careful calculations than in the past, it also depends on elemental psychological factors that are difficult to quantify.²²⁶

Systems analysis could no more inform Kennedy about Khrushchev's grand strategy than they could inform a CORDS adviser about political sentiments of a local hamlet. And yet despite the complex socio-political nature of counterinsurgency, the notion that systems analysis would reduce the war to quantifiable elements and thus allow the US to achieve victory permeated the entirety of the MACV bureaucracy. In fact, the complexities of counterinsurgency and the ongoing debates within DC over strategy gave defense analysts all the more reason in their minds to emphasize statistical analysis. In the words of Gregory Daddis, "Left with insufficient foundational knowledge of counterinsurgencies and vague strategic objectives, MACV embraced Secretary of Defense McNamara's advice that everything that was measurable should in fact be measured."²²⁷

Within CORDS, the preferred statistical method of measuring progress in pacification was the Hamlet Evaluation System (HES). HES was more effective than any previous quantitative method of measuring progress, but it was far from air-tight. HES required district advisers to quantitatively assess if hamlets had reached certain benchmarks—indicators of territorial security—after which a computer would crunch the data and provide a scorecard for each hamlet, A through E, no plus or minus. Some benchmarks were easily quantifiable: "decrease frequency of enemy initiated action against hamlet," "increase the number of households with active members of PSDF to more than 50%," or "increase visits of GVN health workers to once a week or more." Many indicators were far less precise and more subjective, however, such as "provide welfare assistance to needy or refugee households," "PSDF must

²²⁶ Henry Kissinger, *The White House Years*. pp. 34-35

²²⁷ Daddis, *No Sure Victory*. p. 10

actively patrol in hamlet,” “effective intel collection,” or “Insure that self-development projects progress satisfactorily.”²²⁸ The importance of such inherently unquantifiable indicators in HES limited the accuracy of the system. Similarly, GVN officials, understanding that CORDS used poor HES ratings in lobbying for the removal of some of their Vietnamese counterparts, had no trouble finding holes in the system. District advisers were hardly able to get a clear picture of the situation in each of the several dozen hamlets on which they had to report each month and they would be none the wiser if their Vietnamese counterparts, for example, were to simply paint a red cross on an abandoned shed and claim to have opened an aid station without providing any medical assistance.²²⁹

CORDS personnel appear to have been aware of the flaws in the system and not used HES ratings exclusively in their assessments. The author of a memo to DEPCORDS in II CTZ states, “I am becoming increasingly concerned over the validity of recent HES evaluations. . . . I think it highly unlikely that we have made the degree of progress indicated by the HES statistics.” Using basic statistical logic, he continues “I cannot rationalize [our HES rating] on any basis that would indicate valid statistics.” Yet the author’s insistence that the issue of suspicious HES data “be hit very hard, indeed, at the coming [Province Senior Advisers] conference” suggests that at the time, in August 1969, HES data had significant influence on American perceptions of pacification progress nationwide.²³⁰

Another problem with HES was that it lacked any survey of the local population and thus had no way of measuring popular loyalty to the GVN. The system focused only on population

²²⁸ CORDS. *HES Rating-Province*. Kien Tuong (Provincial Advisory Team 85) 1971. National Archives Record Group 472, Entry A1 727, Box 1476

²²⁹ Moyar, *Phoenix and the Birds of Prey*. pp. 258-259

²³⁰ CORDS. *Plans, Reports & Evaluations*. CORDS MR2 Executive Secretariat-General Records 1969. National Archives Record Group 472, Entry 33200, Box 3

security, GVN presence, and the perceived effectiveness of US-GVN grass-roots development programs. HES provided some indication of whether local conditions were conducive to fostering popular support of the GVN, but the system did not itself indicate any actual support. The Pacification Attitude Analysis System (PAAS), created in late 1969, was the only CORDS effort to understand what lay in the “hearts and minds” of the Vietnamese. Villagers were reluctant to reveal whether they trusted the Saigon government, and given the prevalence of GVN corruption and abuse in the countryside, a significant portion of those who responded positively to questions about the government are liable to have done so out of fear. The PAAS was, however, useful in deducing the level of political awareness in the countryside, such as, for example, popular awareness of the Phung-Hoang program. A post-war independent study by the BDM corporation determined that HES “was generally considered to have been the most effective system that could have been implemented.”²³¹ PAAS, on the other hand, was according to Gregory Daddis, “a case of too little, too late.”²³²

The statistical methods utilized for Phoenix were far simpler than those of HES or PAAS. A neutralized VCI was given a ranking of A, B, or C with high A being the highest echelon of VCI, and then listed as either killed, captured, or rallied. District and Province Phoenix committees produced thousands of pages of such statistics each month for the satisfaction of MACV superiors. If one were to only examine these briefs, assessing the month’s work in each province and CTZ, one would have to give Phoenix a favorable assessment, as more often than not senior advisers met their neutralization quotas or, in provinces where no quotas existed,

²³¹ Sorley, *A Better War*. p. 71

²³² *Ibid.*, p. 206

reported that they were satisfied with their month's neutralization numbers.²³³ If one were to define progress based solely on these numbers as the authors of the briefs seem to, then one would consider Phoenix as a whole to be a remarkably successful endeavor. On average, Phoenix oversaw the neutralization of more than 18,000 VCI a year throughout its existence. Given that at their height, the VCI constituted no more than 100,000 individuals and given that their rates of recruitment of new cadre were consistently low, Phoenix appears to have significantly damaged the VCI on the national level.²³⁴

