

# The Phoenix Program and Contemporary Warfare

By MARK MOYAR



Marines guard Viet Cong captured near Chu Lai



President Lyndon B. Johnson greets American troops in Vietnam, 1966

In the mid-1990s, the Phoenix program was considered an artifact of historical interest but with little relevance to the contemporary world. I therefore analyzed the program primarily from a historian's perspective in the first edition of *Phoenix and the Birds of Prey*, making few references to the present or future. Readers interested in future applicability were left to draw their own conclusions from the history. A decade later, Iraq and Afghanistan have brought the study of counterinsurgency and counterterrorism back into fashion. For this reason, the new edition contains this additional chapter summarizing the principal lessons.

## The Shadow Government

The Viet Cong insurgency came to life in 1960 under the leadership of a shadow govern-

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ment staffed by Vietnamese Communist Party members and controlled by the Communist government of North Vietnam. Adhering to Maoist doctrine, this shadow government sought to force the South Vietnamese governmental apparatus—officials, militiamen, informants, and teachers—from the villages by violent means and to take its place. The cadres of the Viet Cong shadow government, or Viet Cong Infrastructure (VCI) as the Americans often called it, recruited peasants into the guerrilla forces, collected taxes, and obtained intelligence. They served as guides to military forces, provided shelter to the troops, coordinated the transmission of messages, and spread propaganda.

Some VCI operated under cover in the villages, but most were overtly Communist, for carrying out the key functions of the shadow government automatically made their identities known to the peasants. They were generally more visible to the population than insurgents in Iraq and Afghanistan today, which not only enabled them to accomplish more in terms of mobilizing the population and exploiting its resources but also made them more vulnerable

to countermeasures. Another critical difference between the Viet Cong and current insurgents is that the former were much less active in the urban areas than in rural areas. Because the Viet Cong were focused on organizing large segments of the population into armed forces rather than on merely harming the government and undermining its public support through violence, they could not normally operate where the government maintained a continuous and large security presence. Despite considerable instability at times, the South Vietnamese government invariably maintained such a presence in the towns and cities because South Vietnam always had a strong urban elite dedicated to the preservation of the state, in contrast to Iraq, where the United States disfranchised the elites of the Saddam Hussein era and installed new elites of uncertain character.

Once peasants joined the Viet Cong, the shadow government used drastic measures to make them more loyal to the movement. Deliberately separating the new recruits from their families, the Viet Cong cadres broke the strong family ties. Through shared hardship, ideological indoctrination, and good leadership, the

cadres replaced those ties with the Communist cause, which became a surrogate family. The Vietnamese Communists acquired a secular fanaticism as intense as that of many Islamic extremists in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. While the Vietnamese Communists did not perpetrate terrorist actions within the United States or other foreign countries, they were more formidable insurgents than the Islamic extremists; they were more disciplined and better organized—indeed, they were more disciplined and organized than nearly any insurgents in history. Thus, they were capable of executing large and complex military maneuvers, which permitted them to inflict much greater damage on counterinsurgent forces and exert much greater control over the population than the small groups of insurgents in Iraq and Afghanistan.

In the mid-1960s, in the chaos that succeeded South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem's overthrow, the Viet Cong insurgency made major advances. While the Saigon government's failure has often been attributed to South Vietnamese and American preoccupation with conventional force, the real problem was the lack of adequate South Vietnamese leadership. When U.S. combat forces arrived in 1965, a few of them participated in pacification, but the large Communist main force threat compelled the Americans to keep great numbers of their troops in conventional operations aimed at attacking big units and reacting to major Communist initiatives. U.S. troops, moreover, were not as effective as well-led South Vietnamese troops in ferreting out Viet Cong in the midst of the populace because the Americans lacked familial, cultural, linguistic, and racial ties. By contrast, the absence of large conventional insurgent forces in Iraq and Afghanistan spares the counterinsurgents from having to conduct big-unit operations, enabling them to focus on the small actions that counterinsurgency theorists emphasize. Because of the frailty of the Iraqi and Afghan governments, though, the United States has not yet been able to leave responsibility for pacification entirely in local hands as it eventually did in Vietnam.

