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**RESURRECTING PHOENIX: LESSONS IN COIN OPERATIONS**

**by**

**Steven J. Weidman**

**A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.**

**The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.**

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## **Abstract**

This paper examines the concept of resurrecting a modified version of the Phoenix Program for possible use in counterinsurgency (COIN) efforts in Iraq. Phoenix was a successful COIN program which lasted in South Vietnam from 1967-1973. Examination of the Phoenix Program is done in this paper, and particular emphasis is given to interagency cooperation on the operational level. This paper also examines modern-day examples of both successful and unsuccessful COIN operations in Africa and Asia and the lessons learned from these efforts. Specific operational level recommendations are given, as well as consideration to the limitations such a program would have in the current political and social climate.

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The United States currently finds itself faced with long-term counterinsurgency challenges in both Iraq and Afghanistan, with no end in sight in the near term. The severity of these challenges and the fanaticism of the enemy had not been predicted by policymakers and planners when these campaigns were initially undertaken. As such, the US Government has been faced with cobbling together an inter-agency effort to deal with this unexpected resistance in both theaters. As with previous large-scale US Government efforts, lessons learned from the past (be they positive or negative) have either been overlooked or ignored entirely. The US has very limited counterinsurgency experience to draw upon and only one genuine inter-agency experience stemming from the Vietnam War. Previous experience with both the Indian Campaigns in the Western US and during the Philippine Insurrection of the early 1900's can be considered successful counterinsurgency efforts. However, neither would be practical models to emulate in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, nor would either provide lessons in inter-agency efforts.

The case with the Vietnam War is very different however. That conflict saw the creation of a successful, inter-agency counterinsurgency effort in the form of the Phoenix Program (or "Phung Hoang" as the South Vietnamese termed it). For the first, and possibly only, time different entities of the US Government (State, CIA, DOD, coalition) coordinated effectively on an operational level in a wartime situation. The collective objective was to aggressively attack the Viet Cong Infrastructure (VCI) in South Vietnam and to root out the VCI shadow government that rivaled our ally in Saigon. This task was accomplished through a variety of methods and, despite the common perception, was not simply an "assassination" program against the VCI. Phoenix ran successfully from late 1967-1973 and lessons learned from this program could be applied to the challenges

facing the US military and CIA today. In this paper I intend to provide a brief background and overview of the Phoenix Program and highlight its successes. Different foreign attempts to use “rally” or defector programs in dealing with insurgencies will also be covered. A brief counter-argument as to why such a program may not be feasible in today’s transparent political/social/media climate. In my summary I will argue how a modified version of such a program, or at least the inter-agency structure of Phoenix, could still be used as a model for today’s inter-agency counterinsurgency efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Phoenix was an amalgamation of different counterinsurgency programs by various elements of the US Government in Vietnam, all aimed at attacking the VCI. The CIA had created a cadre of Vietnamese operatives in 1964 called “Counter Terror Teams” (CTT) that had been dedicated to attacking and degrading the VCI (but had not targeted the civilian supporters of the VCI). The CTT’s were the forerunners to the Provisional Reconnaissance Units (PRU) that would later become the primary action arm of Phoenix (along with US Special Operations Forces and the Special Branch of the South Vietnamese Police). The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) had primary responsibility for pacification programs throughout South Vietnam and the US Military was conducting its own pacification/counterinsurgency program. Not until 1966 did all of these efforts begin to coalesce under one entity with the arrival of Robert Komer, a former CIA officer, National Security Staffer, and Special Assistant to President Lyndon Johnson<sup>1</sup>. Appointed to General William Westmoreland’s staff as a senior civilian deputy, on par with General Creighton Abrams, he created a pacification

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<sup>1</sup>Dale Andrade, Ashes to Ashes, the Phoenix Program (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1990), p. 55.

office which would be known as “The Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS)”. In addition to pacification, Komer’s goal was to create order out of chaos and to channel the various anti VCI efforts into one coordinated program. In this effort he created a coordination entity called Intelligence Coordination and Exploitation (ICEX) and appointed a senior CIA officer to run the program (Komer’s deputy at CORDS, William Colby, would later become Director of Central Intelligence). Komer relied heavily on CIA expertise and assets in the beginning given his former affiliation with the agency and his affinity for the agency’s streamlined bureaucracy and ample funds<sup>2</sup>.

