

Operation Phoenix: A Vietnam Fiasco Seen From Within

Post 41872

By Wayne L. Cooper



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MANY OF THOSE who recognize our military mistakes in Indochina fail to acknowledge the blunders of our quieter war for "hearts and minds." Yet we made most of the same mistakes in this other war of pacification that our armed forces made in applying American weaponry.

Take, for instance, "Operation Phoenix": That disreputable, CIA-inspired effort, often deplored as a bloody-handed assassination program, was a failure. It was a failure for many reasons, most of them Vietnamese. It was a success in a way none of us intended or would have wanted.

The origins of most CIA failures are obscure; the assault on the Vietcong infrastructure (VCI) was no exception. In the mid-1960s, the Central Intelligence Agency began a program which came to be known as "Counter Terror" or "CT." It was a unilateral American program, never recognized by the South Vietnamese government. CIA representatives recruited, organized, supplied and directly paid CT teams, whose function was to use Vietcong techniques of terror—assassination, ambushes, kidnappings and intimidation—against the Vietcong leadership. After all, the Vietnamese police agencies had amply shown their inability to cope with VC political activity and terror. By 1965, the situation was critical.

A Spear-Fishing Plan

IF GUERRILLAS "swim" among a friendly populace like fish, as Mao observed, dynamite and nets (conventional military operations) would clear out most of the fish; the pilot fish, however, required selective spear-fishing—a "rifle shot" rather than a "shot-gun" assault. And that's how CT oper-

ated, with the CIA recruiting Nung, Cambodian and even Vietnamese hoods into CT teams. For obvious reasons, their name was improved to "Provincial Reconnaissance Units" (PRU) and their responsibilities were enlarged. Eventually PRUs operated at the discretion of the Vietnamese province chief, who—with his Special Forces guards, political tasks and other specialized functions, CIA continued to pay the bills.

Return Phoenix only

In 1968, this program was expanded. The CIA and province chiefs retained authority over the PRUs and their operations against the VCI. An intelligence coordination program was devised to identify VCI targets for the PRUs. The Americans called their advisory program "ICEX" (Intelligence Coordination and Exploitation) and eventually "Phoenix." The Vietnamese program was called "Phung Hoang," after an all-seeing, mythical bird which, condor-like, selectively snatches its prey. Phung Hoang had a hierarchical structure, with a Central Phung Hoang Office in Saigon.

By mid-1968, however, the cardinal rule of intelligence—keeping the operation small—was broken. Everyone was sold on Phung Hoang. "Neutralizing" the VC leadership became our first priority. Everybody said so. Gen. William C. Westmoreland, Ambassador-for-pacification Robert Komer, prominent journalists, political scientists and others all hailed Phung

Hoang as the greatest gimmick since canned beer. Even Sir Robert Thompson, President Nixon's personal counterinsurgency expert, was said to have remarked that if the VCI could be

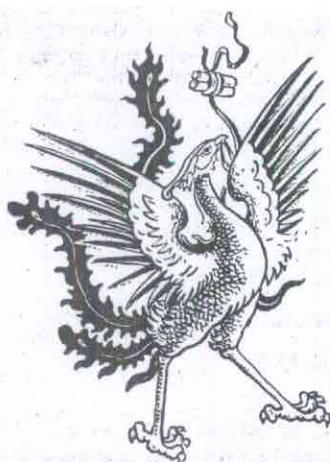
eliminated, one could confidently buy stock in South Vietnam. Otherwise, we should pack up and get out.

And that's what the CIA did. By late 1968, CIA was rapidly withdrawing its support from the program. ICEX became CORDS/Phoenix with a parallel hierarchy to Phung Hoang. By July, 1969, CORDS—Combined Operations for Revolutionary Development Support—replaced CIA support and personnel with Army advisers and a few civilians, including the writer. There were a few CIA hangers-on, who remained in positions of authority and whose presence gave the program an aura of efficiency it never really had.

Mechanics in the Garden

INFRASTRUCTURE is a great word, characteristic of the vocabulary used by men who think like mechanics in an era of effort and locale requiring gardeners. The infrastructure of the Vietcong was seen as a vital part that could be removed, destroying the insurgency—sort of like ripping off the distributor cap from the enemy's machine.

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The mythical Phung Hoang bird, symbol of the Vietnamese program paralleling Phoenix.

