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The Phoenix Program
and Contemporary
Counterinsurgency

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Preface

One of the principal requirements of counterinsurgency is the ability to disrupt or destroy not just the insurgency's military capabilities but also the infrastructure that supports the insurgent forces. This infrastructure provides, among other things, the critical intelligence, recruiting, and logistics functions that enable insurgents to contend with counterinsurgent forces that are often much more capable in a purely military sense. During the Vietnam War, one of the main efforts to attack the insurgent infrastructure was known as the Phoenix Program. Phoenix has subsequently become highly controversial, and its lessons for contemporary counterinsurgency can be overdrawn. However, a careful assessment of Phoenix does provide some suggestions for improving current efforts against insurgent infrastructure.

Contents

Summary

Counterinsurgency campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq have reawakened official and analytical interest in the Phoenix Program. But Phoenix remains one of the most misunderstood aspects of the Vietnam War. Some believe it to have been devastatingly effective against the Viet Cong (VC), while others believe it to have been nothing more than an assassination program. This paper seeks to clarify what Phoenix was (and was not) while also attempting to determine what elements of Phoenix remain relevant to contemporary counterinsurgency.

Contrary to both extreme views of Phoenix, the historical record shows that Phoenix was neither wildly successful nor a massive assassination program. Instead, it consisted of two principal elements supported by a third non-Phoenix effort. The first element—the program actually called *Phoenix*—was intended to promote intelligence sharing among all the various U.S. and Vietnamese agencies.

The second element was the related "action arm" against the VC's "shadow government" or infrastructure. This action arm was principally the Central Intelligence Agency– (CIA-) sponsored Provincial Reconnaissance Units (PRUs). PRUs were composed of South Vietnamese who, in general, were native to the province in which they served. Trained, paid, and advised by the CIA (often with the help of U.S. Army Special Forces), PRUs were often very effective in attacking infrastructure; however, they were limited in size and therefore in their overall impact.

The supporting effort was the attempt to limit infiltration of men and material from North Vietnam. This effort had two parts. The first was the high-technology program known as IGLOO WHITE, which sought to cover the main infiltration routes into South Vietnam with a variety of sensors. The second part was the secretive cross-border surveillance conducted by U.S. Army Special Forces working with South Vietnamese auxiliaries.

While determining the overall efficacy of these programs is difficult, some general assessments can be made. Phoenix made positive contributions to counterinsurgency in South Vietnam. One of the major advantages of Phoenix was that it was a relatively low-cost program (although IGLOO WHITE was not). However, the persistent belief that Phoenix was an assassination program had negative consequences in terms of what are now called information operations.

It would be a mistake to apply in a rigid way the lessons from the U.S. experience in Southeast Asia to today's conflicts. That said, anti-infrastructure operations and related activities in South Vietnam do have relevance for contemporary counterinsurgency strategy, operations, and policy in Afghanistan and other conflict zones where the United States is heavily engaged. Phoenix suggests that intelligence coordination and the integration of intelligence with an action arm can have a powerful effect on even extremely large and capable armed

groups, such as the VC. Moreover, such Vietnam-era programs as IGLOO WHITE remind us of the importance of border control and the enduring requirement to deny insurgents access to resources and cross-border sanctuaries.

More broadly, Phoenix highlights the importance of understanding as fully as possible the nature, structure, and contours of the clandestine systems that sustain, and indeed help to define, insurgencies. In the case of Afghanistan, decisionmakers, military officers, and intelligence personnel should resist the temptation to treat the Taliban and Al-Qaeda and their support networks as inscrutable and analytically impenetrable black boxes; instead, they should devote far greater resources to understanding, mapping, and dismantling the subterranean "ecosystems" that sustain these insurgencies.

Acknowledgments

Abbreviations

AQI	Al-Qaeda in Iraq
CERP	Commander's Emergency Response Program
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CICV	Combined Intelligence Center, Vietnam
CIDG	Civilian Irregular Defense Group
CORDS	Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support
CTT	Counter-Terror Team
DIOCC	District Intelligence and Operations Coordination Center
F3EA	find, fix, finish, exploit, analyze
G2	Army intelligence staff
G3	Army current operations staff
GVN	Government of the Republic of Vietnam
ICEX	Intelligence Coordination and Exploitation
ISC	Infiltration Surveillance Center
ISR	intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance
J2	joint intelligence staff
JIOC-I	Joint Intelligence Center–Iraq
MACV	Military Assistance Command, Vietnam
NLF	National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam
NVA	North Vietnamese Army
PIOCC	Province Intelligence and Operations Coordination Center
PRP	People's Revolutionary Party
PRU	Provincial Reconnaissance Unit

RD	Revolutionary Development
SOF	special operations forces
SOG	Studies and Observation Group
VC	Viet Cong
VCI	Viet Cong infrastructure

Introduction

The persistent insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan have generated fresh interest among military officers, policymakers, and civilian analysts in the history of counterinsurgency. Among practitioners, scholars, and journalists, there is a widespread belief that counterinsurgency campaigns waged by the British and the Americans (and sometimes the French, at least in the case of the Algerian "savage war of peace" during the 1950s and 1960s) have important lessons, both positive and negative, to offer contemporary counterinsurgents. The Phoenix Program in Vietnam—the U.S. effort to improve intelligence coordination and operations aimed at identifying and dismantling the communist underground—is the subject of much renewed attention.

Despite this growing interest, however, the Phoenix Program is not well understood outside a small community of historians of the Vietnam War. In current discourse, *Phoenix* often functions as a codeword, much as it did during the Vietnam conflict. For some contemporary counterinsurgency enthusiasts, the Phoenix Program represents a high-water mark in terms of U.S. counterinsurgency capabilities and performance. In their opinion, Phoenix was a targeted, coordinated, low-cost interagency effort that had a crushing effect on a ruthless and elusive adversary. Indeed, one prominent counterinsurgency theorist has called for the creation of a "global Phoenix program" to defeat what he deems the "multifarious, intricately ramified web of dependencies" that makes up the violent jihadist firmament.[1] But in the judgment of other writers, Phoenix should be seen as a cautionary tale about the dangers of all-out clandestine warfare and U.S. counterinsurgency run amok.[2]

This paper will argue a middle position. Phoenix was neither the devastatingly effective program its supporters have sometimes claimed nor the merciless assassination campaign that its detractors have alleged. The program made a contribution to the broader U.S. pacification campaign waged in the Vietnamese countryside, but its success came at a political cost to the United States. Although assassination was never part of Phoenix policy, it was portrayed as such by opponents of the war, and this view enjoyed wide circulation in the press and among domestic American and international audiences. In the polarized and indeed overheated political environment of the late 1960s and early 1970s, Phoenix embodied for many on the political left the violent excesses of America as it rampaged across Southeast Asia. Phoenix therefore contributed to a lasting legacy of suspicion about U.S. power and global ambitions.

The purpose of this paper is two-fold: to explain and assess the program and to suggest ways in which its elements might be applied in contemporary counterinsurgency campaigns.

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[1]   David Kilcullen, "Countering Global Insurgency," version 2.2, *Small Wars Journal*, November 30, 2004.

[2]   See, for example, Jeet Heer, "Counterpunch Revisionists," *Boston Globe*, January 4, 2004, p. C1.

The paper will begin by examining the Viet Cong (VC) underground, the target of Phoenix operations. After exploring both early U.S. and South Vietnamese work against the subterranean communist support structures and the origins and development of what became known as the Phoenix Program, the paper will offer an overall assessment of these efforts. This paper will also explore border control, a separate but related aspect of U.S. operations in Southeast Asia. Finally, the paper will consider how Phoenix-style intelligence coordination and operations might be applied in contemporary zones of conflict where U.S. forces are engaged, such as Afghanistan.

