A DIRTY, INGLORIOUS AFFAIR:
THE PHOENIX PROGRAM IN VIETNAM

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A DIRTY, INGLORIOUS AFFAIR:
THE PHOENIX PROGRAM IN VIETNAM

A Thesis

by

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Abstract of

A DIRTY, INGLORIOUS AFFAIR: 
THE PHOENIX PROGRAM IN VIETNAM

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This thesis offers an analysis of the Phoenix Program, a counterinsurgency operation during the Vietnam War. From 1967 to 1972, American military advisors worked with South Vietnamese military and police forces to defeat a Communist insurgency deeply enrooted in the Vietnamese society. The Viet Cong Infrastructure (VCI) accessed all levels of the South Vietnamese government in Saigon and helped defeat the regime. Using a variety of techniques including propaganda, monetary rewards, imprisonment, and torture, the Phoenix Program eliminated tens of thousands of VCI members, but in the process, innocents died and Phoenix acquired the label of an “assassination program.” Journalists and anti-war demonstrators took up this label, hoping to bring an end to the war. The war became a dirty conflict with accusations of brutality and war crimes on both sides. The United States portrayed itself as a defender of freedom and human rights, but after years of frustration, American officials looked for a way out by any means necessary.

The Vietnam War divided a nation and in the years since, historians cannot agree on the war’s legacy. Either the United States fought for righteous reasons or politicians deceived the American people for decades on the importance of Vietnam in world affairs. Phoenix, mired in claims of cruelty, equally has a clouded heritage. The war ended in defeat for the United States, making it difficult to judge the Phoenix Program’s impact. In an attempt to win the war for the Saigon government, Phoenix advisors took the fight directly to the insurgency, but in the process, their actions and those of the South Vietnamese working in the Phoenix Program committed violations and atrocities which sullied the program and the overall war effort.

The tremendous amount of writing on the Vietnam War allows scholars to look back on the period and analyze almost any topic—even sensitive operations such as the Phoenix Program. This thesis draws from soldiers’ memoirs from both sides of the conflict, newspaper articles, and Congressional hearing transcripts. These records provide firsthand accounts of the war from the Phoenix offices and the difficulty in fighting the Communist insurgency. In order to understand what the Phoenix Program was, it is important to listen to the voices of those involved. Equally, the newspaper articles and Congressional hearings reveal Phoenix’s impact on the home front. Articles from *Time*, *Newsweek*, and newspapers around the country provide this important perspective as
Americans learned of the actions of their military overseas. Finally, secondary accounts also assisted in the formation of my analysis, with a reliance on the work of Dale Andradé, Mark Moyar, and Douglas Valentine.

By analyzing the various sources on the Phoenix Program and the Vietnam War, this thesis uncovers examples of brutality committed against the Vietnamese citizenry, forcing the question of what kind of program was Phoenix: an attempt at defeating the insurgency by any means necessary or a ruthless program bent on eradication of any suspected of harboring anti-Saigon leanings. Those involved with the program defended their actions, while those on the outside condemned it. Phoenix became infamous because of its secretive nature and the large number of accusations leveled against it. The Phoenix Program did not intend to become an assassination operation, but in the course of fighting the insurgency, many people, including innocent South Vietnamese, died. In the end, the Phoenix Program became just another frustrating failure during the Vietnam War.

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Date
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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

The Vietnam War marks one of the most controversial periods in the history of the United States. Over 58,000 American soldiers died, alongside almost two and a half million Vietnamese. The legacy of the Vietnam War haunts this country to the present, from the war in Afghanistan to the sight of disabled veterans on our cities’ streets. Waged from 1955 to 1975, the war occupied five administrations and the thoughts and minds of an entire generation. The polarizing effect Vietnam had on the country brought divisions not seen since the Civil War. The U.S. goal during the Cold War—as stated in the Truman Doctrine—was to prevent the spread of Communism throughout the world. During this twenty-year conflict, U.S. involvement went through several phases. First, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) installed and supported the South Vietnamese government under President Ngo Dinh Diem through intelligence gathering and advising the South Vietnamese Army (ARVN). The second phase saw the increase in CIA officers as well as advisors from the U.S. military. Third, came an escalation of the war through the introduction of U.S. ground troops, and fourth saw the rise of pacification programs.¹ However, despite intensified American efforts, the Vietnam War quickly ensnared US forces in a quagmire that left many looking for a way out.

The war became a dirty conflict with accusations of brutality and war crimes on both sides. The United States portrayed itself as a defender of freedom and human rights, but after years of frustration, the holy armor began to crack. The American people

¹ The third and fourth phases ran concurrently.
became aware of the horrors of war far easier than ever before. Shocked at the grisly daily war footage in newspapers and beamed into their televisions on a nightly basis—stories of civilian slaughter, rape, torture and other horrible crimes—many Americans railed against the horrors of war and organized protests to vent their anger. Growing discouraged with the lack of success on the battlefield, soldiers vented their frustrations on the peasantry. While American officials claimed these atrocities were false, military and civilian operations told a different tale. Backed by the old adage, “We destroyed the village in order to save it,” Vietnam suffered immense destruction and over two million people lost their lives.\footnote{Don Oberdorfer, \textit{Tet!: The Turning Point in the Vietnam War} (New York: Da Capo Press, 1971), 184.} What confronted American soldiers during the war was an insurgency seemingly impervious to conventional warfare and gaining ground throughout South Vietnam. The United States needed to find the means to attack the insurgency directly without laying further waste to the countryside. This process took several years and controversy was never far behind.

The “Phoenix Program”, technically a civilian operation, became infamous as the conflict declined and people tried to find an honorable solution to the war. Phoenix, or the Phung Hoang Program to the Vietnamese, arose into a firestorm of media attention and political intrigue. In an effort to defeat an insurgent force bent on destroying the Saigon government from within, Phoenix instead faced the same frustrations that plagued the rest of the war. From 1967 to 1972, the Americans and South Vietnamese police forces focused their energies on the destruction of the enemy infrastructure and the securing of the population for the Government of South Vietnam (GVN). Even today,
thirty-seven years after the fall of Saigon, the Phoenix Program is misunderstood and steeped in mystery. This paper weaves through the conflicting reports, various agendas, and military jargon in order to better understand and assess the goals of the Phoenix Program.

The Vietnamese insurgency began because of French domination in the late nineteenth century. The French lost the region to Japan during the Second World War, but the insurgency continued the fight. Following the war, the French returned to power and once again sought to control Vietnam. Such an insurgency continued through the First Indochina War. The Geneva Accords divided Vietnam into two countries—Communist North and “democratic,” capitalist South—but failed to maintain a peace. Formed in the early 1960s in the South, the National Liberation Front (NLF) consisted of ethnically South Vietnamese communists who remained below the 17th parallel following the Geneva Accords in 1954. Phoenix targeted NLF units as well as their logistical support termed the Viet Cong infrastructure (VCI). The theory was that if the VCI could be eliminated, the NLF would collapse and the NVA would lose a valuable ally in the South. The Vietnamese Communist party was committed to reunification and willing to suffer tremendous casualties in order to achieve victory.

After spending several years in Vietnam as combat soldiers, Michael Lee Lanning and Dan Cregg labeled the NLF soldier an enigma. During the war, the Americans

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3 This work will use the terms National Liberation Front or NLF rather than Viet Cong or VC terms. Likewise, North Vietnamese Army or NVA will be used rather than the title of People’s Army of Vietnam.

understood very little about the NLF, assuming the soldiers were brainwashed with Communist indoctrination, but did not comprehend how the Vietnamese hatred of foreigners and the widespread destruction of their homeland prevented the Americans from winning the “hearts and minds” of the South Vietnamese population. Anyone in Vietnam could support or be a member of the NLF and this put every American soldier on alert. The enemy could be anyone and anywhere.

The Phoenix Program faced many accusations and labels during its existence. One side saw Phoenix as an assassination operation conducted against the Communist infrastructure within South Vietnam. Launched at a point when the entire war was unpopular, the media, American public, and some members of Congress believed Phoenix an assassination program. Following the stunning Communist successes of the Tet Offensive in January to March 1968, the CIA and U.S. military launched Phoenix to target NLF for elimination. During the active years of Phoenix, over 20,000 Vietnamese were assassinated and thousands more incarcerated, some later found to have little to do with the NLF. The NLF assisted North Vietnam in the fight against the Saigon government and their American patrons. In the end, even the sinister acts of Phoenix could not prolong the fight.

Others believe Phoenix to be something different, something less sinister. This side consisted of Phoenix advisors, CIA officials, and military officers—people that had access to top secret files or who experienced it firsthand. The Phoenix Program was a counterinsurgency operation whose goal was to arrest and turn NLF agents against their

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5 Ibid., 63-64.
former confederates with the hope of destroying the VCI and increase support for the Saigon government. Some suspects died in the process of arresting suspects, but this was war and casualties were expected. Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS), which ran Phoenix, officially condemned assassination, preferring to interrogate prisoners to gain vital intelligence. Each Phoenix advisor received training on intelligence gathering and dealing with their Vietnamese counterparts. This is very different from a CIA assassination program that hunted down targets without remorse, where Communists and innocent Vietnamese lived in fear of becoming the next victim of Phoenix. This division reveals that the true aspects of Phoenix are relatively unknown despite its presence in Congressional hearings and in news articles.

Learning about Phoenix became easier with the declassification of many documents and the publication of memoirs over the years, but this has not made explaining Phoenix any easier. Surviving soldiers and advisors disagree over the legacy of Phoenix, the actions of the program, and the overall attention given to pacification programs. Stuart Herrington, who spent two years as an advisor with Phoenix, thought the program was winning the war against the Communists until America’s ultimate withdrawal. Advisors John Cook and Michael Walsh agreed with this sentiment, while former CORDS Director William E. Colby believed that Phoenix destroyed the NLF by the time the United States withdrew. Colby said of the final Communist offensive, “The Presidential Palace in Saigon was not entered by a barefoot guerrilla but by a North

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Vietnamese tank with an enormous cannon.”⁷ There is still no consensus definition for Phoenix. Dale Andradé, Zalin Grant and Mark Moyar, in their works, firmly believe Phoenix to be an effective counterinsurgency program that did significant damage to the VCI—although they come to different conclusions on who and what was responsible for Phoenix’s ultimate demise. Douglas Valentine believes differently about Phoenix. Valentine takes the various abuses and places the blame on CORDS. These were not isolated incidents, but rather unofficially sanctioned operations intending to bring terror to NLF supporters.⁸ Intentions might have been good, but by arming former criminals, mercenaries, and other socially unwanted characters, Phoenix risked too much. These “thugs” had bones to pick with the Communists and sought revenge against their enemies. The Phoenix advisors enabled the members of the Provincial Reconnaissance Units (PRUs) to fight back.⁹

Andradé gained an interest in Phoenix after reading about the secretive and controversial operations run by the CIA and decided to make it the focus of his dissertation. In Ashes to Ashes: The Phoenix Program and the Vietnam War, Andradé analyzed formerly top secret documents and official Phoenix reports to discover what Phoenix did in Vietnam. Moyar, in Phoenix and the Birds of Prey, believed that liberal professors were not writing the true history of Vietnam and sought to revise the earlier mistakes. Valentine came across Phoenix by accident when he tried to acquire more

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⁹ Ibid., 172-3.
information on his father’s World War II record, but found the record altered and incomplete. Discussing this issue with Vietnam veterans, he discovered Phoenix veterans receiving the same treatment. He focused his book, *The Phoenix Program*, on shedding light on the secret operations. Valentine’s research and interviews led him to conclude that the Phoenix Program committed acts of terror against the South Vietnamese peasants. These historians studied Phoenix and came to different conclusions based on their perspective and opinion of the sources. Some were against Phoenix because it relied on Vietnamese assistance in gathering intelligence and arresting suspects. Accusations of corruption, abuses, and negligence prevented the American advisors from effectively targeting the VCI. When American involvement in Phoenix was at its height, the program ran efficiently and the NLF power within the village declined.

By the time Phoenix ended, the VCI needed tremendous assistance from the North in order to remain effective. The Vietnam War became one of the most controversial events in history as tens of thousands died and the American public protested against the government. When Colby appeared before Congress in 1971, the public learned of Phoenix and continued to question Colby for the rest of his life over its alleged abuses. Phoenix became the symbol of American tyranny and abuses overseas. The greatest country in the world spent twenty years fighting and had nothing to show for it when the war ended. This was very different from the beginning of the Cold War when the American public demanded a firm stance against Communism. As the historian Kathryn Olmsted wrote: “This was the foreign policy of the ‘liberal consensus.’ Conservative Republicans and liberal Democrats alike agreed on the need for an
aggressive, anticommmunist foreign policy, including overt and covert intervention abroad.” Following Vietnam, the American public was wary of military intervention. The basic principles of the Cold War came into question as the cost of fighting Communism became unbearable. The twenty years in Vietnam changed the political, social, and strategic objectives of the United States and Phoenix became a major mechanism of that change.

Phoenix arrived towards the end of the Vietnam War when U.S. military involvement began to decline. Some, however, remained to advise the South Vietnamese on the nuances of pacification and assist in the destruction of the VCI. Former Phoenix advisor Stuart Herrington writes, “The Americanization of the war during the sixties and the subsequent assignment of advisors down to the lower levels of the Vietnamese chain of command probably caused as many problems as it solved…More often than not, American advisors were resented by their counterparts.” The American withdrawal left the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) on its own and Phoenix in the hands of the unprepared Vietnamese Special Police. Despite this failure, Phoenix decimated the VCI’s ranks. With the guerilla war at an end, Washington and Saigon could focus on the conventional tactics of the NVA. However, the NVA struck hard into the South once the Americans departed and South Vietnamese resistance crumbled.

The war left a bitter taste in the mouths of the American people—the civilian public and military alike. Despite this, interest in the war has increased ever since

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America’s dramatic withdrawal from Vietnam. William Polk opines, “No country has ever been more studied than Vietnam. It has been the subject of countless investigations, reports, and analyses, as well as hundreds of books and articles.” Hollywood and fiction publishers also focused attention on the war, bringing the conflict to new generations. Phoenix is a good case study in the quest for understanding the Vietnam War because it affected all aspects of the American war effort and made an impact on the outcome. This work will investigate what the Phoenix Program was and its effects on the political, social, and strategic aspects of the United States during the era of the Vietnam War.

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The Vietnam War is one of the longest military conflicts in the history of the United States. However, while the origins of the conflict are often as confusing as the battle lines were to become, understanding the U.S. role in Vietnam and its use of the Phoenix Program was intimately connected with a rabid sense of anti-communism and fear of foreign ideologies that existed for decades. From the end of the First World War, Americans had developed an intense fear of Communism. In the 1920s, the U.S. experienced a “red scare” as they witnessed a violent overthrow of a wartime ally and the implementation of a radical political ideology at odds with the American tradition of political and social organization. Even with the rise of fascism and extensive U.S. efforts to uproot “subversive” forces threatening the country, the impetus remained focused on the Communist threat. With the start of the Cold War in the late 1940s, this fear of Communism reached an all time high.

U.S. goals in Vietnam echoed the Truman Doctrine with the emphasis on preventing the Communist North from taking over the Democratic South. Created in 1947, the Truman Doctrine—named after President Harry Truman—stated that the United States would support Greece and Turkey in their struggle against Communism, but it quickly became foreign policy to contain the spread of

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Communism throughout the world.\textsuperscript{15} While this does not assist in ascertaining when the Vietnam War officially began, it does explain why the U.S. spent so many years and sacrificed so much in Vietnam. Pulitzer Prize winning journalist Stanley Karnow writes, “The U.S. commitment to the region dated back to 1950, when President Truman decided to help the French retain their hold over Indochina to block Chinese Communist expansion.” Here the assumption that “Ho Chi Minh was a Chinese pawn” influenced the direction of U.S. policy in the region.\textsuperscript{16} The Cold War became a life or death struggle to prevent the spread of Communism and it was America’s duty to stand on the front lines.

When the French returned to Southeast Asia following the Second World War, the U.S. supported its ally in regaining lost colonies. Although opposed to colonial empires, the U.S. followed a policy of opposing Communism and thus, opposed the Viet Minh. Even though Vietnam’s Declaration of Independence mirrored the U.S. Declaration of Independence, the U.S. refused all appeals from the Viet Minh to support their bid for independence because of their Communist ideologies. After the French withdrawal from Vietnam, the U.S. took over the reins and supported South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem beginning in 1955. Years later, as the first American advisors (military and CIA) entered Vietnam, the mission echoed the Truman Doctrine. The U.S. Presidents from Truman to Richard Nixon committed themselves to the Truman Doctrine’s policy of containment, pushing the U.S. into a destructive war in Vietnam to prevent the spread of Communism.


In his speech to Congress on March 12, 1947, President Truman said, “I believe that it must be the policy of the United States to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures.” The main “outside pressure” of the free world was Communism, the long-feared enemy of capitalism. Yet, when Truman announced this policy to the world, Indochina and indeed Asia, was far from his mind. Instead, Truman remained committed on concentrating on Eastern Europe—specifically Greece and Turkey. The Truman administration believed that a unified Europe could contain Communism and prevent the Soviet Union from expanding. This policy considered Communist China to be a mere extension of the Soviet Union.

France brought Indochina to Truman’s attention with demands of support and threats of withdrawing from NATO. Secretary of State Dean Acheson wrote of the predicament, “As we saw our role in Southeast Asia, it was to help toward solving the colonial-nationalist conflict in a way that would satisfy nationalist aims and minimize the strain on our Western European allies.” Therefore, by 1950, the Truman Doctrine expanded to include Southeast Asia. America would support its troublesome ally in the fight against the Viet Minh. At the outset, the Truman administration avoided committing anything more than financial aid and military supplies to the French in Indochina, but by stating a policy of containment, Truman all but ensured direct future U.S. involvement. The U.S. urged peaceful settlement but Ho refused any offer that failed to include Vietnamese independence at some point in the future. France continued to wage war with


18 Ibid., 671.
the hopes of smashing the Communists and ending all talks of an independent Vietnam. They offered Ho the opportunity to lead his country in relative independence, but as a member of the French Union. Instead, disappointed that the U.S. chose to support France over the Viet Minh, Ho and his top advisor, General Vo Nguyen Giap, devised plans for war. “A long struggle would exhaust the French—not only on the ground in Vietnam but back in France, where the public would lose patience as the war dragged on.”

To place all of the blame for the tragedy of Vietnam on the Truman Doctrine, however, would be unfair. Vietnam experienced a violent internal rivalry between Communists and anti-Communists, Catholics, social elites, French expatriates, and the criminal underground. U.S. State Department officials debated whether Ho Chi Minh—who they agreed was the popular leader of Vietnam—was a Communist or a nationalist, settling on the Communist label. Marilyn B. Young states, “By definition, Communists could not be genuine nationalists; by definition, America supported genuine nationalism. Therefore, those people the United States supported were nationalists, the rest were Communist stooges.” American officials failed to believe that Ho could be both a Communist and a nationalist fighting to free his country. In the mind of Acheson, this made Ho a Communist rather than a nationalist.

During the Second World War in an effort to build a Pacific empire, Japan conquered Southeast Asia, including Vietnam. The Japanese attempted to control the area with brutal tactics and using the French colonial system to their advantage. In 1941, the

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Vietnamese Communist Party (the Lao Dong), created a military front to fight the 
Japanese, the Viet Minh. The Viet Minh rallied the Vietnamese to their cause by 
promoting nationalism and land distribution. This won the people’s loyalty and armed 
with antique weapons, began the campaign to free Vietnam from foreign invaders. What 
they did not expect was continuous warfare for the next forty years. As the Viet Minh 
continued to organize, the Allies saw them to be the only effective resistance to the 
Japanese and the French loyal to the Vichy government. The Americans began supplying 
the Viet Minh with weapons, supplies, and advisors in an effort to defeat the Japanese, 
including sending members of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) to encourage the 
Vietnamese to organize and push out the foreign invaders. The Allies continually 
supported this group with arms and intelligence as the army under General Douglas 
MacArthur hopped from island to island, forcing the Japanese back to their homeland. 
This assistance provided the Viet Minh with the ability to cripple the occupation force. 
Once Japan surrendered, Vietnam was left to the Vietnamese—for a short while.

The French in Indochina

Soon after the war, the French under Charles de Gaulle sought to return to their 
former glory. America found itself in a dilemma. President Roosevelt initially refused to 
allow France to subjugate Southeast Asia again, but his death and de Gaulle’s pressure on 
the Truman administration changed that policy. “The United States decided it had little

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22 William R. Polk, Violent Politics: A History of Insurgency, Terrorism and Guerrilla War, From 
choice but to support the French. America’s own plans for a healthy postwar order rested
on a stable, prosperous France ready to play its proper role in an economic and military
world dominated by the United States, which saw itself acting in the interests of the entire
‘free world.’”\(^\text{23}\) However, when French colonialism returned to Vietnam following the
Second World War, the Viet Minh were ready to resist. As Chairman of the Vietnamese
Communist Party, Ho led negotiations with the West and became the symbol of
Vietnamese independence. The U.S. put pressure on France to resolve the conflict in
Indochina quickly, but France did not want to lose its colonies without some
compensation. Throughout 1946, the Vietnamese attempted to negotiate their
independence, while nationalists in Paris instead chose to hold onto Vietnam as part of
the new French Union. Bao Dai, the former emperor of Vietnam who abdicated in favor
of Ho, warned the French not to instigate hostilities: “Should you reestablish a French
administration here, it will not be obeyed. Every village will be a nest of resistance, each
former collaborator an enemy, and your officials and colonists will themselves seek to
leave this atmosphere, which will choke them.”\(^\text{24}\) The French chose to ignore this advice
and sent tens of thousands of soldiers and tons of equipment to defeat the Viet Minh.

General Vo Nguyen Giap was the commander of the Viet Minh soldiers and later
became the commanding general of the People’s Army of Vietnam.\(^\text{25}\) He understood the
nature of this new war far better than his French opponents. In a 1990 interview, Giap
said: “We were waging a people’s war … a total war in which every man, every woman,

\(^{23}\) Young, *The Vietnam Wars*, 22.

\(^{24}\) Karnow, 163.

\(^{25}\) Commonly referred to as the North Vietnamese Army (NVA).
every unit, big or small, is sustained by a mobilized population.”\textsuperscript{26} The French, conversely, occupied forts throughout the country because that was where they thought they could control the countryside. However, this strategy proved to limit their capacity to wage war against a mobile enemy. The French, under General Henri Navarre, felt confident that they could destroy the Viet Minh with modern firepower. The Viet Minh, relying on mobility and guerrilla tactics to harass and outlast the enemy, survived through the support of friendly villages, safe havens and supplies from China, and the local terrain. They attacked supply lines or outposts and then disappeared before French soldiers responded.\textsuperscript{27} The conventionally trained French army could not defeat the Viet Minh guerrillas. Because the Truman Doctrine committed the U.S. to containing Communism throughout the world, U.S. recognition and support for Vietnamese nationalism was out of the question.

Following official recognition from the Soviet Union and Communist China, the Viet Minh concentrated on organizing resistance in villages. Without the support from non-Viet Minh members in the villages, the French could not hope to maintain control over areas once the army moved on. This insurgency lasted for several years while the French refused advice from the U.S. Instead, the French chose to use other counterinsurgency tactics. “In the ultimate humiliation, the French dug up the graves of Phan Dinh Phung’s ancestors and put the bones on display in the market of a town they

\textsuperscript{26} Karnow, 20.

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 197-8.
had ‘pacified.’” Phan, a Vietnamese hero who fought against French occupation at the end of the nineteenth century, exemplified successful guerrilla warfare for future Vietnamese leaders. The French hoped to declare themselves the rightful rulers of Vietnam through a “Mandate of Heaven” by desecrating the remains of the hero and his ancestors. However, this assault on the culture and history of the Vietnamese only served to enrage them and encouraged further popular support for the Viet Minh.

The French planned to level a final blow against the Viet Minh and end the revolt. In November 1953, General Navarre ordered his army forward to cut the Viet Minh supply route at the small town of Dien Bien Phu. Facing little resistance, the French believed they struck a vital blow to the Viet Minh war effort. General Rene Cogny said the victory “seizes a highly important Viet Minh base in the center of a rice growing area and at the crossroads of supply routes to the northeast and the south.” The French reported inflicting heavy casualties on the Communists and crippled their ability to infiltrate neighboring Laos as well as allowing French forces to pacify areas along the Chinese border. The French believed they had weakened the insurgency that plagued them for so many years. In Saigon, Navarre, after hearing of the victory in the north, exclaimed that, “Now we can see it clearly, like the light at the end of a tunnel.” Navarre did not expect Dien Bien Phu to become a French graveyard in Indochina. By

28 Polk, Violent Politics, 153.

29 Larry Allen, (1953, November 21), “Paratroops Hit Deep in Rebel Indo-China Area,” The Fresno Bee, p. 5-B.

30 Karnow, 204.
the middle of March 1954, the Battle of Dien Bien Phu commenced and the French garrison was under siege.

In each attack, the French brought all of their artillery to bear on the Viet Minh, but as the fortifications began to fall, a gap in the defenses expanded. The encirclement grew tighter with every passing week and French counterattacks failed to push the enemy back. American planes, sent by President Dwight Eisenhower, could not land safely to deliver supplies and soon abandoned the cause.\textsuperscript{31} The French began to starve until a massive attack on May 7, ended the siege. Thousands of French had been killed, while a majority became prisoners of the Viet Minh. General William Westmoreland wrote of the battle in his memoirs, “Time tends to obscure the fact that a tactical defeat for the French was turned into strategic victory for the Viet Minh not so much by what happened on the battlefield as by a lack of support in Paris for a seemingly interminable colonial war.”\textsuperscript{32}

Everything had changed.

