

Shadow Warriors: The Phoenix Program and American Clandestine Policing in Vietnam

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'Their boys did it for faith, ours did it for money.'

– Georgie Ann Geyer, 'The CIA's Hired Killers', *True Magazine*, February 1970.

'If the Union had had a Phoenix program during the civil war, among the targets were likely to have been Jefferson Davis, or the mayor of Macon Georgia.'

– Ogden Reid (D-NY), head of congressional fact finding mission.

In November, 1967, Frank Armbruster of the Hudson Institute drafted a policy brief which provided a blueprint for Operation Phoenix, whose goal was to dismantle the leadership of the Vietnamese revolutionary movement through improved coordination between police and intelligence agents. Written in cold, antiseptic language, the report included a favourable reference to a RAND Corporation study by Chong Sik-Lee on Japanese counter-insurgency during the Second World War and the US-led anti-Huk campaigns in the Philippines. Armbruster argued that current police operations were too lenient and badly organized to successfully infiltrate the VC apparatus, which had established shadow governments in villages and towns to rival the Government of Vietnam (GVN). In his view, the police should perform a similar function to the military in depleting enemy forces and weeding out the guerrilla infrastructure through effective intelligence collection, round-ups and interrogations allowing for a systematic classification of enemy operatives. Photography, ID cards and fingerprinting, as well as paid informants, were crucial to the identification of VC cadres who easily blended into the civilian population. Defectors were needed to ensure the success of bounty-hunter operations. Effective counter-insurgents were best recruited from among the native population because they knew the terrain. Once identified, hard-core VC should be isolated and never allowed to return to their communities or executed outright. The rest of those detained could be won over through political indoctrination built around a counter-ideology.¹ Armbruster's writings provide a window into the mindset of shadow government operators who in plotting clandestine operations had little qualms about employing methods most Americans would consider morally repugnant. Named after a mythical all-seeing bird which selectively snatches its prey,

Phoenix was conceived as a clinically managed operation capable of reinvigorating counter-insurgency while minimizing ‘collateral damage’. The programme was led for a significant period by Robert Komer, a PhD from Harvard business school who embodied the cold managerial ethos of the Pentagon’s Whiz Kids under Robert S. McNamara in their belief that statistical quantification and data management through use of computers could enable greater military efficiency like in the corporate world. As with the massacres in Indonesia following the 1965 coup, the United States could claim plausible deniability because of the reliance on local Provincial Reconstruction Units (PRU), or ‘hunter-killer’ teams recruited sometimes among criminal elements along with disaffected minority groups or religious sects.²

The Phoenix Program provides a quintessential example of *Parapolitics*, a set of observations which suggest a strange, powerful, clandestine and apparently structural relationship between state security intelligence apparatuses, terrorism and organized criminal activity, sustaining in the case of Vietnam a fundamentally illiberal social order.³ Building off European colonial precedents, Phoenix originated in the top-secret 1290-d programme, which was instituted by the Eisenhower administration to train foreign police in counter-subversion and was expanded upon by Kennedy under the United States Agency of International Development (USAID)’s Office of Public Safety (OPS). Embodying a US imperial style grounded in the quest for serviceable information but not deep knowledge of the subject society, these programmes were valued as a cost effective means of suppressing radical and nationalist movements, precluding the need for military intervention, which was more likely to arouse public opposition or enabling the draw-down of troops. Many of the violent excesses were sanctioned as part of a counterterror doctrine which held that since insurgents did not typically abide by Western legal norms, neither should the United States or its proxies.⁴

Despite their centrality to American policy, most histories of the Vietnam War and American foreign relations neglect the police training programmes and give short shrift to Phoenix. The reasons may be psychological: the denial of a violent past is endemic to settler colonial societies.⁵ The study of clandestine policing is essential however not only for its shock value but in understanding the instruments of statecraft deployed to advance US power. It casts important light, further, on the functioning of the American national security bureaucracy and Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).

‘Suppressing dissidence before military-type action was necessary’: 1290-d, the OPS and Roots of Phoenix

After the Second World War, the United States pursued the creation of a stable international order dominated by American capital and open to free trade and foreign investment. Democratization was pursued if and only if it accorded with larger strategic interests.⁶ Clandestine police operations were crucial in the attempt to strengthen client regimes and root out groups resisting American power, including radical nationalists and socialists promoting independent development and resisting the expansion of an American military base network. With remarkable continuity, the United States trained police not just to target criminals but to develop elaborate

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intelligence networks oriented toward internal defence, which allowed the suppression of dissident groups across a wide range and in a more surgical and often brutal way.⁷