The Viet Cong Infrastructure: The "Shadow Government"

"People's war" in South Vietnam was waged primarily in the rural hinterlands, home to the vast majority of the country's 16 million inhabitants.[1] Central to the task of making revolution in the countryside was the subterranean political and administrative apparatus the Americans termed the *Viet Cong infrastructure* (VCI). At the heart of this shadow government, as it was sometimes called, lay South Vietnam's Communist party, known as the People's Revolutionary Party (PRP), which operated through committees at each of the country's administrative levels (national, regional, provincial, district, and village). Ostensibly, the party was only one component of the broader National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam (NLF), an umbrella organization founded in late 1960 to join the communist and noncommunist forces that were resisting the Diem government into what one senior North Vietnamese official referred to as "a united bloc of workers, peasants, and soldiers."[2] In reality, the NLF was entirely a creature of the Vietnamese communists. Supporting communist military units was a key VCI mission, and the VCI supplied recruits, money, intelligence, and supplies to guerrilla forces.[3] Cadres levied taxes, induced the rural population to join military units, and gathered information from farmers and others in the countryside about both the operations of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam and police units and the identity of government informers. In turn, cadres promised South Vietnam's impoverished and largely landless peasantry a better way of life through land reform and redistribution and freedom from government repression, onerous taxation, and military conscription.

Most importantly, the VCI was the structure through which the communist resistance sought to control South Vietnam's rural population and forge the residents of the countryside into a political weapon. According to one Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) veteran of the Vietnam War, the VCI "were a shadow government. The South Vietnamese government—the GVN [Government of the Republic of Vietnam]—may have ruled during the day, but these

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[1]   This figure is from Harvey Smith et al., *Area Handbook for South Vietnam*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, April 1967, p. 60.

[2]   Quoted in Carlyle A. Thayer, *War by Other Means: National Liberation and Revolution in Viet-Nam, 1954–60*, Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1989, p. 187. *Viet Cong* (literally, *Vietnamese communists*) was a term used by the Saigon government and its U.S. patrons. Vietnamese communists referred to their organization as the NLF and, beginning in 1969, as the Provisional Revolutionary Government of the Republic of South Vietnam. For stylistic reasons, this paper will use the terms Viet Cong or Vietnamese communists to describe insurgents in the south.

[3]   U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, *Phung Hoang Adviser Handbook*, Saigon: Headquarters, U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, November 20, 1970, p. 2.

guys ruled at night."[4] Breaking the Vietnamese peasantry's strong kinship ties and their adherence to traditional ways of life was an essential step in the process of forging a revolutionary consciousness and transforming the population into a weapon. The VCI was the instrument through which the PRP disseminated propaganda and established front associations of farmers, women, and students and other sectors of the population to weaken family and other social institutions and establish the party as society's new focal point.[5] Additionally, these organizations served operational purposes by holding demonstrations and disrupting government tax collection and military conscription efforts. They also functioned as revolutionary "transmission belts" by spreading antigovernment propaganda and rumors.

The VCI cadre, who numbered 70,000–100,000 in 1967, according to one estimate,[6] were divided into two categories by American intelligence analysts. So-called legal cadres were South Vietnamese citizens with legitimate identity papers; illegal cadres lacked such documentation. Counterintuitively (given the name), the legal cadres operated covertly, their status as part of the revolutionary movement a carefully guarded secret. Illegal cadres, on the other hand, were typically well known as communists both to local populations and to the South Vietnamese authorities. Their overt status made them vulnerable to apprehension, and they lived in well-defended compounds with retinues of armed guards to protect them from government security forces. By the late 1960s, as pacification programs were bearing fruit, it became increasingly difficult for illegal cadres to live and operate in the hamlets.[7]

Early Anti-Infrastructure Operations

During the early and mid-1960s, the South Vietnamese, encouraged by American civilian advisers, launched a series of programs intended to bolster the GVN's ability to identify, disrupt, and dismantle the shadow government. For Ngo Dinh Diem and his successors, and for their U.S. military patrons, combating VC guerrilla and main-force units (and, later, North Vietnamese Army [NVA] units) was of paramount importance and received the bulk of resources and attention. Nevertheless, early anti-infrastructure initiatives achieved some success in disrupting the communist underground infrastructure, and these efforts served as the nucleus of the broader and more thoroughgoing pacification campaign that began as the focus shifted to Vietnam's so-called other war in 1966 and 1967. Elements of the first anti-infrastructure efforts included the following:

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[4]   Orrin DeForest and David Chanoff, *Slow Burn: The Rise and Bitter Fall of American Intelligence in Vietnam*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1990, p. 71.

[5]   U.S. Information Service, Office of Policy and Research, "The Viet Cong: The United Front Technique," April 20, 1967.

[6]   Dale Andradé and James H. Willbanks, "CORDS/Phoenix: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Vietnam for the Future," *Military Review*, March–April 2006, p. 17.

[7]   Mark Moyar, *Phoenix and the Birds of Prey: The CIA's Secret Campaign to Destroy the Viet Cong*, Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1997, p. 60. According to one authoritative source (Richard A. Hunt, *Pacification: The Struggle for Vietnam's Hearts and Minds*, Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1995, p. 110), intelligence personnel

termed an unarmed member secretly affiliated with the party but openly living among the people a "legal" operative since outwardly he or she was indistinguishable from other law-abiding citizens. The other type, the "illegal" cadre, was an armed member, openly affiliated with the communists . . . . This category encompassed the top-level leadership . . . .

- **Chieu Hoi [Open Arms].** Launched in 1963, the Chieu Hoi program used offers of amnesty and resettlement to encourage defections from the VC and the NVA. According to one estimate, the program was responsible for generating 194,000 "ralliers" during 1963–1971.[8] Many of these defectors were low-level personnel, and few were from the NVA. Nevertheless, the program generated large amounts of useful information about insurgent motivation, morale, and organization.
- **Census Grievance.** Under the Census Grievance program, teams of South Vietnamese were sent to villages to interview one member of every family, ostensibly to develop a better understanding of popular antigovernment sentiment but, in reality, to gather intelligence on the VCI. The program generated vast amounts of information, although in a largely predigital age, it was difficult and time consuming to assess and exploit the data.
- **Revolutionary Development (RD) cadres.** A CIA initiative, the RD program grew out of nascent propaganda and recruiting efforts by the Diem government, such as the *action civique* and Xay Dung Nong Thon [Rural Development] programs.[9] A deliberate mirror-image of the VC, RD cadres were armed teams of young South Vietnamese sent into the countryside to live with villagers, spread pro-GVN and anticommunist propaganda, and recruit for village militias and associations. While ambitious, the RD program failed to gain traction in the countryside: "[T]he RD Cadres did not accomplish much," according to one scholar. "When confronted by the VC, they usually withdrew to safer environs rather than fight."[10]
- **Counter-Terror Teams (CTTs).** Like the RD cadres, the CTTs were organized, trained, and equipped by the CIA and modeled on Vietnamese-communist methods.[11] The CTTs were trained for small-unit operations deep within VC-dominated areas aimed at capturing (or, if necessary, killing) members of the VCI. As with other aspects of pacification, the quality, morale, leadership, and discipline of the CTTs varied from team to team and from province to province. South Vietnamese province chiefs sometimes misused the force by employing its members as bodyguards and using them to settle personal and political grievances. The rapid expansion of the CTTs throughout the countryside occurred without adequate command and control arrangements, and the teams had a reputation for thuggishness—a reputation reinforced by press accounts that claimed that these "assassination squads" were part of a generalized effort to terrorize the South Vietnamese peasantry.[12]

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[8]   J. A. Koch, *The Chieu Hoi Program in South Vietnam, 1963–1971*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, R-1172-ARPA, January 1973, p. v. Quite independently of the United States, Sir Robert Thompson, head of the British Advisory Mission in South Vietnam, urged Diem to adopt an amnesty program, having seen a similar effort bear fruit against communist forces in Malaya during the 1950s (Koch, *The Chieu Hoi Program in South Vietnam*, p. vi).