PHOENIX, From Page B1

As the assault on the VCI became more organized, and Phoenix/Phung

Hoang issued directives about themselves, a theoretical division of labor was formed. The Americans would provide funds and advice for the creation and operation of District Intelligence and Operations Coordinating Centers (DIOCCs), with PIOCCs at province headquarters. The American Phoenix "coordinator" or adviser would furnish cash for the construction of a building, furniture, typewriters, and supplies. The Vietnamese Phung Hoang functionaries would get reports from the agencies they represented.

The S-2 officer, for example, would know of VC military intentions and would presumably receive information on VC recruiters, saboteurs and military/security elements. The National Police representative and the Census Grievance representative would task their agents with reporting VC tax collection, extortion and other uncivil actions. The Chieu Hoi (open arms) representative would read debriefing reports by VC defectors, and so on. At the DIOCC meetings, these agency representatives would pool their information, identify a VCI member and start a dossier on the man. Their informants and agents would be assigned to report specifically on this individual. The dossier would become fatter.

Soon the man is captured, interrogated and eventually prosecuted before a province security committee, where he gets a two-year renewable sentence to the prisons on Conson Island. The Phung Hoang bird has struck. Shazam. Everyone gets out the crayons and adds a VCI to the briefing charts. The commanding general is briefed on the capture the next morning. Unless one was horribly dense, however, he soon learned that Phung Hoang didn't work that way.

Alienating the People

SEVERAL WEAKNESSES among Phung Hoang prevented its becoming an effective program.

First, there was a lack of command emphasis, from Saigon all the way down to the districts. Its budget was very small; few Vietnamese—including those running the program—believed in its widely touted "priority." The personnel assigned to the DIOCC from the various police-type agencies were often the least talented or experienced individuals available; in short, those considered most expendable to another gimmick program.

Second, there was a widespread failure to educate the Vietnamese about Phung Hoang and to win their support. One Vietnamese farmer, asked what Phung Hoang was, replied, "It's a gov-

enment program to catch young men for the army." In addition to rounding up draft-eligible young men, Phung Hoang operations further alienated a cautious, rural folk by causing inconvenience and harassment. Stealing a farmer's chickens or rice—as light-fingered Vietnamese troopers have been known to do—or making him and dozens of neighbors sit in the sun for hours while ID cards are checked won few supporters to Phung Hoang and its avowed goal of protecting the people from terrorism.

Most farmers regarded the armed VC guerrilla as the main threat, not the harmless neighbor who hung up VC flags now and then, or who propagandized occasionally—talk is cheap in

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Vietnam—or who collected what they saw as protection money, a custom as old as Asia. To compound this problem, for months we Americans used a Vietnamese expression meaning "understructure" or "low-level bureaucrat" to convey our "leading cadre" concept of the VCI.

Third, there was usually a lack of direction in the Phung Hoang centers at all levels. Intelligence collection and collation was not centrally directed and "agent handling" consisted of informants being instructed to report everything about everything.

Fourth, there was almost no specific targeting of individuals for capture, despite abundant official paper prescribing such targeting. Perhaps 5 per cent of the hundreds of daily required "Phung Hoang operations" went to a specific location to capture a specific

individual. Most were massive troop exercises, in which dozens of soldiers would sweep or cordon an area and detain every adult they came across. These "suspects" would sit for hours while their ID cards were compared against a cumbersome "blacklist" which was never up to date. Occasionally such operations did capture VC or North Vietnamese soldiers; VCI were captured by accident, if at all, and usually released for lack of evidence.

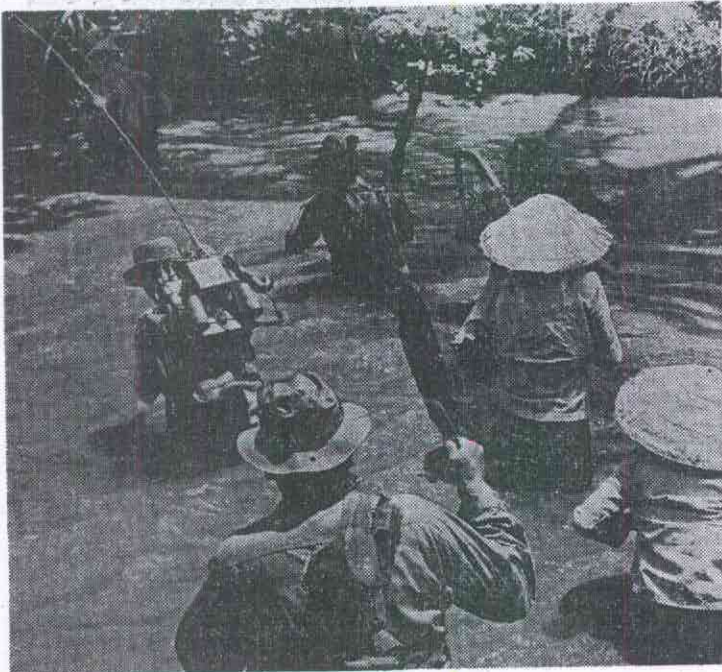
Fifth, and most seriously, the "judicial" aspect of Phung Hoang was a sieve. Despite the punishments stipulated for different levels of VCI, the late John Paul Vann guessed that 90 per cent of genuine VCI suspects were freed within 90 days of capture. Insufficient evidence was only one reason; there were also many instances of bribery, inertia, intimidation, influence, and often just the normal Vietnamese concern that a man's family not go hungry because he passed out some leaflets or collected donations for "Vietminh veterans." South Vietnamese officials and politicians added to this drain of captured VCI with their holiday amnesties and third-party assurances. The lack of a detainee accountability system made it impossible to know who had been released or sentenced.