Many of the techniques adopted under Phoenix were first applied during the US occupation of Japan as part of efforts to consolidate the pro-West Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and suppress the Japanese Communist Party (JCP). Japan was considered the 'superdomino' by planners seeking to isolate China after the triumph of the Maoist revolution in 1949. The Supreme Command of the Allied Powers (SCAP)'s public safety branch assisted former secret police (Tokkô) officers in compiling databanks on 'communist agitators' and 'subversives', and provided training in riot control and the use of tear gas to defuse protests against economic austerity measures (known as the 'reverse course'), resulting in mass layoffs and wage reductions. General Charles Willoughby, head of G-2 intelligence, forged ties with gangsters such as Hisayuki ('the Violent Bull'), Machii and Yoshio Kodama, a class-A war-criminal and Yakuza godfather to assist in breaking the power of the left, ensuring Japan's emergence as a junior partner in the Cold War.⁸

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Orrin DeForest, a CIA counter-intelligence specialist and national police liaison who later sought to apply Japanese procedure in Vietnam, wrote in his memoirs that the Japanese were 'fanatic collectors of information, always exerting themselves to achieve a comprehensive understanding of a person and his activities before making any overt moves against him. ... Their goal was nothing less than total knowledge.'⁹ These comments point to the striving of American advisers for total information control, which was subsequently applied in Vietnam.

South Korea and Thailand, where US policy contributed to the consolidation of military rule, was another model for clandestine policing operations. In 1948, two years before Harry Truman approved \$5 million for the creation of a Thai constabulary, the CIA initiated a \$35 million programme there through a front corporation, Sea Supply, which specialized in importing fruit and dairy products and tear gas for the military and police. Based out of Miami, Florida, Sea Supply was headed by Lt. Col. Willis Bird, deputy chief of OSS operations in China and Paul Helliwell, head of OSS Special intelligence in China who were known for combining moneymaking of an often illegal variety with anticommunism. The pair worked closely with Thai chief of police Phao Sinyanon, who used American aid to transform the police department into a quasi-military force of over 35,000 with its own mounted, mechanized, tank and seaborne divisions. As part of the quid pro quo, Phao established a 'special operations unit' in Burma, in violation of its sovereignty, to transfer arms to GMD commander Li Mi for an invasion of Yunnan province in Southern China.¹⁰

Operation Paper exemplified the intersection between American police training and covert operations in Southeast Asia which would again become manifest under Phoenix. In 1955, the NSC formally inaugurated the top-secret 1290-d programme (later Overseas Internal Security Program - OISP), whose central mission was to develop local police and security forces to 'provide internal security in countries vulnerable to communist subversion' and to 'aid in the detection of communist agents and fellow travelers' and 'suppress local dissidence before military-type action was necessary'. The 1290-d planning board included hard-liners from the Pentagon and CIA obsessed with 'the techniques of international communism', and was initially

headed by Douglas MacArthur II, an ex-OSS operative and nephew of the famous general who later served as the ambassador to Japan and Iran. He was succeeded by Henry Villard, a silent movie actor and heir of a New York fortune, who was the first chief of the State Department's African Affairs Division in the Second World War and ambassador to Libya in the early 1950s.¹¹

In an internal outline of 1290-d, Col. Albert R. Haney, an architect of the 1954 Guatemalan coup who ran secret agents into North Korea during the Korean War, stated that 'an efficient internal security system is a fundamental aspect of any growing society and contributes substantially to its orderly progress and development'. In his view, American support for undesirable political regimes, including dictatorships and juntas, was necessary to prevent the loss to neutralism or communist control.

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Confronted as we are against a deadly enemy who is highly disciplined and organized and dedicated to our capitulation, the U.S. cannot afford the moral luxury of helping only those regimes in the free-world that meet our ideals of self-government... . For those who decry efforts to make over others in our likeness and those who oppose helping undemocratic regimes to entrench themselves in power, let it be said that American methods *are in fact superior* to most others in the world and if we are to help them combat communism we can contribute greatly to the adoption of American democratic ways in achieving this end.¹²

These comments exemplify the ideological mindset underlying what social scientist Ola Tunander characterized as the 'deep state', in which clandestine, often-extra-legal tactics have been adopted to advance American global hegemony.¹³ Staffed with men of like-minded views, the Kennedy administration convened a cabinet-level Special Group on Counter-Insurgency (CI), headed by his brother Robert and five-star general Maxwell Taylor, which championed the creation of police 'hunter-killer' squads serving as a prototype for Phoenix. Robert W. Komer of the NSC advised colleagues that 'while treaty arrangements and international law' were to be given careful consideration there was 'no overriding bar to [clandestine] action when overriding national interests prevail When a government that is inimical to U.S. interests emerges, risks should be evaluated in encouraging and supporting the overthrow of that government.'¹⁴