Of course, statistics without proper context are misleading, and in the case of Phoenix, statistics were often simply dishonest. As I established previously, "neutralization" and "VCI" were rather fluid concepts. A VCI counted as captured might very well return back in operation just weeks later, while a dead guerrilla of no particular significance could be counted as a key member of the communist infrastructure. Furthermore, VCI captured or killed during routine military operations as opposed to targeted anti-infrastructure operations were also included in Phoenix neutralization totals, giving the appearance that the program was much more robust than it was and that it primarily focused on low-level cadre. Compounding the inaccuracy of neutralization reports were the difficulty of identifying let alone collecting enemy KIA after a large firefight, as well as the fact that many PRU reported their neutralizations to the CIA POIC but not the local PIOCC.²³⁵ Neutralization figures are essentially useless in determining the actual progress of anti-infrastructure operations, and yet they were, in the eyes of MACV, the

²³³ CORDS. *Orientation and Briefing Files*. CORDS MR1 Executive Secretariat-General Records 1970. National Archives Record Group 472, Entry 33101, Container 3
CORDS. *Plans, Reports & Evaluations*. CORDS MR2 Executive Secretariat-General Records 1969. National Archives Record Group 472, Entry 33200, Box 3

CORDS. *Significant Activities—Monthly Neutralization Reports*. Kien Tuong (Provincial Advisory Team 85) 1971. National Archives Record Group 472, Entry A1 727, Box 1476

²³⁴ Andrade and Willbanks, *CORDS/Phoenix*. p. 17

²³⁵ Moyer, *Phoenix and the Birds of Prey*, pp. 235-237

most authoritative metric of success. Scholars such as Lewis Sorely and Gregory Daddis have argued that the US never relied on body count alone to judge the progress of the war. Their arguments are convincing in regards to certain aspects of pacification, such as the HES. While HES remained the mainstay of pacification analysis, CORDS advisers recognized that Chieu Hoi rates, incidents of terrorism, and the input of local advisers were necessary to determine progress in pacification.²³⁶ CORDS' understanding of anti-infrastructure operations, however, was far simpler, based on a univariate analysis—a VCI's neutralization or lack thereof. In their, “candid, frank, and open” response to the June 1970 Vietnam Special Studies Group report, the Phoenix Directorate makes no mention of any objective other than reaching nationwide neutralization quotas. The Phoenix Directorate report states:

Although poor results during the first six months of 1969 allowed only 90.4 percent of that year's goal of 21,600 to be met, the situation for 1970 looks more promising. Killed, captured, and rallied figures have equaled or exceeded 1800 for every month thus far in 1970. Figures for April topped 2,200, the first time that number has been exceeded in either 1969 or 1970. The results of Cambodian operations promise to boost the May figures and the potential for achieving the Phase I goal even higher.²³⁷

Phoenix, more than any other aspect of pacification, was a game of numbers in a war which defied statistical logic. The result was a disconnect between the perception of Phoenix that top-level CORDS and MACV officials held and the situation on the ground, as evidenced by the aforementioned Phoenix Directorate report. Dale Andrade succinctly captures this disconnect: “As in most of the rest of the war, [neutralizations] were tallied and sent to Saigon, where the verdict of success or failure was based on numbers.”²³⁸

²³⁶ Sorley, *A Better War*. pp. 70-71

²³⁷ CORDS. *Phoenix Comments—VSSG*. CORDS HQ General Records Spring 1970 (Various Province Briefs). National Archives Record Group 472, Entry 10096, Container 8

²³⁸ Andrade, *Ashes to Ashes*. p. 124

The lack of any indicator of progress against the enemy infrastructure other than neutralization figures inevitably created institutional incentives to lower-level Phoenix personnel to produce numbers, even in provinces where quotas were not in place. In Chau Doc, where no quota existed, Paul Woodruff explained that the GVN seemed uninterested in targeted anti-VCI operations or Chieu Hoi:

In my province, at least when I was there, there were never any assassinations. Nor were there any Chieu Hoi. It seemed to be that 6-8 people were detained in the province every month. And I kept a record of who they were and made a report every month that went up through the American chain of command.²³⁹

Another significant institutional constraint which hampered Phoenix effectiveness was the tour of duty system for advisers. John Paul Vann, the maverick pacification enthusiast and DEPCORDS in II CTZ, dubbed by some “the one irreplaceable American in Vietnam,” stated sardonically towards the end of the war, “We don’t have twelve years’ experience in Vietnam. We have one year’s experience twelve times over.”²⁴⁰ According to Richard Armitage, “Everyone now recognizes that the 12-month advisory tours of duty hurt us badly in Vietnam.”²⁴¹ Most American Phoenix advisers only served for one year, with a significant number serving as replacements for less. Very few advisers had any significant Vietnamese language training, and only those who had deployed in previous tours arrived in their district or province with any knowledge of Vietnamese culture or GVN practices. Army Advisers, the vast majority of Phoenix personnel, received minimal training designed specifically for Phoenix—usually just two weeks. Rather, the bulk of their training was conventional, including six weeks of intelligence training taught from FM 30-5, *Combat Intelligence*, a Korean-War-era field manual that focuses exclusively on order-of-battle intelligence in a mid- or high-intensity

²³⁹ Interview with Paul Woodruff. January 25, 2016.