Vietnamese Attitudes

IN ADDITION to Phung Hoang's internal weaknesses, several uniquely Vietnamese traits handicapped the program.

Consider the Vietnamese attitude toward employment: Once a man gets a position, that job will have certain advantages and opportunities. He can come to work late and leave early. Maybe he'll have a government car. Maybe he'll have access to some resources, commodity or service which, through diversion, will enrich him. Maybe there'll be subordinates who can be counted on for favors or contributions.

In short, the purpose of a job in Vietnam is to get it operating for you



South Vietnamese troopers, with suspects taken during a Phung Hoang sweep, wade across a river in the Mekong Delta.

and your family in a time of great uncertainty and danger. The urgent work which must be done is secondary. The war has exacerbated this syndrome of hustling to a point where often the only work done is in the cause of self-advancement. The late Larry Burrows, a great man and a great photographer, once deplored the Vietnamese overdoing reasonable graft. "Elsewhere in Asia, you willingly pay 10 per cent graft and accept it as necessary lubrication for transactions," he said. "Here the greedy buggers want 90 per cent."

Phung Hoang suffered from this syndrome, although the pickings were slim compared to the cement, roofing, money, rice and wheat available from other American programs. But the Vietnamese in the DIOCC were constantly preoccupied with supplies and how to get more from their American advisers. They had an unquenchable appetite for paper, file cards, acetate, crayons, maps, more desks, more file cabinets, more of everything. They frequently complained that the Americans weren't supporting the program adequately. The DIOCC building needs money for an extra room. And why isn't the adviser's jeep made available for others' use? Nobody seemed to worry about neutralizing VCI except insofar as it required more supplies or money. With nothing but cardboard, acetate, crayons and maps, most DIOCCs and PIOCCs "neutralized" VCI to their satisfaction, while their American advisers became exasperated and eventually resigned to Phung Hoang's pretenses.

Most fundamental of all, the Vietnamese people were not sufficiently committed to the Saigon government or its programs. Their loyalties were to their families, then their hamlets and then to their ethnic or religious group. We still take much American satisfaction in noting the loyalty of these groups to Saigon (or at least their passivity), confusing it with the initial tie of a man to his group. The allegiance to the group to Saigon was usually incidental and unimportant to individual Vietnamese.

A typical DIOCC would have an impossible clutter of paper, with wheat and chaff filed together. The alphabetical files we insisted they keep would not be cross-referenced by alias, family, location or any other useful designation. The dossiers so vital to province security committee prosecution would contain poor, skimpy information; perhaps enough for an operation,

but not enough for prosecution. Other files—most-wanted lists, potential guide files, mug shots and so on—were maintained so poorly as to be useless, or never kept at all. There would be no intelligence collection plan, and agents received little direction.

Because of operational and neutralization quotas levied from above, all operations tended to be labeled as "Phung Hoang operations," and most

detainees and KIA were recorded as VCI. Credit was taken for capturing significant VCI even after the individual had been released.

The Terror Issue

THE MAIN WEAKNESS of Phung Hoang, for which the program won few Vietnamese hearts and minds, and for which many advisers were disquieted and demoralized, was the failure to adequately acknowledge and dispose of the terror issue.