In 1962, the Special Group established the OPS to 'develop the civilian police component of internal security forces in underdeveloped states ... identify early the symptoms of an incipient subversive situation', and 'maintain law and order without unnecessary bloodshed and an obtrusive display of the bayonet'.¹⁵ Komer, a driving figure behind the organization and head of Phoenix, stressed that the police were 'more valuable than Special Forces in our global counter-insurgency efforts' and particularly useful in fighting urban insurrections. 'We get more from the police in terms of preventative medicine than from any single U.S. program,' he said. 'They are cost effective, while not going for fancy military hardware They provide the first line of defense against demonstrations, riots and local insurrections. Only when the situation gets out of hand (as in South Vietnam) does the military have to be called in.'¹⁶

Echoing British imperial strategists such as Winston Churchill, who wrote in 1954 that an 'efficient police force and intelligence service are the best way of smelling out subversive movements at an early stage, and may save heavy expenditures on

military reinforcements, these comments illuminate the geostrategic imperatives shaping the growth of the OPS, which is what accounted for significant human rights violations. Charles Maechling Jr., staff director of the Special Group on Counter-Insurgency, acknowledged years later that in failing to insist on 'even rudimentary standards of criminal justice and civil rights, the United States provided regimes having only a façade of constitutional safeguards with up-dated law-enforcement machinery readily adaptable to political intimidation and state terrorism. Record keeping in particular was immediately put to use in tracking down student radicals and union organizers.'¹⁷ These remarks provide a striking admission of the repressive consequences of the police programmes, of which Vietnam and Phoenix was a paradigmatic example.

Containing the 'Virus' of independent nationalism: Police training and 'nation-building' in South Vietnam

From 1955 to 1975, the United States spent over \$300 million on police training in Vietnam – the largest total in the world – as part of the effort to build a client regime below the 17th parallel following the partition of the country under the Geneva accords. Bent on integrating Vietnam's economy with Japan and stamping out the 'virus' of independent nationalism, which it feared would spread throughout Southeast Asia, the Eisenhower administration refused to allow for elections to reunify the country, knowing that Ho Chi Minh, who led the liberation movement against France, would win. It instead attempted to consolidate the southern rule of Ngo Dinh Diem, a Catholic anti-communist who had limited popular backing and was referred by his own advisers as 'egotistical, neurotically suspicious, stubborn, self-righteous and a complete stranger to compromise'. According to the CIA, Diem was so dependent on American support that 'he would have fallen in a day without it'.¹⁸

The United States had always prized Southeast Asia as one of the richest and most strategic in the world, hoping to convert it into what Gen. Douglas MacArthur characterized as an 'Anglo-Saxon lake'. In a March 1955 *Foreign Affairs* article, William Henderson of the Council on American Foreign Relations (which Laurence Shoup and William Minter aptly termed the 'imperial brain trust') wrote:

As one of the earth's great storehouses of natural resources, Southeast Asia is a prize worth fighting for. Five sixth of the world's rubber, and one half of its tin are produced here. It accounts for two thirds of the world output in coconut, one third of the palm oil, and significant proportions of tungsten and chromium. No less important than the natural wealth is Southeast Asia's key strategic position astride the main lines of communication between Europe and the Far East.¹⁹

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To help fulfil US imperial ambitions, in May 1955, the State Department contracted the Michigan State University School of Police Administration at a budget of \$25 million to provide technical assistance and training to the South Vietnamese police, stressing mass surveillance capable of monitoring subversion and dismantling the

political opposition to Diem, including Binh Xuyen gangsters, the Hoa-Hao and Cao Dai religious sects. The police were controlled by Diem's brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, an opium addict who according to the British ambassador attached 'every bit as much importance to the apparatus of a police state as the most enthusiastic advocate of the social order of "1984"'²⁰

The contract with MSU was unique and presented limitations from the vantage point of the State Department 'because of the sensitive security aspects of the program'. A precedent was established six years earlier when at the behest of Professor Arthur Brandstatter, a public safety consultant to US High Commissioner John J. McCloy, the MSU School of Police Administration brought German police, including ex-Nazi soldiers, and South Koreans onto campus for an eight-week course and arranged for them to observe local law enforcement. Vietnam became a logical next undertaking, in part because of the close relationship between political science professor Wesley Fishel and Diem dating from a 1950 meeting in Japan.²¹

The 1290-d planning group emphasized the necessity of bolstering police 'counter-subversion' capabilities and their proficiency against the nationalist Vietminh, who resettled in the South following the victory at Dienbienphu and established shadow governments in the villages, extending 'their influence to many who are not communist party members through a substantial network of front organizations covering all sectors of the population'. It further warned that 'internal security was at present poor', and there appears to be 'little capability of opposition to Vietminh efforts to further internal chaos and eventually complete takeover probably through democratic means of free elections The governments survival will be determined in large measure by the degree of protection foreign sources will provide in guaranteeing its future.'²²