[9]   William Colby and James McCargar, *Lost Victory: A Firsthand Account of America's Sixteen-Year Involvement in Vietnam*, Chicago and New York: Contemporary Books, 1989, p. 214. Colby served as the CIA's chief of station in Saigon during the Diem era and later served as chief of the CIA's Far Eastern Division, deputy Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) commander for Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS), the CIA's deputy director for operations, and the CIA's director of central intelligence.

[10]   Moyar, *Phoenix and the Birds of Prey*, pp. 37–38.

[11]   Moyar, *Phoenix and the Birds of Prey*, p. 42.

[12]   Douglas S. Blaufarb, *The Counterinsurgency Era: U.S. Doctrine and Performance, 1950 to the Present*, New York: The Free Press, 1977, p. 211.

Although not usually categorized as a counter-infrastructure measure, Diem's strategic hamlet program was intended, among other goals, to disrupt the communist underground. Encircled with moats and sharpened bamboo stakes and defended by local militias, the fortified hamlets were intended to deny communists access to manpower and other resources. Ultimately, the hamlets never proved to be a decisive obstacle to communist ambitions in the countryside. But as the number of fortified hamlets grew, the Politburo in Hanoi grew alarmed about their effect on the insurgency and issued orders to communist commanders in the south to infiltrate and destroy them.[13]

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[13] William Duiker, *Ho Chi Minh: A Life*, New York: Hyperion, 2000, pp. 530–531. By August 1963, the Diem government had established more than 7,000 hamlets. Ultimately, the communists succeeded in "liberating" three-quarters of them, according to one estimate (William Duiker, *Sacred War: Nationalism and Revolution in a Divided Vietnam*, New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1995, p. 154).

The Phoenix Program and Intelligence Coordination

In June 1967, in an effort to centralize and better coordinate anti-VCI operations, Ambassador Robert Komer, the director of Military Assistance Command, Vietnam's (MACV's) overall pacification program, Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS), won approval for a CIA plan to establish a program called Intelligence Coordination and Exploitation (ICEX), later known as Phoenix.

As the ICEX name suggests, coordination of intelligence was the program's paramount objective. While simple in theory, coordination can be extremely problematic in practice. One need only glance at recent arguments about the failure of both the interagency process in the United States and more-specific failures of intelligence coordination to realize the ubiquity of the coordination problem even in mature democracies. In the case of Vietnam, the problem was compounded by the unstable political structure of South Vietnam and the fact that coordination had to occur between two parallel interagency processes, one American and one Vietnamese. This chapter details the apparatus that was constructed in an attempt to pull together all of these disparate elements into a cohesive campaign against the VCI.

The central element of coordination was Vietnamese, as the Saigon government provided the bulk of the manpower. This program was known as *Phung Hoang*, named after a mythical Vietnamese bird somewhat similar to the phoenix. Phung Hoang was not an independent bureaucratic entity; rather, it was a structure of coordinating bodies composed of the numerous agencies involved in the anti-VCI campaign. Phung Hoang was created by decree in 1968, and by 1970, these coordinating committees were organized at the national, regional, and provincial levels.[1] These committees included representatives from the National Police, the Special Police Branch, the National Police Field Force, the Chieu Hoi amnesty program, the RD cadre, the Military Security Service, the military intelligence and current operations staff (G2 and G3, respectively), the Provincial Reconnaissance Units (PRUs), and others.[2] It is perhaps indicative of the coordination problems of the GVN that it had in effect not one but three separate, national-level police forces, each with its own distinct interests.

Most of the coordination under Phung Hoang took place at the provincial and district levels. At these levels, a somewhat more formal entity consisting of the Province Intelligence and Operations Coordination Center (PIOCC) and the District Intelligence and Operations Coordination Center (DIOCC) was created. These centers had (or were intended to have) a physical presence and a staff of detailed personnel—they were not merely committees that met

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[1]   The regional levels corresponded to the four corps areas of responsibility. South Vietnam had 44 provinces.

[2]   U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, *Phung Hoang Adviser Handbook*, pp. 3–4.

occasionally. In addition, Province Interrogation Centers were established to provide a central location to question captured or surrendered VCI personnel, who were technically civilians.[3]

On the U.S. side, the advisory effort for Phung Hoang was the program actually named Phoenix. Phoenix was backed by two U.S. agencies: the CIA and MACV. Both provided funding and advisers to Phung Hoang, although they did so in different ways at different times.

As previously noted, the CIA had long been involved in anti-VCI activities. With their focus on intelligence gathering in a civilian setting, CIA officers were often well suited for the intelligence advisory mission. However, the CIA was (and remains) a relatively small organization, in terms of both personnel and resources. CIA support to Phung Hoang thus tended to be concentrated at the PIOCC level, as even the large CIA country team based in Saigon simply did not have sufficient personnel to staff the hundreds of DIOCCs. This dearth of officers occurred despite the recruitment of numerous temporary "contract personnel" who were not full-time CIA employees.[4]

CIA support for anti-VCI activities was most substantial in the early years of the Vietnam War. As the cost of the campaign increased, the agency's ability to support it declined. Additionally, later CIA station chiefs felt that penetrating the upper levels of the communist political and military apparatus was more important than the more operationally focused campaign against the VCI rank and file.[5]

 MACV, in contrast, was well endowed with both personnel and resources. Phoenix activities fell under the aegis of MACV's CORDS organization, and MACV therefore could draw on the thousands of American officers in Vietnam to staff the DIOCCs. By 1970, more than 700 advisers were serving in Phoenix, with military officers making up the majority of personnel.[6]

Unfortunately, few of the personnel assigned as Phoenix advisers had more than a rudimentary idea of how to conduct the kind of combined policing and intelligence operations needed to gather information on the VCI. In some cases, the CIA Phoenix advisers at the PIOCC level would mentor the DIOCC advisers, but this arrangement was haphazard and ad hoc, particularly because the CIA personnel were already stretched thin.[7] Phoenix advisers often had to rely on external support from nongovernmental research organizations, such as the RAND Corporation, to learn about the VCI. In addition to the formal advisory and coordination effort embodied in Phoenix/Phung Hoang, another set of combined military-intelligence activities impinged on the anti-VCI campaign. These were run jointly by the joint intelligence staffs (J2s) of MACV and the South Vietnamese Joint General Staff. Among these efforts were a Combined Military Interrogation Center, a Combined Document Exploitation Center, and a Combined Materiel Exploitation Center.[8]

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[3] U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, *Phung Hoang Adviser Handbook*, pp. 3–4; Chester Cooper et al., *The American Experience of Pacification in Vietnam*, Vol. 2, Alexandria, Va.: Institute for Defense Analyses, 1972, pp. 87–93. Later, village-level centers were created, but these were judged to be of limited utility.

[4] Moyar, *Phoenix and the Birds of Prey*, pp. 52–54, 135–136.

[5] Moyar, *Phoenix and the Birds of Prey*, pp. 82–83.

[6] Andradé and Willbanks, "CORDS/Phoenix," p. 18.

[7] Moyar, *Phoenix and the Birds of Prey*, pp. 134–136; DeForest and Chanoff, *Slow Burn*, passim.