²⁴⁰ Komer, *Bureaucracy Does Its Thing*. p. 67

²⁴¹ Interview with Richard Armitage. February 9, 2016.

conflict.²⁴² Col. Finlayson felt that this system was the major flaw in what he otherwise feels was a rather successful Phoenix program:

[The initial Phoenix advisers] were usually lieutenants working at the DIOCCs. They had no knowledge of the language, no experience, no real knowledge of what was going on. . . . I would have recommended that Phoenix advisers would arrive [in their district/province] and stay there. A lot of the advisers came from the states with misperceptions about the Vietnamese and the Vietnamese government and they made a lot of personal blunders. Americans have a tendency, and they still do, of pissing people off when they act as advisers. They can be counter-productive that way.²⁴³

In his 1971 end-of-tour report, the Deputy Director of Phoenix, Col. C.B. McCoid, highlighted the inherent dissonance between GVN officials and young American advisers: “The Vietnamese, particularly their Special Police, have been dealing with the communist underground for a generation. It is a measure of our counterparts’ forbearance that they resist telling each new adviser, who implies that the struggle can be won during his 12-month tour, to go to hell.”²⁴⁴ In some cases, the short tours of duty and conventional Army training of advisers crippled local Phoenix operations. A September, 1968 report from the Assistant Phoenix Coordinator in Kien Phong province states, “[My trip] to My An was revealing in that the US advisers had practically no idea of PHOENIX, due to the rapid turnover of personnel.” A Kien Phong POIC report from the same week states that the new personnel at the Cao Lanh DIOCC had collected intelligence on enemy OB (order of battle) “instead of VCI targets due to a lack of understanding of the term VCI on the part of the DIOCC members.”²⁴⁵

²⁴² Krepinevich, *The Army in Vietnam*. p. 229

Details of advisory training duration from interview with Paul Woodruff. January 25, 2016.

²⁴³ Interview with Andrew Finlayson. February 17, 2016.

²⁴⁴ Col. McCoid, *End of Tour Report – Directorate Staff*. August 2, 1971 p. 3

Accessed online via Internet Archive—Phoenix Program Documents

<https://archive.org/stream/PhoenixProgramDocuments/Phoenix%20Program/27%20%20%20McCoid%20EoY%20Phoenix%20Report%20Aug%2071#page/n1/mode/2up>

²⁴⁵ *Phung Hoang Activities—Sep. 68-69*. Kien Phong (Provincial Advisory Team 84) Administrative and Operational Records 1962-1973. National Archives Record Group 472, Entry A1 726, Container 1426

The prevalence of careerism among advisers also plagued Phoenix. American military culture was condescending towards advisory positions, with most officers believing that their best chances for gaining prestige and quick promotion came from unit commands. As such, Phoenix had a hard time attracting captains and majors, and had to make due with a cadre overwhelmingly comprised of inexperienced lieutenants.²⁴⁶ The GVN faced a similar problem in their approach to Phung Hoang. Those Vietnamese educated and competent enough to become officers viewed the ARVN as a more honorable choice of service and considered the National Police and territorial forces which shouldered the greatest burden in pacification to be units for cowardly misfits. As such, the most ambitious and competent South Vietnamese tended to join the former, leaving American Phoenix personnel to deal with generally less motivated GVN counterparts.²⁴⁷

A significant number of American Phoenix personnel seem to have also lacked enthusiasm for the Phoenix Program. While numerous advisers developed deep sympathy for the South Vietnamese and their cause, these sentiments were not universally held among Phoenix personnel. Given the program's late implementation at a time when support for the war back home had turned sour and the conflict increasingly seemed unwinnable, many Phoenix advisers were understandably more concerned with meeting bureaucratic benchmarks to please their superiors than with actually eliminating the enemy infrastructure. In many districts and provinces, Phoenix became yet another bureaucracy spinning its wheels, employing typists and translators and producing documents by the ream, but having no discernible effect on the pacification effort. The pressure to meet neutralization quotas and exceed previous rates is only

²⁴⁶ Andrade, *Ashes to Ashes*. p. 140

²⁴⁷ Herrington, *Stalking the Vietcong*. p. 20
Brigham, *ARVN*. p. 47

one example of this bureaucratic mentality. A March 1969 memorandum on DIOCC procedures from the Vinh Binh Phoenix Coordinator to the IV CTZ Coordinator states:

Efforts should be made to channel intelligence collection efforts and collation efforts toward direct support of operations. This appears to be an obvious situation, however, many DIOCCs have contented themselves with the building of card files and blacklists as an end in itself rather than as a means to improve operational results. It appears to be the feeling of many that these files rather than operations are the chief function of the DIOCC.²⁴⁸

Mark Moyar quotes one Phoenix adviser as saying, “Most guys only had a year or two to make their mark. If they wanted to get good fitness reports, they had to produce numbers. There were a lot of people who were playing the numbers game and not getting down to the nitty-gritty of trying to win the war.”²⁴⁹

This quote is indicative of the most significant issue that Phoenix faced, that of the American chain of command and its inability or unwillingness to scale local innovations to the national level and incorporate them into anti-infrastructure policy. John Nagl argues that the US Army in Vietnam was highly resistant to change and that innovations from below as well as the suggestions of independent studies failed to make their way into doctrine. Nagl notes, “the learning cycle stopped at the level of the Chief of Staff of the Army in Washington and COMUSMACV in Vietnam. . . . Isolated from the war by their staffs and seeing only what they wanted to see, these generals precluded organizational learning on counterinsurgency.”²⁵⁰

Nagl in fact argues that CORDS was more innovative than the rest of the US Army in Vietnam. This assessment is overly optimistic. The institutional incentives for CORDS personnel to play by the books greatly outweighed the incentives to develop new practices, as

²⁴⁸ CORDS. *DIOCC Advisers Meeting*. Vinh Binh (Provincial Advisory Team 72) Administrative and Operational Records 1966-1972. National Archives Record Group 472, Entry A1 721, Container 1253

²⁴⁹ Moyar, *Phoenix and the Birds of Prey*. pp. 191-192

²⁵⁰ Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup With a Knife*. p. 177

explained previously. When Phoenix advisers or their GVN counterparts took it upon themselves to think outside the box, there was insufficient support from CORDS to adopt recommendations or innovations as institutional practices. On the contrary, rather than seeing their superiors embrace ideas from below, Phoenix personnel found their dissent quickly stifled.