These comments provide a striking acknowledgement of the weakness of Diem and his reliance on foreigners, and of the strength of the Vietminh, which was targeted for liquidation. MSU advisers, including a number of CIA agents, built up the paramilitary civil guard in violation of the Geneva agreements, which limited the size of the armed forces to 150,000, and worked closely with the Vietnamese Bureau of Investigations (VBI or Cong An), commanded by General Nguyen Ngoc Le, a twenty-year French army veteran. Cultivating networks of informants, the VBI operated in plain-clothes and functioned principally as a 'political police' and 'political repression organization'. Its mission was to 'correlate information regarding the security of the state, manage political information services' and 'discover plots and activities capable of compromising public order'.²³

In 2005, Ngo Vinh Long, a professor of history at the University of Maine, testified that as a teenager he worked undercover for the VBI as a 'public health specialist' in malaria eradication to access people's homes and search for information on their political affiliations.²⁴ Once identified, those on the blacklist, who included relatives of opposition leaders, had their homes raided by plain-clothes officers, usually in the predawn hours, and in a precursor to Phoenix were sent to rat-infested jails to face torture and possible death by guillotine. Frank Walton, director of public safety in Vietnam from 1959–1961 to 1969–1971, acknowledged that the Diem regime frequently employed the police in 'Gestapo-like operation[s] with midnight arrests, holding without charge, brutality and detentions in secret locations'.²⁵

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To bolster police efficiency in the attempt to counter ‘communist subversion’, the MSUG provided handcuffs, revolvers, tear gas weapons and crystal microphones for wiretapping, established an information clearing house equipped with polygraph and microfilm and ran an espionage and jungle warfare course at an old French Army installation near Saigon. American advisers further improved record-keeping and communications (one adviser, Lyman Rundlett, was forced to resign when it was discovered that he had previously worked for Motorola, which received bidding contracts for radio equipment) and set up a forensics lab including fingerprint identification and an identity card system for social control purposes.²⁶

Financing for clandestine police operations was derived in part from the drug trade, controlled by Nhu and the Corsican mafia as well as CIA-backed warlords in Thailand and Laos, who, according to a public safety report, organized the ‘considerable traffic in smuggling’ as a means of raising money for a ‘wave of repression against political opponents’, including ‘mass jailing and executions.’²⁷ The CIA improved its purchasing power by buying South Vietnamese piasters on the black market, which was illegal under both South Vietnamese and US law. Like its colonial predecessors, the ‘agency’ long relied on ethnic minorities and criminal elements in counter-insurgency operations. General Paul F. Gorman, head of the US Southern Command, commented that ‘if you want to go into the subversion business, collect intelligence and move arms, you deal with the drug movers.’²⁸

For all the outrage over ‘Vietcong terrorism’, MSUG’s reports show that for every VBI or province chief assassinated, at least six suspected ‘VC’ were killed by state security forces and hundreds more arrested ‘for breeches of security’ and ‘purely political violations’ (later the kill discrepancy was far higher).²⁹ With no apparent objection, one MSU professor interviewed a local police chief in his headquarters where a twenty-year-old peasant was ‘curled up, his feet in manacles, the left side of his face swollen and his eye and cheek badly bruised.’³⁰

In 1959, Diem passed a law allowing for the execution of opponents within a period of three days, leading to the formation of the National Liberation Front (NLF), an amalgamation of opposition groups bent on overthrowing his regime and expelling American advisers. Led by a Saigon lawyer, Nguyen Huu Tho, a former prisoner in Diem’s gulag, the NLF was supported by Hanoi, and it derived pronounced support as a result of wide-scale grievances and its promotion of land reform and literacy campaigns. According to journalist Joseph Buttinger, a one-time Diem supporter, the organization enlisted people ‘willing to serve their country in the tens of thousands and extracted from them superhuman efforts and sacrifices in the struggle for independence’. The government meanwhile attracted ‘officials with the lowest possible motivation for public service, the only ones fit to serve in a corrupt, inefficient and despised police-state.’³¹

By providing modern weapons and technical support to police and promoting political operations, the MSUG was pivotal in contributing to the climate of repression that gave rise to the NLF. Art Brandstatter wrote to colleague Ralph Turner in 1961 that he ‘supported Diem’s position regarding the role of the civil guard in “neutralizing VC activity” and never agreed with the position that ‘we should try to help develop a “democratic police force” under conditions of instability and insurgency The

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responsibility for internal security belongs to the police.³² These comments epitomize how commitment to civil liberties and humane principles was subordinated to the goal of fighting communism and securing what were perceived as American strategic interests. The Vietnamese people suffered grievously as a result.