[8] A brief summary of this intelligence effort is available in James Wirtz, *The Tet Offensive: Intelligence Failure in War*, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991, pp. 93–94. Lengthier description is available in Joseph McChristian, *The Role of Military Intelligence, 1965–1967*, Army Vietnam Studies Series, Washington, D.C.: Army Center for Military History,

Perhaps the most notable intelligence coordination effort was the Combined Intelligence Center, Vietnam (CICV). The CICV eventually comprised more than 500 American and 100 South Vietnamese intelligence personnel who were supported by an automated data-retrieval system. Located in what was purportedly the largest single-story air-conditioned building in Southeast Asia, the CICV produced a wide variety of intelligence products using an array of sources.[9]

Most pertinent to anti-VCI operations is the fact that the CICV's Order of Battle Branch contained a Political Order of Battle Section intended to track the VCI. Using a variety of intelligence sources, the Political Order of Battle Section labored to produce dossiers on members of the VCI that could then be stored and recalled by the automated system. By 1967, more than 6,000 dossiers on suspected VCI personnel had been compiled, and more than 1,000 were added monthly.[10]

The central problem with coordination in both Phoenix/Phung Hoang and the combined J2 efforts was the unwillingness of the various intelligence and police agencies to actually agree to pool intelligence resources. Directives for coordination were simply insufficient to ensure actual sharing, a point familiar to any modern-day intelligence officer. Intelligence agencies have a congenital bias against sharing information or, more accurately, have a bias against transmitting rather than receiving information for sharing.

This basic inclination is in part understandable, as sharing information can compromise sources and methods. This was particularly worrisome in South Vietnam, where counter-intelligence and information security were often not high priorities in DIOCCs and where the Vietnamese communists (from both the North and the South) ran very aggressive intelligence operations. Yet this unwillingness to share information also stemmed from simple bureaucratic rivalry in an environment where knowledge went hand in hand with power and authority. This rivalry was most prominent in the government of South Vietnam, particularly with respect to the police and the military.[11]

The rivalry between U.S. agencies was perhaps less prominent (but certainly not absent) in South Vietnam. Major General Joseph McChristian, the MACV J2 from 1965–1967, described his reaction to ICEX:

> On my last day in Vietnam, I became aware that a new plan for attacking the Viet Cong infrastructure was to be implemented. It was to be called the Intelligence Coordination and Exploitation for Attack Against the Infrastructure (ICEX) Program. Ambassador Robert W. Komer was to head the program as a deputy to the MACV commander. To put it mildly, I was amazed and dismayed. I called on Mr. Komer and General Westmoreland that last day and pointed out that I had not known about the program but that I was confident that the combined military intelligence system was out front leading the way against the infrastructure. I suggested that co-ordination was in order.[12]

1974, and in Julian Ewell and Ira Hunt, *Sharpening the Combat Edge: The Use of Analysis to Reinforce Military Judgment*, Army Vietnam Studies Series, Washington, D.C.: Army Center for Military History, 1974, Chapter Five.

[9] McChristian, *The Role of Military Intelligence*, pp. 45–49.

[10] McChristian, *The Role of Military Intelligence*, pp. 50–52, 72–77.

[11] Moyar, *Phoenix and the Birds of Prey*, pp. 130–132.

[12] McChristian, *The Role of Military Intelligence*, p. 78.

Thus, one of the many ironies of Vietnam is that the two programs designed to coordinate intelligence were not themselves coordinated.

Captured VCI personnel posed additional challenges. Those who accepted amnesty under Chieu Hoi were sent to special Chieu Hoi centers, and those captured bearing arms were accorded prisoner-of-war status. However, the legal status of those who did not bear arms but were nonetheless crucial to the insurgent effort was more nebulous, a situation compounded by lack of detention space and poor administrative procedures. A U.S. National Security Council report from 1969 summarized this problem:

> Problems in detention and judicial processing limit Phoenix-Phung Hoang effectiveness. The system for processing, interrogating and detaining prisoners has considerable impact on law and order and anti-VCI programs . . . [P]rovincial detention centers are frequently overcrowded, and poor prisoner accounting procedures are the rule rather than the exception. Roughly 60% of the prisoners arrested in 1968 were released.[13]

Phoenix "Action Arms": The Provincial Reconnaissance Units

In essence, Phoenix was designed to coordinate and disseminate intelligence on the VCI, primarily through such structures as the PIOCCs and the DIOCCs. Phoenix created no new operational units and controlled no forces on the ground. Efforts to disrupt the VCI were carried out by the South Vietnam's National Police, National Police Field Force, and Special Police Branch; U.S. and Vietnamese conventional armed forces; and by what became known as the PRUs, arguably the most effective action arms against the VCI.

Shortly before the creation of ICEX, the CIA decided to reestablish its control over the CTTs, and as a first step, the agency rebranded the teams. The new name, the Provincial Reconnaissance Units, signaled important changes in direction. In highly politicized conflicts during which struggles for "hearts and minds" are under way, names matter, and the term *Provincial Reconnaissance Unit* had none of the lurid connotations of *Counter-Terror Team*, at least not initially. The new name was also meant to signal a reorientation of the units away from killing suspected members of the VCI. Henceforth, the paramount mission of the PRUs was not to kill the adversary but rather to apprehend cadres and use them for intelligence purposes.[14] Although later denounced by the war's critics as an assassination program, the reality was in fact more prosaic. Simply put, the PRUs, according to one military officer, "were in the business of trying to capture VCI which could be exploited at a later date."[15]

Although they were part of the armed response to the VCI, the PRUs differed from other forces associated with the Phoenix Program. The most important distinction was the fact that the PRUs were largely independent of the overall U.S. and Vietnamese pacification and anti-VCI structures. Although the PRUs were technically part of the CORDS pacification program after May 1967, and although they later came under the nominal control of South Vietnam's

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[13] National Security Study Memorandum 19 Report, *South Vietnam's Internal Security Capabilities*, declassified, April 1969, p. 24.

[14] Moyar, *Phoenix and the Birds of Prey*, p. 38.

[15] Warren H. Milberg, "The Future Applicability of the Phoenix Program," Research Study, Report #1835-74, Air Command and Staff College, Air University, Maxwell Air Force Base, Ala., May 1974, p. 41.

province chiefs, the PRUs were organized, trained, equipped, managed, and paid for by the CIA. The CIA's jealously guarded independent relationship with the PRUs paralleled its independent ties to South Vietnam's intelligence and police services.[16]

Although PRU operations continued until the end of the war in 1975, their greatest level of activity occurred during 1967–1972.[17] Operating in all of South Vietnam's provinces, and never numbering more than 5,000 men, the PRUs were in essence an intelligence-driven police force—better trained, equipped, and paid than the South Vietnamese National Police, and with a highly specialized mission, to be sure, but a police force nonetheless. To help ensure that individuals were not targeted for personal or narrowly political reasons, multiple sources of information were required before an operation could be launched. Although it sometimes proved unavoidable, killing a suspect was not the intention of PRU operations. Rather, in the words of John Mullins, an American PRU adviser, "prisoner snatches were key. You can't get information out of a dead man."[18]

Units served in their native provinces, giving them a depth of knowledge about local conditions unmatched by any other South Vietnamese government (let alone U.S.) forces. "Successful PRUs," according to a CIA study, "developed [their] own sources of information, such as defectors, informants, and personal contacts in contested areas."[19] As American adviser John Walsh recalled, the PRU members "knew their territory intimately . . . . We advisors came to rely on their knowledge of who lived where and what their loyalties were."[20] The Phoenix intelligence centers, the National Police, the Special Police Branch, and other agencies were supposed to provide the PRUs with intelligence, but the PRUs typically gathered, developed, and exploited their own intelligence. According to Andrew Finlayson, another American adviser, "seventy-five percent of the time, the PRUs did their own targeting: 'This guy's sister is pro-VC, he comes to the market and is buying way too much food,' etc."[21] The PRUs had informants in nearly every village and hamlet, and they also relied heavily on family members and friends to provide information.[22] This self-generated intelligence was of much higher quality than that provided by U.S. or Vietnamese agencies. "What little intelligence we got from the DIOCC was virtually useless,"[23] according to Walsh. Moreover, organic intelligence was a necessity, since the Vietnamese police and intelligence services were rarely willing to share operational leads with the PRUs. U.S. organizations were also frequently unwilling to share with the PRUs,

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[16] Dale Andradé, *Ashes to Ashes: The Phoenix Program and the Vietnam War*, Lexington, Mass.: Lexington Books, 1990, p. 176; John Prados, *Lost Crusader: The Secret Wars of CIA Director William Colby*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003, pp. 196–197.