Paul Woodruff explains one instance:

I wrote a report saying that I didn't believe that our activities were doing the least bit of good. I suggested that our activities did not seem to be having the least effect on the VCI operations. The Colonel called me up immediately and said, "I can't send this forward. This report shows that the program, which was going very well last year, is now doing poorly under my command." So he wrote his own report saying that progress was being made and stifled mine. I had no other channel of getting a report higher up, so I gave up. I suppose I might have told some fellows I knew at IV Corps at Can Toh about the report, but I didn't know what that would look like for us, so I gave up.²⁵¹

Similarly, in a memo to his boss, the Assistant to DEPCORDS in II CTZ expressed concern about the reaction of national level CORDS staff to any downturn in HES ratings, stating "Should at some time the enemy resume large-scale activities, then we should expect a regression equal to the over-optimism in present statistics. The repercussions from higher headquarters to any regression will certainly be extreme."²⁵² Any organization is bound to face difficulties if those in the operational level fear making recommendations to their superiors. For an organization engaged in operations as complex as counterinsurgency, inflexibility and the quashing of innovation is particularly counterproductive.

Criticism, suggestion, and innovations from below failed to take hold on the national level in Phoenix because the program adopted a rigid, top-down approach after MACV subsumed command of the original ICEX/Phoenix infrastructure. The stove-piping of

²⁵¹ Interview with Paul Woodruff. January 25, 2016.

²⁵² CORDS. *Plans, Reports & Evaluations*. CORDS MR2 Executive Secretariat-General Records 1969. National Archives Record Group 472, Entry 33200, Box 3

intelligence between American and Vietnamese agencies plagued the anti-infrastructure effort since the beginning. Brickham had attempted to overcome this over-compartmentalization with ICEX, which he conceived as a collaborative system. The manpower behind ICEX were CIA officials who shared a common appreciation for the need for flexibility in intelligence collection and who—given their maximum emphasis on operational security—preferred to work with fellow Agency men. While ICEX maintained a bottom-up flow of intelligence, it was also a horizontal organization insofar as there was significant collaboration directly between officials on the district and province levels.²⁵³ As the program grew into Phoenix and MACV assumed significant control, CORDS bolstered the vertical, bottom-up hierarchy of the program in the fashion of a traditional military chain of command but eliminated the horizontal coordination of the initial ICEX design.²⁵⁴ Stuart Herrington, speaking about an ARVN ranger unit whose commander was on the local Phung-Hoang committee, stated “The Duc Hue advisory team knew little about the rangers’ operations because they were not under the control of our district.”²⁵⁵

The vertical hierarchy was a natural development. As the Phoenix bureaucracy grew, a more concrete chain of command and systems of intelligence collaboration became necessary. But the elimination of the horizontal collaboration hurt Phoenix in two discernible ways. First and most important, the vertical structure of Phoenix precluded local innovations from scaling to the national level. Phoenix personnel at each level had few formal means of communicating with their peers and offering suggestions or sharing ideas. Paul Woodruff’s quote earlier in the chapter makes clear that when an adviser had recommendations, the only place to send them was

²⁵³ National Security Archive, *Douglas Valentine Collection*. Box 3. “Nelson Brickham”

²⁵⁴ CORDS. *Phoenix Comments—VSSG*. CORDS HQ General Records Spring 1970 (Various Province Briefs). National Archives Record Group 472, Entry 10096, Container 8

Phoenix Congress Brief—1973. Accessed online via Internet Archive—Phoenix Program Documents. (<https://archive.org/stream/PhoenixProgramDocuments/Phoenix%20Program/36%20Phoenix%20Congress%20brief%2073#page/n0/mode/2up>)

²⁵⁵ Herrington, *Stalking the Vietcong*. p. 10

up. Given the military's tour-of-duty system, it would take an especially committed, maverick of a superior to accept the suggestions of his subordinates and attempt to implement them on the province or regional level. Most officers, like Woodruff's superior, would have been better served covering up any indications of regression in his region and continuing with business as usual.

Second, the vertical bureaucratic structure of Phoenix had the effect of further stove-piping intelligence—not within different GVN and US agencies (though this problem persisted) but within the provinces and regions.²⁵⁶ The district and province boundaries were GVN creations which the VCI had no need to respect. High-level communist cadres frequently operated across district and province lines, but the relevant US/GVN intelligence moved across jurisdictions more slowly.²⁵⁷ In the absence of an official intelligence pipeline between DIOCCs, intelligence collected on the district level flowed to the PIOCC. There it was accessible to personnel from any DIOCC upon request or if the PIOCC staff were cognizant of a DIOCC's need for certain intelligence, but the process of disseminating reporting from the district up to the province and then back down to the district cost valuable time during which the elusive enemy could change location.²⁵⁸ At the end of 1969, the PIOCCs agreed to a new process for 1970 in which they would write up daily consolidated intelligence reports for distribution to province-level Phoenix/Phung Hoang committee agencies. Given how frequently Phoenix personnel neglected official policies throughout the existence of the program, we may question how many provinces actually implemented this practice. What is more striking,

²⁵⁶ Andrade, *Ashes to Ashes*. p. 50

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 10-12

²⁵⁸ Robert Komer, *The Phung-Hoang Fiasco*. pp. 5-6

Accessed via Internet Archive

(<https://archive.org/stream/PhoenixProgramDocuments/Phoenix%20Program/19%20Komer%20Fiasco%2030%20July%2070#page/n0/mode/2up>)

however, is that nowhere in the discussion of the daily intelligence bulletin is there any suggestion that such bulletins be distributed to subordinate DIOCCs within the province.²⁵⁹

