Operation Phoenix: A Vietnam Fiasco Seen From Within

By Wayne L. Cooper

A former Foreign Service officer, Cooper spent 18 months in Vietnam, most of it as a Phoenix adviser at Cantho, in the Mekong Delta.

MANY OF THOSE who recognize our military mistakes in Indochina fail to acknowledge the blunders of our quieter war for "hearts and minds." As a CIA veteran, I take 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 disregutable, CIA-inspired effort, often deplored as a bloody, blood-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 that 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 directed CT teams, whose function was to use Vietnamese techniques of terror-assassination, ambush, kidnappings and intimidation—against the Vietcong leadership. After all, the Vietnamese police agencies had simply shown their inability to cope with VC political activity and terror. By mid-1966, 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, Ambassado-for-pacification Robert Komer, prominent journalists, political scientists and others all hailed Phung Hoang as the greatest gimmick since canned beer. Even Sen 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, 1968, 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 hangovers, 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, 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 engine.

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.

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As the assault on the VC 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 VC 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 VC 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 government 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 guerrillas as the main threat, not the harmless neighbor who hung up VC flags now and then, or who propagandized occasionally—talk is cheap in

South Vietnamese troopers, with suspects taken during a Phung Hoang sweep, wade across a river in the Meang Delta.
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 bureaucracy" 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 they saw. These "suspects" would sit for hours despite abundant official paper to capture a specific individual. Most were massive frauds; and 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.

Fourth, there was almost no specific targeting of individuals for capture, in contrast to either American or Vietnamese programs. But the Vietnamese in the DIOCC were constantly preoccupied with supplies and personnel, and how to get more from their American advisers. They had an unequivocal 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 needed 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 preferences.

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 villages, then to their ethnic or religious group. We still lack 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 impossibly cluttered table of paper, with aerial 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 intelligence committee prosecution would contain poor, skimpy information; perhaps enough for prosecution 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 intelligence collection plan, and age received little direction. Because of operational and neutralization quotas levied from above, all agents tended to be labeled "Phung Hoang operations," and

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 busting 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."

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detainees and KIA were recorded as VCI. Critics also felt that capturing significant VCI even after the individual had been released.

The Terror Issue

The MAIN WEAKNESS of Phung Hoang, 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 legitimate and institutionalize a highly unconventional, frequently illegal counterror 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 screeching journalistic par—continued to confuse the public, function, and impact, and was rarely accurate. One article talked of the CIA's new assassination unit in Vietnam, "ICE," which coordinated and exploited intelligence to zap the VCI. Ever Newsworried about "Operation Phoenix" the techniques of "imagination, torture and outright murder."

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

In fairness to the authors, it should be noted that the Phoenix program acquired some strange advisers. The head of the Phoenix program was a high-ranking agent of the South Vietnamese national police. The head of the Phoenix program was a high-ranking agent of the South Vietnamese national police. The head of the Phoenix program was a high-ranking agent of the South Vietnamese national police.

The Terror Issue was another reason the terror issue remained: the South Vietnamese feared they would be captured again and again, 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. Phung Hoang.

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