[17] Moyar, *Phoenix and the Birds of Prey*, p. 55.

[18] Telephone interview with John Mullins, October 26, 2006. Mullins served as a PRU adviser in Quang Tri/Hue in 1969–1970.

[19] Thomas L. Ahern, Jr., *CIA and Rural Pacification in South Vietnam*, Washington, D.C.: Central Intelligence Agency, Center for the Study of Intelligence, n.d. [2001], p. 301.

[20] Michael J. Walsh and Greg Walker, *Seal!* New York: Pocket Books, 1994, p. 127. Walsh served as an adviser in Chau Doc province.

[21] Interview with Andrew Finlayson, Arlington, Va., November 3, 2006. Finlayson served as a PRU adviser in Tay Nihh province in 1969–1970.

[22] Moyar, *Phoenix and the Birds of Prey*, p. 84.

[23] Walsh and Walker, *Seal!* p. 142.

fearing that intelligence provided to the Vietnamese would be "compromised" and wind up in the hands of the Vietnamese communists.[24]

A typical PRU was made up of five 18-man teams, which were in turn broken down into smaller units for operations at the district level. To maximize the element of surprise, operations most often took place late at night or early in the morning. Operations were of relatively short duration, rarely lasting more than a few hours. Although the units were led by South Vietnamese, American advisers helped plan operations and typically accompanied PRUs in the field. U.S. involvement in planning and carrying out "snatch-and-grab" operations was invaluable. With American advisers accompanying their operations, PRUs had access to air support when they encountered heavy resistance.[25] The ability of Americans to call in helicopters to quickly evacuate the wounded helped sustain PRU morale. Finally, direct participation in field operations helped American personnel gain a first-hand appreciation of strengths and weaknesses of the units they were advising. Although the PRUs obtained excellent intelligence, their American advisers exercised tight control, frequently rejecting proposed operations if they deemed intelligence inadequate.[26]

Most PRU recruits had previous military experience, often in elite South Vietnamese military units, such as the marines. Many had lost family members to VC violence, and revenge often served as a strong motivating factor.[27] Thanks to the CIA's largesse, members of the PRUs were well paid by Vietnamese standards, but it would be a mistake to characterize them as mercenaries, as some critics have: "Most were professional soldiers, they liked soldiering, and they were nationalistic. And they had scores to settle with the communists," recalls Finlayson.[28] Generous pay, specialized training from the CIA, and relatively low casualties contributed to high morale. Careful CIA control over the selection of PRU leaders helped ensure the generally high quality of unit commanders.[29]

The PRUs' American advisers also frequently had a military background. Indeed, until the late 1960s, most of the American advisers were serving military officers detailed to the CIA, which lacked the manpower to support what had become a nationwide program.[30] Still, the number of advisers was small relative to the overall number of U.S. military and civilian personnel stationed in South Vietnam. As of May 1970, 102 U.S. military personnel and five civilians were advising the PRUs.[31] Whether civilian or military, all PRU advisers fell under CIA operational control, with a chain of command extending down from the agency's regional officer in charge and to the agency's province officer, who oversaw PRU field operations.[32]

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[24] Andrew Finlayson, "The Tay Ninh PRU and Its Role in the Phoenix Program, 1969–1970," paper presented at the Conference on Intelligence and the Vietnam War, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, Tex., October 20, 2006.

[25] Finlayson, "The Tay Ninh PRU," p. 11.

[26] Moyar, *Phoenix and the Birds of Prey*, p. 121.

[27] Andradé, *Ashes to Ashes*, p. 173.

[28] Telephone interview with Finlayson, October 26, 2006.

[29] Mark Moyar, "The War Against the Viet Cong Shadow Government," unpublished paper, April 28, 2000, p. 6.

[30] Andradé, *Ashes to Ashes*, p. 177.

[31] "Study: Improving South Vietnam's Internal Security Scene," May 1970.

[32] Andradé, *Ashes to Ashes*, p. 176.

By the late 1960s, unfavorable publicity about the PRUs began to appear, and like their predecessors, the CTTs, the PRUs were mischaracterized as assassination teams.[33] Secrecy surrounding the PRUs made it impossible for U.S. government officials to refute charges that the units were little more than death squads.[34] The mistaken belief that PRUs as a matter of policy engaged in assassination was shared even at the highest levels of the U.S. government. According to one account, President Richard Nixon reacted angrily to proposed cuts in the PRU program, declaring, "[w]e've got to have more of this. Assassinations. That's what they [the Vietnamese communists] are doing."[35] In Saigon, General Creighton Abrams, the MACV commander, had the opposite reaction. MACV had already prohibited U.S. military personnel from accompanying PRUs on field operations, and Abrams, alarmed by the publicity surrounding the PRUs, ordered U.S. forces serving as unit advisers to be withdrawn completely.[36] For its part, the CIA grew ambivalent about the PRU program, pacification, and other "nontraditional" intelligence operations. Although the CIA continued to support the PRUs for the remainder of the war, agency notables, like Ted Shackley, the Saigon chief of station, were concerned that pacification-related activities were excessively "reactive" and that case officers would be more usefully employed in traditional intelligence collection.[37]

Assessing Effectiveness

Judging the performance of the PRUs, the Phoenix Program as a whole, and indeed any single element of the overall pacification campaign presents analytical challenges. According to the CIA, anti-infrastructure operations—including those carried out by the PRUs, the National Police, and allied conventional military units—were responsible for capturing, killing, or persuading to defect ("neutralizing" in the somewhat sinister language of the time) more than 80,000 cadres during 1968–1972.[38] Thomas Thayer described the PRUs—which had killed or captured roughly 380 cadres for every 1,000 men in the force during 1970, a figure that dipped to 263 per thousand the following year—as "the single most effective anti-VCI forces. . . . No other force came close to this."[39] However, such quantitative judgments are problematical, since many of the U.S. government–generated statistics surrounding the PRUs, pacification, and other aspects of the conflict have been revealed to be deeply flawed.

Qualitative assessments of the PRUs offer mixed pictures. In the judgment of some key American participants, such as William Colby, the fight against what he termed the *secret*

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[33] See, for example, Georgie Anne Geyer, "The CIA's Hired Killers," *True*, February 1970, reprinted in U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, *Vietnam: Policy and Prospects, 1970, 91st Congress, 2nd Sess*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1970.

[34] Terence J. Daly, "Killing Won't Win This War," *New York Times*, April 21, 2006, p. 17.

[35] Quoted in Seymour M. Hersh, *The Price of Power: Kissinger in the Nixon White House*, New York: Penguin Books, 1997, p. 547.

[36] Jeffrey J. Clarke, *Advice and Support: The Final Years, 1965–1973*, *The U.S. Army in Vietnam*, Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, United States Army, 1988, p. 379.

[37] Ted Shackley and Richard A. Finney, *Spymaster: My Life in the CIA*, Dulles, Va.: Potomac Books, Inc., 2005, p. 232.

[38] Dale Andradé, "Three Lessons from Vietnam," *Washington Post*, December 29, 2005, p. A23.