‘The numbers just don’t add up’: Phoenix and State terrorism in the shadow war

As the war expanded, police training became even more central to American pacification efforts and contributed to the torture and killing of thousands of revolutionary fighters and civilians. The US received guidance from the British who sent ten ex-colonial police officers and secretly trained hundreds of South Vietnamese (along with Lao and Thai) police in riot control, jungle warfare and special branch intelligence in Malaysia.³³ Following a failed 1960 coup, Diem’s brother Ngo Dinh Can formed a secret police organization at loggerheads with Security Director Tran Kim Tuyen, which extorted, tortured and murdered regime opponents, including five Hoa-Hao members, whose bodies were dumped in a canal in Saigon. Chief of Police Nguyen Van Hieu and two associates who had taken over the torture facility beneath the Saigon zoo were sentenced to life in prison following a sensational criminal trial.³⁴

After the Ngo brothers were assassinated in a CIA-backed coup, the OPS worked to rebuild the police–intelligence–drugs apparatus under Saigon police chief Nguyen Ngoc Loan, who gained notoriety after being photographed shooting an NLF prisoner in the head. Trained at the French St. Cyr military academy, Loan was the power broker of Vice Premier Nguyen Cao Ky, a Hitler admirer previously removed from a CIA mission into Laos for smuggling heroin. An OPS report pointed to Loan’s ‘contempt for individual legal rights’ after he had a member of the constituent assembly assassinated to break a legislative logjam. Four-star general William Corson wrote in *The Betrayal* that ‘Loan’s National police methods to enforce the “laws” make Himmler’s Gestapo look like the board of overseers in a Quaker church.’³⁵

Loan epitomized the danger of the police programmes in empowering warlords of an unsavoury character. After the 1968 Tet offensive (in which he was wounded), he lost his favoured status with the CIA because of his lukewarm backing for Phoenix, whose aim was to eliminate the ‘Vietcong’ infrastructure (VCI) through use of sophisticated computer technology and intelligence gathering and improved coordination between military and police intelligence agencies. The United States in turn elevated Loan’s successor, Tran Thien Khiem, the power broker of Nguyen Van Thieu, who ousted Ky in a power struggle centred in part on control of the \$88 million heroin trade.³⁶

Focused initially in the revolutionary stronghold of Kien Hoa as part of Operation Speedy Express, which claimed over 10,000 Vietnamese lives, Phoenix (Phung Hoang in Vietnamese) was implemented after Tet as an extension of the police programmes. Run by the OPS and CIA at a cost of between \$7 million and \$15 million a year, it adopted wanted posters, blacklists, disguises and other psychological warfare techniques such as the playing off superstitions, spreading disinformation and stringing corpses on

hooks for intimidation. One adviser, David Donovan, likened himself to a warrior-king, who at twenty-three had unprecedented power in his ability to imprison people in his district, direct development funds, and even order executions.

He and his colleagues were equipped with James Bond type gadgetry developed by the CIA's technical services division such as radio transmission devices designed to look like household utensils and camouflaged rocks that came apart inside and could contain messages.³⁷ Navy Seals were mobilized alongside the PRU to 'neutralize' high-value targets, including civilian officials running local administrations under NLF jurisdiction. Operations extended into Laos and Cambodia and 'rogue' Americans may have also been targeted.³⁸

America's clandestine warriors believed the 'Vietcong' were monstrous yet effective in their 'application of torture and murder to achieve psychological advantage'. They in turn sought to emulate their tactics, which included selective assassination, inducing defections and winning over the population through civic action and political education. Third-country nationals were used for the dirtiest tasks, including South Korean, Chinese and Filipino mercenaries willing, in the words of one CIA officer, to 'slit their grandmother's throat for a dollar eighty-five'.³⁹

Most of the Filipinos had served in Nenita hunter-killer teams developed by legendary CIA operative Edward Lansdale in the early 1950s to seek out and destroy leaders of the Huk revolutionary movement, which led the anti-Japanese struggle in the Second World War and promoted land reform. Headed by Napoleon ('Poling') Valeriano, a Lansdale protégé and PRU adviser, the Nenita, named after their skull and cross-bone emblem, practised the water cure, broke bones, cordoned off areas and stacked Huk corpses along the highways beneath warning placards to strike fear in the population. An internal study concluded that that they 'inflicted terror and oppression on the people of Central Luzon'.⁴⁰

The PRU and their American counterparts wrought similar havoc across the Mekong Delta. A lot of the violence was indiscriminate, eroding support for the GVN. Political scientists Stathis N. Kalyvas and Matthew A. Kocher estimated that Phoenix victimized thirty-eight innocents for every one actual Vietcong agent. NLF fighters had access to things like safe houses that enabled them to evade capture, giving young men the incentive to join the NLF, which had a well-developed political infrastructure and skilful political organizers that, according to one Phoenix veteran, no political organization in the United States could remotely match.⁴¹