Phoenix was to be an anti VCI model which could be first demonstrated to the South Vietnamese and then turned over to the Government of South Vietnam (GVN) in its entirety. Structurally, the program had credibility and influence with the US military because of Komer’s rank and position within Westmoreland’s headquarters as a senior deputy. Komer’s deputy in turn worked on par with both the J-2 and J-3 of MACV and this facilitated coordination between the US military and the CIA at all levels, to include the district ground level where Phoenix would actually be implemented. Even the CIA Chief of Station (COS Saigon) was in many ways subordinate to Komer’s mission and existing CIA assets had to be dedicated to the anti-VCI effort. The integration of Komer and his staff into Westmoreland’s chain of command, at a senior level, was key to the success of this program. This enabled coordination to occur at all levels and forced both CIA and the US military to work together and give up assets to the cause. Had Komer and his entourage merely been designated as liaison officers (LNO’s) attached to

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., P. 58

Westmoreland's headquarters' staff, then it could be argued that both CORDS and ICEX would have lacked the necessary influence to bring together these two large bureaucracies on an operational level. It is also important to note that Komer's special status exceeded his senior rank and position on Westmoreland's staff. Komer's personal relationship with President Johnson was well known and key, I believe, to his ability to influence the large bureaucracies he had to deal with. The importance of this factor will be highlighted later on.

Despite public perception of Phoenix being an "assassination" program, its true intent and measure of success was through encouraging defectors from the Viet Cong to the GVN cause. Viet Cong cadres who had abandoned the VCI and had "rallied" to the GVN were listed as successes. However, Phoenix did have an action arm in the form of the PRU, which accounted for the targeting and killing of known members of the VCI. That innocent civilians may have been accidentally killed as well is without question. However, the same could be said of other US efforts to destroy the VCI, which included air strikes, long-range artillery and major conventional operations. The CIA recruited indigenous South Vietnamese personnel to become members of the PRU and all had to pass rigorous vetting and training before being selected. Each member had a personal grievance (usually the loss of a family member to the Communists) and therefore were more inclined to remain loyal to the anti-Communist cause.<sup>3</sup> By 1970, the Phoenix Program was credited for seriously degrading the VCI and had been judged a success in a majority of the provinces in South Vietnam. Gradually the program (especially following the Viet Cong Tet Offensive in 1968) began transitioning from a military focus to one

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., P. 173.

more related to police work. As such the Special Branch of the South Vietnamese Police, and not the PRU's, became the primary action army of the Program. By the early 1970's the CIA had largely turned the program over to the US military which added it to its list "Vietnamization" responsibilities. By 1973, American involvement in Phoenix had virtually ended.

The concept of rallying members of the VCI to the GVN cause was not a new one. In fact, the program had been derived from a similar French colonial effort in Indochina twenty years earlier. At that time, the French civilian colonial authorities (vice the French military expeditionary forces) had been tasked with coordinating a rallying effort against the Viet Minh infrastructure. The French authorities called the effort "rallier" or to "win over" the Viet Minh to the French cause.<sup>4</sup> It was part of a larger French pacification effort that included greater political and military involvement of their Indochinese subjects in the course of the war. Unfortunately for the French and their local allies, these initiatives were instituted late in the war when it was clear to all (save perhaps the most die hard French colonialists) that the French cause in Indochina was a lost one.

Despite the French failure in Indochina, the concept of rallying insurgents to a counterinsurgency effort was not abandoned. In fact the concept gained renewed life during the 1950's when the British Government had to contend with both their Malayan and Kenyan "Emergencies" and were faced with very serious insurgency challenges in both colonies<sup>5</sup>. Unlike the French before them, the British initiated a proactive and all

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>5</sup> Robert B. Edgerton, Mau Mau: An African Crucible (New York: Ballentine Books, 1989).

encompassing pacification program to deal with these insurgencies from the beginning. A significant portion of these efforts was to encourage insurgents to defect to the counterinsurgency cause. The British would go a step further by organizing these defectors and utilizing them against the insurgencies in both an unconventional warfare and PSYOP role. By the early 1960's the British efforts had proved successful and both Malaya and Kenya were granted independence on British terms and only after their respective insurgencies had been neutralized<sup>6</sup>.