Phung Hoang was an attempt to legitimize and institutionalize a highly unconventional, frequently illegal counter-terror program financed and controlled by the CIA. Phung Hoang was not, however, an assassination program; it wasn't that competent. But even after "CT" became "ICEX" and then "Phoenix," the publicity—from the best news analyses to the sorriest journalistic pap—continued to confuse roles, functions and titles, and was rarely accurate. One article talked of CIA's new assassination unit in Vietnam, "ICE," which coordinated and exploited intelligence to zap the VCI. Even Newsweek ascribed to "Operation Phoenix" the techniques of "intimidation, torture and outright murder."

These kinds of conclusions were encouraged by common usage of "Phoenix" as an all-descriptive term for Phung Hoang, its advisers, operations, police intimidation, PRU operations, U.S. Army Intelligence personnel, and the CIA.

In fairness to the reporters, it should be noted that the Phoenix program acquired some strange advisers. The shoulder-holstered .38, the handle-bar mustache, the knowing winks and hair-raising war stories became affectations for many Phoenix advisers. Both young lieutenants and old-time sergeants who should have known better played at Billy the Kid or James Bond.

The specter of terrorism also re-

maintained because the provincial reconnaissance units (PRUs) remained in CIA hands. The PRUs operated at the discretion of the province chief, when and where they wished, presumably against VCI targets. But the PRUs and their Navy advisers answered to the CIA province representative: he paid the bills, he did the recruiting, he reported on their operations and neutralizations. Thus PRU was the best paid, the best led, the best equipped and best motivated tool that could be used against the VCI. But Phoenix never had control over and seldom information from the PRUs or their swaggering advisers. In 1970, the PRUs were turned over to Vietnamese police authority. Their pay and performance have noticeably diminished.

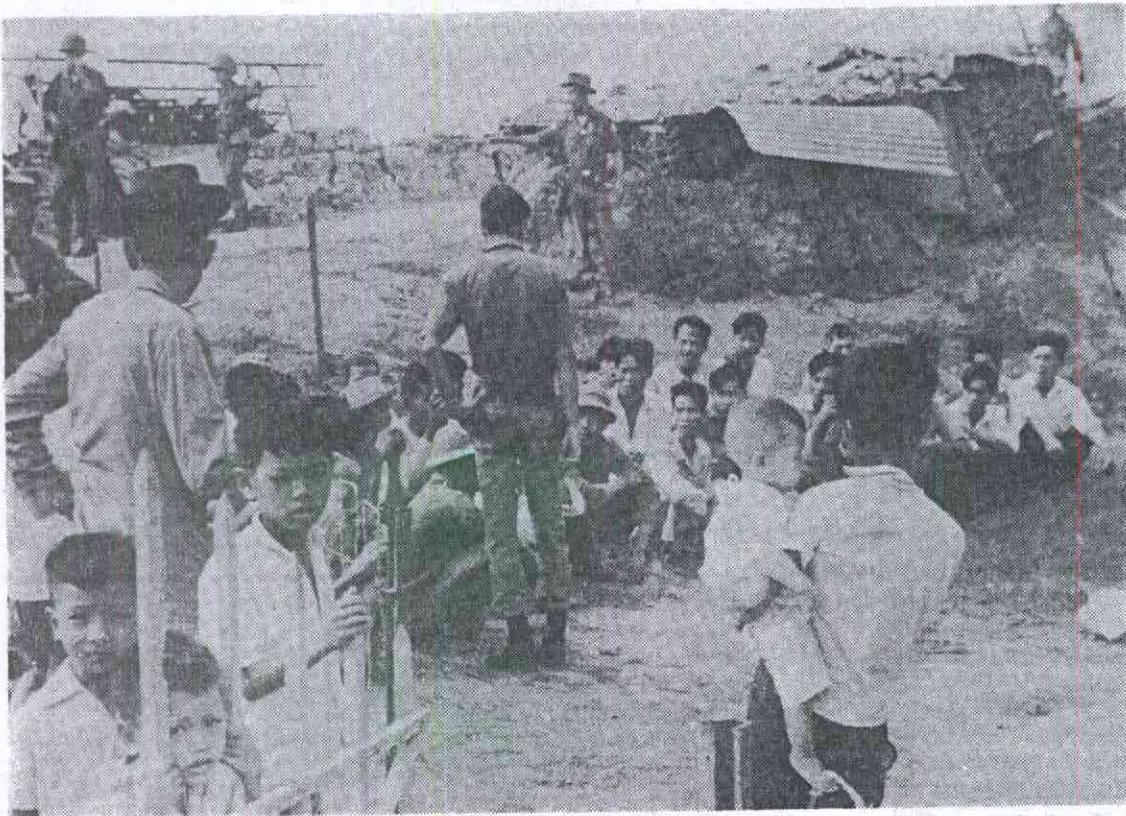
A Tool of Repression

THERE WAS another reason the terrorism issue remained: the South Vietnamese operation of Phung Hoang.