News of the victory reached the diplomats in Geneva and immediately gave Pham Van Dong, the Viet Minh diplomat, the upper hand. The French public demanded a peace settlement and a withdrawal of their troops from Vietnam. The French government was willing to accept a partition of Vietnam, but the Americans at the Geneva Conference—including Under Secretary of State Bedell Smith—refused to support any further expansion of Communism per the policy of containment. Smith’s superiors in Washington, President Eisenhower and Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, prevented


\textsuperscript{32} William C. Westmoreland, \textit{A Soldier Reports} (New York: Da Capo Press, 1976), 405.
him from deviating from America’s hard-line anti-Communist policy by participating in the negotiations. This diplomatic stalemate prevented a negotiated settlement and compelled the French government to maintain their presence in Vietnam. Dulles even considered pulling the American delegation out of Geneva, writing, “These negotiations appear to have gone underground, and we have little reliable knowledge of what is really in the minds of the French government.” Dulles, like many other Americans, feared that any agreement between the French and the Communists would inevitably lead to the expansion of Communism throughout the rest of Southeast Asia.

Negotiations continued without U.S. participation. The Chinese did not want regional instability when peace could be achieved with minor concessions. They, along with the Soviet Union, urged Dong to surrender half of Vietnam to the nationalists in the name of peace. Reluctantly, and with shouts of betrayal to their Communist allies, the Vietnamese Communists accepted the arrangement. In separate negotiations without the Americans, the Chinese, Viet Minh, British, Russians, and French decided on a peace treaty that divided the country with a promise of national elections at some point in the future. When such national elections would take place, was another cause of debate. The two year timeframe put forth by French Prime Minister Pierre Mendès France, seemed to be enough time for the Viet Minh to establish a government in the north, while more importantly, a nationalist, anti-Communist government under Emperor Bao Dai and

33 Karnow, 215-6.
34 Ibid., 218.
35 Young, 38-42.
Prime Minister Ngo Dinh Diem organized in the south. With that, the French withdrew from Vietnam. After a decade of conflict with the French, peace seemed a likely future for the two Vietnams. However, peace would not come for another generation.

CIA Advising

Diem refused much of the accords reached in Geneva and received support from the U.S. Bao Dai’s diplomats were excluded from the final negotiations, so Diem felt justified in rejecting the accords’ demands. With American assistance, Diem could maintain a separate country free from Communism. The North Vietnamese expected this and left thousands of supporters in the south to train the population for a future conflict. These southern Communists established the National Liberation Front (NLF) in 1960 to weaken the authority of Diem’s government. CIA advisors landed in Saigon—the seat of government for South Vietnam—to train police forces to destroy the growing insurgency. However, the Saigon government was extremely weak. William Colby wrote, “Diem’s power and authority in those days didn’t extend much farther than the gates of the Presidential Palace. Beyond, he was challenged on every side by a host of dissident and powerful factions, quite apart from the Communists.” In order to strengthen Diem’s grasp on power, the U.S. needed him in complete control of the country and the emperor ousted.

36 Karnow, 220-1.

American aid propped up the Diem government throughout its existence and in the early years, CIA training revealed a concern that Diem would maintain a dependence upon foreign support. CIA advisor Edward Lansdale helped Diem become acquainted with ruling the country and advised him how to win the presidency. Because of Lansdale, Diem had a direct line to officials in Washington. One of the first setbacks Lansdale faced during his frustrating years in Vietnam took place after the 1955 referendum that declared Diem president of the Republic of Vietnam. In this referendum, Diem ran against Emperor Bao Dai for the leadership of South Vietnam. The election was marred by fraud as Diem received 98 percent of the vote, as well as more votes in Saigon than there were voters. Voter intimidation as well as cunning advertising ensured the referendum favored one candidate—Diem. Lucien Conein, another CIA advisor, and Lansdale urged Diem to run a clean and fair election because it would help solidify the regime’s legitimacy. Lansdale later said after returning to the U.S., “I told Diem not to cheat and then he came up with ninety-eight percent of the vote. Jesus!” Despite backing Diem, the CIA understood early on that the government they were creating was not exactly a “democracy.”

As the national election deadline came closer, the chances of actually holding elections dwindled. The U.S. realized Ho Chi Minh would probably be victorious and South Vietnam would fall to Communism. Diem, already disregarding the Geneva

38 Colby and Forbath, *Honorable Men*, 143.

39 Karnow, 239.

Accords by increasing the size of the army and national police forces to combat the growing Communist threat, intended to cancel the elections. Based on reports from their CIA advisors and other State Department officials, the U.S. agreed that the election must be avoided. Eisenhower, wishing to prevent another Korean War, refused to send combat troops to Vietnam. Despite the fear of Communist expansion, the country was not ready to sacrifice tens of thousands of lives in another far away country. There were already several hundred advisors in South Vietnam as members of the Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG), but these advisors received little support from Diem and their advice frequently rejected by the government. Diem in power would alleviate the necessity of direct American involvement and might provide some breathing room for improving American influence within the regime.

Despite the difficulties involved, the U.S. fully supported Diem’s decision to ignore the Geneva Accords and increased advising and aid. Diem could be a stubborn leader, but he was also the only one to rise above the internal conflicts. Advisors like Colby had to accept this fact and help resist the pending Communist invasion. The U.S. supported Diem because, “He had taken control of a disintegrating country and sewn it together. He had overcome the enmity of the army and the sects, the intrigues of the French, and the contempt of two American ambassadors, and he had fended off the Communists.”\(^4\) Although marred by fraud, the referendum allowed South Vietnam to survive independently from the French and Communist insurgents. Diem was not Ho but

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Diem’s fervent nationalism made him the strong leader the U.S. needed in the Presidential Palace.

The End of Diem

Throughout Diem’s tenure in power, different sects rose up over the years and attempted coups. All the while, the U.S. stood firmly behind their ally and guaranteed Diem that he would have all the resources he required. Withstanding multiple attempts to usurp his position, Diem destroyed the coup attempts and remained in power. Resiliency in the face of tremendous pressure appealed to the Vietnamese masses and gained support for the regime in the U.S. Americans avoided an active role in the early years of Diem’s rule, and this in turn, added legitimacy to Diem. A tour of the U.S. also gave Diem the opportunity to gain support in Congress and meet with Eisenhower at the White House in order to appeal for more aid.\(^42\) Despite Eisenhower’s goal of reducing costs in the Defense Department, he agreed to continue aiding Diem. As Eisenhower gave way to newly elected John F. Kennedy, he advised the new president to avoid uncontrollable escalation in Vietnam. Eisenhower specifically warned against the introduction of ground troops, yet encouraged the continued support of South Vietnam. Much like his predecessors, Kennedy echoed the Truman Doctrine, stating in his Inaugural Address on January 20, 1961: “Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, in

\(^{42}\) Young, 58.
order to assure the survival and the success of liberty. This much we pledge…”43 The policy of containing Communism would continue. The Kennedy administration continued supporting South Vietnam and in fact, increased the number of advisors in the country.

The Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) became the conventional military force expected to battle the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) when the invasion finally began and the American advisors trained the South Vietnamese for such a purpose. They thought little of the growing insurgency, while Diem crafted the army into his main tool for remaining in power. He improved the quality of the officer corps by removing incompetent officers, but replaced them only with loyal men, ensuring the army could never be as well led as their adversaries. Aid packages included demands for supporting the police, but Diem spent American dollars where he thought best, not succumbing to the demands of his benefactors. Diem reasoned that because the NVA heavily outnumbered his army, the aid needed to go to increasing the size and equipping ARVN. While publicly the Kennedy administration fully supported Diem’s decisions, privately they wished he would stay more in line.

Back in 1956 when Diem refused to follow the Geneva Accords, then-Senator Kennedy said: “This is our offspring and if it falls victim to any of the perils that threaten its existence—Communism, political anarchy, poverty and the rest—then the United States, with some justification, will be held responsible; and our prestige in Asia will sink

His presidency would reflect such beliefs when he sent more American soldiers to South Vietnam as “advisors” and suffered some of the earliest American casualties of the war. The NLF officially declared war against the South and began to test the support networks they established over the past several years. Any support Diem gained due to his resiliency and leadership weakened among the rural population due to his “Communist sweeps” and the brutality of his soldiers. Former members of the Viet Minh and their relatives faced arrest, torture, incarceration or execution because of their previous connections. Assassinations increased in the South as the Communists sought to remove village chiefs, but these were not done to protect the innocent people, but rather to weaken opposition when the inevitable war commenced and to prove the Communists’ ability to strike anyone at anytime. The Hanoi government supported this major move, believing the time was right for the NLF to strike. In the North, however, little was done to prepare as Giap slowly gathered the NVA for an offensive. The NLF was on its own for the time being, but this did not deter them. Throughout South Vietnam, Diem lost support and major protests erupted in Saigon, proving the leader was not as popular or competent as led to believe. By 1960, Vietnam was at war once again.

One of the most famous images of the Vietnam War was a photo of a Buddhist monk setting himself on fire in protest to Diem’s regime. This action, during the height of the protests in 1963, shocked the world and forced American officials to question whether or not they supported the right leader. Leading into 1963, much of South

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44 Young, 58-9.
Vietnam despised Diem and he did nothing to regain their support. Due to the harsh measures enacted to root out Communism and dissenters, people turned away from the government and listened to the Communist political cadres when they entered the districts. Diem could not weed out all of the Communist infiltrators and their presence within South Vietnam made him look weak. The NLF threatened local landowners into compliance and cultivated membership. Playing on traditional Vietnamese xenophobia, the NLF gained support by declaring the Saigon government to be puppets of a foreign invader. Diem needed more American aid to remain in power, but he also needed to change the way he governed South Vietnam or risk downfall.\(^46\) He continued his campaign against the Communists and hoped that with the war intensifying, President Kennedy would increase aid along with the increase in American personnel. However, despite calls from his military advisors to escalate the war, Kennedy refused to commit more than what the U.S. already offered.

Before the Kennedy administration lost patience with Diem, they heavily invested in Diem’s survival. By 1961, the number of U.S. personnel in South Vietnam went from several hundred to over 3,000. American advisors were now authorized to participate on missions with ARVN units and ride helicopter gunships conducting search and destroy operations. The Green Berets were some of the earliest American units to fight the NLF.

The French may have left Vietnam, but another Western power had quickly taken their place and intended to remain for some time. In February 1960, General Samuel Williams—the first commander of MAAG—wrote to Ambassador Elbridge Durbrow,

\(^{46}\) Young, 74-5.
“The truth is that the population of South Vietnam, like any other, is more responsive to fear and force than to an improved standard of living … The paramount consideration is to gain and maintain a superiority of force in all parts of the country. This is done by developing the military and police potential as the most urgent objective of our national program in Vietnam.”$^{47}$ This statement would define U.S. strategic policy in Vietnam for the rest of the war. Kennedy and his advisors agreed with that assessment and continued increasing the U.S. presence. The pressure increased for Colby, then CIA station chief in Saigon and the one responsible for fighting an insurgency now openly at war with the government. While the U.S. military advisors focused on preparing to fight the NVA, Colby and his officers created a plan to win the support of the South Vietnamese people by securing a power base for Diem and protect these supporters from the Communists. In 1961, they created the Strategic Hamlet campaign.$^{48}$

The Pentagon Papers, compiled by the Defense Department, reveal that Diem was no longer as popular as he was in the previous decade and the growth of the NLF was cause for concern. U.S. officials concluded, “For by late 1960, it was a quite widely held view that the Diem government was probably going to be overthrown sooner or later, barring major changes from within.”$^{49}$ The Strategic Hamlet campaign was supposed to reverse the aggressiveness and successes of the NLF. The Americans concluded that a counterinsurgency plan was required immediately and proposed this

$^{47}$ Young, 60.

$^{48}$ Colby and Forbath, 165-9.

idea to the Ngo brothers.\textsuperscript{50} Diem and his brother Ngo Dinh Nhu, the chief political advisor in the regime, readily agreed to support the operation because it gave them control over the development of rural South Vietnam and prevented the Americans from gaining too much influence. The theory behind the strategic hamlet was that by gathering the rural population into protected areas, the Communists could be exposed and further contact with villagers ended. In this campaign, “90 percent of South Vietnam’s 15,000,000 people [were placed] into 11,000 strategic hamlets or fortified villages. The program, patterned after the successful ‘new villages’ of the British anti-guerrilla campaign in Malaya, was designed to protect the peasants against NLF terror.”\textsuperscript{51} If the NLF lost their safe havens, they could not operate effectively in the South.

Like a majority of the other programs designed to win the “hearts and minds” of the peasants, this campaign failed to take into account the ability of the NLF to infiltrate all aspects of South Vietnam society. Unlike Phoenix, the Strategic Hamlet did not attempt to improve the people’s lives; it only herded them into a confined space where they could be watched. The other problem with the hamlets was they took the people away from their native lands and forced them to live on foreign soil, surrounded by barbed wire and under armed guard. The refugees attempted to continue their lives as they had before the evacuation, some even sneaking out of the hamlet at night to visit with relatives and friends—including members of the NLF—or tending to their old

\textsuperscript{50} The United States Department of Defense, \textit{The Pentagon Papers}, 135-7.

lands. Thus, the main purpose of the hamlets was nullified and the peasants alienated within their new homes. Multiple sides claimed responsibility for creating the strategic hamlet, none more so than Nhu, but when the program began to fall apart, Nhu was quick to place the blame on the CIA. Nhu claimed the CIA wanted the campaign to fail in order to discredit the Diem regime, disregarding the fact that the CIA had supported the regime since 1954.

The CIA long grew tired of Diem and his family. Not only was the CIA blamed for every mishap, but as distrust and dissent grew, access to the apparatuses sustaining the regime decreased. The Ngo family refused to allow outsiders a say in the government and even Madame Nhu, Diem’s sister-in-law, caused problems for the regime in her own right. Tact was not a term Madame Nhu practiced. She loved power and made it well known that upsetting her meant upsetting the entire regime. Nhu’s use of the secret police alienated more people than it protected. The Buddhist protests erupted on May 8, 1963 (Buddha’s 2,527th birthday) because Diem long supported the Catholic minority, while alienated the Buddhist majority. The protests began after the government decided to make the display of flags other than the national flag, illegal. Two Buddhists were killed in the protests and Diem blamed NLF infiltrators, but the people knew the truth. In response, a Buddhist monk set himself on fire. This shocking image spread around the world as millions of people suddenly became aware of events in Vietnam. After the

52 Young, 83-4.
53 Young, 95.
Buddhist monk burned himself to death, Madame Nhu called the actions nothing more than “monk barbecue shows.”

Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge made it clear to Diem that after a decade of aid, the U.S. questioned further support of the status quo. Lodge urged Diem to remove his brother from power and send him, with Madame Nhu, to Paris. Diem refused such a move and Lodge notified Washington that Diem did not want an increase in American personnel and instead wanted control of the distribution of aid. In effect, Diem wanted the Americans out, but the aid to continue. Further protests erupted out of the continued persecution of the Buddhists by Nhu and a crisis emerged not only within the Diem regime, but with American policy as well. Continued support of Diem under the current conditions was unacceptable. In August, a group of generals contacted U.S. officials with the intention of staging a coup and the generals wanted to gauge U.S. response. “They were told that the U.S. could no longer support a regime which included Nhu, but that keeping Diem [alive] was entirely up to them. This was communicated to the generals on August 27.”

This plan petered out, but anti-Diem officials understood that the U.S. would not stand in the way of a future coup. Conditions did not improve in South Vietnam during the next few months. NLF attacks increased, the number of protests multiplied, and Nhu remained in power. In October, CIA agent Conein received money to pay off soldiers and

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55 Young, 94.

56 The United States Department of Defense, 203.
officials still guarding the Ngo brothers.\textsuperscript{57} The coup began on November 1 and Diem and Nhu were murdered in the back of an armored personnel carrier the next day. The junta took control of the country and met with U.S. officials to confer with Lodge as the new regime reestablished order. Diem was viewed as a failure because the NLF continued to control much of South Vietnam and protests against the regime threatened to tear the country apart. The Kennedy administration did not approve of the assassination, but wanted change in South Vietnam’s leadership—a coup became the only way for such desired change.\textsuperscript{58} Three weeks later, an assassin’s bullet killed President Kennedy in Dallas, Texas. Lyndon B. Johnson became president. Both South Vietnam and the U.S. now had new leadership heading into the next stage of the Vietnam War.

Escalation: 1964-1967

President Johnson was not Kennedy. This much became clear when Johnson made it known that he intended to support South Vietnam and increase U.S. presence in the country to scare Hanoi into a peace settlement. Johnson followed the Truman Doctrine, but with a slight deviation. He believed in the domino theory of the containment policy. Johnson said back in 1961, “The battle against Communism must be joined in Southeast Asia with strength and determination … or the United States,

\begin{itemize}
    \item\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 218-9.
    \item\textsuperscript{58} Zalin Grant, \textit{Facing the Phoenix}, 212-4.
\end{itemize}
inevitably, must surrender the Pacific and take up our defenses on our own shores.”

Johnson believed that once South Vietnam fell, Cambodia, Laos, the Philippines, Malaya, Thailand, and even Hawaii would fall to the Communists. Therefore, when Johnson took office, he assured the South Vietnamese that the U.S. would continue its support and steadily increase the number of American military personnel. The Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) replaced MAAG as the American command structure in 1962 in order to deal with the increasing number of American personnel in South Vietnam. General Paul D. Harkins became the first commander of MACV and attempted to maintain friendly ties between the Diem government and later the Minh government with the U.S.—not an easy task considering the increase of NLF attacks and coups staged. Johnson’s advisors created several plans for waging the conflict, from mining North Vietnam’s ports and creating a blockade to a full-scale American invasion of the North. However, before considering any of these plans, the new Saigon government needed secure control over the country. General Doung Van Minh (Big Minh) became the leader of the new government and welcomed American assistance. Staging a coup in the middle of a war is not flawless, but Minh believed that by reversing all of the unpopular Diem policies, the people would remain loyal and the NLF members no longer had a reason to fight the government. Suddenly, the strict anti-Communist, nationalist Diem government turned into a neutral government willing to allow Communism in exchange for peace. This domino theory dominated American fears through the early

59 Karnow, 267.

60 The United States Department of Defense, 272-3.
years of the Vietnam War, but by the mid-1970s, this theory proved false as other Southeast Asian countries did not immediately fall to Communism:

Moreover, a communist takeover in one place does not necessarily lead to a communist takeover in another. Dominoes are not likely to fall together unless they are ready to fall separately. The prospect of takeover depends on local conditions, especially on the capacity or incapacity of governments to meet the basic needs of the people. Where the political elements of this capacity are lacking, there is little any outside power can do to bolster a country against revolutionary forces in any case.  

However, in 1963, Johnson believed the U.S. could prevent a Communist takeover by applying a tremendous amount of force. First, he needed a South Vietnamese government willing to fight an escalating war without compromise. The current junta that brought down Diem was not that government and the new year saw a new man in power.

In January 1964, General Nguyen Khanh received U.S. backing to overthrow Big Minh’s government. Khanh became prime minister, while Minh remained but a figurehead. Khanh accused some of Big Minh’s ministers of being too soft on Communism in order to further appeal to his U.S. benefactors. Khanh took a strong stance against the NLF, attempting to solidify control over the military and force the civilian government to bend to his wishes.  

Khanh’s heavy handedness sparked riots in Saigon, while his external enemies remained relatively quiet. Although turmoil followed the assassinations of the Ngo brothers and the peaceful overthrow of Big Minh, the NLF and Hanoi did not change their tactics. Instead, they grew concerned for a different

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62 The United States Department of Defense, 316-7.
outcome—the Americanization of the war on a level they were not ready to fight.\textsuperscript{63} If the U.S. entered the war, it did not matter how weak the Saigon government was because the American military could prop it up and fight the war on behalf of Saigon. Once the U.S. military entered the conflict, the war could last decades. Hanoi urged the NLF to increase membership and for the NLF to continue the armed struggle against the Saigon government. Meanwhile, construction of a supply and transportation route began, starting in North Vietnam, cutting through Laos and Cambodia, and ending at several points in South Vietnam. This was the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Ho believed that only through internal strife could the country be reunited quickly and the Trail would assist the NVA and NLF in reunification.\textsuperscript{64} For the moment, Hanoi chose to sit back and watch how events proceeded. In August, the U.S. took the initiative and forced Hanoi into a wider war.

The Gulf of Tonkin incident remains shrouded in mystery and debate over what happened to the U.S. destroyer \textit{Maddox} during the early hours of August 4, 1964. For the past few months, the \textit{Maddox} supported several South Vietnamese commando raids into North Vietnam.\textsuperscript{65} One night, the ship’s radar revealed several torpedoes in the water heading toward the destroyer. There were no explosions, but it led the \textit{Maddox} and fellow destroyer \textit{C. Turner Joy} to fire all of her guns, blindly hoping to hit a target. The aircraft carrier, \textit{Ticonderoga}, sent aircraft in support, but they found nothing. The next day, reports flooded Washington that the \textit{Maddox} had been attacked and U.S. sailors injured. This motivated President Johnson into asking Congress for war powers. In the Gulf of

\textsuperscript{63} Karnow, 343-4.

\textsuperscript{64} Ibid., 350.

\textsuperscript{65} Westmoreland, \textit{A Soldier Reports}, 71.
Tonkin Resolution approved by a joint session of Congress, Johnson received the power to send American ground forces without a full declaration of war.\textsuperscript{66} Congress understood what they gave to Johnson and the confusion behind the \textit{Maddox}, but they also concluded that the president already intended to send troops to Vietnam and only needed an excuse to do so. Deputy Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach concluded that “if it hadn’t been that incident, something else would have come around.”\textsuperscript{67}

Back in Saigon, Khanh supported Congress’s decision and eagerly awaited the arrival of American forces. However, in his quest to strengthen his own power, further riots erupted and the government weakened beyond repair. The U.S. needed a Vietnamese leader to fight Communism, but not make too many enemies in the process. Khanh’s disbanding of the High National Council was an act of a man desperately maintaining control of his government. The U.S. scolded Khanh for such a move and decided that the war was better off in other hands. A relatively unknown military officer that did not bear the mark of a Diem or Khanh supporter was preferred. In June 1965, the decision came down to General Nguyen Van Thieu and Air Marshal Nguyen Cao Ky, where Thieu became chief of state (a figurehead position) and Ky prime minister.\textsuperscript{68} In these leaders, the U.S. found anti-Communist military leaders eager to take the war to the NLF. General William C. Westmoreland replaced Harkins at MACV in June 1964, as the war became Americanized and the advisory group turned into combat units.

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{66} Moyar, 313-5.
\textsuperscript{67} Young, 120.
\textsuperscript{68} Moyar, 402-3.
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Westmoreland was a product of a traditional military education. He attended West Point in the 1930s and cut his teeth as a regimental and divisional commander during and immediately following the Second World War. A brilliant man, Westmoreland graduated top of his class at West Point and later earned an MBA from Harvard Business School. Despite his forward thinking, his military education and combat experience made him a conventional strategist. In his autobiography, *A Soldier Reports*, Westmoreland claimed to be a proponent of the pacification effort to destroy the NLF, but his actions from 1964 to 1968 prove the opposite.\(^69\) When he came to Vietnam, there were 16,000 American soldiers and when he left to become Army Chief of Staff, there were over 500,000. As commander of MACV following the Gulf of Tonkin resolution, he would be responsible for implementing America’s escalated commitment to South Vietnam.

The massive military might of the U.S. would be sent to Vietnam, but not until after the 1964 Presidential Election between Johnson and Republican Senator Barry Goldwater of Arizona.\(^70\) Johnson portrayed himself as the “peace candidate,” while painting Goldwater as a warmonger. The country did not want to enter into another Asian conflict after the results in Korea and Johnson assured voters that he would not send Americans to do the fighting for the South Vietnamese. Johnson received the power to wage war, but refused to exercise such power while his political career was on the line. Even a NLF attack on the American air base at Bien Hoa shortly before Election Day and the later bombing of an officers’ hotel in Saigon could not force Johnson’s hand. He

\(^69\) Westmoreland, 68-9.

\(^70\) Moyar, 325.
remained the “peace candidate” through the election. Hanoi, long fearing increased American involvement, took this reluctance as a sign of declining resolve towards protecting South Vietnam and prepared the NVA for an invasion. Only after he won a landslide victory over Goldwater did Johnson reconsider his position and create a working group to determine the future American role in Vietnam.

After the new year, Westmoreland received permission to increase the bombing campaign using massive B-52s, A-1 Skyraiders, and helicopter gunships to defeat the NVA units flooding south and provide the U.S. with a position of strength at the negotiation table. As bombing restrictions lifted, American planes targeted more of the Vietnamese countryside, destroying entire villages in “free fire zones.” On February 13, 1965, Johnson approved Operation Rolling Thunder—the prolonged bombing campaign of the North. With Thieu and Ky vowing not to negotiate a peace with the North without U.S. support, bombing campaigns increased in both the North and the South in an attempt to cripple the Communist forces before they encountered ARVN units. With the increasing number of American air bases came the need for added protection of the planes on the ground. ARVN guards failed to prevent the mortar attack at Bien Hoa, so Johnson authorized the dispatch of U.S. Marines to protect American installations. In March 1965, the first American combat units landed in Vietnam. Officials such as Ambassador Lodge and pacification officer John Paul Vann believed that the presence of

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71 Ibid., 333.
72 Karnow, 430-1.
73 Westmoreland, 285-6.
74 Young, 138.
American soldiers would turn the war around, strengthen the Saigon government, and destroy the Communists once and for all. “By mid-1965 the tactical debate over whether to bomb the North, intensify the war in the South using U.S. troops, or concentrate on pacification of the countryside had been resolved.” The U.S. chose all three of these tactics, hoping one of them proved successful.

Major American combat operations in Vietnam began in May after the bombing missions did not have the desired effect on the North Vietnamese. These consisted of “search and destroy” missions where units would enter a village, inspect the government issued identification cards, and destroy the village if shot at by the inhabitance. Winning the trust of the South Vietnamese held no importance in these early missions. Pacification of the insurgency was a secondary mission to the conventional war. Johnson wavered on Westmoreland’s initial requests for more troops—especially so soon after he was reelected as the “peace candidate”—but was swayed by Westmoreland’s explanations for the increase and the need to create logistical support for the Americans already in the country. The search and destroy missions were subjected to similar restrictions as the Air Force, but it provided the Americans with a sufficient number to advise the ARVN and fight independently of the South Vietnamese. By June, Westmoreland came to the troubling conclusion that the current strategies were failing and that South Vietnam could not survive on its own. He wrote, “The premise behind whatever further actions we may undertake … must be that we are in for the long pull …

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75 Young, 149.
76 Westmoreland, 83-4.
77 Ibid., 133-7.
[I] believe it is time all concerned face up to [the] fact that we must be prepared for a long war which will probably involve increasing numbers of U.S. troops.\textsuperscript{78} One month later, Johnson order the dramatic increase of American forces to well over 100,000 and left open the possibility of additional troops sent at a later time. Westmoreland wanted to go on the offensive in 1966 and was gathering a massive army in order to do so.