Thieu and various district chiefs at times used Phoenix to eliminate political rivals, including the non-communists opposition. Targets were also at times selected by the NLF, which widely penetrated the state security apparatus. One of Thieu's top intelligence advisers, Vu Ngoc Nha, who neutralized people that had nothing to do with official Phoenix goals, was found guilty of espionage and became a general in North Vietnam's secret service. He may have at one time been paid by the CIA to bring down Thieu's government.⁴²

Theodore Shackley, CIA station chief in the late 1960s, wrote in his memoir that CIA officers generally found Phoenix 'repugnant. They felt that the dossiers were based on dubious information All too frequently, arrest efforts turned into firefights and more so-called VCI were killed than detained for processing'.⁴³ Declassified field

reports point to the wide-scale corruption of PRU cadres who used their positions for revenge and extortion, threatening to kill people and count them as VCI if they did not pay them huge sums. When CIA officer John Stockwell reported that his police liaison was torturing and murdering suspects who could not pay ransom, he was threatened with reassignment.⁴⁴

Many of the atrocities were committed by 'VC avenger units' prone to rape, pillage and body mutilation.⁴⁵ While the quantity of 'neutralizations' was reported to be high in many districts, the quality was 'poor'. Adviser Charles N. Phillips lamented that there was a large number of 'phantom kills' which hampered good Phung Hoang statistics. There were also 'flagrant' cases of report padding, most egregiously in Long An province where CIA operative Evan Parker Jr. noted 'the numbers just don't add up'. Dead bodies were being identified as VCI, rightly or wrongly, in the attempt to at least approach an unrealistic quota. The catalogue of agents listed as killed included an inordinate number of 'nurses', a convenient way to account for women killed in raids on suspected VC hideouts.⁴⁶

An artillery adviser to South Vietnamese army units in Long An stated in an interview that several women were killed in his district (of Tan An) because they spat at the PRU lieutenant after being tied to a tree. The women's bodies were then carried to the market place as a warning. As part of black operations, PRUs disguised as 'Vietcong' engaged in search operations in which air support and defoliation were ordered to wipe out villages. They also assassinated people in their sleep using silencers. A CIA agent commented that when he arrived in his district, he was given a list of 200 people who were to be killed; six months later 260 had been killed – but none of those on the list.⁴⁷

A 1971 Pentagon study found that only 3 per cent of 'Vietcong' killed, captured or rallied were full or probationary party members above the district level. Ralph McGehee, CIA chief in the Gia Dinh province, who nearly committed suicide from guilt, stated in his memoirs that 'never in the history of our work in Vietnam did we get one clear-cut, high-ranking Vietcong agent'.⁴⁸ The reasons stem from faulty intelligence, lack of language skills by Americans and extraordinary NLF/NVA counter-intelligence as well as organizational protection afforded to top cadre by NLF shadow governments.⁴⁹

Some PRUs were recruited from criminal gangs, giving them skills conducive to the clandestine arts. A Phoenix operative noted that they were 'a combination of ARVN deserters, VC turncoats and bad motherfucker criminals the South Vietnamese couldn't deal with in prison, so they turned them over to us. Some actually had an incentive plan: If they killed × number of Commies, they got × number of years off their prison term'.⁵⁰ In certain provinces, PRUs were recruited from among disaffected Catholics and Cao Dai and other religious sects with real grievances against the VCI who had killed members of their family. While some were well disciplined, the PRU were often hated by the population and even, according to an anonymous veteran, by the ARVN, which in his district fired machine guns into the PRU compound. One PRU cadre would cut the liver out of those killed and take it home in a plastic bag, an example of the dehumanized brutality bred by war.⁵¹

The CIA instructed the PRU in sophisticated psychological interrogation techniques designed to emphasize the prisoner's helplessness and dependence on his captor.

These methods led to systematic abuse, including an incident where officers planted electrodes in a prisoners' brain, and another where a detainee was kept in an air-conditioned room for four years to exploit his fear of the cold.⁵² Military intelligence specialist K. Barton Osborn told Congress that he witnessed the starving of prisoners, their being thrown off helicopters and the prodding of a woman's brain with a six inch dowel through her ear until she died. In his year and a half with Phoenix, he did not see 'a single suspect survive interrogation'.⁵³

Despite later attempts by conservatives to discredit Osborne's character, CIA Director William Colby conceded that much of what Osborne said was likely to be true. In testimony before Congress, Colby stated that Phoenix (which he defined as an 'attempt to identify the structure of the communist party and go out and capture or shoot them') led to 'unjustifiable abuses' and the death of over 20,000 people. The GVN placed the total at over 40,000, which many historians believe to be an underestimation. A Phoenix operative who served in Czechoslovakia during the Second World War commented, 'The reports I sent in from my province on the number of communists that were neutralized reminded me of the reports Hitler's concentration camp commanders sent in on how many inmates they had exterminated, each commander lying that he had killed more than the others to please Himmler.'⁵⁴ These comments epitomize the deadly ramifications of Phoenix, which unleashed violent social forces that took on a momentum of their own. War crimes were clearly committed, for which ultimate responsibility lay with the programme's architects.