Confounding the convoluted intelligence dissemination process within Phoenix, CIA personnel became less inclined to coordinate with the PIOCCs and DIOCCs as the Agency's role in the program rapidly diminished during the first year. As noted earlier, CIA officers quickly reverted to their old ways of withholding intelligence from the South Vietnamese and relevant American advisers, fearing a leak and, in some cases, contemptuous of the low-quality intelligence efforts of the GVN and US Army. That CIA officers chose not to participate in Phoenix/Phung Hoang coordination is entirely their fault and not that of MACV. Nevertheless, the fact remained that by the time Phoenix fully operational, the American contribution in personnel comprised overwhelmingly of Army officers with little-to-no intelligence training apart from that found in the Korean War-era FM 30-5 operating within a rigid, vertical bureaucracy which inhibited both innovation and the timely exploitation of intelligence. Evan Parker stated, "My biggest regret was that we had so many people involved as Phoenix advisers who hadn't been involved in intelligence their whole career. I'm not saying they weren't good, because lots of them were very good. I only wish that our advisers had had a consistently higher level of experience and training."²⁶⁰

Leslie Gelb and Richard Betts argue in their study of the American national security decision-making that the military in Vietnam succumbed to the same fate as any bureaucracy: it developed immense stakes in proving to the White House that its policy had the best chance of success. In the words of Gelb and Betts, "the bureaucracy became like a cement block in the

²⁵⁹ CORDS. *Phoenix File 1969*. Kien Phong (Provincial Advisory Team 84) Administrative and Operational Records 1962-1973. National Archives Record Group 472, Entry A1 726, Container 1426

²⁶⁰ Mark Moyer, *Phoenix and the Birds of Prey*. p. 135

trunk of a car—it added tremendous momentum.”²⁶¹ The bureaucratic inertia which plagued Phoenix is best evidenced by CORDS’ final assessment of the program, the Phung Hoang Reexamination Study (PHREEX). The last chief of CORDS, George Jacobson, approved the PHREEX study in September 1971 as a final set of guidelines for the GVN who were at the time beginning to take full control of the anti-infrastructure effort. With America’s military engagement in Vietnam nearly complete, PHREEX was an effort to save face while handing over responsibility of an ineffective program. The authors of PHREEX get credit for their candid assessment of Phoenix’s flaws, but the irony is that issues outlined by PHREEX had been apparent to Phoenix personnel since the program’s inception. Indeed, the study’s recommendations were ones that lower-level Phoenix personnel and external study groups had made to senior CORDS staff for several years.

The first recommendation of PHREEX, that new criteria were needed for counting VCI as neutralized, had been central to Thomas Thayer’s December 1968 study of the Phoenix Program included in his *Systems Analysis View of the Vietnam War, Volume 10: Pacification and Civil Affairs*. The authors of PHREEX also recommended that only dead VCI who were previously on DIOCC or PIOCC blacklists count as neutralized, and that three sources of intelligence should be required to arrest a VCI suspect. Phoenix personnel had made their superiors aware of the lack of prior intelligence available on neutralized VCI for years: the Vinh Binh Province Senior Adviser’s June 1969 report to his superiors in IV CTZ, quoted in chapter five, is but one example. As also mentioned in chapter five, the June 1970 Vietnam Special Studies Group report found that senior CORDS staff were cognizant of the fact that a significant

²⁶¹ Gelb and Betts, *The Irony of Vietnam*. p. 239

number of VCI suspects' dossiers were supported only by fewer than three pieces of outdated evidence.

Second, the PHREEX study noted that DIOCCs and PIOCCs were “not secure repositories for intelligence information.” The standard DIOCC inspection forms from at least 1969 if not earlier ask the inspector if DIOCC documents are kept secure and if source control is in effect. To take one example, three of six DIOCCs in Vinh Binh in May 1969 did not meet standards for source control or DIOCC security, while a fourth DIOCC had been destroyed by a satchel charge.²⁶² Third, according to the authors of PHREEX, “A direct line of authority and responsibility for the program has not been firmly established.” Colby had eliminated all CIA involvement in Phoenix in July 1969 precisely to remedy the issues with the chain of command, but clearly to little effect. Finally, PHREEX recommended the elimination of neutralization quotas. Evan Parker admitted, as mentioned in the fifth chapter, that he had fought strongly against the imposition of quotas since Phoenix's inception, and in 1970, John Paul Vann, DEPCORDS in II CTZ, estimated that the South Vietnamese listed roughly half of all VCI KIA as VCI simply to meet quotas.^{263 264}

PHREEX strikingly indicates the extent to which Phoenix's rigid bureaucracy precluded systematic improvements, no matter how needed. Personnel from the level of DIOCC advisers to that of the national DEPCORDS himself recognized critical problems with Phoenix from the beginning but were unable to implement rather straightforward policy changes over the course of

²⁶² CORDS. *DIOCC Advisers Meeting*. Vinh Binh (Provincial Advisory Team 72) Administrative and Operational Records 1966-1972. National Archives Record Group 472, Entry A1 721, Container 1253

²⁶³ Moyer, *Phoenix and the Birds of Prey*. pp. 183-184

²⁶⁴ The author was unable to find an archival copy of the original PHREEX study, relying on a contemporary summary of the study in a 1971 MACV command history: Headquarters U.S. Military Assistance Command Vietnam. *General 1971 MAC-V CMD History Part 6*. The Virtual Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University. Bud Harton Collection. pp. 23-25

several years. Eliminating neutralization quotas, consolidating Phoenix personnel under one chain of command, punishing American DIOCC personnel for failing to implement source protection protocols, and ensuring Province Senior Advisers not count a suspect as VCI until the former possessed three pieces of corroborative intelligence were not radical suggestions; they were intuitive prescriptions intended to address critical shortcomings. Such innovations were simple in theory, but never saw the light of day.



An anti-infrastructure operation in Quang Nam province (photo courtesy of Fred Vogel)

CONCLUSION

An Alternative to Phoenix?