The idea that our allies might have notions of their own on the uses of Phung Hoang, and might abuse the program for their own political purposes, was either ignored or dismissed as a matter of Vietnamese concern. After all, we were only advisers and internal security was a purely Vietnamese matter.

In the field, we saw the inertia and ineptitude and knew the program wasn't succeeding. But we failed to notice that Phung Hoang was becoming something else—a means for repressive political control over the South Vietnamese. VCI economy-finance cadres and military-security cadres would be captured again and again, only to be released. But the "subversive" nationalist who expressed fatigue with the war, scorn for Thieu and Ky, and enthusiasm for a coalition government, was by definition a threat to public security. He might easily find himself on Conson Island, his arrest being explained to advisers by ascribing to him a VCI title.

The larger task of neutralizing the



Photos by Wayne L. Cooper

"Suspects" would sit for hours while their ID cards were compared against a cumbersome "blacklist."

Vietcong leadership was obviously considered impossible by South Vietnamese authorities. With self-interest foremost as usual, the Saigon government used the mechanisms of Phung Hoang to intimidate and control more accessible segments of the population.

One byproduct of this intimidation was the one-candidate presidential election of 1971, a curious monument to the cause of self-determination for which 55,000 Americans are supposed to have died. When retired Gen. Duong Van Minh, whose candidacy against President Thieu might have made the farce less obvious, announced his decision to withdraw, one of his reasons was Thieu's police apparatus of political control, which operated through Phung Hoang.

At the rice-roots level, we Americans were filling our neutralization reports and briefing charts and hoping the program would somehow improve. We never questioned our allies as to what evidence justified a Phung Hoang arrest; the Vietnamese knew their country, it was their problem. And once a suspect was forwarded upward for further questioning, we never knew whether he'd been sentenced or released; there was no detainee accountability system. Like advisers everywhere, we reported what the Vietnamese told us, continuing to deliver their supplies.

There are thousands of political prisoners in Vietnamese jails and prisons. Many of them may be innocent. Many of them may be there on too severe a charge. Many of them may be hardened VC leaders and agents. We just don't know. Despite this negligence and ignorance, millions of dollars have been poured, and continue to pour, into Phung Hoang. The unfortunate, innocent or guilty, who experi-

enced interrogation and imprisonment by Vietnamese authorities fail, to this day, to be major concerns of the U.S. government, despite the responsibility we incurred in financing Phung Hoang.

Bureaucratic Body Count

IT WOULD BE impossible to get an accurate total of the millions of dollars USAID, USAID/CORDS, the U.S. Army (MACV), and the CIA contributed to the support of Phung Hoang in the last five years. A classified GAO report states that \$80 million represents this effort; however, considering the costs of the advisory effort alone (training, salaries, vehicles and servicing, housing, travel, family allowances) the total must certainly exceed \$100 million.

What have we to show for this investment? Thousands of presumed VCI have been reported as "neutralized," an estimated 27,000 from January, 1970, to March, 1971. Phung Hoang represents a last, lingering vestige—the bureaucratic body count—of a U.S.-imposed quota system, at a human cost impossible to measure. Nobody knows what Phung Hoang has done to the Vietcong infrastructure. The highest officials in our Saigon embassy and in Washington can only quote statistics on fulfilled quotas, sentencings, and overall "neutralizations." Statistics about Vietnam, however, were and are practically worthless.

The only honest conclusion one can form, based on impressions rather than hard facts, is that VC political activity has slowed. One strongly suspects that this lessening of activity represents a tactical VC decision and is not a result of Phung Hoang. Yet VC documents referred to Phung Hoang personnel as "bloody-handed assassins" and VC cadres were exhorted to "crush the head of the Phung Hoang snake." The VC were aware of Phung Hoang and it was possibly hampering their plans. More specific conclusions by anyone would be almost impossible to verify.

What, then, is the final lesson of the failure of Phoenix? For too many Americans in Vietnam, and political scientists and counterinsurgency experts busily analyzing the whole misadventure, there is an enthusiastic listing of mistakes we Americans made and of suggestions for doing it right elsewhere the next time.

In fact, it is the lesson that gimmicks — administrative like Phoenix or technological, like "smart" bombs and mines — cannot compensate for