While the British model had been successful and would influence US counterinsurgency efforts in Vietnam, it can be said that this model did not succeed every time it was implemented. The Portuguese in Mozambique and the Rhodesians in their insurgency war both attempted to use the British model in the 1970's, with varying results. The Portuguese were faced with insurgencies in all three of their African colonies throughout the 1960's and '70's (Angola, Mozambique, and Guinea-Bissau). Given the homogeneity and localization of their enemy in the colony of Mozambique, the Portuguese were able to tailor their counterinsurgency efforts there with a little more thought and planning. As part of a larger effort to Africanize their war effort and encourage defectors to their cause, the Portuguese implemented the "Flecha" (arrow) program<sup>7</sup>. This involved using former guerrillas to live among the African populace to serve not only as an intelligence network in rural areas, but also to use them to generate support for the Portuguese cause among the Africans. Unfortunately for the Portuguese, the model they used, intentionally or not, came closer to the French effort twenty years

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<sup>6</sup> Noel Barber, The War of the Running Dogs, The Malayan Emergency: 1948-1960 (New York: Bantam Books, 1971).

<sup>7</sup> Peter Abbott, Modern African Wars (2); Angola and Mozambique 1961-74 (London: Osprey Books, 1988).

earlier in Indochina than to the British model. As with the French, the Portuguese had initiated the effort late in the war and just a couple of years before the collapse of their African empire.

Rhodesia on the other hand, had made better use of its rally program than had its Portuguese neighbor in Mozambique. Rhodesia of the 1970's was faced with a growing insurgency problem (especially after the Portuguese defeat and withdrawal from Mozambique in 1975) as well as increasing shortages of fuel, spare parts, and manpower<sup>8</sup>. The Rhodesian military's strategy to deal with the insurgency with a force on force construct was not only straining their security forces to the breaking point, but was ceding the initiative to the guerrillas, of which there were thousands more with every passing year. Many of Rhodesia's senior officers had served with British forces during the Malayan Emergency and witnessed firsthand the benefits of implementing a rallying program. Therefore in 1973, the Rhodesians formed an elite unit called the "Selous Scouts" which was comprised of Rhodesian security force members and guerrilla cadre who had defected to the government's cause. These defectors were granted amnesty by the government and their families were relocated to safe areas and provided with housing and other necessities. The defectors were retrained and utilized to combat the insurgents as small units. This was sometimes limited to tracking guerrillas and calling in conventional attacks by conventional Rhodesian forces. At the other times, the Selous Scouts themselves were called upon to be the action element against the insurgent networks<sup>9</sup>. This is where the Rhodesian effort was more akin to the Phoenix Program in

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<sup>8</sup> Peter Godwin and Ian Hancock, Rhodesians Never Die (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

<sup>9</sup> Peter Stiff, Selous Scouts Top Secret War (Johannesburg: Galago Publishing, 1986).

Vietnam in that they deliberately targeted, on a tactical level, the insurgent network in a selected portion of the country. This negated the need for large conventional “sweep” operations that could result in alienating the civilian population and/or ensuring the escape of the targeted insurgents.

While the foreign examples of similar Phoenix-like counterinsurgency efforts are important to consider, it must be noted that the inter-agency piece of these programs varied greatly. In the case of the French in Indochina, it was non-existent with the civil colonial authorities operating independently of the French military. The same could be said of the Portuguese efforts that had been largely ad hoc and solely under the auspices of the Portuguese intelligence service. The British and Rhodesian cases are the best examples of across the board inter-agency effort in a Phoenix-like program and it is no accident that officials such as Komer relied heavily on the British experiences in Malaya when formulating CORDS and ICEX in Vietnam.

Phoenix was credited with having seriously degraded the VCI and by 1971 a total of 81, 740 VCI had been “neutralized”<sup>10</sup>. This figure was further broken down in the following manner:

22, 103 Rallied (defected to the GVN)

33, 358 Captured

26, 369 Killed

The official figure for the VCI who rallied were a matter of debate, however, given that fraud was known to occur. This did not mean that corruption or fabrication of the statistics on an official level was necessarily at work. Rather, those VCI who had rallied

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<sup>10</sup> Mark Moyer, Phoenix and the Birds of Prey (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1997). P. 236.

and collected their awards from the GVN, quickly realized that they could do so again in a different province using an alias.<sup>11</sup>

More than just relying on statistics, there was ample intelligence information indicating that Phoenix had proven to be effective in helping to disrupt the VCI. In 1969, the GVN captured insurgent documents and correspondence indicating the strain on the VCI and the related effects on morale and discipline. The report stated, “A number of personnel showed a tendency to respond to the enemy pacification program. They were not eager to do their tasks, attend meetings regularly, or participate in Party activities. They also spoke at random, lacked a sense of responsibility and organization, did not strictly execute orders, had little will to fight, and feared hardship.”<sup>12</sup>

The VCI reaction to Phoenix could also be used as a reliable indicator of the effectiveness of the program. Indeed, by 1970 both North Vietnam and the VCI dedicated a large percentage of their propaganda efforts towards countering and attempting to discredit Phoenix. Special prison camps were established with the sole purpose of incarcerating and interrogating VCI who were suspected of being tainted by Phoenix (many of whom were actually innocent and were loyal Communists).<sup>13</sup> In fact to the superstitious Vietnamese, Phoenix began to take on a life of its own and was being blamed for every set back and malady suffered by the VCI in the field. Phoenix was clearly seriously hurting the VCI to engender such a reaction and punitive measures against its own cadre.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 239.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 270.