[39] Thomas C. Thayer, *War Without Fronts: The American Experience in Vietnam*, Westview Special Studies in Military Affairs, Boulder, Colo., and London: Westview Press, 1986, pp. 210–211.

apparatus kept the pressure on the communist underground, which helped to sever its connection with the rural population, thereby cutting off communist access to manpower and other key resources. However, according to Colby, the Vietnamese communists "attributed their problems to Phoenix, when they really should have attributed them to the growth of self-defense forces and that sort of thing."[40]

Critics of the effectiveness of the anti-infrastructure operations also note that most of the VCI who were neutralized were low-ranking individuals rather than the high-value targets that Phoenix and related efforts were designed to apprehend. Although it is true that most neutralizations were of low-level figures, they nevertheless had a powerful effect on the VCI, as Colby hints. Village- and hamlet-level cadres, who collected taxes, spread propaganda, and recruited new members, were essential to the smooth and effective functioning of the "invisible Vietcong empire."[41] After the war, senior Vietnamese communist officials testified to the deadly utility of anti-infrastructure operations. Phoenix and associated efforts, according to a senior North Vietnamese officer, were "devious and cruel" and claimed "thousands of our cadres," a view held by another senior officer, who described them as "extremely destructive."[42] In the view of Colby and others, these Vietnamese were mistaken in assigning responsibility to Phoenix-related forces. But given that the Vietnamese communists possessed what was arguably the most formidable intelligence structures of any twentieth-century insurgency, it seems unlikely that they would be so badly mistaken about who among their adversaries were responsible for decimating their ranks.

Finally, in assessing the effectiveness of anti-VCI operations, some consideration must be given to the costs to the United States. The financial impact was minimal: During 1968–1972, Phoenix cost a mere $4 million, although that figure does not include support to operational units, such as the PRUs. But the United States did pay a heavy political price, both domestically and internationally. Although abuses did occur, neither Phoenix nor its action arms were assassination programs, as critics charged, but negative publicity helped shape public perceptions that the United States was at war with the Vietnamese people. The PRU program, concluded one contemporaneous U.S. government study, "is clearly identified as an American program despite the cover arrangement and their operating under the control of the province chief."[43] The intense official secrecy surrounding such anti-VCI elements as the PRUs heightened fears that the United States and its South Vietnamese ally were engaged in illegal and immoral activities. The secretive and ruthless reputation enjoyed by the PRUs had an effect on their adversaries, to be sure, but that effect extended beyond Vietnam and reached broader audiences in ways that worked against U.S. policy objectives.

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[40] Quoted in Zalin Grant, *Facing the Phoenix: The CIA and the Political Defeat of the United States in Vietnam*, New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1991, p. 296.

[41] DeForest and Chanoff, *Slow Burn*, p. 71.

[42] Quoted in Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History*, New York: Penguin Books, 1997, p. 617. Such statements undercut the argument made by some scholars that it was the loss of large numbers of communist cadres during the 1968 Tet offensive rather than deliberate anti-infrastructure operations that was ultimately responsible for the destruction of the VCI. For a representative view, see John Prados, *Presidents' Secret Wars: CIA and Pentagon Covert Operations from World War II Through Iranscam*, New York: William Morrow, 1986, p. 310.

[43] "Study: Improving South Vietnam's Internal Security Scene," p. B-24.

Intelligence at the Border: IGLOO WHITE and OP 35

Apart from the formal coordination system of Phoenix/Phung Hoang and the PRU action arms, one other aspect of intelligence in Vietnam is worth mentioning. A variety of border intelligence and interdiction efforts were conducted by the U.S. government in an attempt to monitor and interdict supplies moving from North Vietnam into South Vietnam. These efforts fell into two general interrelated approaches: technical intelligence and human intelligence.

The technical intelligence component is best exemplified by the IGLOO WHITE surveillance system. IGLOO WHITE, a very early example of networking sensors, emerged from an earlier attempt to create a physical barrier system. It utilized unmanned ground sensors (primarily seismic and acoustic) along the Laotian infiltration route known as the Ho Chi Minh Trail. These sensors transmitted signals that were relayed via orbiting aircraft to the Infiltration Surveillance Center (ISC) at Nakhon Phanom Royal Thai Air Force Base. At the ISC, the IGLOO WHITE data were processed, stored on computers, and analyzed for patterns that indicated the movement of trucks and personnel along the trail. These data were transmitted to gunships or jet fighter-bombers that would then engage the targets.

The human intelligence effort is best characterized by the special operations program known as OP 35. OP 35 was the Air Studies Group component of MACV's blandly named Studies and Observation Group (SOG). SOG was in fact a cover for special operations, and OP 35 was the component focused on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. OP 35 utilized small reconnaissance patrols, generally composed of a few U.S. Army Special Forces and several locally recruited tribesmen (for a total team size of about 12), to locate infiltrators and call in air strikes on the targets. Additionally, the OP 35 patrols emplaced sensors for IGLOO WHITE, performed bomb damage assessment, and even conducted limited direct-action missions to capture prisoners or destroy facilities.

In addition to the cross-border OP 35, U.S. Army Special Forces camps along the Vietnamese side of the border also provided the ability to gather intelligence aimed at interdicting infiltration. These camps grew out of area-security programs begun in the early 1960s that eventually became a program known as the Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG). In addition to area security, U.S. Army Special Forces intelligence/reconnaissance efforts known as Projects Delta, Sigma, and Omega helped locate insurgent bases inside South Vietnam.

Overall, anti-infiltration intelligence and border-security efforts produced mixed results. They compelled the North Vietnamese to devote resources to protecting their operations along the Ho Chi Minh Trail—resources that the communists could have committed to military purposes elsewhere. But given that logistical requirements for communist forces in South Vietnam were small, only a modest amount of materiel had to make it through the trail's "pipeline."[44] Stopping that tiny flow was an insurmountable challenge for the United States. Moreover, evidence indicates that an even more important source of external support came through Cambodian ports, such as Sihanoukville.[45]

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[44] John M. Van Dyke, *North Vietnam's Strategy for Survival*, Palo Alto, Calif.: Pacific Books, 1972, p. 36.

[45] On the importance of the Sihanoukville route, see Thomas Powers, *The Man Who Kept the Secrets: Richard Helms and the CIA*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1979, pp. 274–279; George Allen, *None So Blind: A Personal Account of the Intelligence Failure in Vietnam*, Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2001, pp. 275–280.

Intelligence Coordination and Contemporary Counterinsurgency

The problems of intelligence coordination experienced during the U.S. counterinsurgency effort in Vietnam are present in current U.S. campaigns, most notably in Iraq and Afghanistan. Some efforts to correct this problem are under way, such as the creation of both tactical fusion centers and the overarching Joint Intelligence Center–Iraq (JIOC-I), which links multiple intelligence databases together so that they can be searched simultaneously with one query. This fusion concept, essentially a twenty-first–century version of the CICV, is certainly a sign of progress.

However, and perhaps more importantly, it does not appear that collectors and analysts are themselves fully collaborating across all agencies. This lack of collaboration is reminiscent of the limited coordination in South Vietnam before Phoenix. As in South Vietnam, a welter of agencies is involved in the collection and analysis of intelligence in both Iraq and Afghanistan. The CIA, the Defense Intelligence Agency, U.S. military service intelligence agencies, special operations forces (SOF), and individual military units are all engaged in these activities to one degree or another. In addition, both the Iraqi and Afghan governments have their own intelligence services, military units, and police forces, although most are probably not as capable or reliable as South Vietnam's security forces were.

Where collaboration does occur, it appears to be ad hoc and based on positive personal relationships. Such relationships are a feature of all intelligence services, although being ad hoc and contingent in nature, some of their consequences pose challenges. Finally, it is not clear that all agencies share the same understanding of the importance of insurgent infrastructure or even agree on a common definition of infrastructure.