By and large, the CORDS chain of command either silenced dissent or failed to incorporate innovations from the field into Phoenix doctrine that would percolate through the provinces and districts. Compounding these problems were the institutional pressures to produce numerical evidence of progress and MACV's failure to divert adequate resources to the pacification effort. These issues stand in sharp contrast to the PRU, in which individual advisers had significant autonomy and faced few institutional pressures to mold the units into uniform bureaucracies across the provinces. The PRU operated internally. In the words of the Navy SEAL who oversaw the program in the Mekong Delta, "[The PRU] produced their own intelligence, and they set up and planned their own reaction responses."²⁶⁵ While the DIOCC and PIOCC staff were under constant pressure to produce tangible results in the form of neutralization figures, PRU advisers were encouraged to give more substantive and complex

²⁶⁵ Moyar, *Phoenix and the Birds of Prey*. pp. 144-145

evaluations of their progress. Col. Finlayson stated, “All I can say is, I was really under no pressure from my boss to produce statistics. . . . My boss’s interest was in classic intel gathering and penetrating the enemy circle, not onerous neutralization reports.”²⁶⁶

Veteran PRU advisers have made clear time and again, in previous publications and in my interviews, that their CIA superiors stressed that PRU were to operate under the laws of war. Col. Finlayson told the author, “I never received an order to anything that was illegal. And I was told by my CIA boss that if I ever did anything illegal he would come up and kick my ass on the air field. And he would.”²⁶⁷ There were, nevertheless, drawbacks to the decentralization of the PRU and the lack of uniform operating procedures. As mentioned previously, in some provinces PRU acted at the whims of the local GVN chiefs, even carrying out their dirty work. For example, in Quang Nam province some of the PRU took the side of the Dai Viet, a nationalist political party, in a dispute with local officials from a rival party, the VNQDD, resulting in several PRU casualties.²⁶⁸ Furthermore, as a result of their affiliation with the CIA, the PRU earned a generally undeserved reputation in the United States for extrajudicial actions and brutality.

The PRU operated as effectively as they did because they were under the very tight control of the CIA. Irregular warfare in Southeast Asia was part of the CIA’s institutional repertoire, dating back to the early 1960s with the Agency’s organization of the Civilian Irregular Defense Groups. PRU advisers had significant control over their unit’s personnel, including the ability to relieve and replace PRU commanders deemed unfit. In contrast, the Phoenix advisers had far

²⁶⁶ Interview with Andrew Finlayson. February 17, 2016.

²⁶⁷ Interview with Andrew Finlayson. February 17, 2016.

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*,

Interview with Fred Vogel. March 29, 2016.

less control over the performance of their GVN Phung Hoang counterparts, be they Province and District Chiefs, local National Police commanders, or even DIOCC and PIOCC staff.

It may be tempting therefore, to argue that Phoenix would have had greater success had it been a purely CIA program, or even if anti-infrastructure operations had been left entirely to the PRU. There are several problems with this reasoning, the most obvious being one of scale. At its height in 1970, Phoenix personnel numbered over 700 and even then there were personnel shortages in many of the districts. While CIA personnel numbers are still foggy at best, at no point in the war did the CIA maintain a presence commensurate to the demands of the Phoenix program.

The PRU, meanwhile, were highly effective in targeting VCI through ambushes and patrols, but their mobility and flexibility was inherently linked to their small size. No more than 6,000 men in total fought in the units between 1965 and 1975. The VCI, meanwhile, numbered in the tens of thousands throughout the war and were able to rapidly replace neutralized cadre. Given the prevalence of the enemy infrastructure throughout nearly the entirety of the country, as well as the significant presence of upper-echelon cadre in Cambodia, the more numerous regular US and Vietnamese military units, as well as local police units and territorial forces, were needed to match the threat. Although these units did not carry out targeted operations, they nevertheless accounted for the majority of recorded VCI neutralizations (though, admittedly, these numbers are unreliable). A system of intelligence sharing was therefore necessary if only to keep tabs on the net losses of VCI through both targeted operations and conventional military, militia, or police actions. A central component of my thesis is that such a focus on VCI losses when isolated from other indicators was highly misleading to US and GVN officials, but some record of neutralizations was absolutely necessary. Furthermore, the CIA is by nature hesitant to

collaborate, especially with foreign agencies. As noted earlier, PRU and RD cadre did not always share their intelligence with Phoenix DIOCCs and PIOCCs for fear of leaks. If Phoenix were a fully CIA show from start to finish, one has to wonder how much intelligence the DIOCCs and PIOCCs would have actually shared with the local police, army units, and territorial forces responsible for such a significant share of recorded neutralizations.

Although the CIA consistently recognized the political dimensions of the conflict to a greater extent than MACV, the Agency's priority in Vietnam was always penetration of the enemy's upper echelons, namely COSVN. The CIA had neither the resources nor a particularly strong inclination to maintain a close watch on every hamlet in South Vietnam. Information on the enemy infrastructure would need to come from the local police and territorial forces whose presence throughout the countryside was most extensive. An entirely CIA-managed anti-infrastructure effort, therefore, would not have looked strikingly dissimilar to the Phoenix Program, thus defeating the purpose of CIA control. Nor would pacification have fared any better under the command of any other civilian agency. Pacification, and specifically anti-infrastructure operations, is inherently violent. Apart from the CIA and MACV, no American institution in Vietnam had the military or paramilitary capability of targeting the VCI. A pacification strategy involving only the "carrot" approach of USAID and State and lacking the kinetic component provided by the PRU or other Phoenix-related units would have proved a foolish endeavor.