'You ask me where is hell ...' Prison overcrowding and the Tiger Cages of Con Son

Phoenix's catastrophic impact was compounded by the atrocious conditions in the GVN's prisons, where overcrowding was rampant and many died from malnutrition, disease or torture. The total number of political prisoners was estimated at 200,000 at its peak, the highest in the world. Under the army's small wars doctrine, effective prison management was seen as crucial to counter-insurgency, as it provided a symbol of government authority and means of winning political converts through re-education. The State Department spent \$6.5 million between 1967 and 1972 for the maintenance and renovation of the forty-two major prisons run by the GVN and built three additional facilities and a juvenile reformatory. It provided generators and handcuffs, built special isolation cells for hard-core 'Vietcong' and oversaw the construction of over thirty state-of-the-art detention centres (PICs – Provincial Interrogation Centers).⁵⁵

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Many of the supplies, however, were resold on the black market by local authorities, usually cronies of Ky or Thieu, or kept until wardens paid a bribe. William Colby wrote to the director of CORDS, the agency responsible for pacification, that commodities and money destined for correctional centres were 'held in Saigon until local authorities were presented with gifts or proper wining and dining'. Nguyen Van Thuc, deputy chief jailer of Kien Phong Correctional Center, reported that he had to take 'the right

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people' out to a 20,000 piaster meal (\$250) and provide them with whisky and cash gifts to secure access to a generator. Other wardens paid 2,000 piasters for the use of a forklift and 3,000 for a dump truck.⁵⁶ No wonder most of the renovations were never completed.

AQ: Please check if the edit made to the sentence beginning as "Poor facilities and overcrowding ..." is grammatically appropriate. Or, please suggest if "Poor facilities and overcrowding" should be taken as one unit and the verb 'was' retained as is.

Poor facilities and overcrowding were compounded by a lack of judicial process and access to fair trial or counsel. In Chau Doc in November 1968, Don Bordenkircher, a correctional officer at San Quentin in California who joined the Foreign Service to avoid sending his kids to school with 'flower children', noted to his boss Randolph Berkeley that only 27 of 457 prisoners had been sentenced and eleven children under the age of eighteen were currently detained. In Phan Ding the total was 2,550 prisoners out of 2,903 in a facility intended for only 440. To make up for the discrepancy, inmates had to begin cooking supper at 4:00 am.⁵⁷ In other facilities, inspector reports reveal that inmates withstood rodents the size of cats, ate in kitchens that doubled as garbage dumps and had to bathe in raw sewage. In Bac Lieu, Bordenkircher wrote irately to his superiors that 'political reeducation cannot occur until you enable a man to sleep away from his own urine and feces, give him wholesome food and the opportunity for rehabilitation'.⁵⁸

Some of the worst abuses took place at the infamous Con Son prison, located on an archipelago 180 kilometres off the southern Vietnamese coast, where inmates reported being worked nearly to death in the fields, severely beaten by trusties and left on the verge of starvation.⁵⁹ Prisoner Thep Xanh wrote of his experience, 'Deep in my heart I remember nights at Con Son, the echo of the creaking door, the beatings, the crying out at midnight, the shouting of guards, you ask me where is hell; where on earth people cannot live as human beings, where people with heart and soul live like beasts.'⁶⁰

In 1970, after veering from the itinerary during a congressional tour, International Voluntary Service (IVS) employee Don Luce found detainees crammed into six-foot windowless pits or 'Tiger Cages', where they were forced to subsist on three handfuls of milled white rice and three swallows of water per day and had lime thrown in their faces, causing lung disease and tuberculosis. OPS Director Frank Walton, a former LAPD deputy chief who also served in Libya, Philippines and Iran, sanctioned a report stating that non-cooperative prisoners, whom he referred to as 'reds who keep preaching the commie line', were 'isolated in their cells for months' and 'bolted to the floor or handcuffed to leg-irons'.⁶¹ This resulted in wide-scale paralysis, which Dr John Champlin of the Air Force testified before Congress, resulted from 'severe nutritional deficiencies coupled with prolonged immobilization unique in the history of modern warfare A computer review of 1200 medical journals and a personal search through medical literature on the health of POW's produced no similar descriptions.'⁶²