Now that Westmoreland had enough troops to guard American bases and attack the enemy, he decided on a plan to hunt down the NVA units in the South, believing that once the Americans crushed the NVA, the NLF would melt away. Original assumptions believed this entire process would take one and a half years and based on American military strength, this timetable was on the long side. Westmoreland describes his plan as:

As I saw the three phases of my strategy, American combat troops were to be used at first to protect logistical bases ... In the second phase, we were to gain the initiative, penetrate, and whenever possible eliminate the enemy’s base camps and sanctuaries...In the third and final phase, we were to move into sustained ground combat and mop up the last of the main forces and guerillas, or at least push them across the frontiers where we would try to contain them.\textsuperscript{79}

He expected the ARVN to focus on the cities, regaining the people’s trust through their familiarity of the region and leave the Americans to clearing the countryside. If all went according to plan, roadways, waterways, and railways would reopen, allowing the economy a chance for growth.

In his strategy, Westmoreland figured the Americans would do the majority of the fighting, giving the ARVN the facade of responsibility for the safety of the citizens of

\textsuperscript{78} Young, 140.

\textsuperscript{79} Ibid., 145.
South Vietnam. Prime Minister Ky agreed with this plan. Ky felt his new regime held the full support of the government-controlled areas of South Vietnam. He told Lodge, “that he thought U.S. forces should ‘hold strategic points’ so that the Vietnamese could concentrate on pacification operations. That is, he wanted the United States to take over the main force war.”

The MACV commanders disagreed with Johnson’s plan of gradual escalation, believing the Communists could survive each attack rather than negotiate after too much pressure. Instead, Westmoreland wanted to destroy the NVA units quickly and then support the ARVN’s attack on the NLF insurgency. Massive firepower all at once could prevent further invasion of the South and take the initiative away from the Communists.

Philip Caputo, a marine lieutenant, said in March 1965 when his unit first arrived in Vietnam, “We marched into the rice paddies on that damp March afternoon, we carried along with our packs and rifles, the implicit convictions that the Vietcong could be quickly beaten…We kept the packs and rifles; the convictions, we lost.”

Westmoreland received full support from the Johnson administration and went forth with his plan. What he did not realize was how similar his strategies were to those of the French.

American soldiers entered South Vietnam with a sense of superiority because they were there to do a job the Vietnamese had been unable to do. John Paul Vann and other

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80 The United States Department of Defense, 365.

81 Once again, it is important to note that Westmoreland paid little mind to pacification. In 1966, he felt it was the duty of the South Vietnamese government to defeat the insurgency and prove to the people that Saigon was strong enough to protect and provide for them. The American troops would destroy the NVA and withdraw, allowing the Saigon government to do its job without the appearance of American control. Early American efforts at pacification will be covered in the next chapter.

82 Kornow, 453.
officers believed that the Vietnamese could fight, but only by learning how from the Americans.\textsuperscript{83} Vann supported this argument by noting several examples of the fighting spirit of the ARVN, only to be let down by the officers. American troops did not suffer from the same failures and found success in battle. The army and marine units moved from province to province, targeting suspected Communist enclaves and destroying them with superior firepower. Not only were soldiers such as Caputo better equipped, they also had the benefit of calling in artillery or air support if the situation became too difficult.\textsuperscript{84} Napalm, white phosphorous, defoliants, and other chemicals killed thousands and destroyed the jungles. Although the firebombing campaigns of the Second World War on Dresden and Tokyo did not take place in Hanoi or the vital port city of Haiphong, American planes rained down from the skies and destroyed every target deemed important to the Communist war effort. Cities in the North and South swelled with the influx of refugees fleeing the bombings. However, when the U.S. troops moved through the provinces and pushed back the enemy, the Communists slipped back into the area once the U.S. troops departed and continued prophesying as they had done before, forcing the U.S. troops to return for another battle.\textsuperscript{85}

As American and South Vietnamese civilian officials met in a series of conferences to solidify their alliance, Westmoreland and Giap engaged in an extended campaign for all of Vietnam. ARVN units generally accompanied U.S. troops into battle,


\textsuperscript{85} Westmoreland, 180-3.
but it was the U.S. troops doing most of the fighting. Without U.S. troops by their sides, ARVN troops suffered embarrassing defeats at the hands of the Communist at the Battles of Binh Gia and Dong Xaoi. Contrary to what Johnson told voters prior to the 1964 election, he was sending “American boys to do the fighting for Asian boys.” As the war intensified and victory was not in sight, the addition of tens of thousands of troops upset the American public. Johnson, Westmoreland, and other top U.S. officials assured people that the conflict in Vietnam was a short one and the U.S. would prevail over the Communist forces. Images of destruction and thousands of refugees fleeing their destroyed villages filled living rooms across the world. War correspondents, such as Richard Boyle and thousands of others, not allowed to label it a stalemate, brought home the gruesome images of the war.

Corruption and vice plagued South Vietnam as much as NLF insurgents and assisted in its ultimate downfall. Corruption thrived in the Diem regime where advancement and prosperity relied on one’s devotion to the Ngo family. Madame Nhu often made it known that extravagant gifts would earn her favor and the favor of her husband. Corruption was not limited to the highest levels of government, where South Vietnamese patrols received bribes from Communists to look the other way. Other officials demanded “gifts” in return for their compliance. CIA advisors understood the game and received extra funds to buy off such characters. The promotion of vice also moved money into the wrong hands and brought decay to the entire country. With over

86 Moyar, 325.
87 Karnow, 437.
one hundred thousand young American soldiers in Vietnam, Vietnamese entrepreneurs saw the renewed profitability of prostitution, drug dealing, and the black market. The soldiers all had money in their pockets and with the threat of death awaiting them, sought to enjoy themselves. Brothels, massage parlors, and bars became the focal point for the seedy inhabitants of big cities. Women of almost any age, drugs of every type, and cheap products often found in the Post Exchange (PX) were available on the black market.

When the Saigon Offensive began in 1974, corruption had crippled South Vietnam and assured its destruction. In 1966, the U.S. thought their influence and expertise could deter further corruption. However, the U.S. only added to the problem. Karnow once joked to Robert Komer, member of the National Security Council and later head of CORDS that “the way we’re squandering money here, we could buy off the Vietcong at five hundred dollars a head.” In this atmosphere, the U.S. waged war and attempted to support a government beset by problems. The American operations were supposed to win the “hearts and minds” of the Southern population, but instead the harsh treatment of civilians and the widespread destruction of their homelands hurt the cause. Meanwhile, the NVA continued their infiltration of the South. Something big was in the works.

The Tet Offensive, 1968

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88 Westmoreland, 284-5.
89 Karnow, 453-5.
90 Ibid., 457.
91 Ibid., 477-8.
On January 31, 1968, South Vietnam turned into an inferno. Tet, the Vietnamese Lunar New Year, is the most important holiday in Vietnam and a day of unofficial truce between the North and South. However, in the early morning hours of the 31st, NLF and NVA units attacked strategic points throughout the South. They used the Ho Chi Minh Trail to infiltrate the country without running into U.S. or ARVN patrols. Large cities such as Saigon and Hue became battlegrounds as the Communists sought to end the war with one massive surprise attack that would topple the Saigon government and force the U.S. to withdraw. Much of the cities were destroyed in the fighting as civilians and soldiers became casualties at an alarming rate. For the first half of 1968, the two sides waged a vicious campaign with an intensity never before witnessed. Brutally and wholesale destruction became commonplace as the offensive inflicted enormous casualties. The battle became infamous for the stunning photograph by Eddie Adams of National Police Chief Nguyen Ngoc Loan executing a handcuffed suspect and for American public opinion turning completely against the war and demanding Johnson withdraw the troops. The Tet Offensive proved to be the turning point of the Vietnam War.

The Communists planned the Tet Offensive to be the Dien Bien Phu of the Americans and South Vietnamese. Every available NLF and NVA soldier mobilized to take part in this campaign—one that could ruin Hanoi should the attack fail. The reason for such an attack can be found in a message to the American people written by Ho, “For

92 Westmoreland, 310-2.

independence and freedom, the Vietnamese people are determined to fight the U.S.
aggressors through to complete victory, whatever the hardships and sacrifices may be.”

Having received permission to plan such a campaign, Giap needed to decide the proper
time to begin. He chose January 1968 because the truce during Tet allowed him to move
his men into position without fear of enemy contact and he knew it was an election year
in the U.S., which made the offensive an attempt to sway American voters in the fall.

There were plenty of risks involved for the Communists, but by 1968, they had survived
two and a half years of conflict with the Americans and projected to sustain the war for
much longer. “For years they had been men of the jungle, daring in boast and banner but
cautious in the commitment of major military assets. Now they would emerge
everywhere.” The U.S. operations were successful because they were on the offensive,
but Hanoi reasoned that the U.S. troops would not have the same success on the
defensive. Widespread infiltration of government-controlled areas prevented air and
artillery support, forcing the ground troops to slug it out with the Communists.

One of the main attacks took place in Saigon at the American embassy. Although
merely a battle between two platoon sized units, the battle for the embassy became a
symbol of the war. The U.S., despite the manpower and weaponry available in Vietnam,
could not protect one of their most important structures. MACV Headquarters, the
Presidential Palace, and various government buildings came under mortar fire, but were

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95 Oberdorfer, *Tet!*, 52-3.

96 Ibid., 116.
not breached. U.S. military policemen and Vietnamese civilians died in the embassy, while only a handful of NLF soldiers survived to be captured by reinforcements.\(^97\) This result mirrored that of the rest of the Tet Offensive. The Communists had initial success, but American reinforcements became too much to bear. The NLF flag rose above the fortress gate of the Citadel in the imperial city of Hue and the Palace of Perfect Peace became headquarters for the Communist forces. The battle to retake Hue lasted weeks as U.S. Marines and ARVN soldiers fought door to door, inflicting casualties among the enemy and damage to the city. From late February to April and again during the summer, the American forces counterattacked, destroying the NLF and NVA units who resisted. It was part of the Communist strategy to force the Americans into destroying the country. “It was officially estimated immediately after the battle that 80 per cent of the houses and buildings in Hue were destroyed or damaged in the battle. This estimate was probably high but it did justice to the visual impression of the devastated city.”\(^98\) Pushed out of the cities and forced to flee back to their sanctuaries in Laos and Cambodia. Westmoreland, under pressure from the media and senior U.S. officials, proclaimed victory and downplayed the original surprise attacks on January 31, while U.S. Marines struggled under siege at Khe Sanh.\(^99\) Tet became an American victory, but not everyone saw the results the same way.

Henry Kissinger said Tet was “a political defeat in the countryside for Saigon and the United States…the prevalent strategy could no longer achieve its objectives within a

\(^{97}\) Oberdorfer, 34-5.

\(^{98}\) Ibid, 234.

\(^{99}\) Westmoreland, 323-4.
period or with force levels politically acceptable to the American people.”100 As the troops mopped up the last of the enemy units, Westmoreland’s words delivered at the National Press Club in Washington on November 21, 1967 now came back to haunt him and the Johnson administration. The general stated, “We have reached an important point when the end begins to come into view.”101 This statement echoed General Navarre’s “light at the end of the tunnel” boast on the eve of Dien Bien Phu. Seeing the results of the Tet Offensive on their television sets, the veil over the American public lifted and the frustration and failures came to light. As the smoke cleared, questions arose over how the offensive was possible and how to prevent a repeat. Serious changes were in the works.

By the end of the Tet Offensive, thousands of Americans had been killed, tens of thousands were wounded, and unknown numbers were rotting away in prison camps. The casualty lists were much higher for the Vietnamese. As the Vietnam War intensified, more Americans wanted to learn about the tragic war in a country few knew existed a decade before. Political theorists rewarded this desire with countless books and articles attempting to answer “Why Vietnam?” and explain the war’s importance in the wider struggle against Communism. Every explanation must begin with the Truman Doctrine and the policy of containment. Every president from Truman to Ford maintained this strategy because he felt it was the right course to take and that the U.S. could indeed bear any burden. The escalation of the Vietnam War took place because each president felt it was his duty to adhere to the Truman Doctrine and appear to be tough on Communism.

100 Young, 225.
101 Oberdorfer, 105.
The war became an example of such a “get tough” strategy. The Tet Offensive proved that policy needed to change, if not in the political realm, then on the battlefield.

Pacification was required if the U.S. wanted to win the war.
The Tet Offensive shocked the United States as National Liberation Front (NLF) forces appeared throughout South Vietnam and turned the entire country into a battlefield. American soldiers were exhausted with months of constant fighting as the country crumbled around them. Tet showed how important the Viet Cong Infrastructure (VCI) was to the war effort. For years, the VCI expanded due to the lack of attention paid to it by the conventional forces of the U.S. military and the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). ARVN fought the Communist forces in a conventional war and required American assistance because it failed to destroy the VCI. Slowly but surely, more and more hamlets fell to NLF influence.

From the moment General William Westmoreland took command of Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), he waged a war of attrition against the Communists using search and destroy operations. Although this strategy successfully inflicted great casualties on the enemy, it failed to cripple the VCI. Moreover, while the U.S. had opportunities to support existing pacification operations, Johnson, Ambassador Maxwell Taylor, and other officials believed the path to victory lay on the conventional battlefield.\textsuperscript{102} To his credit, General Westmoreland demanded his troops treat Vietnamese civilians respectfully and limit collateral damage while waging this war, however, he had

no control over the actions of the National Police and ARVN. The Americans and South Vietnamese needed a new policy to combat the growing insurgency.

In June 1968, as the final engagements of the Tet Offensive petered out, Westmoreland departed Vietnam to assume the post of Army Chief of Staff in Washington. President Johnson, already declaring that he would not run for reelection in November, chose to bring his warhorse back to Washington. Replacing Westmoreland was a general beloved by his men and one with ideas vastly different from his predecessor: General Creighton Abrams. Abrams chose to change strategies for the MACV—from a war of attrition using search and destroy tactics to “clear and hold” tactics. The difference between the two plans was that Abrams paid greater attention to pacification and his plans called for U.S. and ARVN forces to break down into smaller units and maintain a presence throughout the country. The Communists long took advantage of the fact that U.S. and ARVN forces often moved out of a region after it was declared “free” of Communist influence, but now, the Americans and South Vietnamese would never be too far away. Not only did Abrams force the ARVN into a more active role, he also assisted the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) as they created the Phoenix Program with logistical and strategic support.

Prior to the arrival of U.S. combat troops, South Vietnam tried its hand at pacification, but failed. Back in the early 1960s, Diem thought little of pacification—only supporting the Strategic Hamlet program—and Regional Police forces quickly acquired a bad name from the peasants. The villagers saw the government officials as corrupt and selfish. “Common abuses included extortion, misuse of GVN (Government of South
Vietnam) funds, arrest and torture of people with marginal ties to the Communists, 
looting, monopolization of commodities that villagers needed and impressments of the 
villagers for GVN construction projects.”  

The Americans did little to improve the situation when the first combat troops arrived in 1965 because with them came the ability to destroy large portions of the countryside. As the war continued, both President Johnson and the CIA understood the need for a better counterinsurgency program. But the Phoenix Program did not spring up out of the ashes of the Tet Offensive on its own. It was the culmination of several failed operations and the recognition that pacification was an extremely important aspect of this war.

Sir Robert Thompson

One of the original creators of the pacification strategy in Vietnam was British officer Sir Robert Thompson, a veteran of the Second World War and the world’s foremost pacification expert of the time. His successful campaign to defeat the Communist rebels in Malaya led the CIA and MACV to approach Thompson to create a plan for Vietnam. Accompanying the British Advisory Mission, Thompson sought to learn about Vietnam before developing a strategy. In Malaya, Thompson took the time to learn about the people and those resisting the Communists. He did the same in Vietnam and learned that the strategies that worked in Malaya would not work in Vietnam. What

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he learned was that “the priority intelligence target [in Malaya] was the underground organization rather than the guerrilla units.”\footnote{Dale Andradé, \textit{Ashes to Ashes: The Phoenix Program and the Vietnam War} (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1990), 28.} In Vietnam, he encouraged advisors to develop intelligence-gathering centers and learn the Vietnamese way of life. If they could block the VCI from reaching the Communist district committees and the rural population, the VCI could not operate effectively. The VCI maintained their numbers through effective use of propaganda or through forced conscription. The Saigon government proved to be corrupt and incompetent from the beginning and the heavy American involvement pushed neutral South Vietnamese into the arms of the NLF.

Thompson’s research led him to an understanding of the NLF and VCI structure. He divided the insurgent movement in four parts, each representing a different group with different responsibilities. The VCI within the villages and hamlets held the responsibility of subverting the government, gaining the loyalty or submission of the peasants, and providing the NLF “with recruits, supplies, and intelligence.”\footnote{Robert Thompson, \textit{No Exit from Vietnam} (New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1969), 33.} The second level represented the village guerrilla units in the NLF with the responsibility of protecting the VCI and performing assassinations. The third level consisted of larger regional guerrilla units who attacked small outposts and police stations, generally causing damage to the government’s presence in an area. The fourth level represented battalion or regiment-sized guerrilla units that attacked U.S. and ARVN units.\footnote{Ibid.} This fourth level was heavily involved in the Tet Offensive. The American strategy attacked the fourth level of the
insurgency, but ignored the other three. Thompson quoted an American general, “Let’s
go out and kill some VCI, then we can worry about intelligence.” This attitude
prevented early success against the NLF, allowing it to grow to dangerous levels.
Thompson encouraged MACV and the CIA to focus on the first three levels of the
insurgency, particularly the first level, in order to secure the countryside.

One of Thompson’s earliest ideas was the Strategic Hamlet program. He wrote,
“The establishment of strategic hamlets has three main objects. The first … is the
protection of the population … The second object of strategic hamlets is to unite the
people and involve them in positive action on the side of the government … The third
object of strategic hamlets is the development in the social, economic and political
fields.” Because of the strategy’s success in Malaya, Thompson expected similar
results in Vietnam. In Vietnam, however, the Communists found far more support among
the peasants than did the Communists in Malaya. Additionally, the Malaysian anti-
Communist government was well led and accepted British advice. The police forces grew
in order to combat the insurgency and the army fought the Communist main units. This
idea slightly deviated from Thompson’s “New Villages” in Malaya, but the same basic
principle remained. “We had to enlist the active participation of the community in a
program to improve its security and welfare on the local level, building cohesion from the
bottom up rather than imposing it from the top down.” The differences between the
anti-Communist forces in Malaya and South Vietnam emerged from contrasting

108 Thompson, Defeating Communist Insurgency, 84.
109 Ibid., 125.
110 Colby and Forbath, Honorable Men, 176.
strategies: the British encouraged the growth of nationalism, the French used colonialism and the Americans relied completely on their war machine. Despite the differences in plans, Thompson and Colby moved forward with the strategic hamlets.

Placed under the command of the Diem regime, the U.S. and South Vietnam thought they had found a way to control the rural population and identify the Communists. The program failed, however, because Nhu attempted to create a strong political power base for the Diem regime through force, not comprehending that the peasants cared little for politics and only wanted to live in peace. In addition, the Catholic minority received more power under Diem and this made his regime seem foreign to the rest of the population. Due to this disconnect between the people and the Diem regime, the NLF was able to infiltrate the hamlets and cultivate dissent among the population, often excoriating the prison-like hamlets as examples of Saigon’s failures. The repression fueled the insurgency. Thompson acknowledged these failures by writing that the Strategic Hamlet program overextended itself too quickly and could not secure every region as it hoped. VCI marched through areas labeled “secured” by the GVN and the clashes in Saigon between Diem and the Buddhists prevented continued support of the program.111 This program, which alienated the peasantry, died with the Diem brothers in November 1963.

Despite the failure of the Strategic Hamlet program, Thompson laid the groundwork for future pacification operations. His research and advice reconnected American intelligence officers with information previously ignored and, inspired by his

111 Thompson, 137-139.
work, led the CIA to move forward with various Vietnamese-led programs. Additionally, the CIA gained more influence over strategy and compared results to those of the Philippines a decade earlier.\footnote{Zalin Grant, \textit{Facing the Phoenix: The CIA and the Political Defeat of the United States in Vietnam} (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1991), 91.} In the Philippines, the CIA found a leader that held the loyalty of a majority of the population. This element was missing from Vietnam. It became imperative that Americans show the South Vietnamese population that the GVN was effective and received the important “Mandate of Heaven” to rule. The key was avoiding the targeting of VCI battalions and, instead, focusing on the cadres operating in the provinces. By targeting these individuals, the overall enemy infrastructure weakened and reduced the effectiveness of main-force units. Securing the provinces for the GVN meant the NLF and NVA had fewer bases of supply and refuge.\footnote{Thompson, 55-57.} The CIA argued that massive bombing missions and body counts would not win the war and urged the U.S. and the GVN to place their emphasis on pacification. “Tired of the squabbles between the military and the civilian bureaucracies, President Johnson sent Robert Komer, his White House assistant for pacification, to Saigon with the rank of ambassador and told him to do whatever necessary to beat the program into shape.”\footnote{Grant, \textit{Facing the Phoenix}, 291.} The father of the Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) arrived in Vietnam and forever changed pacification.

Robert Komer
Robert Komer, the former interim National Security Advisor, joined the CIA in 1947 and faithfully served for twenty-one years until his appointment as Ambassador to Turkey in 1968. His first order of business as he toured Vietnam, involved speaking with both Vietnamese and American officials, demanding increased cooperation and rapid improvement of the current systems in place. Komer quickly earned the nickname “Blowtorch Bob” because of his volatile character and his ability to find faults with almost anything and anyone. In order to organize CORDS and develop detailed evaluations for the president, Komer relied on those with experience in Vietnam. As an ambassador, Komer became a direct subordinate to Westmoreland and acquired access to anything within the American arsenal for use in CORDS operations. To build and strengthen CORDS, Komer pulled together existing systems and forced them to work together. Provincial Reconnaissance Units (PRUs), the National Police, the Police Special Branch, ARVN, the CIA, and the American armed services unified their specialties in a bid to defeat the VCI. The new program would oversee the entire system and bring more intelligence strategies into the mix, increasing the overall effectiveness of pacification.\footnote{Andradé, *Ashes to Ashes*, 57.}

After spending much of 1966 touring the country and gaining an understanding of the pacification programs, Komer wrote his first report to the president about the current situation and the potential goals for the future. In *The Komer Report*, he told Johnson:

> For ten years the VC has marked the structure of government in Vietnam as its special target; systematically murdered, maimed or kidnapped government
officials; and made public service vulnerable and hazardous. Their aim has been to destroy government at the lower levels, or leave behind a wasted structure of intimidated and ineffective officials, especially in rural areas. Cities have been besieged by refugees, and beset by problems of rapid urbanization, political instability and growing insecurity. 1964-1965 saw rapid deterioration. These trends have not yet been finally reversed, but much progress has been made, especially in the last six months.\textsuperscript{116}

In order to reverse the trends of the previous years, Komer pulled all military advisors into CORDS with the intention of establishing standardized training for combating the insurgency. This involved placing all the available intelligence services within the new program, and then establishing operational goals. Next, Komer addressed the issue of pacification. Komer wrote that, although pacification operations had existed in South Vietnam, they were not extensive enough to be truly effective. He believed that with American assistance, pacification programs could be successful and progress made clear.\textsuperscript{117}

The Phoenix Program developed from the Intelligence Coordination and Exploitation (ICEX) program, which allowed pacification programs to be refined before becoming operational.\textsuperscript{118} In June 1968, ICEX was renamed the “Phoenix Program” and the battle against the VCI began. However, the program had many problems in its early months. The first issue revolved around the training and abilities of the Phoenix advisors. The CIA spent over a decade in Vietnam and its personnel were better trained, had trusted interpreters, more experience, and better funding than the other advisors joining

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{117} Ibid., 44.
\item \textsuperscript{118} Andradé, 59.
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Phoenix. CORDS and military intelligence officers received no standardized training regimen; consequently, these officers adopted varying methods on pacification and were unknown faces to the local Vietnamese population.\(^{119}\) To remedy this deficiency, advisors received crash courses on pacification, interrogation and intelligence, while CORDS director William Colby pulled more CIA personnel to Phoenix.

The Phoenix Program had to combat the NLF strategy of isolating hamlets from the GVN and then moving into the villages without risk of exposure or attack from government forces. The peasants, seeing this as a mandate that the NLF held a right to rule, accepted the Communists as long as they received the farmland promised to them for their loyalty. Those disloyal to the Communist cause found their land confiscated and themselves sent to reeducation camps. The NLF knew that a majority of the rural population wanted little to do with the conflict and wished only to continue their livelihoods. Komer spoke of this problem: “Basic to the VC strategy has been interdiction of roads and waterways. The VC have sought to cut or control transport routes, prevent surface military movement, disrupt the village market economy and supply of cities, exploit remaining civilian traffic by setting up tax collection roadblocks, and isolate the people.”\(^{120}\) Phoenix would try to prevent this by working with the South Vietnamese and earning the people’s loyalty before the VCI could cut them off. Komer established neutralization quotas for every Phoenix team to meet, adopting the system from the kill quotas General Westmoreland used to assure Americans that the U.S. was winning the


war. However, as Phoenix advisor Bob Wall said of the quotas, “Komer didn’t understand the police nature of the attack against the VCI . . . Quotas gave starving policemen a way to feed their families. It let them bring in bodies and say that they were VCI.” Another Phoenix advisor, Evan Parker, also worried that quotas led to corruption because they forced innocent people to pay bribes or face arrest, compelling the listing of fake names just to meet the quota, encouraged the attacks on the personal enemies of local South Vietnamese officials, and the slaughter of civilians wrongly labeled as VCI.