One must conclude that Brickham, Parker, Komer, and Colby et. al. managed as effective an anti-infrastructure program as possible given the available resources, the strategic situation in South Vietnam, and prevailing doctrine vis-à-vis counterinsurgency. After all, CORDS, and thus Phoenix, was on paper a civil-military hybrid. Such an institution appears to be the most

effective solution to the asymmetric and ubiquitous threat posed by the enemy infrastructure, combining the flexibility and tolerant attitude towards innovation of smaller civilian bureaucracies with the resources of a military expeditionary force several hundred thousand strong. In implementation, however, Phoenix relied so heavily on the institution which provided the lion's share of its personnel and funding, MACV, that the program fell victim to the larger institution's prejudices. Phoenix experienced its own problems as outlined in the previous chapter, but these constituted only one aspect of a greater military failure in Vietnam: the inability to change strategic course late in the war and develop and implement a coherent pacification strategy. Many within Phoenix realized that the program was failing to produce a tangible impact on the enemy infrastructure, but their recognition alone was insufficient. A significant change in the US-GVN approach to anti-infrastructure operations would have had to have come from outside Phoenix, involving a major overhaul of MACV's strategy. The protagonists of the "Better War," Abrams, Colby, and Bunker, recognized the need for such an overhaul but ultimately proved unable to affect such change after Nixon had already decided upon the policy of Vietnamization. Phoenix was thus not simply a case of "too little, too late," as many scholars have argued. It was too little, too inflexible, too late.

EPILOGUE

Phoenix and Counterinsurgency in the 21st Century

We were great at what we did—indeed, unequalled—but we weren’t right for what needed to be done. We were losing to a side that lacked our resources and professionalism. But no one outside the force would dare tell us to change; it had to come from within.

--General Stanley McChrystal, *My Share of the Task: A Memoir*. p. xii

In this quote, General McChrystal refers to the American special operations community when he took over command of JSOC in Iraq in 2003. McChrystal could just as easily have been referring to the US military in Vietnam, an organization of notable prowess in conventional warfare but unprepared for the asymmetric environment of Vietnam. Furthermore, as was the case regarding McChrystal’s JSOC, a profound change in the military’s practices would have required an institutional effort from within. We owe credit to the US military for proving far more capable of significantly transforming its doctrine and practices in the post-9/11 era than it had in Vietnam.

McChrystal's JSOC is only one of several organizations within the US civilian and military effort in Afghanistan and Iraq that recognized the need for innovation in confronting the political-military challenges of combatting insurgencies in foreign states with weak institutions of governance and minimal security. *FM 3-24 Counterinsurgency*, when first published on the eve of General Petraeus's Surge in Iraq, signaled that the United States would not repeat the mistakes of Vietnam. With contributions from military officers, police experts, diplomats, historians, development specialists, and cultural anthropologists, *FM 3-24* not only prescribed new tactics, but changed the way America thought of its role in the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts.

FM 3-24 stresses certain immutable principles of counterinsurgency such as population security, "unity of effort" between civilian and military organizations, and the need to understand local politics and customs, as well as the paradoxes of counterinsurgency such as "the more you protect your forces, the less secure you are." Most importantly, however, *FM 3-24* stresses the importance of decentralized command, adaptation, and innovation from the ground up. The introduction to the Field Manual begins with a quote from General Peter Schoomaker, then Chief of Staff of the Army: "This is a game of wits and will. You've got to be learning and adapting constantly to survive." The expressed willingness, indeed enthusiasm, of the Army and Marines to radically adapt their practices to the current warfare environment was key to the success of the Surge in Iraq but had been entirely absent in Vietnam. In Iraq, an armored battalion commander might call in Tactical Air Support on the enemy one day and then help organize local elections in the same province the next. Such flexibility in operations was essentially non-existent in Vietnam in part because there existed nothing *FM 3-24*. *FM 3-24* faced significant and, in some regards, well-deserved criticism from within the military, principally for its overly expansive

scope. (Numerous military officials have criticized the manual for incorporating vague and challenging objectives related to state building into military doctrine, such as the elimination of corruption) Nevertheless, the Field Manual represented a significant step in the right direction, if only insofar as it represented the Army and Marine Corp's efforts to develop a comprehensive COIN doctrine, one which stresses critical facets of COIN such as population protection, intelligence-driven special operations, flexibility in small-unit operations, and civilian-military collaboration. In COIN, innovations can and must percolate from the bottom up, but cultural and doctrinal change within a fighting organization is a top-down affair which requires an overhaul of the conventional mindset such as the one heralded by FM 3-24.

The closest parallel the Phoenix Program in today's Global War on Terror has been the Fusion Cell, an organization which brings together analysts from multiple agencies to coordinate and analyze targeting intelligence conducive to JSOC capture/kill operations against terrorists and insurgents. While most details regarding the DoD Fusion Cells and JSOC operations in general remain classified, by all accounts Fusion Cells have operated both far more efficiently and more effectively than the DIOCCs and PIOCCs of Phoenix. Part of this can be attributed to advances in military and intelligence technology. America's IMINT and SIGINT (imaging and signals intelligence) are far superior today to those used during the Vietnam War. It is much more difficult for insurgents to remain hidden while also coordinating operations (which involves communication with one's counterparts) in the age of satellite and thermal imaging and dragnet telecommunications surveillance than it was in the Vietnam War, when the US relied on reconnaissance flights and radio intercepts. Furthermore, advances in computer-based Social Networking Analysis provide intelligence analysts new methods of examining how insurgents operate with one another and with the general populace through a careful examination of

interactions within the smallest subsets of society—from the neighborhood, to the street, to the apartment block, to the family unit.