Phoenix and its antecedents can ultimately be seen to embody the repressive parastatal structures underlying American global hegemony. Financed in part through illicit channels, the Phoenix concept grew out of a larger web of clandestine policing operations, which aimed to root out leftist and revolutionary movements threatening US interests. Under the small wars doctrine, it was felt that costly military engagement could be avoided through carefully calibrated political policing operations designed to liquidate the revolutionary opposition. In Vietnam, however, these goals provide to be

untenable, owing in part to deep-rooted support for the revolutionary movement and the absence of institutional correctives for false identification and inflated statistics. The Thieu government and US war effort was in turn undermined, with the NVA-NLF forces liberating the country by 1975.⁶³

‘You have to not mind killing innocents’: Phoenix’s long staying-power

Despite being publicly repudiated after its exposure in the United States, Phoenix served as a templar for future CIA operations, first in Central America during the 1980s and most recently in the War on Terror. With a large sector of the population opposed to large-scale military commitments and a revival of the draft, neoconservative policymakers and traditional elites bent on restoring US hegemony after Vietnam, relied on the subcontracting of counter-insurgency, largely to ensure deniability. Following the 9/11 attacks, Vice President Dick Cheney undertook research in the CIA archive and embraced Phoenix as a model for extrajudicial rendition and assassination programmes designed to obliterate the leadership of Al-Qaeda and insurgent movements opposing the US occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq.⁶⁴

The Bush administration invested billions of dollars in police training under the premise that local ‘police are often the best force for countering small insurgent bands supported by the local population. In COIN operations, special police strike units may move to different AOs [Areas of Operation] while patrol police remain in the local area on a daily basis and build a detailed intelligence picture of the insurgent strength, organization and support.’⁶⁵ This is a prescription for Phoenix-style policing operations little different from Vietnam, apart from in the use of private security corporations such as Blackwater and DynCorp and predator drone machines. And once again, the consequences have been deadly, with night-time snatch and grab raids, civilian killings, overcrowded prisons and systematic torture generating pronounced resistance to US policies.⁶⁶

Reflecting the continuity in personnel, a number of OPS personnel served with police training operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. One was seventy-five-year-old Adolph Saenz, a Korean and Vietnam War veteran who had hunted down Ché Guevara in Bolivia. The Bush administration’s 2006 appointment to head the Abu Ghraib prison, Don Bordenkircher, oversaw the ‘Tiger Cages’ in Con Son as part of Operation Phoenix.⁶⁷ Another shadow operative in the War on Terror, Billy Waugh, was a Special Forces officer in Korea and Vietnam who led Hmong units in Laos and clandestine missions in Libya alongside disgraced CIA agent Edwin Wilson. After 9/11, the seventy-two-year-old was asked to head a CIA-paramilitary unit in Afghanistan, which was authorized to assassinate enemy combatants by calling in air strikes using smart bombs and hellfire missiles controlled by remote control joystick. Waugh told a reporter that the way to win the war is to ‘let them kill each other. Send up a satellite and take pictures. Keep the Special Operations teams in the hills, fifty miles out of the towns. Then go in at night and do your work. Kill them. Kill like we

did in Germany. Flatten the place. You have to not mind killing innocents. Even the women and children.⁶⁸

These comments epitomize the ends justifies the means philosophy of America's clandestine warriors operating beyond the pale of public accountability. The Phoenix Program was clearly an important watershed, contributing to the institutionalization of COIN strategies employing sophisticated social control technologies and sanctioning systematic torture and assassination, largely by proxy to ensure plausible deniability. The study of Phoenix and American police training programmes generally casts important light on the hidden, extra-legal methods that have been adopted to advance American global hegemony. The long staying power reflects in part the dictates of the national security bureaucracy and military-industrial complex which requires a constant stream of foreign enemies, both real and imagined, for its sustainability. The tactics adopted in Phoenix, it should be noted, are similar to those of previous colonial powers, including Britain, which also relied on clandestine policing operations to root out opposition movements.⁶⁹ Their eradication can only come through sweeping repudiation of the ideas underlying their implementation and demand for a peaceful resolution of international conflicts.

Notes

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- 3 Robert Cribb, 'Introduction: Parapolitics, Shadow Governance and Criminal Sovereignty' in *Government of the Shadows: Parapolitics and Criminal Sovereignty*, ed. Eric Wilson (London: Pluto Press, 2009), 1. See also Peter Dale Scott, *The War Conspiracy: The Secret Road to the Second Indochina War* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs Merrill Co., 1972); Peter Dale Scott, *Deep Politics and the Death of JFK* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).
- 4 Col. Virgil Ney, 'Guerrilla Warfare and Modern Strategy', in *Modern Guerrilla Warfare: Fighting Communist Guerrilla Movements, 1941-1961*, ed. F. M. Osanka, introduction by Samuel Huntington (New York: The Free Press, 1962), 25-38.
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- Uhl, *Vietnam Awakening: My Journey from Combat to the Citizens' Commission of Inquiry on U.S. War Crimes in Vietnam* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co, 2007).
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