Solving this problem was not easy, compounded by the fact that both Komer and President Johnson supported this plan without truly understanding what it meant. They wrongly believed that strategies that worked on paper would work in Vietnam. Phoenix advisor Warren Milberg said he ignored the quota goals because “For the most part it was coming to you from people in Saigon who were home at night and sitting under the veranda of the Continental Hotel . . . They couldn’t relate to what you were doing, just like you couldn’t relate to what they were doing. It was a different war.” However, Milberg was in the minority. Even though many officers thought the quotas flawed, they remained in place for several years. When Komer returned to Washington to submit his report, he left Colby in charge of CORDS. It fell upon to Colby to coordinate the various programs under his authority and defeat the VCI. To do this, Colby relied heavily on the hundreds of Phoenix advisors throughout the country.

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122 Ibid., 191-2.
Phoenix, In a Nutshell

By design, the Phoenix Program brought forth the strategy of the “small unit” war to a command trained and experienced only in “big unit” warfare. From 1965 to 1968, Westmoreland’s war of attrition cost the lives of tens of thousands of Americans and Vietnamese, but it did not bring the war closer to a conclusion. “The object of Phoenix, of course, was not merely to collect an academic treatise on the VCI but to contribute to the fight against it.”123 The CIA and CORDS gained more influence under Komer and Colby, allowing a program like Phoenix the chance to develop. These two men had analyzed the strengths and weaknesses of previous pacification programs, molding Phoenix along the way. Although it was by no means perfect when initiated, Phoenix represented a rejuvenated effort to defeat a dangerous foe that grew stronger every day.

The program’s organization expanded as “Phoenix offices were set up from the national level down to the district level. Their functions were to organize intelligence on the VCI infrastructure.”124 Hundreds of these Phoenix centers arose to centralize intelligence efforts and identify members of the VCI. The intelligence gathered by the various units went first to the district centers, then to the provincial centers, and finally to the national center in Saigon. Although the system rarely worked perfectly, the potential purpose of

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123 Colby and Forbath, 269.

sharing information was to ensure all Phoenix centers had intelligence on VCI members and consequently, they could work together in eliminating the target.

The VCI consisted of spies, terrorists, guerrilla fighters, Communist Party civilian liaisons, supply officers, tax collectors, and others that assisted the Communists. “The insurgents sought to either incite the peasants to hate the government by championing and distorting popular grievances or, if that failed, to terrorize the people with violence in order to cow them into submission.”\textsuperscript{125} Also, Vietnamese civilians had legitimate grievances against the GVN and found the NLF sympathetic to their situation. The Phoenix Program needed to heal the wounds between the GVN and its people. The indiscriminate killing of civilians, the lack of credibility from informants, and the military control over every aspect of the war needed to end. In order to accomplish this goal, military strategy merged with complex intelligence-gathering operations. Every department, organization, and unit became available to Phoenix in its struggle against the VCI.\textsuperscript{126} CIA led the way by creating organizational structure charts and databanks outlining the VCI chain of command and VCI presence in South Vietnam. These diagrams resembled growing spider webs as additional intelligence flowed into the Phoenix centers and more of the mysterious VCI infrastructure became clear. This new “scientific” approach to fighting insurgents proved to have eventual success as Phoenix identified more VCI members and assaulted the movement. The essential key was to


\textsuperscript{126} Grant, 292.
avoid reliance on firepower and numbers, and instead concentrate upon winning South Vietnamese loyalty over to the GVN.

CIA officer Orrin DeForest helped set up much of Phoenix’s early structure and databanks. Under DeForest, Phoenix centers “would categorize targets as Class A—significant political operatives, Class B—lesser Vietcong personnel, and Class C—suspected Vietcong.”\(^{127}\) The higher-ranking VCI cadre tended to be more difficult to capture or rally to the GVN. They carried more intelligence and maintained a deeper faith in Communism. The majority of the informants came from classes B and C.

Identification of these suspects came through different means, and if the different GVN agencies—at least those agencies found to be trustworthy—could work together, share intelligence, and provide assistance to each other during operations, Phoenix would be successful. In Komer’s report to Johnson, he fully expected inter-agency cooperation throughout the GVN. If the agencies could not get along—as they failed to do through most of the war—Phoenix would fail.\(^{128}\) On paper, this seemed enough motivation for the South Vietnamese to work together and help their country. However, not many U.S. officials, including DeForest, had much faith in the South Vietnamese working together, but the Americans understood the importance of taking the fight to the VCI.

One vexing problem was the accuracy of suspect identification and whether or not the source of information was trustworthy. People could inform on their enemies, pulling the Phoenix Program into local disputes. In order to curb or prevent corruption, the


Phoenix advisors required at least three different verifiable sources to identify a suspect. If the accusations did not hold much weight, the Phoenix advisors hesitated to target the suspect until they gathered more information. If three different sources identified a suspect as a member of the VCI and that information was duly verified, Phoenix advisors and Vietnamese units mounted an operation. Surprise was the intended goal. Operatives did not want the target to escape or mount a defense against the Phoenix team. The teams followed a capture or kill policy, but, in order to gain further intelligence, target capture remained the primary objective. Following this course of action optimized the chances of obtaining intelligence. Villagers loyal to Saigon could still inform the Phoenix centers, captured prisoners might reveal critical information during interrogations, or Phoenix advisors could maintain surveillance of witnesses or suspects in action. Phoenix teams studied a target’s movements, their role within the infrastructure, their local contacts, their relations in the region, and with whom they travelled through the jungle. Understanding these patterns could lead to the capture of the larger infrastructure—from personnel to weapons to intelligence reports.

Target elimination was the alternative to capturing suspected VCI. “Neutralization of identified targets was conducted in the jungle regions through pattern analysis.”\textsuperscript{129} Successful ambushes required patience and an understanding of the VCI’s pattern of operation. New paths through the jungle meant new activity in the area, while old paths meant less activity. At least one member of the team carried a camera to take pictures of the dead and match them with known VCI members. Phoenix members searched the

\textsuperscript{129} Cornett, \textit{Gone Native}, 241.
bodies of the dead for documents or any other intelligence that would make up for the lack of prisoners. This method of documentation became sufficient when a live prisoner was unavailable.\textsuperscript{130}

Once captured, a suspect arrived at a Phoenix center and underwent an interrogation. Anything the prisoner revealed was checked for accuracy and then added to the database. If the prisoner cooperated, he or she could turn into an informant and assist the Phoenix center hunt down other VCI members. Uncooperative prisoners had a difficult time during interrogation (even tortured) and found themselves transferred to one of the GVN’s notorious prisons.\textsuperscript{131} Brutal guards, eager to take advantage of the prisoners, operated these overpopulated prisons. This transfer marked an advisor’s failure as it meant the opportunity for any possible intelligence and portraying the GVN in a positive light was lost. Early success depended on the quality of the Phoenix advisors.

Advisors

The Phoenix Program depended on Americans and Vietnamese working together to defeat the enemy infrastructure. However, for the program to be successful, the Vietnamese had to take the lead in capturing or eliminating the VCI, while the Americans appeared as mere advisors. These advisors came from a variety of places and backgrounds. Advisors with CIA experience performed well because they understood the

\begin{footnote}
\textsuperscript{130} Michael J. Walsh and Greg Walker, \textit{Seal!: From Vietnam’s Phoenix Program to Central America’s Drug Wars: Twenty-Six Years with a Special Operations Warrior} (New York: Pocket Books, 1994), 125.

\textsuperscript{131} Boyle, \textit{Flower of the Dragon}, 154.
\end{footnote}
methods of acquiring intelligence. Military officers made up the bulk of the Phoenix advisory team (especially after the CIA withdrew from the program in late 1969) but they needed training before heading out to the field. John Paul Vann spent the early 1960s in Vietnam as a colonel in Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) until he retired in disgust over the way the war was progressing and returned to Vietnam as a civilian pacification officer. John Cook and Stuart Herrington, both army lieutenants, transferred to Vietnam to further their careers and quickly joined the Phoenix Program. Michael Walsh arrived in Vietnam as a Navy SEAL and Alan Cornett was a Green Beret, both became Phoenix advisors based on their backgrounds in small unit warfare. Evan Parker, Don Gregg, Orrin DeForest, and Warren Milberg cut their teeth as CIA agents before joining the Phoenix Program.

One major objective for these advisors was to gain support from both the provincial government forces and, most importantly, from the highest levels. The Tet Offensive shocked President Thieu into declaring martial law and throwing his support behind the Phoenix Program and, by mid-1968, the GVN officially endorsed Phoenix with a presidential decree ordering all government officials to work with the American advisors. The provinces included both civilian and military officials who were to share the responsibility of assuring the public that Phoenix was not just another military operation.

With this official support came an onrush of applicants to fill the advisory positions. In fact, Doug Dillard, one of the CIA advisors, thought Phoenix was growing

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132 Andráde, 71-2.
too quickly: “This was moving so fast in 1968 that young lieutenants and captains coming through the MACV advisory assignment system began arriving in-country, receiving orders and going right out to the district or province.”\textsuperscript{133} New advisors received on the job training, leading to many mistakes. They attended an eight-week course on the Vietnamese language, brief instruction that failed to prepare advisors to be able to communicate effectively with their counterparts (especially if the advisor did not make an effort to learn the language.)\textsuperscript{134} They were also ill prepared to fight the VCI after such limited training and some saw themselves pulled from the field and returned to training centers for proper instruction. Those who took the time to learn Vietnamese earned the respect of their counterparts and, more importantly, they learned more about Vietnamese culture. For example, American advisors learned that they could not scold a Vietnamese officer in front of his subordinates as he could in the American military because, if this took place, Vietnamese officers would often lose face and may hold a grudge. This often necessitated replacing the Phoenix advisor if there was to be any hope of progress. This cultural sensitivity came late in the war and forced advisors to seek forgiveness from their allies before they could seek out the enemy. In order to separate the Phoenix Program from previously failed programs, Phoenix advisors had to understand both their enemies and allies.

The difference between an effective advisor and an ineffective one was training. Before Stuart Herrington arrived in Vietnam as a Phoenix advisor, he attended Army

\textsuperscript{133} Valentine, \textit{The Phoenix Program}, 223-4.

\textsuperscript{134} Cornett, 43.
Intelligence School at Fort Holabird, Maryland. Herrington said of the training, “The course was good training and consisted of a brief introduction to Vietnam and the ways of the Vietnamese most likely to frustrate new advisors.”\textsuperscript{135} By the time Herrington learned how to become an advisor, the instructors had a standardized lesson plan and two years of Phoenix operations to prepare their students. As he disembarked from the airplane in Saigon, he understood that he still had much to learn about the country and its people. Most advisors, including Herrington, entered the country with the thought that they could solve the VCI problem. Some refused to be deterred by difficulties and pushed their solutions onto the South Vietnamese. They imposed their will on the people of their particular district and caused more harm than good. Others, including Herrington, adapted to the situations and developed good relationships with the Vietnamese. Sometimes, Vietnamese officials refused to heed American advice and made both the advisor and the Phoenix Program irrelevant in that district or province. South Vietnamese Colonel Hoang Ngoc Lung argued: “U.S. advisors served only one year, enjoyed a good life and were not immediately concerned about family affairs or anything other than their jobs.”\textsuperscript{136} In his view, these advisors simply wanted to survive and spend as little time in harm’s way as possible. Other advisors, eager to see the program work properly, found loopholes to extend their tours in Vietnam. Both CIA and CORDS advisors struggled with different aspects of the war, but attempted to make a difference. The CIA advisors held the upper hand in most relationships, but once the quotas ended and the CORDS


\textsuperscript{136} Moyar, 195.
advisors gained experience, the military men made progress. Despite training and the program’s ambitious goal, not all operations ended in success. Some advisors even found themselves inflating neutralization numbers in order to prove progress and save their careers. Phoenix could not live up to its original designs as the pressure for success pushed advisors to disregard some of the program’s safeguards.

It was Komer’s quotas that compelled some advisors to either falsify their numbers or attack NLF that were not part of the infrastructure. To ensure the most accurate numbers, advisors joined the South Vietnamese in the field and participated in the operations against the enemy. Much like the early American advisors of MAAG, Phoenix advisors went into the field to assist in the capture of VCI and to call for any support if needed. Even senior advisors such as Vann participated in operations by riding in a helicopter and watching the mission from above, maintaining contact with his men and directing orders. Only later did policy changes require Phoenix advisors to remain behind during operations. Even so, few advisors heeded these orders and many snuck out into the field. These advisors believed that they could not send the South Vietnamese after a target without joining them. This risk-taking improved their image in the minds of the South Vietnamese.

The stated role of an advisor included analyzing intelligence, providing advice and leadership in the field, writing reports, and lending military support without upsetting

137 Moyar, 190.


139 Andradé, 97.
the South Vietnamese. General Nguyen Duy Hinh, an ARVN commander, stated: “The best approach for any advisor was to mention a problem, let his counterpart think about it, and in the process, inject suggestive ideas as to how he thought the problem could best be solved.”\textsuperscript{140} Fighting for much longer than the Americans, the Vietnamese understood it was a war for their survival and saw the destruction of their homeland by the U.S. and GVN on a daily basis. Some of the several hundred Phoenix advisors might pick up a rifle and hunt down the enemy, but the majority remained behind, waiting to see if their work paid off. Hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese were already dead and more would die in a war with no end in sight. The Phoenix Program placed the VCI in American sights, but it was the South Vietnamese doing the fighting.

The advisors brought with them ideologies that did not belong in Vietnam and, at times, alienated the South Vietnamese. Advisors had to gain the Vietnamese’s respect before he could work effectively.\textsuperscript{141} Equally, Phoenix advisors wanted to gain the support of the countryside for the GVN and attempted to do so through kindness, rather than force. Aside from supplying food, tools, animals, and other needs, American doctors and medics provided medical services for the villagers or recommended they seek further treatment at the nearest hospital. Some medics even performed surgery when doctors were unavailable.\textsuperscript{142} Despite these efforts, some villagers maintained a distrust of the Americans and avoided such house calls until they knew the medics were genuine. John

\textsuperscript{140} Moyar, 193.

\textsuperscript{141} Cornett, 71.

Cook witnessed such hesitation from the Vietnamese as American medics treated the sick and injured. Alan Cornett trained as a Special Forces medic and maintained that role while an advisor to the Montagnards (a group of people inhabiting the central highlands of Vietnam and detested by both North and South Vietnamese) as part of a Mobile Advisory Team (MAT). His job was to improve village sanitation and provide medical care to the Montagnards and his fellow advisors. After almost a year with the Montagnards, the sick call line went from four or five weary individuals to more than fifty from all the villages in the area. Cornett wrote, “Before I left Buon Dham, the people boiled their drinking water and, for bathing, used the showers instead of the pond.” Cornett and the other medics also performed basic dentistry, pulling decayed teeth and encouraged oral hygiene. This selflessness on the part of the American medics paid dividends in showing the government’s good qualities and assisted in the success of the Phoenix Program. By improving the lives of the Vietnamese, the GVN—through the Americans—proved it could take care of their people. Equally, the people could accept the U.S.’s gifts and still work for the VCI, but the undeclared population looked favorably upon the development brought forth by the GVN.

After a successful operation, captured intelligence and prisoners found themselves in Phoenix centers (district or province level headquarters for the advisory teams) where the advisors hoped to continue on the VCI’s trail. These centers included prison cells for the prisoners, interrogation rooms, living quarters for the advisors, radio rooms, and

143 Cornett, 178-9.
144 Ibid., 199.
arsenals designed to assist in pacification. The Phoenix centers became the hubs for the entire program and the target of insurgents.\textsuperscript{145} Part of an advisor’s job was to watch over these prisoners, protecting them from other Communists and the South Vietnamese who brought them in. The Americans wanted to prevent abuses while the prisoners were in custody and demanded their teams do the same. With the senior Phoenix advisor demanding accountability and order, the prisoners were relatively safe within the confines of the Phoenix centers. Communist prisoners feared the harsh conditions of the prisoner of war camps or prisons run by the GVN, rather than the comfortable Phoenix centers. In return for remaining in the Phoenix center, the prisoners cooperated with the advisors, either by divulging the location or size of the local VCI or by volunteering to become an informant.\textsuperscript{146} Nevertheless, there were ardent Communists who refused to cooperate and many found themselves hauled away to interrogation centers in Saigon. Nevertheless, informants became a vital piece to the continued success of the Phoenix Program, giving the Americans and South Vietnamese more information about the VCI and how to defeat it.

The South Vietnamese

A wide variety of South Vietnamese assisted the American advisors in destroying the enemy infrastructure. Since the Phoenix Program was an umbrella organization

\textsuperscript{145} Herrington, \textit{Stalking the Vietcong}, 185-7.

\textsuperscript{146} Ibid., 200-5.
managing several departments, many different units acted on the collected intelligence and fought the VCI. While the U.S. and ARVN forces fought “the big war,” the police forces, the Provincial Reconnaissance Units (PRUs), and regional militias fought the VCI. These were the civilian units ordered by President Thieu to assist the Phoenix advisors and secure the provinces. According to observations by advisor John Cook, these units, poorly armed and trained during the early years, gradually became more effective and popular among the South Vietnamese loyal to the GVN as dedication to improving the regional militias provided adequate security for the villages. Improved and expanded cooperation resulted in higher quality intelligence and an enhanced ability to launch intensive operations. The more effective units brought intelligence, prisoners, informants, and regions under the GVN fold, while the military fought against NVA and VCI battalions. Every successful operation, no matter the size, helped turn the tide of the war in favor of the U.S. and GVN. Phoenix brought together Vietnamese from across the country and urged them to fight the enemy in a new way, as small units infiltrating enemy-held territory, guarding important roadways, capturing suspected VCI, and destroying the Communist hold over much of the country. These units, often much maligned, were the only ones under the Phoenix umbrella.

The PRUs became the most important component of the Phoenix Program. They gained a reputation for ferocity because their ranks consisted of men with a grudge

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148 Andradé, 96.
against the VCI. At the hands of the VCI, some witnessed the deaths of family members, the theft of their lands, the destruction of property, or threats of violence. Others were former criminals or Communists with an axe to grind and suddenly had the opportunity to release their anger.

The CIA recruited PRU members locally, looking for men with a pronounced hatred for Communists, physical and mental toughness, an ability to work together and follow orders, and a willingness to kill. Equally, many former VCI chose to rally to the government and sought membership in the PRUs. Correspondent Chalmers Roberts of The Washington Post reported “the PRU work on the theory of giving back what the VCI deals out—assassination and butchery.” Phoenix advisors denied such tactics took place, but the members of the PRUs all despised the enemy and sought to force the VCI to pay a high price for continued operations. These fresh recruits used the intelligence acquired by the Phoenix Program and sought to contribute to the intelligence database during their missions by capturing prisoners and documents. Regularly joined in the field by the advisors, the PRUs became the weapon of choice against known VCI positions. Lacking an official uniform, the PRUs took on the appearance of a ragtag group of hardened mercenaries—an image that drew criticism in the U.S. because they resembled hired killers and death squads—who appeared suddenly out of the jungle much like the VCI had done for almost a decade. Despite their limited numbers, the PRUs exemplified

149 Colby and Forbath, 234.
150 Andradé, 173-4.
151 Valentine, 163.
152 Andradé, 173-4, 180.
the new direction of the war, until claims of brutality surfaced. As reported atrocities from journalists, fellow Vietnamese, American soldiers and Phoenix became more prevalent, the PRUs came increasingly under fire. The U.S. was quick to avoid responsibility for the PRUs’ actions by transferring control of the teams to the National Police. The transfer was a political move, not a strategic one. The PRUs instilled fear into the enemy, but could easily degrade into angry death squads if poorly led or used inefficiently. Until Phoenix’s end in 1972, the PRUs remained one of the most effective fighting forces available. They did not fear combat and were as familiar with the region as the VCI. They could identify possible members of the VCI and competed with each other over unit prestige. Despite their effectiveness, the PRUs did not prevent the Communist invasions once the Americans withdrew and the final groups disbanded by the time of the Saigon Offensive in 1974. Their numbers were too few and were underequipped to match the NVA. Their effectiveness declined as the GVN focused on its own survival rather than on the pacification effort.

The South Vietnamese police forces—both the National and Special Police—bore the brunt of the blame for the ultimate failure of the Phoenix Program and for the corruption of South Vietnam. Phoenix advisors and CIA officials held the police in such low regard that, during the first few years of Phoenix, they refused to work with them. Hopelessly corrupt, cowardly, and lazy, the police failed produce positive results until Thieu imposed reforms and turned the police forces into a moderately effective

153 Valentine, 298-9.

154 Andradé, 185-7.
counterinsurgency force. One reason for their incompetence was Diem’s organization and use of the police forces. The National and Special Police sullied their names during the Diem years because they protected the president against possible military coups and hassled anyone suspected of being against the regime. They often mishandled intelligence and were known to torture excessively. These duties bred corruption and the subsequent regimes used the police in a similar fashion. During the Tet Offensive in 1968, these police forces failed to protect key locations, including the American embassy, which allowed the VCI easy access to their targets. Men such as General Nguyen Ngoc Loan, shed a negative light on the National Police when they were caught on camera committing tremendous brutality. There were indeed many hardworking police officers tirelessly gathering intelligence for the Phoenix centers and helping to destroy the enemy infrastructure. Despite this, the National Police remained a detrimental thorn in the side of the Phoenix Program. The Special Police were far more efficient because their CIA advisors provided the necessary motivation, ensuring that the Special Police actively sought intelligence and shared it with their American counterparts. Like the PRUs, the Special Police understood the importance of quality intelligence and actively sought to avoid ambushes and traps by researching their targets and the region before committing themselves to an operation. Phoenix’s success declined when more of the day-to-day operations fell under the control of the National Police. Phoenix’s intentions were to

155 Herrington, 145.
156 Valentine, 280.
157 Herrington, 6.
158 Moyar, 143.
bring the various departments together, but the National Police often disregarded this necessity until the war’s outcome appeared to turn in favor of South Vietnam in 1969 to 1970.\footnote{Andradé, 140-1.}

The motivations for joining the police forces ranged from the belief that a person was more likely to survive the war as a police officer than a soldier in the ARVN, to opinions that the police uniform looked better than an army uniform.\footnote{Ibid., 159. (Memorandum to DEPCORDS/MACV William Colby from Jean A. Sauvageot, CPDC Liaison Group, \textit{Evaluation of Motivational Training for National Police at National Cadre Training Center}, 16 March 1971.)} Training and discipline remained inadequate and it became common knowledge in many regions that the villagers paid protection money to the local police forces, lest they become suspects. Many, but not all, of the accusations leveled against the Phoenix Program originated from actions of these police forces. Because they were more numerous than the PRUs, Phoenix advisors reluctantly used the police forces on many operations and hoped that their presence would ensure the operation went smoothly and the police forces did not violate codes of conduct. The CIA found ways to motivate the police forces, but early CORDS advisors did not have the same experience. Many lost hope for pacification’s success after dealing with the National Police.\footnote{DeForest and Chanoff, \textit{Slow Burn}, 53-4.}

Revolutionary Development (RD) cadres, Regional Forces (RF), and Popular Forces (PF) maintained the duty of protecting the villages from VCI incursions, and the alerting of government units to the enemy’s presence. Eventually numbering over 100,000 strong, these territorial forces received arms from the U.S. and protected their
villages and hamlets from the Communists. The idea behind these units was that the men who previously avoided the draft would find the courage to defend their families and homes if attacked.162 Although they had the much to lose, they spent most of the war on guard duty, protecting communication lines, roads, and waterways. In fact, some units did not even venture out of their outposts and these outposts often could not withstand attacks from heavily armed VCI units. In essence, they became death traps if the territorial forces chose to stay and fight. Because they expected to avoid the dangers of battle, these territorial forces panicked easily and became quick pickings for the well-disciplined and well-armed VCI soldiers.163 Those who surrendered found themselves sent off to reeducation camps, while the rest perished in the outposts.

The downside of the territorial forces was the habit for VCI infiltration and defeat. At times, the territorial forces faced old neighbors or acquaintances and refrained from treating them as an enemy. Despite serving the GVN in an official capacity, the territorial soldiers could not push themselves to kill family members, friends, or neighbors. Additionally, many soldiers of the territorial forces were actually Communist infiltrators hoping to acquire intelligence on upcoming government missions.164 Because the Phoenix program’s attention lay focused on the PRUs and South Vietnamese police forces, the territorial forces became especially vulnerable to infiltration. Territorial forces soldiers all knew their VCI counterparts and met with these former friends and neighbors when their superiors were away. These gatherings at times resulted in defections or

162 Cornett, 175-6.

163 DeForest and Chanoff, 59.

promises not to oppose the Communists. There was no effective way to weed out every member of the VCI and yet retain enough men to run the Phoenix Program’s operations. Even with these setbacks, as the number of successful Phoenix Program missions increased, more South Vietnamese began to believe in a Southern victory and joined the GVN to obtain any spoils resulting from the demise of the Communists. Therefore, despite the risks, the dual role the territorial forces shared in protecting and improving the villages while identifying and eliminating the VCI, provided helpful support system for Phoenix.

Interrogation

The interrogation techniques used to acquire intelligence differed between the Americans and the Vietnamese. For instance, methods seen as inhumane in the U.S. were considered commonplace in Vietnam and subsequent disagreements involving interrogation techniques became a clash between two cultures. Journalists in Vietnam picked up rumors of brutality within the walls of the Phoenix centers and utilized them to attack the entire program. Congressman Jerome Waldie (D–Wisconsin) toured the centers in 1971 and stated: “I saw nothing in any of the centers to which I had access that led me to believe that abuses, in fact, did occur in the province interrogation centers.”165 Operating within the Phoenix Program’s established codes of conduct led U.S. advisors to believe early on that the GVN could not win the “hearts and minds” of the people if its

165 Moyar, 90.
agents tortured suspects for information. While some prisoners volunteered information because they grew disenchanted with the Communist cause or they simply wanted to stop fighting, it became clear that better intelligence came from willing sources.