<sup>13</sup> Dale Andrade, Ashes to Ashes, the Phoenix Program (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1990). P. 256-257.

Critics of the Phoenix Program were numerous in the United States, as the program became increasingly known to the public. However, the program also fell victim to opponents of the Vietnam War more interested in discrediting any US Government effort than uncovering the facts. The effort quickly became synonymous in the media and among critics for being an “assassination” program that targeted innocent Vietnamese civilians. The fact that direct action played only a partial role in the effectiveness of the overall program was lost on these critics. Further, the covert nature of the program was used against it, as it was difficult to engage in a public debate over a program which was still regarded as a CIA operation in the early 1970’s. In 1971 the House Subcommittee on Foreign Operations and Government Information began looking into legality of the Phoenix Program.<sup>14</sup> Critics who charged that assassination and the targeting of non-uniformed combatants as illegal under the Geneva Convention were missing the point. Insurgent warfare by its nature meant that the enemy would not be in uniform. Further, if it was perfectly legal and within the confines of warfare to ambush an enemy combatant then why was that different if one conducted the same ambush but was aware of that combatant’s identity?

This leads to the question of whether or not a Phoenix-like program could be implemented in the wake of the Vietnam-era controversy and in today’s political/social/media climate? The answer is a qualified, “yes”.

Phoenix went through three distinct phases from 1967-1973. The first phase was largely entirely covert when Phoenix was solely a CIA program and involved the CIA’s indigenous CTT’s as the operational arm deployed against the VCI. The second phase

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<sup>14</sup> Douglas Valentine, The Phoenix Program (New York, NY: William Morrow and Company, 1990). P. 376.

from 1968-1971 saw the increasing involvement of the US military into the Phoenix Program and added Special Operations Forces (primarily Navy SEALs) as part of the action arm of the program. This period also saw the end of the CTT's and the creation of the PRU's from the CIA end. The third and final phase 1971-1973 coincided with the final months of the "Vietnamization" program when Phoenix was turned over in entirety from the US Government to the GVN. It is important to note that with each passing phase, Phoenix not only became more transparent and open but transitioned from a military-related counterinsurgency effort to one more along the lines of a civil police program. By 1973, the GVN was running Phoenix on its own and it had become a successful public program to encourage defectors from the VCI.

The historical cases used in this paper which proved successful in the end, were the ones where the counterinsurgency forces possessed an advantage on both the strategic and the operational level. Counterinsurgency efforts in Rhodesia, Mozambique, and in South Vietnam were both innovative and effective on a local level. However, these programs alone could not alter the overall strategic disadvantage that the counterinsurgency forces were faced with. This leads to an all too common mistake among counterinsurgency forces that rely too much on tactical and operational data to determine the overall success of their efforts in a given theater. While the data collated from operational level headquarters can be both genuine and encouraging, it can also be misleading and help paint a distorted strategic picture of the larger counterinsurgency effort. During the 1970's both Rhodesian and US authorities, in their respective theaters, were assessing a more favorable position for themselves than was actually the reality. This was not due to either faulty intelligence or deception. Rather, these

assessments were based on data that indicated favorable counterinsurgency trends on a local level, be it in a Rhodesian operational area or in a South Vietnamese province. While this data was largely accurate, in the case of Rhodesia it failed to take into account the thousands of new recruits who were flocking to the banner of the “Patriotic Front” in both neighboring Zambia and Mozambique. These new recruits, whose numbers increased with every passing year, would in the end prove an irresistible force for the Rhodesian security forces that negated any counterinsurgency successes that had been made inside the country. In the case of South Vietnam, such data omitted the strategic threat posed by the conventional North Vietnamese Army (NVA) which had been permitted (in the 1973 Paris Peace Accords) to maintain a presence in South Vietnam. The NVA would spearhead the conventional take over South Vietnam in April 1975.