In Afghanistan, where the United States and its allies face their most formidable challenges, ad hoc collaborative arrangements should be replaced with the Phoenix concept of joint intelligence centers at the provincial and perhaps the district and city levels of political organization. These centers should host representatives from all of the military and civilian intelligence agencies operating in that area, even if those representatives meet only a few times a week. Ideally, each center's physical location would be at least semipermanent and equipped to provide some type of classified information storage so that copies of notes from joint discussion could be retained. A meeting room used by other groups would therefore not be adequate. However, this arrangement may not be possible below the provincial level due to security conditions. Indeed, as with Phoenix, the lowest practical level may be the provincial level.

The reason to create physical intelligence centers is that collaboration by analysts is at least as important as the integration of databases. Many unstated assumptions, beliefs, and theories often lie behind intelligence judgments. Ensuring that these judgments are discussed and debated among intelligence professionals will, ideally, help sharpen these judgments and

expose unstated ideas to critical scrutiny. Further, collectors and analysts will be able to share tradecraft that is specific to the country or province.

Of course, as the adage goes, familiarity can breed contempt, and it is possible that rather than improving analysis, discussion in these centers may prove unproductive. Clearly, not every PIOCC and DIOCC in the Phoenix Program produced excellent coordination. Yet it is better to establish a formal mechanism that at least requires regular interaction than to leave such interaction to chance and ad hoc circumstances. Further, such centers could also integrate operators, which is a vital component of any attempt to attack an insurgent infrastructure (as discussed in the next section).

Anti-Infrastructure Operations and Contemporary Counterinsurgency

Even more critical than the coordination of intelligence operations is the synchronization of efforts to attack insurgent infrastructure and leadership. These efforts, if well coordinated, can yield major dividends in counterinsurgency by limiting insurgent funding, recruitment, logistics, and intelligence. On the other hand, if uncoordinated, these attempts can undermine other efforts to establish security and win the hearts and minds of the people.

In contemporary counterinsurgency, the United States has developed two different models of infrastructure attack. The first is based principally on U.S. capabilities, particularly technical intelligence. The second is based principally on local capabilities supported or sponsored by the United States. Both approaches involve trade-offs in terms of resource utilization, level of U.S. control, and overall effectiveness.

The U.S.-centric approach is perhaps best exemplified by what is known as the F3EA targeting cycle. F3EA, an abbreviation of *find, fix, finish, exploit, analyze*, is primarily associated with SOF, although conventional units have adopted a variant.[1] "An article in *Joint Forces Quarterly* describes F3EA thus:

> massed, persistent ISR [intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance] cued to a powerful and decentralized all-source intelligence apparatus in order to *find* a target amidst civilian clutter and *fix* his exact location . . . . This precision geolocation enables surgical *finish* operations that emphasize speed to catch a fleeting target. The emphasis on the finish was not only to remove a combatant from the battlefield, but also to take an opportunity to gain more information on the globalized and networked foe. *Exploit-analyze* is the main effort of F3EA because it provides insight into the enemy network and offers new lines of operations. Exploit-analyze starts the cycle over again by providing leads, or start points, into the network that could be observed and tracked using airborne ISR. A finishing force unified with airborne ISR and an exploit-analyze capability is able to be persistent, surgical, and rapid in operations against the insurgent's network. Airborne ISR became the pacing item for operations, but it had to be cued by the meticulous work of a robust, all-source, and collaborative intelligence network.[2]

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[1]   See Raymond T. Odierno, Nichoel E. Brooks, and Francesco P. Mastracchio, "ISR Evolution in the Iraqi Theater," *Joint Forces Quarterly*, No. 50, Third Quarter 2008, pp. 51–55.

[2]   Michael Flynn, Rich Juergens, and Thomas Cantrell, "Employing ISR SOF Best Practices," *Joint Forces Quarterly*, No. 50, Third Quarter 2008, p. 57.

This approach has netted a number of successes against insurgent leadership in Iraq, most notably the death in 2006 of Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) leader Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi. According to a recent Department of Defense publication, hundreds of targets have been captured or killed using F3EA, including some related to insurgent "infrastructure for things such as funding, meetings, headquarters, media outlets, and weapons supply points."[3]

The F3EA model's greatest strength is the level of U.S. control it affords, which is absolute. Highly disciplined American personnel relying heavily on airborne ISR provide a highly responsive capability that is also highly mobile. The approach can thus be employed equally well (with minor adjustments) in Iraq, Afghanistan, and anywhere else the United States conducts these operations. Using U.S. forces also lessens the risks associated with partnering with host-nation or third-county forces, whose loyalty and interests may change.

The F3EA approach's greatest weakness is that it consumes enormous amounts of resources. Most notably, it requires massive coverage by airborne ISR platforms. Even advocates of the approach note that this coverage requirement entails either concentrating all available airborne ISR assets in the hands of a few units or expanding the airborne ISR fleet by orders of magnitude (or both).

In addition to direct resource costs, there are opportunity costs associated with the F3EA model. It requires the dedication of assets for rapid response that might otherwise be available for other missions, such as supporting population security or training indigenous forces. Given that many of these assets, such as highly trained SOF, are in short supply, this opportunity cost can be significant.

Finally, the F3EA model may entail externality costs. The rapid operational tempo of raids in this model can be detrimental to other counterinsurgency efforts. This is particularly true if the initial part of the cycle (the "find" function) accidentally misidentifies a target, leading to the death or detention of an innocent civilian. Such an event can damage the relationships that other units or organizations have built with the local population.

The second approach, which is locally based, is best exemplified by the Awakening, a movement against AQI in Iraq's Al-Anbar province that began in 2005. The Awakening consisted of Sunni tribesmen and former insurgents who had come into conflict with AQI yet were initially unsuccessful in fighting the disciplined, well-managed, and highly resourced organization. However, with support from SOF, other U.S. government agencies, and, eventually, conventional forces, the Awakening began to achieve considerable progress against AQI.[4]

The Awakening is thus a very real heir to the PRU program, which combined U.S. support with local capability and intelligence to attack insurgent infrastructure. The members of the Awakening had considerable knowledge of AQI infrastructure; in fact, the two organizations often included members of the same tribes. Using this knowledge, the Awakening, with U.S. aid, was able to dismantle much of the AQI infrastructure during 2005–2007. Al-Anbar, which had been extraordinarily violent and AQI-dominated in 2006, was relatively stable and free from AQI control by mid-2008.

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[3] Flynn et al., pp. 57–58.

[4] See Austin Long, "The Anbar Awakening," *Survival*, Vol. 50, No. 2, April 2008; John A. McCary, "The Anbar Awakening: An Alliance of Incentives," *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 32, No. 1, January 2009; and Thomas R. Searle, "Tribal Engagement in Al Anbar Province: The Critical Role of Special Operations Forces," *Joint Forces Quarterly*, No. 50, Third Quarter 2008, pp. 62–66.

The second model's strengths and weaknesses are essentially the opposite of those associated with the F3EA model. Its greatest strength is that it is extremely inexpensive, at least by U.S. standards. Although the actual financial cost of the Awakening cannot be estimated (at least at the unclassified level), Commander's Emergency Response Program (CERP) spending can provide a high-end estimate. CERP is used to fund a variety of projects, including some that support various parts of the Awakening. The total cost of projects funded by CERP in Al-Anbar in 2007 was $160 million (a monthly average of a little over $13 million).[5] Even if all of that spending directly supported the Awakening (which it did not), the cost would still be much lower than 1 percent of the monthly cost of U.S. efforts in Iraq. Moreover, like the PRUs in Vietnam, the Awakening can be maintained as U.S. force levels in Iraq decrease.