Intelligence acquired by force, coercion, or threats tended to be worthless. In an official statement about the training provided to the South Vietnamese, Colby wrote, “This training certainly did not include torture, which is morally impermissible and produces bad intelligence—the subject either confessing what he thinks the torturer wants to hear or deciding to hold more firmly to his information, since he anticipates death in any case.”166 There are cases of coerced intelligence turning out accurate, but torture was an ineffective way to learn about the VCI. Torture was a common in Vietnamese interrogations and even the prisoners accepted this as standard procedure. What the prisoners found to be abnormal was the reasonable treatment shown to them by the Americans. Communist propaganda portrayed the Americans as a ruthless people controlling the puppet government in Saigon and warned prisoners to expect the worst. Although the threat of transfer to one of the GVN prisons was real, American interrogators frequently attempted glean intelligence from the prisoners without having to send them to a brutal prison where all hope of gathering intelligence was lost and the prisoner would be lucky to survive. In the end, American advisors considered it to be in the best interests of both the prisoner and the Phoenix Program to work out a deal.167

166 Colby and Forbath, 230. Emphasis in original.

167 Walsh and Walker, Seal!, 141-3.
The GVN routinely tortured suspects for any information and acted on the acquired intelligence without consulting the American advisors. Stuart Herrington called the methods a “throwback to the Spanish Inquisition” and “countless American advisors had struggled over the years to convince the Vietnamese that brutality and successful interrogation did not go together, but in Bien Hoa, as in Hau Nghia province, we still had a long way to go.” Vietnamese interrogators used torture as an acceptable means of acquiring information. To them, every suspect had something to hide and intelligence was acquired by any means necessary. What made this such a predicament was that the GVN depended on the U.S. for its survival, but the U.S. never issued a firm denouncement of torture. Instead, they remained compelled to support inhumane methods.

When receiving their training, American advisors learned specific techniques for interrogation. These did not include having the prisoner handcuffed to a chair, while the interrogator demanded answers and beat the suspect. Americans believed a successful interrogation took time, perhaps even several months, as the interrogator attempted to make the prisoner comfortable. They discussed each other’s background, interests, and dreams for the future, all while avoiding discussions on the VCI or other war-related topics. Orrin DeForest instructed his interrogators to ask questions that avoided intelligence. “Talk to him about his family. Be sympathetic. Where are you from? What did you do for entertainment? How well do you read, write? Anything at all you can think

168 Herrington, 97.

169 Valentine, 350.
of to help you understand this guy. Ask him about his friends, why he joined the Vietcong…”

Advisors asked these questions in the hopes the prisoner would let their guard down and reveal information on the VCI. All levels of the cadre knew some aspect of the VCI and could assist the GVN if convinced to do so. Stuart Herrington went so far as to taking his prisoner, Do van Lanh, on a trip through Saigon to prove the falsity of the Communist claims that the South Vietnamese lived in chains. They toured the large marketplaces, multiple restaurants, and other aspects of capitalism. He told Lanh “My real purpose in coming to Vietnam was to help reestablish peace and understanding between the North Vietnamese and their southern brothers. Since my arrival, I had seen the ugliness and bloodshed that the war had produced, and I was horrified at the continued killing of Vietnamese by Vietnamese.”

Although this motivation did not mirror those of every Phoenix advisor, Herrington’s strategy paid off when Lanh became an informant and warned of a major North Vietnamese offensive in 1972. Both Herrington and John Cook prided themselves on their ability to woo a prisoner to the GVN’s side after the South Vietnamese interrogators failed to do so. This earned the men praise from their American commanders and grudging respect from the Vietnamese.

As Phoenix’s problems declined, more disenchanted Communists found their way into GVN lines. The NVA and VCI units believed that the Tet Offensive would bring the U.S. to the negotiating table and eventually lead to an American withdrawal. In hindsight, they were correct in these beliefs, but it did not take place as quickly as they hoped. At

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170 DeForest and Chanoff, 53.

171 Herrington, 191.
the time, many saw a South Vietnamese and American victory as inevitable and sought to survive the war by surrendering and assisting the Phoenix Program.

Fighting a Guerrilla War

There was a dramatic change in strategic policy when General Westmoreland departed Vietnam and Creighton Abrams took command of MACV. The VCI fought the guerrilla war that was so successful against the French and proved to be a thorn in MACV’s side as well. The early success of the Tet Offensive showed the effectiveness of guerrilla warfare against the massive MACV. Although eventually defeated after several months of heavy fighting, the Communists taught the Americans a valuable lesson: in order to defeat the “small unit war,” one must engage in the “small unit war.” The Phoenix Program provided the Americans and South Vietnamese with a vehicle in which to launch this new war. Abrams had little time to change strategies in late 1968 as the Americans mopped up the last of the Communist units from the Tet Offensive. This earned criticism from home and within MACV. The critics had had enough of Westmoreland’s strategy and expected it to change as soon as Abrams took command. However, with the entire American Armed Forces trained and focused on winning the war of attrition, change took time. John Paul Vann, the Deputy for CORDS, criticized Abrams in the media and almost was sent home for insubordination. Always outspoken, Vann retired from the military in disgust over the U.S. strategy and joined USAID

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(United States Agency for International Development) to enact change. When Robert Komer and William Colby asked him to join the Phoenix Program, Vann eagerly jumped at the chance because he believed the U.S. was finally on the right track. Unfortunately for Vann, his comments infuriated Abrams and almost cost Phoenix one of their best senior advisors. In the end, Vann remained in Vietnam because of the support of Komer, then still in command of CORDS.

The major problem Abrams had with Vann’s comments was not that he disagreed with MACV strategy of conventional warfare, it was that Vann complained to the media. By the end of 1968, the American people turned against the war and demanded the troops come home. Having one of the top commanders saying he had little faith in the current strategy could harm the war effort far more than a Communist offensive. A change in strategy gave more power and resources to CORDS, while the main units targeted enemy battalions. This is not to say that the war of attrition did not hurt the infrastructure. In fact, with the heavy firepower and willingness to engage in firefights, MACV divisions did hurt the VCI. However, the only way to wipe out the VCI was through CORDS and the Phoenix Program.

This change of strategy would rely on pacification rather than attrition. Instead of search-and-destroy operations, the Phoenix Program used cordon-and-search operations, surrounding a village or hamlet, cutting off all entrances and exits, and slowly moving into the target area. They demanded to see the government-issued I.D.s and questioned

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174 Ibid., 728.
village leaders, hoping to find VCI members. Remaining in the villages, the GVN and Americans improved the local infrastructure, hoping to secure the area for Saigon. A regular GVN presence meant the VCI had a more difficult time returning to their work of securing supplies and sanctuaries for the war effort. Both the Phoenix teams and regular army units launched these operations in order to find and eliminate VCI. The key was surprise as escape or a firefight usually degraded the quality of intelligence. All of the Vietnamese units employed by the Phoenix Program learned these facts and an advisor accompanied the units to ensure everyone followed procedures. Phoenix units left the “big unit war” to the MACV and ARVN divisions and focused solely on the VCI. Just as VCI units avoided American divisions, Phoenix units avoided VCI battalions and ambushed VCI escort squads.

Colby wanted to make sure every member of the Phoenix Program understood exactly what to expect and respond accordingly. Colby scheduled surprise inspections during his first few years as head of CORDS and his directives involving assassinations and Phoenix Program objectives intended to ensure that his advisors and the Program operated effectively. Colby urged Phoenix advisors to arrest suspects and bring them before Province Security Committees, rather than use lethal force. Colby proceeded to list acceptable operations, defining the proper methods for intelligence gathering, capturing or arresting targets, and interrogation (not torture). He warned advisors, “If U.S. personnel come into contact with activities conducted by Vietnamese which do not meet

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175 Walsh and Walker, 122-3.
176 Colby and Forbath, 271.
the standards of land warfare, they are certainly not to participate further in the activity. They are also expected to make their objections to this kind of behavior known to the Vietnamese conducting them …”¹⁷⁷ Colby wrote this directive in response to the growing uproar over atrocities and various activities by Phoenix advisors. Colby needed to standardize advisor duties and prevent both the South Vietnamese and the Americans from condoning this type of conduct.

Back home, more Americans turned against the war and found a willingness to listen to reports of brutality and assassination at the hands of the mysterious Phoenix Program. As with any unfamiliar program, these rumors forced the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to investigate. The Phoenix members could see the light at the end of the tunnel and only needed more time to prove the assassination allegations false and defeat the VCI. However, time, was not something the Americans had in Vietnam, for there was a second war erupting on the streets of America’s cities and towns.

¹⁷⁷ Colby and Forbath, 271.
Chapter 4

THE WAR AT HOME

America Turns Against the War

An American soldier, exhausted by heavy combat, voiced his opinion of the war in 1969: “The revolution is coming. There’s no way to stop it. Look at what’s happening in France, Latin America, even China. Our generation just isn’t going to take the same old shit. We’re going to fight.”\(^{178}\) The fighting quality of the American forces declined as the war continued and casualties increased. The soldiers experienced years of horror in the jungles of Vietnam and began to crack. This military breakdown, coupled with a home front that witnessed youths rebelling against authority and protesting the war, the draft, social inequality, and the current political system came to define the Vietnam era in the United States. The 1960s came to an explosive conclusion, with massive protests, riots, and assassinations ushering in an era of distrust, failure, and heartbreak. Within this troubled and tenuous milieu, the CIA came under fire for their operations in Vietnam, calling into question whether the Agency furthered traditional American ideals or dark, imperialist machinations. In September 1969, when word reached American shores of a massacre at the hamlet of My Lai in 1968 and the execution of an informant by Special Forces, the U.S. government went into full damage control. The U.S. had always advertised itself as the defender of the free world and as the righteous opponent of Communism. However, reports of massacres, torture, and executions contradicted this

wholesome image. The Phoenix Program suffered because of the unpopularity of the war and the methods used to fight the enemy infrastructure. The volatile social conditions in the United States contributed greatly to undermining the full implementation of the Phoenix program and accelerated its ultimate demise.

Vietnam became the first war viewed on television by millions from the safety of their homes. Through television, Americans experienced the horrific reality of war and witnessed the breakdown of the war effort. Americans expected a quick victory over the North Vietnamese and were shocked by the rapid escalation of the war. “America went to Vietnam with certain cultural blinders and biases that grew out of the American way of approaching Asia and world problems generally.” Americans at home failed to improve their comprehension of the Vietnamese culture after a decade of American involvement and the lengthening years of war only added to Vietnam’s unpopularity. As the war escalated, it became less a civil war between the two Vietnams and more a conflict involving the U.S. and North Vietnam. Media coverage highlighted this distinction as it reported on expanding American military operations and the mushrooming American presence in the country. The apparent futility of traditional military tactics to achieve a definitive victory against the insurgent VCI brought calls for greater involvement, even though, “Americanization was evident everywhere: a network of ‘firebases’ with artillery to protect infantry patrols that were sent out to engage the

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Viet Cong … When asked what was the answer to insurgency, General Westmoreland answered with one word: ‘firepower.’”\textsuperscript{180}

These U.S. policies tore the country apart as well. President Lyndon B. Johnson watched as tens of thousands burned their draft cards and risked imprisonment in the ultimate form of war protest against implementing the draft. Meanwhile, returning veterans arrived home to a far different country from the one they left. Protestors openly despised the soldiers, making it difficult for the soldiers to make the readjustment to civilian life. For instance, Alan Cornett returned home in 1967 after serving his first tour and met several protestors awaiting GIs fresh off the plane from the war. They verbally assaulted him, leading to a fight and Cornett’s arrest. To avoid jail time, Cornett agreed to sign up for another tour in Vietnam.\textsuperscript{181} Cornett was one of thousands of veterans to receive such a homecoming from those against the war. The soldiers found themselves without a sense of belonging—while in Vietnam, all they could think about was getting home, but while they were home, they wanted to return to the jungle.

A Year of Turmoil

As the Americans and South Vietnamese confronted the Tet Offensive in 1968, a series of crises rocked the U.S. political landscape to its core. The Tet Offensive revealed that the U.S. was not winning the unpopular war in Vietnam as the Johnson

\textsuperscript{180} Hess, \textit{Vietnam and the United States}, 96.

administration had been reporting, evidenced by NLF and NVA battalions appearing throughout South Vietnam at will. “After Tet, the American public had no stomach for Vietnam. It even brought about a ‘regime change’ in America as Lyndon Johnson withdrew his candidacy for the presidency.”¹⁸² In a matter of months, the assassinations of both Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Kennedy, the chaos at the Democratic Convention in Chicago, and the return of Republican Party dominance after the election of Richard Nixon altered the progress of the country. These events and tragedies of 1968 changed the social and political status quo of the U.S., marking the end of the era of social and political liberalism and ushering in the rise of conservatism. This demise of American liberalism did not occur without protest from its prominent proponents, however, and the Vietnam War influenced people like King and Kennedy to speak out against the war and support a change in the White House. Unfortunately, they were not able to live long enough to make the change themselves.

Charles Kaiser wrote, “King’s hostility to the war grew out of his opposition to all violence, but he was also deeply disturbed by its practical consequences.”¹⁸³ The government spent vast amounts of money fighting the war, but largely abandoned the war on poverty. In fact, by 1967, violent riots erupted in Newark and Detroit due to increasing racial tension and the widening economic gap.¹⁸⁴ King wrote of the war, “When machines and computers, profit and property rights are considered more important than


¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 140.
people, the giant triplets of racism, materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered.\textsuperscript{185} Despite both internal and external pressures, King organized a new campaign that he hoped would culminate in a second March on Washington. “The core of their demands was to be a $12 billion ‘economic bill of rights,’ guaranteeing employment to all the able-bodied, viable incomes to those unable to work, and end to housing discrimination, and the vigorous enforcement of integrated education.”\textsuperscript{186} The stalemate in Vietnam, especially after Tet, continued to derail these efforts and, after King’s assassination on April 4, 1968 in Memphis, the country exploded with violence. Riots erupted as word of King’s murder spread. King had been the guiding light in a time of darkness and now that light had been put out, violently. Without King, the Civil Rights Movement turned violent as African Americans felt pushed against the wall. Some now sought to force change using confrontational tactics and sometimes violence, much to the displeasure of King’s closest supporters.\textsuperscript{187}

Kennedy, the former Attorney General under his brother John F. Kennedy, gained popularity as the Johnson administration stumbled in its handling of the Vietnam War. Although one of the original architects of the U.S. policy in Vietnam, Kennedy altered his position after witnessing the futility and destruction resulting from America’s involvement in Vietnam. He began to speak out against the war, acquired a following that included many Democrats, and concluded that backing Johnson in the upcoming election

\textsuperscript{185} Mary Susannah Robbins, Ed., \textit{Against the Vietnam War: Writings by Activists} (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc., 1999), 108.


\textsuperscript{187} Ibid., 374-7.
would lead to the victory of the Republican Richard Nixon. Kennedy initially refused offers to run for president because he did not want to divide the Democratic Party between him and the Johnson camp while the country was in a state of turmoil. The U.S. was fighting a losing war in Vietnam, while domestically poverty continued its dramatic increase. The racial divide widened as African Americans fell farther behind and with the death of King in April 1968, African Americans lost a powerful voice for their cause. Increasing poverty, unemployment, and disenfranchisement involving African Americans led to an outbreak of riots. Kennedy felt that another four years with Johnson would be a disaster. Inspired by Eugene McCarthy’s success in the New Hampshire primary, he felt the time was ripe for change.188

On March 16, 1968, he finally announced his intention to run for the Democratic presidential nomination with opposition to the Vietnam at the core of his platform. Continued U.S. involvement in Vietnam threatened America’s social stability and committed the U.S. to maintain its presence in a losing effort. Rioting and demonstrations in various cities proved that Americans had grown tired of the war. The Government of South Vietnam (GVN) was corrupt and could not sustain the war without the support of the U.S. military and Johnson continually assured Thieu that he would not abandon the South Vietnamese. Johnson’s escalation of the war revealed his desire not to be the first American president to lose a war, even when the GVN appeared to many Americans to be a useless ally and compelled many to question the goals of the war. In fact, if peace

188 Kaiser, 1968 in America, 113-114.
was established, many felt that the GVN would quickly crumble from its own decay.¹⁸⁹

Just as the Nixon campaign promised to end the war, Kennedy also assembled a coalition of groups opposed to continuing the war. Faced with a determined opposition from both Republicans and Democrats, Johnson decided not to run for reelection. However, as Kennedy’s efforts to get to the White House gained momentum, he was shot in the kitchen in the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles.¹⁹⁰

In an instant, Kennedy’s death dashed the hopes of millions and became another disaster in a year of turmoil that ended with the divisive 1968 Democratic National Convention (DNC) in Chicago. Inside, intra-party divisions ruptured the Democratic Party and violent protests outside the building led to confrontations with police and arrests. The DNC convened in late August to establish a suitable replacement for Johnson. Kennedy had momentum leading up to the convention, but his death ended that possibility. While a battle raged outside, Eugene McCarthy and Vice President Hubert Humphrey fought over Kennedy’s coalition. Around ten thousand protestors marched through the streets, meeting police and National Guardsmen sent to prevent the protest from reaching the convention. The two sides clashed because the protestors feared the outcome of the convention would result in four more years of war. What started as a public protest morphed into a melee when the police and Guardsmen used tear gas and


¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 248.
other riot suppression techniques to quell the demonstration. Savage beatings and mass arrests ended the event and the brutal suppression of the demonstrators shocked the American people. The Republicans capitalized on the public discontent by promising to end the war honorably, propelling Richard Nixon to the presidency of the U.S.

My Lai, Colonel Robert Rheault, and the *Pentagon Papers*

American strategy also came under fire from the public because of graphic images and accounts of decimated villages and the killing of innocent people during search and destroy missions conducted by both American and South Vietnamese forces. With war correspondents embedded with the search and destroy units in the field, many of the lurid details of the missions reached the public before MACV published their edited action reports. The brutality and government cover-ups sent anti-war protestors into frenzy. Arising in this environment, the Phoenix Program quickly became a target of protest. The anti-war advocates focused on the rumors of murder and corruption because of the bloody transgressions of the My Lai Massacre where a platoon of American soldiers executed several hundred Vietnamese villagers and the events surrounding Colonel Rheault’s execution of an informant. The My Lai Massacre revealed the dark side to the war, shocking most Americans and making the Vietnam War synonymous with evil.

The details of a horrendous massacre at the hamlets of My Lai and My Khe shocked the U.S. and the world, prompting further opposition to the war and compelled

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the government to take action against the men responsible. Ostensibly, the Americans entered the hamlets in search of weapons, enemy troops, and intelligence. The March 16, 1968 operation began as expected with the troops, supported by air power, surrounded the hamlets and began their search for the enemy. The peasants had faced screaming American soldiers in the past and expected this to be more of the same. However, this time, the Americans thought the village was infested with the enemy. American soldiers began shooting, wounding and killing some of the inhabitants. If any peasant attempted to flee, the soldiers took that as a sign of guilt, catapulting the Americans into a murderous frenzy. Led by Lieutenant William Calley, the soldiers killed every living thing—people and animals—in the hamlet. When the exterminations ended, the soldiers burned all the dwellings. The dead numbered between 300 and 500 and included elderly men, women, and children.

Initially the U.S. government tried to cover up the incident, however, by August 1969, Americans slowly began to learn the extent of the My Lai Massacre from Vietnamese survivors and American soldiers who recounted the operation’s rapes, beatings, tortures, murder, and mutilations. Additionally, when journalists visited Son My village and questioned the local inhabitants—without the South Vietnamese liaison officer present—the tragic reality began to emerge. These enterprising journalists, thirsty for a story and tired of the government’s edited accounts, came to the area and uncovered a story contradicting the government’s explanations to the American people. Photographs and soldiers’ testimonies supported the journalists’ findings and forced the U.S. government to launch an investigation. Despite the public outrage though, Calley
was the only soldier found guilty and, although sentenced to life imprisonment with hard labor, on April 1, 1971, Nixon commuted the sentence to house arrest.\footnote{\citeseq{192}Michael Bilton and Kevin Sim, \textit{Four Hours in My Lai} (1992; repr. New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 343.} With rising public awareness about the American atrocities and the government’s lenient metering of justice, this event solidified the growing perception that the Vietnam War, and the American methods of fighting it, was synonymous with evil.

On the heels of the revelation of the My Lai Massacre, several Green Beret officers were detained in response to reports of premeditated execution of a Vietnamese informant. Colonel Robert Rheault, commander of the 5\textsuperscript{th} Special Forces Group, allegedly executed the informant when Rheault learned he was a double agent.\footnote{\citeseq{193}“The War: Mystery of the Green Berets,” \textit{Time}, 15 August 1969: Paragraph 2, http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,901231,00.html, (accessed 20 May 2011).} Like the My Lai Massacre, the Army released little information about the incident and investigators never found a body. Because the U.S. government stalled the release of information, members of the press sought their own conclusions. “Regular military investigating units professed to have no knowledge of the incident, leading to conjecture that the case involved a secret agency, possibly the CIA. This speculation was supported by the fact that at least three of the Green Berets were intelligence specialists.”\footnote{\citeseq{194}Ibid., Paragraph 3.} A media circus developed as tales of secret intelligence operations that used Vietnamese informants to kidnap or eliminate enemy combatants filled newspapers. Eventually, all criminal charges leveled against Rheault and his men were dropped, leaving the real story
behind the execution unknown.\footnote{Nation: Green Berets on Trial, \textit{Time}, 22 August 1969: Paragraph 10, http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,898517,00.html, (accessed 20 May 2011).} However, several leading politicians supported the dropping of charges. Future President George H.W. Bush said, “I think this action … is a correct one and should prove significant in helping the morale of our combat troops.”\footnote{Daniel Ellsberg, \textit{Secrets: A Memoir of Vietnam and the Pentagon Papers} (New York: Viking, 2002), 288.} While some may have felt that egregious actions by the American military could be controlled through whitewashing and censorship, the media continued to expose to an outraged American public the harsh realities of the Vietnam War. Americans also began to gather information from returning veterans and a plethora of other sources as well.

Another factor contributing to the negative public fervor was the influx of Communist and anti-war literature, especially Ho Chi Minh’s history of American involvement in Vietnam and his plea for the American public to force their politicians to end the war. “Our cause is absolutely just. It is to be hoped that the U.S. Government will act in accordance with reason,”\footnote{Ho Chi Minh, \textit{Against U.S. Aggression for National Salvation} (Hanoi, Democratic Republic of Vietnam: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1967), 152.} Ho articulated the Vietnamese point of view and depicted the Communist fight against the U.S. as righteous. His work characterized the U.S. as an imperialist force determined to defeat the democratic resistance fighters of North Vietnam. Ho railed against the American strategy, arguing against previous failed campaigns, “The main military operations are designed to sweep the peasants up into the so-called ‘strategic hamlets,’ the concentration camp villages.”\footnote{Ibid., 41.} The American public became receptive to Ho’s assessment of the war because of the increasing visibility of
American transgressions in newspapers and on televisions around the world. It was easy earlier in the war to dismiss Ho’s work as Communist propaganda because Americans still believed in the image of the U.S. as the defender of the free world. However, as Johnson and Westmoreland escalated the war and committed more American troops, the reports of Americans committing violence against civilians circulated back to the U.S. Even though there was often a significant time lapse between the incidents and their reporting, the hostile reaction to these events showed the divided American people had had enough. President Nixon tried to distance himself from these incidents by repeatedly promising he had a plan to end the war. Like his predecessor, Nixon did not want to be the first president to lose a war and actively sought to force the North Vietnamese to the negotiating table.

The exposure in 1971 of the *Pentagon Papers* aired twenty years of U.S. government dirty laundry. Daniel Ellsberg, friend of Colonel John Paul Vann and a military analyst for the RAND Corporation think tank, grew tired of the government’s “lying machine” and facilitated the leak. Ellsberg handled the reports that became the *Pentagon Papers*, saw firsthand the government’s questionable actions and considered the escalation of the war to be criminal. Ellsberg risked professional blacklisting, life imprisonment, and embarrassment for his family. Accepting the risks, he sent the documents to the *New York Times* and the *Boston Globe* for publication. The detailed analyses focused on the Vietnam conflict from the end of the Second World War to 1967.\(^\text{199}\) The Papers also demonstrated that the Vietnam War expanded because the

Johnson administration wanted it to escalate.\footnote{Ellsberg, 52.} Because North Vietnam felt all of the U.S.’s demands were unacceptable and refused to give up the dream of a united Vietnam the U.S., in return, began an intensive bombing campaign and eventually sent over 500,000 American soldiers to “save” South Vietnam.

The release of the \textit{Pentagon Papers} and their revelations unleashed a fury in the American public and turned them against the administration. Because the media had become such a powerful adversary to the government when it spoke out against the war and published all of the government’s secret documents, any attempt to continue the conflict or increase American participation would be politically untenable for Nixon. As he promised peace in 1968 and would again in his presidential campaign in 1972, Nixon had to find a way for the U.S. to leave Vietnam. He slowly withdrew U.S. ground forces, while escalating the air war, but this was merely a temporary solution. Nixon had to be the first American president to lose a war.

Guilty by Association

This growing hatred toward the Vietnam War led many to connect the Phoenix Program to the same crimes that Americans had been seeing in the news. CORDS designed the program to be disconnected from the main war effort, but Phoenix still maintained the same war aims and committed its share of violence. The journalists in Vietnam wrote the first accounts of Phoenix as an ultra-secret assassination program.
Journalist Richard Boyle recounted a story told to him by one American soldier, “Just before we broke up, Benn told me about seeing an American intelligence officer, an ‘average Joe,’ question two Vietnamese, husband and wife. When the man refused to talk, said Benn, the officer threw the wife out of the chopper while in flight.”

Journalists believed the program was rife with corruption because suspects arrived at the Phoenix centers with little evidence of Viet Cong Infrastructure (VCI) connection. Believing part of the problem lay with a “guilty by association” attitude over anything related to the war.

The Phoenix Program first appeared in the news in 1968 as several anti-war activists and journalists sought to expose Phoenix as an assassination program. Peter Kann of The Wall Street Journal and Robert Kaiser of the Washington Post both wrote articles on Phoenix and came to similar conclusions of the program. Kann, embedded with Phoenix advisors, believed that despite official statements, claiming it was a Vietnamese program, Americans truly operated the system and were the only reason the program remained active. One U.S. operative told Kann, “face it, we can’t really tell who is a VCI and who isn’t. The GVN has to do this job.” However, Kann found the program received little support from the Vietnamese, limiting the Phoenix Program’s ability to eradicate the VCI. Additionally, success at the provincial and district levels

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201 Boyle, Flower of the Dragon, 82.