Conversely, British success in both Malaya and Kenya was far from assured in the 1950’s, and the insurgents in both theaters scored operational victories at the outset. While the outcome of both insurgencies could have resulted in failure had the British authorities responded differently on the operational level, it cannot be denied that success was largely due to the strategic advantage the British enjoyed vis-à-vis both the Malayan Communist Party and the Mau Mau. Would the implementation of a Phoenix-like program alter the overall strategic effort in these theaters just as it would bring successes on the operational level? This question remains to be answered in regards to counterinsurgency efforts in both Afghanistan and Iraq today, and the data is not sufficient to state categorically whether they are similar to either the lost causes or successful cases examined above. What can be stated is that current efforts, particularly

as being implemented in Iraq, are not working and that a radical course change is required.

This paper is not advocating dusting off the Phoenix Program and implementing it exactly as had been done during the Vietnam War. Operational planners have to deal with the world as it is today and that means a world of 24-hour, immediate news coverage. A world of opponents to both Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom who are both politically powerful and determined. A world where the media and these opponents look for any opportunity to draw parallels in the public mind between these current day operations and with the failed effort in Vietnam. Finally, the operational planner has to keep in mind the inevitable leakage of classified information to the media of any program considered remotely controversial. The original Phoenix Program actually fell victim to a leak in 1970 when a “whistleblower” provided a Phoenix field manual to an aide to Congressman William Moorehead<sup>15</sup>

With all of this in mind a modified version of Phoenix could be implemented if both “Other Government Agencies” (OGA) and the US military went immediately to a latter phase two part of the program where both the OGA and the US Military were working side by side in implementing the action arm of the program in preparation for transition to the host nation government. The following would have to be implemented:

- First and foremost this would require a genuine plan and dedication of resources from both DOD and OGA to this program. As in the case with Robert Komer, a senior civilian officer (perhaps from a newly created

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<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 376.

OGA) would have to be integrated into Multi-National Forces Iraq (MNF-I) headquarters with genuine authority over both OGA and DOD resources. Some military commanders and their OGA equivalents would be also be subordinate to this new position. This new director would truly have to be an individual who spoke with an authority that Komer possessed given his personal relationship with President Johnson.

Anything less would prove a waste of time.

- A robust, proactive program to encourage and exploit fissures in the Iraqi insurgency would have to be carried out. Rather than focus on sectarian divisions, which would prove counterproductive to long-term US goals in Iraq, this effort should concentrate on “rallying” the Sunni insurgent population with the goal of turning a portion of these fighters against the “Foreign Jihadists” fighting in Iraq
- As during Saddam Hussein’s era, tribes along the Syrian border of Iraq were granted considerably autonomy and rewarded with material goods such as weapons, gold, and vehicles. In turn, these tribes never wavered in their allegiance to Saddam’s regime and were responsible for securing their section of the Iraqi border from hostile intruders. The arrangement called for the inducements as mentioned above but also allowed for punitive measures to be taken as well. Such a program could also be a part of this new effort.
- Monetary reward programs and public television shows such as “Mosul’s Most Wanted” have proven to be popular with Iraqi audiences. Such

programs should be expanded into other areas of Iraq, again with the aim of targeting Sunni insurgents for capture and turning against the Foreign Jihadists.

- A dedicated OGA-DOD led indigenous paramilitary effort could be launched to operate on missions targeting the Iraqi insurgency on a level separate from both conventional Coalition operations and those of Iraqi Defense Forces.

Such an undertaking would have to be transparent from the beginning on a strategic level with the consent of the Congress and with the aim of gaining US public support from the outset as a method to decrease US casualties and bring the US mission in Iraq that much closer to completion. On the tactical and operational level security would be maintained for obvious reasons but it remains important for this program not to be painted as an assassination program operating outside the framework of legalized warfare. While these charges will inevitably be made, if the program is given an Iraqi face and its goals (and the role of the participating agencies) are addressed publicly then such charges can be mitigated.

A modified Phoenix Program in Iraq would be part anti-crime initiative along the lines of “America’s Most Wanted”. It would also involve utilizing “turned” Sunni insurgents against Foreign Jihadists operating within Iraq with the understanding that the underlying motivating factor driving the Sunni portion of the insurgency is the loss of political power and the presence of Coalition forces in Iraq. This new program would also capitalize on the mercenary ways of that part of the world and would recognize that many will cooperate with anti-Jihadist cause given the proper inducements to do so. The

new program would not be about “building democracy” or “promoting human dignity”. Rather the program would be very limited in its aims of destabilizing and neutralizing the flow of Foreign Jihadists flooding into Iraq and buy time for the US to extricate itself and provide an Iraqi client state a chance to meet such challenges largely on its own.

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