The success of Fusion Cells cannot be attributed solely to advances in technology, however. Human intelligence has reaffirmed its timeless value in recent counterinsurgencies. The authors of FM 3-24 understood HUMINT to be so invaluable that the field manual recommends that counterinsurgents mingle with the population to collect tips, despite the inherent risk to the soldiers.²⁶⁹ According to McChrystal's former aide de camp Chris Fussell, DoD Fusion Cells have generally been quite successful in leveraging the capabilities of different agencies in pursuit of actionable intelligence, for example, pairing human, signals, and geospatial intelligence from the CIA, NSA, and NGA respectively to identify targets.²⁷⁰ With Phoenix, Komer and Brickham had hoped to create a system similarly conducive to intelligence collaboration, but more often than not the parties involved either stove-piped their best intelligence, made half-hearted attempts at corroborating evidence simply to meet quotas, or failed to collect information of any value. The differences between the PIOCCs/DIOCCs and Fusion Cells were thus not only limited to collection capabilities. Rather, for reasons of bureaucratic obstinacy and institutional incompetence, the DIOCC and PIOCC staff hardly ever conducted analysis on their targets using the full range of available intelligence, if they conducted any analysis at all. In short, Fusion Cells possess the institutional willpower as well as the diverse collection capabilities to foster intelligence-driven operations. Phoenix, on the other hand, derived its intelligence from more limited sources, and, more important, the program treated intelligence (i.e. the creation of black lists and dossiers) as detached from operations and being an end unto itself.

²⁶⁹ FM 3-24. Sections 3-130-134

²⁷⁰ Chris Fussell, Trevor Hough, and Matthew Pederson. *What Makes Fusion Cells Effective?* Postgraduate Thesis, Naval Postgraduate School. December 2009. p. 58

While America's contemporary counterinsurgency efforts are more precise and intelligence-driven than they were in Vietnam, there remain limits to how discriminate warfare can be. As FM 3-24 makes clear, in a counterinsurgency dead, wounded, detained, or otherwise highly inconvenienced civilians are not merely collateral damage, they are *losses* to the counterinsurgent, as they decrease host government legitimacy and catalyze sympathy for the insurgents.²⁷¹ The United States has not been able to develop or implement perfectly discriminate firepower in Iraq or Afghanistan, nor has any fighting force in the history of warfare. In the first months of the Iraq Surge, US and Iraqi security forces killed more civilians than they had at any point since the battle of Fallujah in late 2004.²⁷² These figures do not negate the impressive coalition gains made during the surge nor the significant decrease in sectarian violence against civilians which followed, but they demonstrate the extent to which strategies designed to protect and win the trust of the population are invariably bloody and destructive. It is the quintessential catch 22 of counterinsurgency that the counterinsurgent must both eliminate enemies who hide among the populace with kinetic means while protecting that same populace from violence. Americans, both policymakers and concerned citizens, would do well to fully understand the significant strategic disadvantage we face as counterinsurgents forced to fight against an enemy whose primary tactic is the use of civilian shields.

As a democratic power, America is understandably wary of maintaining significant occupying or stabilization forces overseas. "Bring the troops home," has been heard every election cycle since 2001. Unfortunately, counterinsurgencies have not proven to be short affairs. Because we are not a colonial power, American counterinsurgencies are efforts at armed

²⁷¹ FM 3-24, p. xxvi

²⁷² Iraq Body Count, *Documented Civilian Deaths from Violence by U.S.-led coalition incl. Iraqi state forces* <https://www.iraqbodycount.org/database/>

nation-building. Assisting the creation of a legitimate, multi-sectarian Iraqi state from the ashes of Saddam's regime or building a democratic Afghan state where one has never existed are arduous missions unequalled in complexity. Furthermore, the United States faces a strategic quagmire once policymakers have made the decision to occupy foreign lands, no matter how noble the intentions. Our continuous presence in both Iraq and Afghanistan helped strengthen local support for insurgent groups, but our precipitous withdrawal from Iraq and gradual scale-back in Afghanistan have also facilitated the rise of ISIL and the resurgence of the Taliban, respectively.

Failed states, ever-present sectarian tension, dwindling natural resources, and the ability of radical jihadism to spread its message globally make it increasingly likely that insurgencies will continue to rage and proliferate in the lands between Morocco and Pakistan—as well as South of the Sahara—in the near future. The United States does not at present have the political will to “surge” troops in Iraq or Afghanistan, let alone put boots on the ground in some Sahel nation few Americans could identify on a map. But the US has certainly not lost its interest in counterterrorism, and our efforts in that field continue to include supplying resources, advisers, and small numbers of operators to partner nations combatting Islamic insurgencies. America thus appears set to remain on the periphery of counterinsurgencies for the time being. The geostrategic situation can change very quickly, however, as the enemy always gets a say. There is no guarantee that going forward America will not take a larger role in combatting what we at present consider obscure insurgencies. After all, in 1959 America's military presence in Vietnam consisted of a mere 760 advisers. Within ten years that number exceeded half a million combat troops.

In addressing new insurgent threats over the coming years, Americans, both policymakers and concerned citizens, will seek answers from our nation’s more recent experience in COIN in Iraq and Afghanistan, but Vietnam will remain an important source of historical consultation as well. The issues that shaped the Phoenix Program—finding a balance between civilian and military control over operations, leveraging assistance to counterinsurgency partners, developing networks to foster intelligence-driven operations—will remain relevant to future American conflicts. Of course, it is always possible to draw the wrong lessons from history. FM 3-24 includes a vignette on CORDS which concludes with, “CORDS was a successful synthesis of military and civilian efforts. It is a useful model to consider for other COIN operations.”²⁷³ In theory, yes. In preparing for future conflicts, however, I would recommend a more thorough and honest examination of CORDS’ offensive arm to better understand the disconnect between counterinsurgency as it appears on paper and counterinsurgency as it appears to the young lieutenant patrolling a foreign village. Should we fail to recognize the disconnect between theory and practice, we risk repeating what Komer called, “the Phung Hoang fiasco.”

²⁷³ The U.S. Army and Marine Corps, *Field Manual 3-24: Counterinsurgency*. p. 75

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