202 Colby and Forbath, 276.


204 Ibid., 1.
required close cooperation between various American and South Vietnamese agencies—something difficult because corruption, incompetence, and infiltration plagued the program. “Also, the Vietcong have been skillful at permeating many of the government’s intelligence agencies. Thus, while American agencies seek to have the government share its secrets, it is questionable if the Americans share their own best information.”

Designed for the Vietnamese to take the primary role, Phoenix became completely reliant on the Americans.

Robert Kaiser’s article, “U.S. Aides in Vietnam Scorn Phoenix Project” appeared in the *Washington Post* on the first day of hearings between CORDS and the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. In his article, Kaiser considered the Phoenix Program a tremendously flawed operation and having little chance of eventual success. “Phoenix’s unsavory reputation apparently stems from its clandestine nature, its connections with some deliberate assassinations, and accusations made by several public figures and army veterans about its activities.”

Furthermore, Phoenix was not working because of widespread corruption. In fact, according to Kaiser, it actually provided the VCI with recruiting centers within the government’s prisons. As a result, the Americans were forced to maintain the program while working with “poor quality personnel, chosen for their jobs by local officials who don’t want to waste their good people on the program.”

Writing at a time when the majority of Americans vehemently opposed the Vietnam conflict and the U.S. Congress began to take a closer look at clandestine military

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207 Ibid.
activities, Kaiser condemned the Phoenix Program as a terror program. William Colby would face considerable opposition as he met the Senate Foreign Relations Committee because the Senators obtained such opinions on the war from articles on the Phoenix Program.

Drummond Ayers of *The New York Times*, however, considered the Phoenix Program effective, despite the numerous accusations leveled against it. To Ayers, Phoenix was not an assassination program, but a successful counterinsurgency operation:

A typical example of one of Operation Phoenix’s successes took place in Hue…The police there received a tip that a Vietcong specialist in propaganda would attend a certain meeting. He was captured en route. In questioning him, the police learned the identification of eight more agents…They too were arrested and questioned. Fifteen more arrests followed, for a total of 24 enemy agents.  

Ayers credited the program with turning the course of the war in favor of the GVN because National Liberation Front (NLF) political agents had moved throughout the country for years without fearing capture. After implementing Phoenix, the political agents required bodyguards when travelling in government-controlled areas. Ayers also considered the unification of intelligence services under the Phoenix Program critical, as the increasing effectiveness of the program uprooted the dangerous VCI agents that had set up a rival government to Saigon and prevented a unified campaign against Communism. Unlike Kann, Ayers emphasized the Phoenix Program’s ability to unite the plethora of intelligence services and its influence in developing coordinated police actions and planning between the South Vietnamese and the Americans.  

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209 Ibid., 7.
Ed Murphy, a Phoenix advisor, after his experiences in Vietnam chose to speak out against the program and the war. His conversion followed the death of Robert Kennedy and his realization that he targeted people with little evidence linking them to the VCI.\textsuperscript{210} Patriotism compelled him to enlist, but his disillusionment left him feeling betrayed. Trained at Fort Holabird, Maryland in the arts of intelligence gathering, interrogation, and language skills, Murphy became a valued advisor who successfully netted VCI suspects. However, when he completed his duty in 1970, Murphy joined the Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW) and prepared to protest against the program. Murphy argued, “Phoenix was a bounty-hunting program—an attempt to eliminate the opposition. By which I mean the opposition to us, the Americans, getting what we wanted. Which was to control the Vietnamese through our clients—the Diems, the Kys, the Thieus.”\textsuperscript{211} He disagreed with Phoenix’s methods and considered the program a complete failure. The Phoenix Program attracted the wrong Vietnamese and these dubious recruits subsequently committed crimes beyond the scope of counterinsurgency. The concentration of power in the hands of advisors also alarmed Murphy. As he explained, “One of my agents says somebody’s a spy. If I had reason to believe … that he was telling the truth, and if I wanted to bring somebody in for interrogation, I could do it. It was that easy.”\textsuperscript{212} He worked under the impression that he could do anything he wanted without consequences. Murphy lamented his role in America’s counter-insurgency campaign, exposing the dangers of the Phoenix Program, and by joining other veterans in

\textsuperscript{210} Valentine, 310-11.

\textsuperscript{211} Ibid., 309.

\textsuperscript{212} Ibid., 310.
issuing joint press releases that explained the negative consequences of the Phoenix Program as they saw it.

Another soldier to speak out against Phoenix was Francis Reitemeyer. He also attended Fort Holabird in 1968 in order to become an advisor. However, after completing the course and before seeing actual combat, he hired a lawyer to change his status to “conscientious objector.” Journalists Judith Coburn and Geoffrey Cowan interviewed Reitemeyer after his petition became public and heard startling tales of the Phoenix Program. According to Reitemeyer, Phoenix instructors taught him how to torture suspects to gather intelligence, pursue the “kill quotas,” and the preferred methods for intimidating the Vietnamese into assisting Phoenix advisors. His instructors also warned Reitemeyer to avoid capture at all costs because he could be tried “as a war criminal under the precedents established by the Nuremberg Trials as well as other international precedents such as the Geneva Convention.”213 Such accusations brought forth by an insider shocked the public. Coburn and Cowan investigated the Phoenix Program using the testimony of Reitemeyer and a fellow petitioner Michael J. Cohn, by traveling to Fort Holabird to learn firsthand about the program. The U.S. government, however, refused to answer their questions, leaving reporters to rely largely on Reitemeyer’s accounts.

In their article, Reitemeyer claimed that, through his training, he learned that he could employ any means to acquire information from a suspect and that Phoenix advisors had often employed extreme forms of torture. According to Reitemeyer, “On one occasion, a civilian suspected of being a sympathizer was killed by the paid mercenaries,

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and thereafter decapitated and dismembered.” These paid mercenaries—the Provincial Reconnaissance Units (PRUs)—employed terror against terror, hoping the cost to be too high for NLF sympathizers to bear. Reitemeyer described the advisors as being “gung ho” about the war, loving every fight and relishing every enemy death, but no longer caring about the war’s overall outcome. The article further threw suspicion upon the actual numbers of “neutralized” VCI among the reported 30,000 enemy agents neutralized. Phoenix, to Reitemeyer, Coburn, and Cowan, was a cold, computerized program that senselessly murdered tens of thousands of Vietnamese in the name of “democracy.”

Reitemeyer’s testimony created doubt because other advisors, especially Stuart Herrington who arrived at Fort Holabird soon after Reitemeyer, gave no mention of such instruction or stories from the instructors. Rather, Herrington learned that torture did not lead to intelligence, and therefore, the best plan for a successful Phoenix operation relied upon earning the people’s trust and showing them kindness. Additionally, the necessity for intelligence emphasized the value of captured suspects over dead ones. Ayers’s description of a typical Phoenix operation directly refutes this point. This led Erwin Knoll, editor of *The Progressive*, to caution that Reitemeyer signed a sworn statement—because he bragged to his girlfriend and others that he was an assassin—that stated he had not received assassination training at Fort Holabird. In the article, Knoll further noted that the impetus for the Congressional hearings were the articles and opinions of

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215 Ibid., 6.

journalists, rather than any factual accounts of the Phoenix Program. The Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for East Asian Affairs added that Phoenix made “every effort ‘to capture and reorient former members of the VCI toward support of the government of Vietnam and to obtain information from them about the VCI.’”

The article stated that the Phoenix Program instilled little regard for human life or for justice, programming the Americans and South Vietnamese to care only about meeting monthly kill quotas and to ignore any moral implications connected with their missions. The article credited Reitemeyer and Cohn’s honorable discharges as concrete proof of the lieutenants’ honesty and integrity. The article’s authors opined, “This ruthless system, it appears, has achieved much of what it was designed to achieve.”

The Phoenix Program employed mercenaries who fought the VCI without restraint and the American advisors chose to remain silent about any atrocities. Phoenix exemplified, to these authors and many of those opposed to these tactics, all that was wrong with the U.S. involvement in Vietnam. Under increasing pressure from anti-war activists armed with these types of articles, the members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee called for the officials of the Phoenix Program and CORDS to come to Washington D.C. to explain their program and answer the allegations of torture and assassinations.

Fulbright Hearings

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219 Ibid., 25.
Senator J. William Fulbright of Arkansas was the Democratic chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee during the Vietnam War and held a series of hearings on the war from 1966 to 1971. After initially approving President Johnson’s Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, Fulbright later turned against the war and subsequently published several critiques of the American justification for the war. The congressional hearings involving CORDS officials lasted eight days in February and March 1970 and entailed hours of statistics and other droll facts designed to coax committee members and the media into losing interest in Phoenix and convince Americans that the program worked. This ensured that the committee and those against Phoenix’s strategies lost interest before hearing the negative aspects and failures of the program. Phoenix gained the support of the Nixon administration—especially Henry Kissinger—because the U.S. intended the Vietnamese to assume control of the program when American involvement in the war declined.

CORDS Director William Colby began his statement by providing background on the Phoenix Program, touting its ability to bring “together the police, and military, and the other government organizations to contribute knowledge and act against the enemy infrastructure. It secures information about the enemy organization, identifies the individuals who make it up, and conducts operations against them.” This openly disputed the “Murder Incorporated” title given to the Phoenix Program by the media. According to Colby, Phoenix did not involve assassinations or torture, rather it ensured

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220 Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, Hearings Before the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, Ninety-First Congress, Second Session on Civil Operations and Rural Development Support Program, 91st Cong., 2nd sess., 17 February 1970, 6. [hereafter referred to as Committee on Foreign Relations, Hearings Before the Committee on Foreign Relations].
the “ability of the farmer to sleep in his home at night without fear of guerrillas forging, conscripting, or taxing. This security is provided by local forces and militia, permanently protecting the community while the regular troops operate against larger regular enemy units.” Equally, Phoenix continued American assistance in the development of the South Vietnamese infrastructure, providing tools and construction materials for projects and instilling villagers with self-determination. By sending the Vietnamese villagers and their provincial chiefs to training courses, they could successfully lead their communities without relying too heavily on Saigon. By assisting refugees, developing informational courses on citizens’ rights and privileges, and creating programs for stimulating the economy, Colby presented Phoenix as a well-crafted, supremely benevolent program rather than another poorly planned attempt at pacification.

Much like the committee members, Colby also prepared for this hearing by reading published media reports on Phoenix and planned his responses accordingly. Considering himself the father of the Phoenix Program, Colby sat before the Committee and defended the program against accusations that the U.S. intentionally sanctioned murdering of innocent civilians. Though he exaggerated the amount of support received from the Thieu regime and ignored the ramped repression and use of torture, Colby assured the committee that the Vietnamese controlled all levels of the Phoenix Program and that American involvement remained minimal. Despite media claims that American advisors and SEALs ran the operations, Colby asserted, “The territorial security forces are Vietnamese. The police are Vietnamese. The local hamlet and village chiefs are

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221 Committee on Foreign Relations, *Hearings Before the Committee on Foreign Relations*, 4.
Vietnamese … In a people’s war in Vietnam, the people engaged in it will be Vietnamese.” Colby later acknowledged that Americans were involved in Phoenix through the provision of weapons, funds, recommendations, intelligence, and other assistance facilitated through CORDS. This gave the ultimate responsibility of maintaining the Phoenix Program to the Americans, while the Vietnamese provided the manpower.

Colby noted the Phoenix Program’s positive results of the change of strategy. He claimed as successes the GVN’s accelerated pacification focus, the retaking of territory lost during the Tet Offensive, the growth of the village infrastructure, and the success in identifying and removing VCI sympathizers from South Vietnamese ranks, proved Phoenix’s effectiveness. Any negative reports resulted from exaggerations, falsehoods, or operations conducted by non-Phoenix personnel. In conclusion, Colby expressed optimism for the future, while avoiding any prediction of an ultimate victory. For the Phoenix Program to work, a number of things had to happen. For one, the U.S. government needed to continue its support and the GVN needed to commit its full resources to the program. Secondly, the policy of steady withdrawals needed to ignore Phoenix personnel. The committee questioned Colby’s wavering prediction and the necessary conditions required for success, wondering if, despite all of the statistics and explanations, Colby actually believed that the Phoenix Program would work. Like many U.S. officials before him, Colby assured the committee of his optimism, but reminded them that there was still work to be done:

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222 Committee on Foreign Relations, *Hearings Before the Committee on Foreign Relations*, 8.
At night there are still guerrillas in Vietnam, and the roads open in the day are deserted and dark, occasionally criss-crossed by contending local forces…Some officials have by no means caught the spirit of the village community and endeavor to assert their Mandrinal privileges of dictation from above. There are still refugees and others whose lives have been blighted by the war who must be helped to a decent place in society. Most of all, North Vietnamese divisions are over the border or in jungle redoubts, and prepare for other sallies against South Vietnam.\textsuperscript{223}

Success required continued assistance by the U.S. government and the existence of pacification efforts like Phoenix. South Vietnam could indeed survive and prosper, and because of the Phoenix Program, the NLF suffered major setbacks.

Senator Fulbright, however, questioned the director of CORDS of his knowledge of the overall strategy of the war. Important for the Senator, why should the U.S. continue to sacrifice American lives in Vietnam when very little concrete progress was made and why should the American people care about the South Vietnamese when the GVN is incompetent? Colby retorted by reciting the overall mission of Truman’s Cold War policy: to stop the spread of Communism and ensure the continued security of the U.S.\textsuperscript{224}

Fulbright, however, suspected that the U.S. intended to stay in Vietnam for a long time, despite the Nixon administration’s claim of the opposite. In order to sustain a U.S. presence, the North Vietnamese and NLF had to be destroyed. The Phoenix Program was the required tool to achieve that elusive goal of identifying and removing suspected enemies within South Vietnam, thereby weakening any attempted invasion by the North Vietnamese. Such actions would commit large numbers of American forces in Vietnam.

\textsuperscript{223} Committee on Foreign Relations, \textit{Hearings Before the Committee on Foreign Relations}, 13.

\textsuperscript{224} Ibid., 15-17.
for the foreseeable future. Colby disagreed with Fulbright’s rationale, saying, “I believe, Mr. Chairman, that the Vietnamese would not fall in love with us if they thought we were going to stay.”

Instead, Colby asserted, the continued U.S. presence in Vietnam would ensure the survival of South Vietnam in the short term as the GVN assumed greater responsibility for its own defense. Colby felt the increased support and success of the Phoenix Program provided the necessary foundation, allowing the GVN to continue the effort without massive numbers of U.S. combat troops. In fact, the NLF specifically mentioned the Phoenix Program in its reports to local village chiefs and urged caution because Phoenix had more success in identifying and eliminating the VCI.

Proving the Phoenix Program’s detrimental effect on the VCI during its first two years also became difficult to estimate. The VCI ranks fluctuated regularly—especially with influxes of North Vietnamese—and Colby could not provide a definitive answer for the number of enemy neutralized. Indeed, tens of thousands defected from the NLF since 1963 and these defections increased as Phoenix became more efficient at capturing VCI members and turning them into informants. However, what increasingly became a point of contention was not necessarily overall numbers but the topic of assassination.

The committee wished to understand the effect of the “other war” on Vietnam, learning from Colby that over one hundred thousand Vietnamese were refugees and several thousand more fell victim to selective assassination. Just as Phoenix targeted VCI leadership and other important cadre, Colby elaborated on the VCI death squads after

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225 Committee on Foreign Relations, *Hearings Before the Committee on Foreign Relations*, 24.

226 Ibid., 28-29.

227 Ibid., 33.
competent village officials and other GVN supporters. Colby emphasized these assassinations in order to highlight the image of Viet Cong death squads, rather than the PRUs. Through Colby’s testimony, it was clear that civilians were paying a heavy price in this war. “For 1969 there were a little over 6,000 people who were killed, of those about 1,200 were selective assassinations. There were about 15,000 wounded and about 6,000 abducted.”\(^{228}\) However shocking these figures may have appeared to the committee, it was Colby’s mentioning of the words “terrorism” and “assassination” that brought the topic responsible for the hearings to the forefront.

Every military and intelligence officer brought before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee swore that Phoenix was not an assassination program. Each described different aspects of the operation, from providing economic and humanitarian aid to assisting in the resettlement of refugees. Colby and the others focused on the claims of increasingly positive reaction towards the South Vietnamese government and avoided those details describing how the program removed the Communist threat to the GVN.\(^{229}\) There were indeed yearly and monthly quotas that consisted of killed, captured, or surrendered cadre, but the “kill quotas” did not officially exist. The preferred result was capture or rally—especially for cadre labeled as leaders within the VCI. Colby admitted to the committee that there were excesses and problems in the beginning, but by 1970, the Phoenix Program cleaned up, expelled the malcontents, and now ran a more

\(^{228}\) Committee on Foreign Relations, *Hearings Before the Committee on Foreign Relations*, 38.

\(^{229}\) Ibid., 49.
efficient operation.\textsuperscript{230} Allegations of selective assassinations and torture—especially those put forth by Reitemeyer and Cohn—were false and against the training found at Fort Holabird.

U.S. personnel are under the same legal and moral constraints with respect to \textbf{regular military operations} against enemy units in the field. Thus, they are especially not authorized to engage in assassinations or other violations of the rules of land warfare, but they are entitled to use such reasonable military force as is necessary to obtain the goals of rallying, capturing, or eliminating the Viet Cong Infrastructure in the Republic of Viet-Nam.\textsuperscript{231}

Colby tried to clarify the elements of individual advisor, but could not provide the percentage of killed and captured within each month’s quota. Nor could he definitively answer how many of the 20,000 VCI neutralizations came about through excesses or violations. This question haunted Colby for the rest of his life. Colby swore that the Phoenix Program was not a counter-terror program, but the Committee reasoned that, if Colby could not testify that absolutely no assassinations, tortures, or executions took place, it could be possible that these violations were rife throughout the program. Questioned several times on this point, Colby refused to put forth a confident answer.\textsuperscript{232} In his memoirs, Colby justified his position by saying he could not possibly know the individual cause of every neutralization, and therefore, would not testify to such. He could only state that despite being in the middle of a war, Phoenix advisors made considerable efforts to prevent such atrocities and CORDS condemned such actions.\textsuperscript{233}

\textsuperscript{230} Committee on Foreign Relations, \textit{Hearings Before the Committee on Foreign Relations}, 59.

\textsuperscript{231} Ibid., 61. Emphasis in the original.

\textsuperscript{232} Ibid., 66.

\textsuperscript{233} Colby and Forbath, 279.
Despite numerous explanations of CORDS policy in regards to the Phoenix Program, more reports surfaced detailing violations and excesses, American advisors’ frustrations with their counterparts, and the general negative outlook on the overall war. Colby stood firm and staunchly defended the Phoenix Program, bringing with him to Washington, representatives from all levels of the Phoenix Program. Donald G. MacDonald, Director of USAID in Vietnam, testified to the developing South Vietnamese infrastructure, John Paul Vann spoke on the implementation of Phoenix at the Corps level, William K. Hitchcock discussed the refugee problem, and several junior officers and Non-Commissioned Officers (NCOs) shed light on Phoenix at the provincial level. Despite this onslaught of testimony, Fulbright remained unconvinced. “It raises extremely serious questions about our being able to cope with the conditions, our being able to build a good society using these means because I don’t think you can build a good society and an exemplary one using means such as have been described in article after article.” While Colby could not give solutions that eased the committee’s misgivings, he had hoped that, after hearing from all of his officers, Congress would continue its financial support of CORDS and the war.

The first day of hearings concluded with Colby listing the strides made since 1967 and his intentions for the future. Colby assured the committee that through the efforts of the Phoenix Program, more areas of the country came under government control and the territorial forces became a useful force in defending the land against the NLF. Phoenix

\[234\] Committee on Foreign Relations, *Hearings Before the Committee on Foreign Relations*, 2.

\[235\] Ibid., 75.
remained more important to the Americans than it did to the South Vietnamese; the Vietnamese units became more effective in acquiring intelligence and using it to their advantage. Although American advisors continually worked hard to continued operations while eliminating corruption and violations, they recognized the losing effort. The American people turned against the war, Nixon promised to find a “peace with honor” as the South Vietnamese took over more of the war effort, and advisors began receiving orders prohibiting them from going out into the field. They were to remain at the centers and await the results of the mission. Consequently, many advisors simply kept their heads down and counted the days until their tour ended.

In all, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee spent two weeks investigating CORDS and the Phoenix Program, listening to one expert after the other. The public lost interest in the hearings as statistics dominated the testimony, rather than lurid details of assassination and torture. In any case, the numerous reports of such incidents held the public’s attention far more than the testimony and the image of the Phoenix Program developed into a dark and secret operation. No amount of testimony could convince people otherwise. Colby returned to Washington periodically to speak with other members of Congress about Phoenix until the end of the program and America’s withdrawal from Vietnam in 1972. By that time—and when Nixon nominated Colby as Director of Central Intelligence—Phoenix was forever linked to American atrocities and failures in Southeast Asia. It was part of the larger war effort that seemed less likely to succeed as time went on and casualties mounted. Phoenix became guilty by association
because of the unpopularity of the war and numerous reported incidents of murder in American newspapers.
Chapter 5

Vietnamization

Richard Nixon’s election in 1968 brought forth a change of policy in Vietnam. Nixon promised to conclude the war and tasked his National Security Council with coming up with various viable options. He wanted a “peace with honor” and originally believed that one last offensive could bring the North Vietnamese to the negotiation table with the United States. However, public support for the war eroded after the Tet Offensive, convincing the public that the U.S. could not win the war. Despite this erupting turmoil at home, the war in Vietnam had shown signs of improvement. The American offensives throughout 1968 and 1969 saw the enemy thrown back into their sanctuaries in North Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos.

This time however, President Nixon and National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger decided to secretly attack those sanctuaries, possibly escalating the war further but potentially preventing the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) and National Liberation Front (NLF) soldiers from recuperating and launching new invasions of South Vietnam. U.S. air raids dropped bombs deeper into Cambodia, targeting the possible locations of the NLF’s headquarters.236 Despite this escalation, Nixon proceeded to inform General Creighton Abrams of the imminent U.S. withdrawal. This meant that Abrams and the U.S. war effort now had to do more with less indicating the end of Americanization.

efforts and a shift towards implementing the “Vietnamization” program. The Nixon Administration’s conflicting approach towards ending the Vietnam War made it a necessity to place more responsibility for fighting the war in the hands of the Thieu government.

The U.S. was the dominant partner in the long fight against the NVA and NLF since 1963, increasingly infuriating an American public that protested against the mounting casualties and the absence of tangible, large scale victories and the concomitant belief in the progress towards bringing U.S. forces home. To initiate Vietnamization, the Nixon Administration thus opted to push the South Vietnamese into a larger role in the war immediately by expanding efforts to train and equip of South Vietnam’s army. Rapidly increasing numbers of weapons and equipment flowed to the ARVN as American numbers in Vietnam began their decline. After years of the U.S. primarily running the war, American troops now largely switched to a supporting role towards the South Vietnamese. “Our principal objectives shifted to protecting the South Vietnamese at the village level, reestablishing the local political process, and winning the loyalty of the peasants by involving them in the government with economic opportunity.”

Reeling from the failed Tet Offensive, the NLF retreated, leaving the countryside open for the taking. On orders from Hanoi, members of the Viet Cong Infrastructure (VCI) identified themselves through their participation in the offensive and their public endorsements for a Communist overthrow of the Thieu government. When the Tet Offensive failed in its military goals and the expected Communist uprising never took

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place, these VCI cadres became exposed targets for Phoenix advisors. Thus, American advisors soon found peasants willing to identify VCI members and more began to rally to the government. South Vietnam survived one of the most audacious offensives of the war, while the NLF and NVA licked their wounds in sanctuaries in Cambodia, Laos, and North Vietnam.

The Phoenix Program had success in 1969 and 1970 when record numbers of VCI killed and peasants rallied to the government occurred. Alongside the military successes and the gradual improvement in the quality of South Vietnamese forces, Phoenix also accelerated the pacification programs in the countryside and netted more VCI. These successes were also due in part to the losses sustained by the NLF during the Tet Offensive. They simply could not replace tens of thousands of experienced guerrilla fighters in the short term. This compelled the NLF to retreat in order to receive reinforcements from the North, especially in light of the fact that NLF members found it increasingly difficult to find the same level of support in the countryside they had enjoyed before the offensive. The Phoenix Program took advantage of this reversal by increasing the pressure on local political cadres. Because NLF members had to travel with armed bodyguards in the countryside, the Phoenix teams quickly learned the identities of the cadres, their relatives, and their habitual tendencies while travelling. This often made their capture even more certain.

Equally, Phoenix experienced an improvement in the quality of the American advisors because the on the job training gave way to structured intelligence courses found at Fort Holabird and other stateside centers. From on a purely military standpoint, the
U.S. was finally starting to win the war. Communist forces retreated under the pressure of crippling bombing campaigns and Phoenix activities. Such conditions convinced many Phoenix officials and advisors that, with more time, U.S. efforts would crush the NLF infrastructure.

Thus, it was the intensified bombing campaign, increased training and supply for the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), and the accelerated pacification campaign that supplemented the U.S. troop withdrawals and paralleled the ongoing peace talks in Paris. When the North Vietnamese refused to budge on an issue, the U.S. military intensified its efforts. When Kissinger considered negotiations more successful, the intensity declined. Peter Kann of The Wall Street Journal believed the Phoenix Program was “related to the Paris negotiations. When peace comes, South Vietnam’s claims to control the countryside will be strongest where the VCI cadre are fewest.”238 As long as the Thieu government could control much of the countryside, especially without the assistance of American combat troops, South Vietnam held a better position at the negotiating table and the U.S. could continue to support them without incurring losses in American lives. In the race to achieve a peaceful outcome to the Vietnam War, Nixon’s Vietnamization program forced Phoenix to produce results in the face of dwindling windows of opportunity. It was, Vietnamization, ultimately, that led to the failure and shutdown of the Phoenix Program.

