

THE NEW YORK TIMES, TUESDAY, JULY 20, 1971

U.S. Aide Defends Pacification Program In Vietnam Despite Killings of Civilians

By FELIX BELAIR Jr.

Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, July 19—

The former head of the American South Vietnam acknowledged today that the agency's anti-subversion program had resulted in "occasional" political assassinations and the killing of civilians suspected of being Vietcong agents.

But the official, William E. Colby, told the House Foreign Operations and Government Information Subcommittee that the benefits derived from the program—Operation Phoenix—in uprooting Vietcong intelligence apparatus "more than overcome these occasional abuses."

In prepared testimony, Mr. Colby gave the number of people killed under Operation Phoenix since 1968 at 20,587, of whom 3,560 were killed from January through May this year. For earlier periods the number of deaths were put at 2,559 for 1968, at 6,187 in 1969 and at 8,191 last year.

Two Republican Representatives, Ogden R. Reid of Westchester and Paul N. McCloskey of California, charged that Operation Phoenix had been responsible for "indiscriminate killings" of civilians and the imprisonment of thousand of others in violation of the Geneva Convention.

Mr. Reid contended that "it is far from an ideal program even in a war situation." He said that "no court anywhere would uphold the practice of imprisoning a civilian — Vietcong or otherwise—without a trial, denying him right to counsel and without acquainting him with the nature of the charges against him."



The New York Times

William E. Colby

Mr. Colby said the United States should continue its support of Operation Phoenix as "an essential part of the war effort" whose effectiveness had been proved in "neutralizing" the Vietcong underground.

'Not an Ideal Program'

"It is not an ideal program," Mr. Colby said, "but there are some other things that are not ideal that we are associated with in Vietnam. The Phoenix program is not a program of assassination. In the course of normal military operations of police actions to apprehend them, however, VCI [Vietcong infrastructure] are killed as members of military units or while fighting off arrest."

Asked by Mr. Reid whether "unjustifiable abuses," such as assassinations, had been brought to his personal attention, Mr. Colby replied affirmatively. He said that "in collaboration with the Vietnam authorities, we put a stop to this nonsense."

South Vietnam in 1967 and 1968 was in a "wild and unstable period and a lot of things were done that should not have been done," Mr. Colby said. "We have been trying to get it stopped with some measure of success," he declared.

A former senior official of the Central Intelligence Agency, Mr. Colby resigned his post in March, 1968, to join the staff of the executive office of the President. He was promptly assigned to Saigon as deputy to Gen. Creighton W. Abrams, who was then head of the United States Military Assistance Command and director of the pacification and development program.

Formerly in Diplomatic Service

Mr. Colby served during World War II in the Office of Strategic Services. He was twice parachuted behind German lines—once in France to disrupt communications and later in Norway to blow up a vital railroad line. After the war he held United States Embassy posts in Stockholm, Rome and Saigon before joining the Central Intelligence Agency.

The main thrust of his argument today was that operation Phoenix was "entirely a South Vietnamese program" although originated by the Central Intelligence Agency and supported since its inception by United States military and a few civilian personnel and backed by funds from the Defense Department, Agency for International Development and the C.I.A.

The United States role in Operation Phoenix, he said, is entirely advisory except for the use of military personnel in preparation of dossiers against suspected Vietcong agents and leaders and employment of troops to run them to ground. After capture, the prisoners are turned over to South Viet-

namese authorities, he said.

When Mr. Reid and Mr. McCloskey pressed their complaints, Mr. Colby argued with quiet persistence that Operation Phoenix was "designed to protect the Vietnamese people from terrorism and political, paramilitary, economic and subversive pressure from the Communist clandestine organization [in?] Vietnam."