However, this second approach affords the United States only tenuous control. Members of the Awakening have a variety of interests beyond opposing AQI, including specific grudges and grievances. There is considerable opportunity for the enemies of yesterday who have become today's allies to once again switch sides. For example, Al-Anbar is almost exclusively Sunni, and its inhabitants have concerns about their future under a central government dominated by Shia, particularly the Shia religious parties.

The locally based approach is not as readily "portable" as the F3EA model, being highly dependent on local conditions. In Al-Anbar, for example, the opportunity for a movement like the Awakening essentially did not exist before early 2005, and it took the movement a year and a half to become widespread, even with U.S. support. In other counterinsurgencies, these local opportunities may either take considerable time to develop or be absent altogether.

It is difficult to judge the effectiveness of these two approaches, especially at the unclassified level. One observation that may reveal the comparatively greater effectiveness of the local model is that the F3EA model was being applied in Al-Anbar from 2004 to 2006, a period during which AQI's infrastructure increased dramatically according to unclassified sources.[6] In 2006–2008, as the Awakening spread and consolidated, AQI's infrastructure was decimated. This seems to indicate the superiority of the local model.

However, even this judgment is not clear-cut. The F3EA model was still being employed in 2006–2008, so the resulting devastation of AQI infrastructure in Al-Anbar likely resulted from the combination of the two models. It is probably best to argue that although F3EA may be a necessary component of infrastructure attack, it is not sufficient. The local model, based on both the PRU and Anbar Awakening experiences, seems more definitely to be a necessary condition, even if it too may not be sufficient.

Border Security in Contemporary Counterinsurgency

Insurgencies that can access significant external support can better withstand almost all efforts to counter them, including infrastructure attack, than can insurgencies without such support. In the case of Iraq, external support for the Sunni insurgency in Al-Anbar does not appear critical to the continuation of the insurgency. However, the insurgency is able to benefit from the poorly patrolled western border in important ways: in particular, the ability to finance itself

5   Dana Hedgpeth and Sarah Cohen, "Money as a Weapon," *Washington Post*, August 11, 2008.

6   Thomas Ricks, "Situation Called Dire in West Iraq," *Washington Post*, September 11, 2006.

through a variety of cross-border activities, such as smuggling. Better intelligence and border security would help weaken insurgent logistics and financing. The terrain of western Iraq is much more amenable to observation than the jungles of Laos, and both sensor and network technology have improved dramatically since the 1960s, so it should be relatively easy to create a surveillance system that could at the very least monitor the border, if not actually seal it.

In contrast to the situation in Iraq, the insurgency in Afghanistan derives enormous benefit from not only external support but also sanctuary in Pakistan's semilawless northwest. This case is much more analogous to the Ho Chi Minh Trail example, with the important difference that major cross-border activity on the part of the United States and its allies, such as undertaken in OP 35, is probably impossible for political reasons. Pakistan is nominally an ally of the United States, and even the limited cross-border U.S. activity that has been made public has caused an enormous outcry in Pakistan.

In all likelihood, OP 35–style operations would have to be conducted in an extremely limited fashion, if at all. However, other approaches from the Vietnam War era could be relevant for border control. The CIDG program could be recreated in strategic parts of Afghanistan's border with Pakistan. Sensor networks like IGLOO WHITE could be established on the Afghan side of the border near suspected infiltration routes. Even if the only result of this effort was to make infiltration and exfiltration more difficult, it would be a significant boon to counterinsurgency in Afghanistan.

Of course, the terrain in eastern Afghanistan is not as amenable to monitoring as areas in western Iraq. It is extraordinarily rugged in many places, and there are numerous potential routes for those seeking to move clandestinely. However, the very ruggedness of the terrain also means that movement is naturally canalized toward traversable routes. Simply monitoring the easy routes would at least help to drive insurgents toward the more-difficult and more-dangerous paths. Further, unlike the insurgents in Southeast Asia, the insurgents in Afghanistan have no real alternate supply route akin to the port of Sihanoukville. The prospects for at least modest success at border security thus appear even better.

Conclusion

Some analysts have claimed that the lack of an insurgent shadow government in Iraq and Afghanistan makes a Phoenix-style anti-infrastructure program in those countries both unnecessary and unworkable. But insurgent documents captured in Al-Anbar—at one point, Iraq's most violent region—describe elaborate underground bureaucratic structures with functional elements devoted to intelligence and counterintelligence, media and propaganda, finances, recruitment, and religious affairs. The insurgencies in Afghanistan may not be as well organized or as highly bureaucratized, but they certainly have an apparatus for financing, intelligence, and recruitment that could be targeted in a selective fashion.

Applying any model from the Vietnam War in a doctrinaire fashion would be both unhelpful and ahistorical. A number of analysts have claimed that contemporary insurgency is vastly different from the Maoist people's wars of the Cold War, in which insurgents "made revolution" in the countryside, created an alternative state, defeated the incumbent on the battlefield, and consolidated national power.[1] Although it is true that some aspects of insurgency have changed over time—for example, the ability of armed groups to tap into regional and international economic circuits to sustain the armed struggle is dramatically greater now—some have endured, and differences may in fact be ones of degree rather than kind. Even during the Cold War, the Maoist model was not the only one available to insurgents: The Gueveraist or "foco" strategy was another well-known option. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that contemporary insurgencies are highly variegated, manifesting themselves, organizing, and operating in a diversity of ways. In Iraq and Afghanistan—frequently cited as examples of radically unstructured "netwar"—classic features are in evidence, including underground structures to support operations, disseminate propaganda, and recruit militants. Effective counterinsurgency today, as in Vietnam, calls for much more than defeating guerrillas on the battlefield: It requires the ability to understand, map, and disrupt the insurgent infrastructure. And today, as in Vietnam, improved intelligence coordination and dedicated anti-infrastructure forces can play a critical role in dismantling the subterranean "ecosystems" that sustain violent opposition.

Judged in its totality, the Vietnam War must be considered an American failure. This failure continues to resonate, and as one military historian reminds us, "it is difficult to convince the public or policymakers that there is anything to learn from a losing effort."[2] But the failure in Vietnam was not unmitigated. The pacification effort in general, and the Phoenix Program in particular, met with successes.

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[1] See, for example, Bruce Hoffman, *Insurgency and Counterinsurgency in Iraq*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, OP-127-IPC/CMEPP, 2004, pp. 16–17.

[2] Andradé, "Three Lessons From Vietnam," p. A23.

Perhaps the most important lesson to be derived from the anti-VCI operations is the critical requirement in any counterinsurgency to understand as fully as possible the nature and contours of the largely invisible structures that sustain the armed opposition. Although the United States has enjoyed considerable success in Iraq, its achievements could have come sooner if U.S. military and intelligence officers had devoted greater resources to understanding the inner workings of Iraq's multiple insurgencies. For all too many Americans, the insurgencies represent a black box whose inner workings—recruitment practices, sustainment activities, leadership, and decisionmaking process—remain obscured. This clandestinity was and is partly the result of the insurgents themselves, who, like insurgents everywhere, require this metaphorical cloak to remain viable in the face of sustained counterinsurgency operations. But the United States has helped sustain this clandestinity, albeit unintentionally, by failing to recognize it and strip it away. In Vietnam, most American civilians and military personnel alike recognized the importance of prisoner interrogations as sources of crucial (and otherwise unobtainable) information on enemy motivation and morale, strategy, tactical and operational innovation, and intelligence operations. Unfortunately, no such comparable effort has been made in Iraq. As the United States and its allies shift their focus to Afghanistan and weigh counterinsurgency alternatives for that country, decisionmakers would be wise to consider how Phoenix-style approaches might serve to pry open Taliban and Al-Qaeda black boxes.

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