When Nixon, Kissinger, and Abrams decreased the number of American combat troops in Vietnam, the overall effectiveness of counterinsurgency activities against the

238 Young, The Vietnam Wars, 240.
NLF and NVA suffered a decline. Vietnamization thrust more responsibility onto the shoulders of the South Vietnamese and transferred all intelligence over to the police forces. Phoenix advisors such as Stuart Herrington and John Cook remained in Vietnam as long as they could, but by 1972, almost every advisor had left the country. The South Vietnamese soon abandoned the pacification campaign as the North Vietnamese began their assault in 1974, culminating with the Saigon Offensive and the destruction of South Vietnam. The erosion of the essential components of the U.S. pacification effort influenced the overall decline in the effectiveness of the Phoenix Program.

The Chieu Hoi Program

It was official policy to welcome enemy deserters back into the government’s fold without facing consequences. South Vietnam initially suffered from military coups and incompetence, allowing the NLF to make considerable gains in the countryside and deterring any significant support of the South Vietnamese government. However, starting in 1963 at the urging of American advisors, defectors began to learn of a Chieu Hoi program through government propaganda campaigns and Phoenix teams seeking to acquire new intelligence. Chieu Hoi, or “Open Arms,” presented NLF defectors with the opportunity to surrender to the government. “Propaganda teams deliver personal letters by the thousands to homes of suspected Viet Cong, some frankly designed to so
compromise a Viet Cong that he is forced to defect to save his life.” Chieu Hoi was established during the early years of the war by offering exoneration without penalty in exchange for information, especially in cases where the defector may not have a choice. The program floundered for years under the Diem and Thieu regimes, but received greater importance due to the Phoenix Program. Phoenix and the Chieu Hoi program assisted each other as defectors often had intelligence to share and wished to return to their former lives. Chieu Hoi made it possible for those tired of fighting and sacrificing to return home. Defectors faced grave repercussions if the NLF returned, but American firepower made remaining with the NLF far more dangerous. They defected to the government to survive.

Chieu Hoi also held many similarities with Phoenix when processing and interrogating those NLF members who surrendered to the government. These defectors were interviewed and, if they had any information on the VCI, transferred to the local Phoenix center. There they received a meal, a bath, some money, and a chance to visit their families. The goal of these incentives was to turn the defectors into informants, enabling the advisors to send them back to the countryside to urge other members of VCI to recommit to the South Vietnamese government. As Phoenix advisor Jim Ward said, “The great thing about the Chieu Hoi program is that we didn’t have to put people in jails or process them through the judicial system, which was already overcrowded. You could talk to Chieu Hois when you brought them in—talk to them about what the government

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was doing for the people.” The Chieu Hoi program facilitated discussions between NLF members and government soldiers on the strengths and weaknesses of each system. Each Communist received heavy doses of propaganda and entered South Vietnam with the belief that they fought to free their Southern brethren from tyranny and enslavement. Chieu Hoi and the Phoenix advisors sought to undermine and countermand the communist propaganda, convincing the defectors that Hanoi lied to them. At times, some still refused to realign themselves with the Government of South Vietnam (GVN) and they would be transferred to one of South Vietnam’s many prisons. On the other hand, those willing to consider the American or South Vietnamese offer found their lives made immediately easier and opened the door to someday returning home.

As the Nixon administration escalated operations against North Vietnamese sanctuaries while scaling back the U.S. presence, the Phoenix Program struggled to meet the monthly goals. This led to the cutting of corners and a rise in deceptive record keeping and outright falsifications. Chieu Hoi’s downfall mirrored the erosion of the Phoenix Program. Chieu Hoi suffered from the American withdrawal because the overall numbers of defectors aligning to the GVN decreased. The South Vietnamese abandoned the program completely, when confronted with another major invasion by the NVA, people lost faith in the government and Communist soldiers refused to defect to a government bound to fall. The shadow government survived this assault and flourished with the fall of Saigon.

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241 Ibid., 281.
Phoenix Has Success

Vietnam was now Nixon’s war. He won the 1968 election with the promise to end the war and now he had to put his plan into action. The public gave the new administration time to do so, but Nixon knew he faced mounting pressure to end the conflict and using any escalation to end the war would unleash public outcry. While Kissinger remained in Paris to negotiate a ceasefire, Nixon hoped that U.S. airpower could weaken the NLF and NVA and coerce the North Vietnamese to the negotiating table. Nixon called for the intense bombing of Communist sanctuaries in Cambodia, but the campaign did not have the desired effect as Hanoi refused to negotiate. In response, Nixon ordered an invasion of Cambodia using ARVN divisions and American airpower. The purpose of the mission was twofold: first, Nixon wanted to see if the ARVN could take over the war once the U.S. withdrew. If Vietnamization remained official policy, the South Vietnamese forces had to prove themselves worthy. If they failed, the American people could demand an immediate withdrawal of all personnel at any cost. South Vietnam could not survive such a sudden abandonment. Secondly, by invading Cambodia, Nixon argued that the U.S. was ensuring the country’s neutrality and eliminating the threat to Cambodian independence. A pro-American regime under General Lon Nol took power in Cambodia from Prince Norodom Sihanouk and requested

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assistance from the U.S. This request, and the Communist occupation of regions of Cambodia, gave the U.S. reason to invade.

Nixon’s advisors recommended the use of South Vietnamese ground troops to cut down on American casualties and using overwhelming air power to clear a path for the ARVN divisions. The advisors believed such carpet bombing would inflict enough damage upon the enemy. As the South Vietnamese divisions crossed into Cambodia and the U.S. Air Force launched its massive bombing sorties, Phoenix achieved its record numbers. The bombing sorties from a B-52 frightened NVA and NLF soldiers on the ground and they sought safety from the Saigon government. Phoenix welcomed these defectors warmly as the VCI weakened from the loss of cadre. American advances in the thirteenth year of the war convinced them that the Saigon government would win the war. Official reports gave the number of defectors at 4,832 in 1969 and 7,745 in 1970.\footnote{Mark Moyar, \textit{Phoenix and the Birds of Prey: Counterinsurgency and Counterterrorism in Vietnam} (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 236. Adapted from “Vietnamization of the Phung Hoang (Phoenix) Program,” discussion paper, 18 September 1972, U.S. Army Center of Military History, Washington, D.C., 1.}

Despite these successes, the NLF and VCI refused to surrender. In an effort to make their cause more legitimate to the rest of the world, the political groups within the NLF formed the Provisionary Revolutionary Government (PRG) in June 1969, claiming to truly represent the South Vietnamese people.\footnote{Valentine, \textit{The Phoenix Program}, 280.} Communist nations throughout the world recognized the PRG, but the U.S. refused. Although the various political cadre and VCI networks reorganized to accommodate and assist the PRG, Phoenix ignored this recent development and continued targeting only VCI. Phoenix improved to the point in
1969 that it actually met its stated goals with police forces performing consistent operations and territorial forces improving in their protection of villages. Although the overall quality of leadership within Saigon did not improve, the village chiefs did assume more responsibility because of Phoenix. The military and police each had areas of responsibility, with the majority of the attacks on the VCI coming from the police and ARVN fighting for large swaths of territory. After one year of existence, the Phoenix advisors finally understood how to take the fight to the VCI.

The measure of success for Phoenix relied on statistics. From the estimated number of VCI to the number of neutralizations throughout Phoenix’s existence, statistics provided officials and politicians with absolute numbers to report to the public. The statistics showed the number of neutralizations increasing every year until the end of the program. Phoenix acquired these statistics through a variety of means, though none without difficulty. Phoenix personnel had to check the battle sites and count the number of dead. Otherwise, the advisors relied on the reports of the police or territorial forces—reports that were not always accurate—because they refused to go out into the field. Other problems with the statistics included the enemy’s ability to remove or bury their dead before the advisors or police forces could count them and the inability to correctly identify members of the VCI. Unlike defectors, deserters wanted no part of the conflict and made their way home or disappeared into one South Vietnam’s large cities, without surrendering to the government or offering intelligence on the VCI. While this did further deplete the VCI ranks and deterred future recruitment, it did not assist Phoenix. Deserters faced the risk of death at the hands of their former comrades or arrest by the government.
for the failure to have an identification card. Defectors usually experienced too much of
the war’s ugly side and risked everything to flee the war. These deserters rarely were
high-level cadre with much information, rather low-level cadre with little loyalty to
Communism or intelligence on the VCI.

According to reports from the Hamlet Evaluation System (HES), the pacification
effort had noticeable success in the countryside. This system, used by the CIA and
CORDS, provided a security rating for every hamlet in South Vietnam. “The HES forms
required entry of a wide variety of information about the military and political activities
of the two adversaries in each hamlet, such as the number of Communist military actions
and the presence of the GVN hamlet chief.”245 U.S. advisors conducted the evaluations
each month for the hamlets in the beginning, but they soon gave way to the South
Vietnamese. Statistics and opinions molded the evaluation for each hamlet, often leading
to inaccurate conclusions. “Some of the Americans and the South Vietnamese, they
asserted, did not have enough time or desire to check the hamlets themselves, so they
relied on the opinions of others or simply created data that seemed reasonable.”246 A
poorly rated hamlet reflected negatively on the local personnel, so both advisors and
chiefs manipulated the findings to earn a higher rating.

Because of Phoenix, the VCI sustained significant losses, and in some locations,
saw the complete destruction of their network. Political cadre refusing to leave their
hideouts, Hanoi sending Northerners south to fill the ranks of the VCI and the peasants

245 Moyar, Phoenix and the Birds of Prey, 258.
246 Ibid.
turning to the government for support, all became evidence of Phoenix’s success. The
difference between Phoenix’s first two years in operation and the later years was
improved hamlet security.  In the mid-1960s, U.S. and ARVN units attacked large
Communist forces and then moved on once the area was clear of the enemy. As a result,
the NLF later returned to continue their work. However, by 1969, territorial forces
remained in the area to provide security and ensure the NLF could not return. “Finally it
became impossible for concentrated forces to conduct military operations or even to
move in groups larger than half a dozen individuals.” A constant government presence
dissuaded the VCI from returning to a region without armed bodyguards. The invasion of
Cambodia sought to expand that strategy by attacking NLF sanctuaries. Stuart Herrington
said the invasion, “denied the convenience of their medical facilities, schools,
ammunition dumps, and food storage sites.” Not only did the NLF lose vital supplies,
but individual cadre now realized there was no place to hide from the Americans. Had the
ARVN divisions pushed forward, the entire NLF infrastructure lay vulnerable to
destruction. Instead, the ARVN units retreated in confusion after facing minimal
resistance and the operation crumbled. The disappointing end of the Cambodian invasion
allowed the VCI and NLF to survive and fight another day, while Cambodia was left in a
state of turmoil.

Schiffer Military History, 1997), 167.

248 Jeffery Race, War Comes to Long An: Revolutionary Conflict in a Vietnamese Province
(Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), 271.

249 Stuart A. Herrington, Stalking the Vietcong: Inside Operation Phoenix: A Personal Account
(New York: Ballantine Books, 1982), 34. Originally published as Silence was a Weapon: The Vietnam War
The Vietnamese Opinion of Phoenix

The NLF paid little attention to Phoenix in the early years because the program was unsuccessful in derailing the NLF’s plan to create a shadow government to rival the one in Saigon. By 1969, this changed and political cadre warned each other to remain vigilant in the field, lest they run into Phoenix personnel. High-level cadre rarely leaving their sanctuaries, especially without bodyguards, was evidence of Phoenix’s impact. After the war, former NLF leaders acknowledged Phoenix’s impact beyond the accepted statistics published in the U.S. They claimed the Phoenix Program eliminated far more than the claimed 21,000 VCI. “The grassroots party organization suffered heavy losses—hundreds of thousands of cadres and party members sacrificed their lives or were sent to prison.”[^250] This number was an exaggeration because Party officials blamed every loss on Phoenix, rather than examining the various agencies that worked alongside the program. Nevertheless, the statement reveals that the NLF had trouble replenishing the ranks after years of fighting against Phoenix and the loss of so many VCI members harmed the movement in the South. As NLF correspondence reported, “the expansion of the guerrilla warfare has been slow and limited, and thus failed to meet the requirements dictated by the General Offensive and Uprising Campaign. It is not yet widespread and strong enough to successfully play its strategic role.”[^251]

[^250]: Moyar, 246.

[^251]: Ibid., 244.
In response to the NLF’s growing inability to function in the countryside, Northerners came south to fill the ranks of the NLF and continue the insurgency. However, the Northerners were foreigners to the South Vietnamese and unwelcome in their villages. Thus, as Phoenix continued its attack on the infrastructure, its advisors found the job becoming easier as peasants informed on these “foreign” VCI cadre members. For the South Vietnamese peasants, informing the government of the presence of the VCI became easier because the NLF had lost its ability to incite fear and retribution in the villages. In the mid-1960s, the NLF intimidated those opposed to Communism through threats and violence. People feared to inform the government of communist infiltration because the NLF controlled the countryside, a clear indicator that Saigon could not protect its own people. Political cadre prophesized to the villagers about the advantages of Communism, while demonizing the Saigon government as corrupt and a puppet to the West.\(^{252}\) The temporary presence of American troops in a region only added to the NLF’s legitimacy as the true and lasting defenders of Vietnam. The Saigon government appeared weak and unable to protect its citizens. Phoenix, however, worked to reverse this trend.

The battle for the countryside was vicious and innocents often found themselves in the middle of the war. The peasants experienced abuses from both the Phoenix Program and the VCI. Intelligence acquired by Phoenix led to the arrest of thousands each year and in some cases, the information was faulty and the suspect innocent. These suspects might be released immediately or perhaps face several months of abuse. One ex-

\(^{252}\) Herrington, *Stalking the Vietcong*, 171.
cadre said, “The people didn’t dare say anything, but they were dissatisfied because there were innocent people who were arrested and killed. They denounced the ARVN’s doings—destructi ons, seizing of poultry and harsh words with the people who hadn’t given information about the VC…” The system was not perfect. Although the peasants expected and accepted some levels of corruption, some South Vietnamese officials took corruption to new levels. The VCI hassled the peasants, collected taxes and supplies, and demanded their support in the struggle against the government. In return for the peasants’ complacency, the VCI did not harm the people. However, those who resisted the NLF faced violent repercussions. Even those not openly supporting the NLF passively allowed them free reign of the area. Another ex-cadre said of the VCI:

As for the Front, the people ridiculed the VC by saying that they called themselves revolutionaries but they only hid among the people and caused them many sufferings. People got killed because of bombs and bullets which were meant primarily for the VC. If the liberation fighters were so brave why didn’t they live outside of the village and save people from having to bear the strafing?  

Frustrations grew as the war waged among the people and the elderly, women, and children became victims. The side that could protect the peasants and provide for them earned their loyalty. The Phoenix centers that successfully won over the local populace often successfully disabled the local VCI network.

Frustrations Ever Present

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253 Moyar, 296.
254 Ibid., 284.
255 Ibid., 302.
The VCI was far larger than a single local network. Its size and bureaucratic structure rivaled that in Saigon. Far more than a guerilla warfare force, the VCI consisted of political committees, standard military units, logistical support units, and other agencies that spread throughout South Vietnam.\textsuperscript{256} Not only was it the goal to win over the local population—much as it was for the GVN—but to root themselves into the region. The Americans and GVN needed an organized and unified response to defeat the “shadow government.” Phoenix was designed to create such a front, but soon bogged down in the fight against the most visible portion of the infrastructure—the political cadre, armed NLF soldiers, and their supporters—but the invisible political motivations, the hearts and minds of the South Vietnamese people, remained a tougher nut to crack. Phoenix teams could purge areas of VCI, but the Communist ideology remained.

In mid-1969, the CIA decided to end its participation in the Phoenix Program. Several factors explain this, although corruption and violations plaguing the program pushed the CIA to disassociate with Phoenix.\textsuperscript{257} This development had consequences. CIA officers had spent years in the country, developing relationships and training the Vietnamese in counterinsurgency techniques. By contrast, the military intelligence officers received several months of training before arriving at their posts and advising the local forces. As military advisors began to quickly outnumber those from the CIA, the level of quality receded. The military advisors needed time to develop new relationships while simultaneously attacking the VCI. Along with a loss in personnel quality, the


\textsuperscript{257} Dale Andradé, \textit{Ashes to Ashes: The Phoenix Program and the Vietnam War} (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1990), 133.
departure of CIA personnel meant the loss of a rich line of funding. Now the operation budget came from the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam’s (MACV) budget and advisors found they could no longer operate as they had in the past. They now needed to justify their expenses, pay informers less, and only call for helicopters or artillery when necessary. Neither the CIA nor the military wanted the involvement of the other and both sides sought the other’s removal. The CIA advisors controlled the money and operated as they saw fit, at times failing to inform the other Phoenix teams of their intentions. As a result, Phoenix suffered from an inefficient chain of command with the two sides working against each other, until the CIA had enough. On July 1, the CIA gave control of Phoenix over to MACV.

In response to the CIA withdrawal, Phoenix officials decided the loose umbrella organization system was not sufficient to maintain the various intelligence organizations and pursued a plan of strengthening Vietnamese participation through integration into the National Police. This transition gave Phoenix the support of all Saigon government agencies and expanded the fight against the VCI to include all South Vietnamese. Phoenix acquired public relations bureaus to improve its image and play to the traditions of the Vietnamese. The Phoenix bird became an acceptable and honorable image, encouraging more people to fight the VCI.

CIA officer Orrin DeForest had a low opinion of Phoenix. As a Phoenix senior advisor from 1968 to 1969, he experienced the flaws of the program from the lack of

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258 Andradé, *Ashes to Ashes*, 134.

259 Ibid., 127.
support from Saigon, the inexperienced advisors sent by the military and the CIA, the
failing interrogation centers, and the lack of proper intelligence gathering techniques.\textsuperscript{260} He agreed with the CIA’s decision to abandon Phoenix because he believed the
neutralization statistics were phony and Phoenix centers claimed other operations as its
own. The numbers William Colby reported to Congress were the results of provincial and
regional briefings without much evidence to prove them true or false.\textsuperscript{261} As a result,
DeForest refused to work with Phoenix and like the CIA, moved away from the
controversial program. He later established his own version of the Phoenix Program with
CIA and trusted Vietnamese personnel.

South Vietnamese participation in Phoenix remained a source of disappointment,
however. As a frustrated senior province advisor reported, “The enemy has the ability
and capability to do almost anything he chooses at any time. Conversely, friendly forces
also have the ability and capability to do anything they want at any time they choose, but
they do not appear to want to do anything at any time.”\textsuperscript{262} As a result, the program relied
on the efficiency of the American advisors, rather than that of the South Vietnamese.
Such a state of affairs could not ensure the future success of Phoenix once the Americans
departed.

At the end of the 1960s, Robert Thompson, the British counterinsurgency expert,
came out in opposition to the continuing American war effort and the pacification

\textsuperscript{260} Orrin DeForest and David Chanoff, \textit{Slow Burn: The Rise and Bitter Fall of American

\textsuperscript{261} Ibid., 54-5.

\textsuperscript{262} Moyar, 266.
programs. Having gained experience fighting a Communist insurgency in Malaya, Thompson accepted U.S. requests to assist in the development of a counterinsurgency plan for Vietnam. He found the strategies he suggested either failed to work in Vietnam or were ignored altogether. The problem, Thompson believed, was the U.S. fought a limited war, while North Vietnam pursued an unlimited strategy. “Power can be applied but not brute force. Massive retaliation is not the successor to the gunboat. It is, therefore, no good ‘winning’ in such a way that the power and prestige of the United States lose their credibility.”

U.S. military victories could not defeat the political movement spreading throughout the land alone. Instead, a military and political strategy was required to defeat the NLF. The North Vietnamese did not suffer from constant attacks as experienced in the South. Even Phoenix faced restrictions in the limited war. Calls for artillery or air support needed verification and permission from a senior officer, the focus on destroying the larger guerrilla units throughout the 1960s meant pacification held little importance by the chiefs of MACV, and the demand for visible results and the reliance on statistics led to falsifications. This was not the strategy that saved Malaya from a Communist takeover, nor was it the strategy suggested and designed by Thompson during the early years of the war.

The U.S. killed hundreds of thousands of enemy soldiers, cadre, and insurgents, but failed to win the war. This was due to the assumption that if the number of casualties reached a certain number, North Vietnam would call for peace. Instead, it was the amount of American casualties that shortened the war. Thompson quoted an American general, “I

can go on killing Viet Cong for ever [sic] but where’s that going to get us?\textsuperscript{264} Attrition had no place in pacification as the goal was to eliminate the enemy’s ability to function and win over the loyalty of the people, not to kill as many as one could in order to claim an area for the government.

In a similar vein, Robert Komer, the first director of Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS), wrote a scathing report on Phoenix for the RAND Corporation in 1970. In his report, Komer believed Phoenix came too late to change the outcome of the war and required too much American involvement. “To date, Phung Hoang has been a small poorly managed and largely ineffective effort, though some attrition of the VC infrastructure has taken place.”\textsuperscript{265} As the Saigon government weakened, Phoenix’s task became more difficult. Part of the reason behind the American involvement in the program stemmed from the need to bring the program online quickly and begin the Accelerated Pacification process. As a result, Phoenix employed some of the worst South Vietnamese police and territorial forces available since they remained idle in the war.\textsuperscript{266} Over time, the American advisors improved the Vietnamese forces and created an efficient pacification program. The lasting impact of Phoenix was difficult to assess as many factors led to the decline of the NLF and VCI. Sheer exhaustion of launching failed offensives, the U.S. and South Vietnamese counteroffensives that drove

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item[264] Thompson, \textit{No Exit From Vietnam}, 135.
\item[266] Ibid., 2-3.
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the NLF from population centers and the violent NLF coercion tactics all played a role in the increasing influence of the government and need inclusion.

Komer’s report shocked those who knew his role in creating the pacification doctrine and the Phoenix Program. He did acknowledge Phoenix’s contributions to the pacification effort with the identification of the different aspects of the infrastructure, preventing VCI activities, and eliminating its members. During the period of 1968-1970, Phoenix reported the neutralization of over 40,000 VCI and “the important point is that the growing, if belated, focus on neutralizing the VC politico-military apparatus as well as insurgent military strength has probably seriously reduced insurgent capabilities.”

He concluded that despite being a flawed program, it contributed to the short-term improvement of Saigon’s ability to fight the insurgency and control the countryside. He hoped that pacification would continue after the American withdrawal, especially since the South Vietnamese had all of the tools necessary to maintain a successful pacification effort.

The Easter Offensive

Phoenix showed its worth in the spring of 1972 when the NVA and NLF launched a massive conventional attack on South Vietnam. The battles of the previous two years hurt the NVA’s ability to recuperate, although they also revealed the extent of ARVN’s reliance on American support. Feeling confident that its new army could avoid the

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267 Komer, Impact of Pacification on Insurgency in South Vietnam, 12.
mistakes of the Tet Offensive four years earlier, Hanoi ordered the attack to take advantage of the American withdrawal and the perceived poor quality of ARVN. Hanoi also relied on events in the U.S. to prevent a large scale American response. In this, Hanoi miscalculated. Nixon refused to let any domestic turmoil affect his war decision making. The multi-pronged offensive used conventional units of infantry, artillery, and armor. One prong moved through the center of the country towards Saigon. A second prong moved through Laos to attack Hue, and the third marched through Cambodia to invade southern South Vietnam. However, instead of the South Vietnamese fleeing in the face of the advancing enemy, ARVN divisions held, fighting to defend their homes. American airpower transported troops to weak points in the line and dropped thousands of tons of bombs on NVA positions.

Assisting the Southern preparation for the coming attack, Phoenix centers received intelligence of enemy build-ups and signs of a future invasion. Defectors, fearful of death in the new offensive, approached Phoenix advisors with information about the plans of attack. Hai Tiet, a captain in the NLF, decided to rally to the government in December 1971 and quickly revealed his knowledge of the invasion plan to Stuart Herrington. Rumors of massing tank units gave the appearance of an invasion using everything in the NVA arsenal and Tiet’s knowledge led to the capture of several guerrilla units preparing for the grand assault. Phoenix centers around the country reported similar signs of an upcoming invasion. Although Phoenix activities ceased

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269 Herrington, 91-2.
during the offensive as throwing back the NVA became the focus, Phoenix advisors armed themselves and prepared for an enemy assault alongside their territorial forces and PRU teams. Acquired intelligence allowed American bombers to launch air strikes with pinpoint accuracy. By May, the offensive stalled and the NVA divisions became easy targets for ARVN and American bombers. Finally, in June, ARVN launched a counteroffensive that threw back the enemy and inflicted heavy casualties. By August, the NVA limped back into North Vietnam and the policy of Vietnamization proved to be effective. Once the danger passed, Phoenix centers came back online and renewed their efforts at identifying and eliminating the VCI. This task became easier as captured NVA and NLF soldiers chose to assist the government in return for fair treatment and new lives. The Easter Offensive proved to be far more costly than the Tet Offensive and crippled the NVA for three years. Peace talks renewed and a light at the end of the tunnel was in sight.

The Bitter End of Phoenix

The Easter Offensive turned out to be the last major operation for Phoenix. Peace talks continued in Paris and many believed the two sides were close to an agreement. Because of this, Phoenix advisors received instructions not to place themselves in any unnecessary danger, leaving the territorial forces to operate in the field alone. When

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270 Nixon, 151-2.
271 Herrington, 179.
the U.S. signed the Paris Peace Accords on January 27, 1973, a ceasefire went into effect and American military personnel withdrew from the country en masse. The U.S. continued its financial support of South Vietnam, but would not be there to assist unless North Vietnam blatantly violated the terms of the treaty. As long as the threat of U.S. retaliation loomed, the status quo remained. Hanoi released American prisoners of war and promised to negotiate with Saigon.\textsuperscript{272} Nixon and Kissinger finally achieved the honorable peace the American public demanded for a decade.

However, with this peace came the end of Phoenix. Dedicated advisors remained at their posts well beyond their original tours of duty, but the withdrawal of the American military included the military advisors. The CIA remained in the country, but the military departed, effectively ending the Phoenix Program. Saigon ordered the absorption of all Phoenix centers into the Phung Hoang Program as the South Vietnamese took over all aspects of the fight against the VCI, but this did not last long. All documents, intelligence, informants, and other aspects of Phoenix transferred over to Phung Hoang in order to continue the pacification effort, assuming the amount of American financial assistance remained the same. Beginning in 1974, the U.S. decreased funding to South Vietnam, forcing them to do more with less. As a result, programs such as Phung Hoang fell by the wayside, as the budget could no longer sustain the pacification effort. With no money to pay the territorial forces or informants, units simply disappeared and intelligence dried up. Even ARVN and the Saigon government itself suffered from the massive budget cuts. South Vietnam lost the ability to purchase basic war materials such

\textsuperscript{272} DeForest and Chanoff, \textit{Slow Burn}, 202-3.
as weapons, ammunition, and medical supplies. Hanoi saw the opportunity, launched another major offensive—this time throwing aside the decaying ARVN divisions—and marched on Saigon. Designed to make a major impact on the war, Phoenix went out with a whimper.

The Fall of Saigon

In 1975, after three years of rebuilding from the previous disaster, NVA units pushed through the demilitarized zone that divided the two countries and into South Vietnam. In the past, ARVN divisions supported by American airpower could hold off the NVA. This time, American planes remained on the ground. President Gerald Ford pleaded with Congress to increase aid to South Vietnam and launch a bombing campaign to stem the NVA tide, but Congress refused. The country wanted no part of Vietnam and South Vietnam was on its own. The ceasefire agreements signed in 1973 promised an American response to any Northern aggression, but when that aggression appeared, the U.S. chose not to act. Without American support, President Thieu knew the ARVN divisions could not hold back the enemy for very long and called for a retreat to link all of his forces together. American air superiority held back the NVA divisions for many years and now, without airpower to hold back the tide and ARVN drastically under supplied, Thieu could not hope to hold. Combined however, the ARVN divisions could outnumber the enemy and strike back. This call for retreat doomed the country. DeForest
and other Americans still in South Vietnam watched in horror as ARVN broke and pushed aside fleeing civilians in order to reach safety.

Instead of an orderly retreat of military units, civilians and soldiers alike saw it as an acknowledgement of defeat. Tens of thousands of Vietnamese refugees crowded the roads and bridges south, preventing the army divisions from linking together. As the South Vietnamese fled for their lives, the NVA destroyed ARVN piecemeal. While some divisions chose to stand and fight, others routed and disappeared. The NVA surrounded and killed both the heroic and cowardly alike. Some divisions made their way to the outskirts of Saigon, but were not enough to stop the NVA. On April 30, 1975, NVA tanks stormed the Presidential Palace and raised the Communist flag over the Southern capital. The last American personnel fled the country on helicopters while some South Vietnamese, fearful of a Communist victory, attempted to climb aboard the already over-capacity helicopters. DeForest feverously tried to ensure the safety of his Vietnamese staff because those who worked for the Saigon government faced painful indoctrination or worse in a Communist victory. The Vietnam War was over. Nixon wrote of the war’s conclusion, “It is vital that we learn the right lessons from that defeat. In Vietnam, we tried and failed in a just cause. ‘No more Vietnams’ can mean that we will not try again. It should mean that we will not fail again.”273

By the 1970s, the U.S. looked for ways out of the Vietnam War and found an avenue through the policy of Vietnamization. This policy bought the Nixon administration more time because the public saw an active attempt of disengagement

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273 Nixon, 237. Emphasis in the original.
from the war. The invasions of Cambodia and Laos hurt Nixon’s stock as they escalated the conflict, but Nixon’s decision to release the details of the North Vietnamese’s unreasonable demands to the American public gave Nixon the justification to renew the bombing campaigns over North Vietnam. The Phoenix Program found success late in the war, but could not change the outcome. In 1973, the North Vietnamese reluctantly agreed to the peace terms when they realized that not signing meant renewed bombing campaigns and an American public willing to continue the war for the time being.
Chapter 6

LEGACY OF THE PHOENIX PROGRAM

What Was Phoenix?

The Phoenix Program was not an assassination program; nor was it successful. Phoenix was a controversial and flawed attempt to eliminate the enemy infrastructure. “Under the Phoenix program, each constituent agency was supposed to share intelligence information with the others in order to compile dossiers on the party’s operatives, identifying their aliases and functions in the infrastructure.”274 This cooperation never flourished. Long ignored in favor of the “big unit war,” the Viet Cong Infrastructure (VCI) showed its worth as soldiers appeared throughout South Vietnam and even stormed the American embassy in Saigon during the Tet Offensive in 1968. Months of heavy fighting following Tet critically weakened the infrastructure, but the NLF managed to survive for the rest of the war. Phoenix, created by the CIA and joined by the military, targeted this infrastructure in order to prevent another massive offensive and regain the people of the countryside for the Saigon government. Only by winning the support of the countryside could Saigon act as the legitimate government of South Vietnam. Phoenix became a threat to the NLF in the later years of the war, but it could not prevent the ultimate defeat of South Vietnam. In the end, the Phoenix Program became just another failed American operation during the Vietnam War. Phoenix became infamous because of its secretive nature and the large number of accusations leveled against it.

The Phoenix Program came under the overall pacification structure of the Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS), to combat the VCI from the village to the national level. Because previous pacification efforts failed, those that created the Phoenix Program intended to avoid the same mistakes. While CIA officials understood the urgent need for unity between different agencies within the Saigon government, they had also been watching with growing alarm the infectious spread of double agents within the Thieu government. These double agents weakened the government and its ability to govern.275 For years, the only factor holding the Saigon government in place was the presence of American combat troops, although the policy of “Vietnamization” attempted to prepare the South Vietnamese to fight the war without the United States and preventing ambitious attempts to destroy the South Vietnamese government.

In order to prevent this outcome, the Phoenix Program united several different agencies and units together, facilitating better intelligence gathering, improving the accuracy of identifying of enemy agents, and launching a series of operations against the enemy. Prior to Phoenix, the intelligence services, police forces, territorial forces, and the military refused to share information with each other, preventing coordinated and effective attacks upon the VCI and hindering any real chance at successful counterinsurgency efforts in South Vietnam. In fact, in some cases, police actually captured informants working for the Saigon government and thus severed an opportunity

to gather intelligence. These types of errors and animosities influenced the thinking behind the creation of the Phoenix Program.

As a result, the Phoenix Program merged a scientific approach to pacification—including an extensive use of detailed diagrams, structural charts, and databanks—with traditional intelligence gathering to track enemy agents and the movements of larger VCI units. Using these tools, Phoenix advisors could post the picture of a VCI member, his or her known aliases, and any other important information that would lead to the location and capture of the suspect. The goal was for the Phoenix Program to avoid the flawed strategies of previous pacification efforts, such as herding people into strategic hamlets, forcing the conscription of South Vietnam’s young men, arresting suspects without any intelligence on them, using torture during interrogations, and many other techniques extensively abused before the creation of the Phoenix Program.

By bringing reform to the pacification effort, Phoenix hoped to win the “hearts and minds” of the South Vietnamese through the efficient identification of targets and prevention of abuses within the system. If the South Vietnamese peasants believed Phoenix to be a ruthless system of torture and murder, they would be less likely to assist the government and the perception of the NLF as the saviors of Vietnam would strengthen. However, if the captured suspects reappeared in the village, this time assisting the government, there would be a greater willingness from the village to help the government. Officially, Phoenix teams preferred prisoners to body counts because prisoners often held information about the VCI, whereas dead suspects revealed nothing. Additionally, the NLF maintained their numbers through recruitment or transfer;
therefore, the deaths of a few members of the infrastructure would do little to change the tide of the war. While much of the countryside tried to remain neutral in the conflict, when forced to make a decision, the people tended to align with the side that offered the best source for protection and ensured the greatest odds for the survival of their way of life. Because this loyalty changed with the fluctuating fortunes of war, it made the Phoenix Program’s objective of dismantling the VCI infrastructure all the more important.

Despite the growing realization that a successful counterinsurgency campaign relied on winning over the South Vietnamese by providing a safe and secure environment while repudiating the violent and misguided efforts utilized earlier in the war, the Phoenix Program suffered at the hands of its own military establishment. The massive bombing campaigns and offensives did not help Phoenix. Many high-ranking American officials in government and the military believed that the full application of American military power would be more than enough to win the war. However, the massive bombing campaigns killed soldiers and civilians indiscriminately, causing the Vietnamese civilians to turn away from the Americans and the Saigon government, thus undermining Phoenix’s mission. Despite possessing the most advanced technology on earth that could pinpoint attacks against the North Vietnamese and the NLF, American bombing sorties had the opposite effect because of the widespread destruction and deaths that resulted from the use of American airpower.

The Phoenix Program was a high-tech pacification effort, which provided the best opportunity to defeat the VCI infrastructure. Phoenix was to be the rifle-shot approach,
rather than the shotgun blast approach to fighting the war.\textsuperscript{276} Alas, the Phoenix Program was born too late to turn the tide of the war and the end came too quickly. As the system perfected itself, the U.S. decided it had enough of Vietnam and withdrew. Much to the relief of American soldiers and to the disgust of the Phoenix advisors, Henry Kissinger finally signed an agreement in Paris in 1973 with the North Vietnamese to end the U.S.’s participation in the war. The Paris Peace Accords also established a ceasefire between North and South as the U.S. withdrew and encouraged a series of negotiations between both sides. This ceasefire lasted until the NVA’s last offensive began in 1974.\textsuperscript{277} By that time, after over 250,000 American casualties, Congress denied President Gerald Ford’s request for increased funding for South Vietnam and wiped its hands clean of America’s involvement in Southeast Asia. Saigon fell the next year and Vietnam was reunited, albeit as a Communist country. The Phoenix advisors that remained in the country until 1972 felt bitterness towards the politicians in Washington, the protestors throughout the U.S., and for the way the Americans abandoned their allies. South Vietnam had relied on the U.S. for its survival and its abandonment guaranteed its downfall.

Though Nixon considered his promise of an “honorable peace” fulfilled, the U.S. withdrawal in 1973 became the first time the U.S. abandoned an ally and lost a war. The scenes atop the U.S. Embassy in Saigon two years later, with many South Vietnamese crying at the gates of the embassy and frantically trying to board the last American helicopters out of the country, became iconic images of the twentieth century and served

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{276} Douglas Valentine, \textit{The Phoenix Program} (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1990), 206-7.}

as constant reminders of America’s failure in Vietnam. Within this larger context and
despite its short lifespan, the Phoenix Program had a profound effect on the war and on
American society. The program brought forth change in the political spectrum, American
society, and military strategy.

The Political Spectrum

Phoenix ultimately could not escape the wrath directed towards the Vietnam War,
especially since the American political landscape had underwent drastic changes as the
war dragged on. Ongoing U.S. involvement in Vietnam increasingly polarized public
opinion and heightened social tensions as the debate over definitive progress towards
winning the war continued. In 1964, Congress supported President Johnson’s Gulf of
Tonkin Resolution and, despite several known Congressmen speaking out against the war
eyearly on, wide scale opposition of the war from Congress did not begin until later.
However, as more Americans died in an apparently futile effort to achieve victory and
General Westmoreland continued to request more troops, Congress began initiating
investigations of the war effort.

Senator J. William Fulbright, Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations
Committee, launched a series of hearings on the war from 1966 to 1971. The Committee
wanted to analyze America’s commitmen to South Vietnam and the progress of the war.
Facing pressure from their constituents, the committee members sought to determine
whether the escalation of the war had been just or had the U.S. needlessly caused the
deaths of almost two million people. In order to come to a balanced conclusion, they needed to hear from both pro-war and anti-war officials, including the leaders of a new pacification program (the Phoenix Program) receiving bad press in the newspapers. Beginning in late February 1970, William Colby, John Paul Vann, and several other officers appeared before the Committee to explain what the Phoenix Program was and how it contributed towards winning the war. They also wanted answers for the numerous claims of brutality and violations committed by Phoenix teams throughout South Vietnam.

The committee found that, despite its original goal of creating an effective counterinsurgency program run by South Vietnamese police and regional forces, American advisors were compelled to remain an essential component to the operation of the Phoenix Program until the end. Unlike previous counterinsurgency programs that failed to include the South Vietnamese, the Phoenix Program made a significant attempt to be inclusive and provided a potential blueprint for Vietnamization. Because American advisors could train the South Vietnamese to run such a complicated operation as the Phoenix Program, many felt that Americans could have the same success turning the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) into an efficient fighting force. Having the most advanced weaponry, the U.S. hoped and expected ARVN to succeed. This did not take place as ARVN divisions often failed to remain a viable opponent for their NVA counterparts. Some ARVN units did manage to hold up under fire, but many others suffered annihilation. These broken units would then simply abandon their weapons and flee. The survivors found themselves in reeducation camps after the war, forced into
becoming Communists. Others managed to escape the country, finding safe havens throughout the world. Countries in North America, Europe, and Asia have sizeable Vietnamese communities because of this Diaspora.

The Vietnam War also shifted the country’s political power structure for the first time since the early 1930s. The Democratic Party, in power since the Great Depression, buckled from the immense pressure from protestors throughout the country. In 1968, Richard Nixon swept into office with the promise of ending U.S. participation in Vietnam. In an effort to achieve an “honorable peace,” Nixon secretly escalated the war into Cambodia, Laos, and North Vietnam, while publicly appearing to be actively negotiating with the North Vietnamese to end the war. Nixon also introduced the policy of Vietnamization—forcing the South Vietnamese to take more responsibility for fighting the war—as a starting point for the slow process of withdrawal. This U.S. doctrine relied on previous pacification programs such as Phoenix to carry the load and assist the South Vietnamese as Vietnamization began.

As difficult as it was to withdrawal, for many it was even more difficult to stomach a complete abandonment of allies in the middle of a war the U.S. knowingly escalated. Continued US support for the South Vietnamese during Vietnamization required minimizing the discussion of Vietnam, a task made increasingly difficult with the controversial publication of the *Pentagon Papers* in American newspapers. Daniel Ellsberg experienced the war firsthand and thereafter committed himself to putting a stop
to the bloodbath. In response, the Nixon administration attempted to block the publication of the *Pentagon Papers*, ultimately suffering defeat at the hands of the Supreme Court. With the printing of the Pentagon Papers, the American public learned how deeply intertwined the two countries had been. Ellsberg revealed years of deceit during the Gulf of Tonkin incident, the U.S.’s involvement in the Diem coup, and the ever-expanding American presence in Vietnam. U.S. involvement began under President Harry S. Truman, Eisenhower and Kennedy increased the level of support of South Vietnam, and, finally, the Johnson administration had successfully found a way to escalate the war and introduce combat troops into the region. They also revealed Johnson’s eagerness to commit combat troops to Vietnam as early as 1964, but his reelection required adopting an anti-war stance. With his victory assured, however, Johnson and his administration set upon a path to war. Such revelations alarmed the American public and Ellsberg, avoiding a conviction of treason, quickly became a hero for the anti-war movement.

Nixon blamed this political upheaval for the overall defeat in Vietnam. Having inherited the war from his predecessors, he was determined to win. He believed continuous military effort against the North Vietnamese and NLF would force them to the negotiating table. If North Vietnam would then agree to a ceasefire and the withdrawal of their troops, Nixon could then claim victory. The political defeat came when the U.S. no longer could stomach fighting the war. To prevent another defeat,

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279 Ibid., 274-5.
Nixon suggested the Americans be “willing to provide military aid to friends who need it; being united, with each other and with our Western allies … and, above all, having the wisdom and the vision to support nonmilitary programs to address the poverty, injustice, and political instability that plague so many Third World countries.”

Taken alone, the Phoenix Program had little impact on the political chaos in the U.S. Although it did provide ammunition for critics of Colby during his nomination for the Directorate of Central Intelligence, Phoenix did not receive the bulk of the blame for the turmoil.

War and Society

The Vietnam War quickly became the focal point in American affairs as more American soldiers died with little to show for it. When Johnson chose to escalate the war, he abandoned his Great Society project. Money originally intended to improve the life of the middle and lower classes instead went to fighting the war. Massive riots, protests, and unrest erupted in cities throughout the U.S. as the American public grew tired of inequality and disappointment. Resistance against the war appeared even before Johnson ordered the first combat troops to Vietnam and only increased as the war dragged on and the body count increased. The war at home had a significant impact on American society during the 1960s and 1970s. People lost trust in the government and given the opportunity, forced political change.

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The Phoenix Program became ammunition used in the massive protests against the war. Its frustrating failure to destroy the VCI led to the exposure of torture and murder appeared in newspapers across the country and provided the protestors and journalists with another reason to despise the war. The American public saw the horrors of the war from the comfort of their homes. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) provided updates on the fighting, but enterprising journalists joined American troops in the jungle and reported the truth. Early in the war, such reports received little attention. However, as the war continued and returning veterans confirmed accounts of atrocities, corruption, and frustration in South Vietnam, a shocked public demanded an end to the conflict.

In addition to sparking outrage with protestors, these press reports prodded Senator Fulbright to summon Colby to Washington to clarify the missions of CORDS and Phoenix. The anti-war protests marked a rare moment in history when those in power lost the ability to dictate policy. This volatile mixture of anger, frustration and sense of betrayal towards the Vietnam conflict became the bedrock for a new political reality in the U.S., one in which “the people, ordinary citizens with no authority but the force of their belief and the commitment, simply refused to tolerate the war or the official assumption that there was no alternative to war.”

Vietnam and the deaths of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy left millions heartbroken and caused riots in many American cities. Those challenging the status quo hoped for change from King and Kennedy and their deaths diminished such hopes.

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While hopes may have diminished, the Vietnam War remained a political minefield that U.S. presidents had to deal with, attempting to placate the American public while disengaging U.S. forces from an increasingly costly commitment. Such a precarious precipice claimed President Johnson as a political casualty. Vietnam dominated the 1968 election as each candidate promised different ways to end the war. Nixon, with his secret plan for an “honorable peace,” won the election and the voters waited for him to fulfill that promise. President Nixon, however, believed the war’s unpopularity represented the Johnson administration’s failure to acquire a solid public backing for the war before the Tonkin Resolution and committing U.S. combat troops. To Nixon, the American public never understood the importance of saving South Vietnam or how oppressive and dangerous the Communist North would be once they conquered the South.

The U.S. arrived in Vietnam with a conventional army, prepared to fight a conventional war. What awaited them was anything but conventional. The NLF fought a guerrilla war, attacking with hit-and-run tactics to attack and avoiding the Americans’ heavy firepower. Meanwhile, the VCI waged a political war in the South, building a shadow government network to rival the Thieu government in Saigon. In response, the Americans and South Vietnamese altered their counterinsurgent policies and changed the nature of the conflict. To secure an “honorable peace,” the battle for the hearts and minds of the South Vietnamese returned to the forefront. Nixon said of the war in 1985, “The Vietnam War was not unwinnable. A different military and political strategy could have
assured victory in the 1960s.” Phoenix represented one such change of strategy Nixon felt was required from the very beginning—one that focused on fighting a political war against Communist political cadre, rather than the conventional war against NVA soldiers. The U.S. efforts to win a war of attrition failed and the U.S. increasingly sought an exit strategy out of Vietnam. An immediate withdrawal would assuredly initiate the collapse of South Vietnam; therefore establishing a workable pacification program to secure the countryside and provide ARVN with more time to take over the war became a necessity. More than just a last ditch measure, Phoenix offered the U.S. a way to support South Vietnam with minimal American casualties. Neither Johnson nor Nixon intended to abandon South Vietnam, so the Phoenix Program initially became an important weapon in the new American strategy.

However, as noted earlier, the program suffered from its relatively late birth, a lack of support at home, corruption and mismanagement internally and, finally, a shift in NVA strategy that emerged in some of the last Phoenix operations. Phoenix’s final involvement in Vietnam came during the Easter Offensive in 1972, where U.S. combat troops played a minor role holding back the NVA. The majority of American support came from the air, stifling the Northern advance and inflicting tremendous damage in the process. The NVA lost thousands and needed years to recover. Prior to the offensive, Phoenix advisors heard rumors of a possible attack. Although Phoenix advisors no longer participated in operations and could not join their Vietnamese counterparts in combat, the advisors still launched operations to gather intelligence and test the validity of such

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283 Nixon, No More Vietnams, 18.
rumors. An attack indeed came and because the Phoenix Program successfully weakened the VCI, the Northern advance stalled. However, by this time, officials in Hanoi chose to focus exclusively on the conventional war, slowly making Phoenix irrelevant.

Just as Nixon and General Abrams worked against the clock, Phoenix had a limited time to defeat the VCI and turn the program over to the South Vietnamese police forces. When the U.S. finally departed the country and abandoned the South Vietnamese to their fate, the pacification effort suffered and collapsed. Two years after Phoenix, the NVA, supported by the last remnants of the NLF, launched another massive offensive across the demilitarized zone and into South Vietnam. Unlike the Easter Offensive, the South Vietnamese received no air support from the Americans or enough equipment. Congress refused to reengage in Vietnam, forcing their former allies to fight for themselves. After being hard pressed, members of the police and territorial forces melted away and the ARVN divisions fared little better. After thirty years of conflict, North and South Vietnam united under the Communist banner.

Despite the ultimate defeat, the success against the VCI marked Phoenix’s importance to the American strategy fighting in an asymmetrical war. Study groups examined the statistics of Phoenix and gave the total number of VCI neutralized at 81,740—26,369 killed during the five years in operation.284 Those captured by Phoenix received the opportunity to assist the government or face a prison sentence. Robert Komer, the CIA officials, and the military officers who created Phoenix hoped to have

more success in the pacification effort than its predecessors. Phoenix achieved this goal, but could not alter the conclusion of the war.

Conclusion

During its five years in existence, the Phoenix Program targeted the enemy infrastructure creating a rudimentary Communist government in South Vietnam. Since the Geneva Accords in 1954 that created the two halves of Vietnam, NLF insurgents remained in the South and stirred up discontent. In response, the Saigon government and the Americans created a series of pacification programs to prevent the loss of the countryside to the Communists. These programs faced their share of struggles as the VCI proved to be a consistently resilient enemy, surviving the various attempts to destroy it. Borrowing from the British successes in Malaya, Sir Robert Thompson and the CIA in the early 1960s tried their hands at the Strategic Hamlet program, meant to gather peasants from the countryside and place them under the “protection” of the government. However, it became difficult to win the loyal of the people by placing them into hamlets surrounded by barbed wire and armed guards. In designing Phoenix, the CIA hoped to avoid past failures and eliminate the lack of cohesion in previous pacification attempts. Phoenix became an umbrella organization uniting various police and intelligence forces together under one roof.

Phoenix also emphasized new methods of finding and eliminating the VCI. While conventional warfare eliminated the enemy through firepower and numbers, Phoenix’s
methodical and scientific approach targeted individuals, with the preference of capturing rather than killing. NLF political cadre had long felt secure travelling throughout the countryside until Phoenix made these journeys unsafe. Along with police forces and the Provincial Reconnaissance Units (PRUs), Phoenix gathered intelligence on the ever-growing VCI. Once Phoenix teams received enough intelligence on a suspect, they launched an operation against the target. Killed or captured, the VCI member no longer contributed to the infrastructure. Slain targets yielded no information—aside from any documents they may have been carrying—but captured suspects received the opportunity to rally to the government under the Chieu Hoi program and assist Phoenix in hurting the VCI. Tens of thousands of former VCI took advantage of the Chieu Hoi program and rallied to the government, but not all had the government’s best interests in mind. Some became double agents for the VCI and sabotaged the program. While the Phoenix Program worked well on paper, corruption and incompetence plagued the program from the beginning.

CIA officers spent years in Vietnam developing relationships and intelligence gathering techniques, while the American military officers received several months of classroom training, then served one-year tours before departing. However, the quality of the Vietnamese forces varied from province to province. Some had officers and men eager protect their homes and take the fight to the VCI. Phoenix advisors felt comfortable sending these forces into the field, knowing they could trust them to bring back valuable intelligence with few civilian casualties. On the other hand, Phoenix advisors also worked with incompetent or corrupt officers. Some Vietnamese officers were not qualified for the
program and, in other cases, the officer merely wanted to survive the war, obtain wealth, and punish his enemies. Consequently, the majority of alleged violations came from provinces with poor police forces. These allegations reached journalists and then the American public, causing an outrage and undermining support for the war.

Whether one believes the Phoenix Program was an assassination program or effective counterinsurgency operation, Phoenix successfully combated the VCI for five years. By 1972, the conventional NVA fought the war, rather than the South Vietnamese insurgency and Colby’s remark that NVA tanks stormed the Presidential Palace and not men in pajamas and sandals proved that Phoenix severely weakened the NLF. By 1975, the NLF had little impact during the Saigon Offensive and on the outcome of the war. Phoenix also failed, however, because it did not ensure the South Vietnamese could run the program without the Americans, nor did it change the overall outcome of the war. Despite over two million dead Vietnamese and over seven million tons of bombs dropped on the country, the war would continue without the Americans. Participants in the program as well as those on the outside debate this conclusion. Officers such as William Colby, John Paul Vann, Stuart Herrington, Alan Cornett, Orrin DeForest, John Cook, and countless others believed in their mission and felt they made a difference. They watched as the war effort crumbled and it sickened them to witness the fall of Saigon after decades of American support. They participated on many missions and fervently disagreed with the claims of torture, execution, and other violations allegedly committed by Phoenix.

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Those against the program focused on alleged atrocities to attack Phoenix and U.S. policy in Vietnam. As protests against the war increased, so too did opposition to the Phoenix Program. Even some intelligence officers refused involvement in the program after hearing and reading the rumors leveled against it. In the eyes of those against the war, Phoenix became guilty through its association with the war. The country suffered from the “Vietnam Syndrome,” where people became doubtful of U.S. foreign policy and fearful of another Vietnam. Military interventionism gave way to military isolationism. Several presidents found themselves handcuffed by the Vietnam Syndrome, forcing them to react to events, rather than precipitate them. Politicians opposed going on the offensive lest the U.S. suffer another political, social, and military defeat. The Vietnam War remained a dark period in the country’s history and people tried to forget what went on in Southeast Asia. President Johnson’s prediction of a “domino effect” failed to materialize. Although Cambodia suffered greatly from Communist rule for four years, the entire region did not fall to Communism. The war occupied six administrations and the thoughts of millions. Forgetting such an event became impossible. In the annals of American history, the Phoenix Program remains a dirty, inglorious affair.
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