**A “Rifle Shot” Approach**

In 1967, President Lyndon Johnson sent Robert Komer to Vietnam to improve coordination among the numerous agencies involved in counterinsurgency. With Johnson's concurrence, Komer created an integrating organization called Civil Operations and Rural Development Support (CORDS). Komer

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and many in the military found the CORDS concept attractive because it created unity of command and because the military was the only organization with enough people, funds, and other resources to support pacification on a large scale. The civilian agencies, on the other hand, disliked the concept because it put them within a military chain of command and often placed their personnel under the direct command of military officers who, in the opinion of the civilians, did not understand all aspects of pacification. When compelled to go along, the civilians did cooperate and, in general, CORDS proved to be successful in integrating interagency operations. In every

**Viet Cong prisoner awaits interrogation during Tet Offensive**



U.S. Information Agency

district and province, CORDS placed a single individual in charge of all U.S. military advisers and all civilian personnel except those of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). This individual was a military officer in some places and a civilian in others.

Komer also oversaw the creation of the Phoenix program in 1967. In the minds of Komer and others, pacification was hampered by insufficient attention to the Viet Cong Infrastructure and inadequate sharing of intelligence. Numerous South Vietnamese and American agencies were collecting information pertinent to the shadow government in isolation from one another; were they to share their information freely, they could corroborate each other's findings, reduce duplication of effort, and make better use of action arms. Komer created the Phoenix program to facilitate interagency sharing of intelligence on the Viet Cong shadow government, and he put it in the hands of the CIA, which had considerable experience with pacification and valuable advisory relationships with key South Vietnamese organizations. At Komer's behest, the CIA created Phoenix centers in every district and province, and the various agencies received instructions to send to each center a representative who was supposed to share the parent agency's information.

The creators of the Phoenix program advocated a “rifle shot” approach, whereby the South Vietnamese and Americans would try to get sufficient intelligence on a Viet Cong cadre to target that person with surgical precision, as opposed to a “shotgun” approach, in which forces apprehended or killed large numbers of insurgents in the hope of catching a few important cadres in their net. By the late 1960s, however, the ability of American and South Vietnamese forces to access any hamlet compelled overt Viet Cong cadres to live away from the population, to visit the villages only in the company of Communist armed forces, and to carry weapons. Thus, the cadres could not normally be neutralized independently of Communist armed forces, and collecting intelligence on the Viet Cong shadow government was largely indistinguishable from collecting intelligence on the Communist armed forces. Some theorists assert that targeting individual members of the infrastructure should always be a top priority for counterinsurgents, but in this case it could not be done as a separate task. The rifle shot method is not always feasible.

In the war for the villages, the Americans and South Vietnamese invested heavily in

human intelligence, which yielded a great deal of tactically useful information. One principal source of human intelligence was the peasant. In contrast to the villages of Afghanistan and the neighborhoods of Iraq today, where cellular telephones have proliferated, the Vietnamese village lacked instant communications, yet the peasants still provided much intelligence that allied forces could exploit. The members of the Viet Cong constituted the second principal source of human intelligence. Because the top Viet Cong were highly dedicated and well hidden, nearly all who served as allied informants and agents worked at the lower levels of the organization. For the United States, the employees of the South Vietnamese government were a third major source of human intelligence.

Many informants and agents provided information because they were paid. Such individuals, however, were less reliable than those with other motivations, which included hatred of the Communists and a desire to curry favor with the government. The most plentiful and reliable information, though, came from the relatives of the Saigon government's personnel. One key consequence of the expansion of the South Vietnamese armed forces in the late 1960s was the increase in the number of villagers who had relatives on the government side, as it facilitated a great deal of intelligence collection. For the student of counterinsurgency in general, the great capacity of the counterinsurgents to obtain information from their relatives undercuts the common refrain that counterinsurgents cannot obtain much intelligence in areas where the bulk of the population sympathizes with the insurgents. It also underscores the importance of recruiting or conscripting large numbers of individuals into governmental organizations, even organizations that may be ineffective in carrying out their primary missions.

### Sharing Information

The use of torture was widespread among South Vietnamese interrogators and security forces. Typical forms of torture included electric shock, submersion of the head in water, and beating. Some South Vietnamese forces killed prisoners out of revenge, the desire to compel other prisoners to provide information, or the fear that the prisoners might later be released. In the torture and killing of prisoners, they differed little from the Vietnamese Communists and, indeed, from many other armed forces in history.

American advisers rarely participated in the torture or execution of prisoners. Some advisers tried to prevent the South Vietnamese from torturing prisoners, while others just looked away because they lacked authority over their counterparts, believed the South Vietnamese knew best what to do, or feared that protests would alienate their counterparts. CIA advisers, in certain instances, compelled the South Vietnamese to stop using torture by threatening to withhold aid from South Vietnamese agencies that received CIA support, although at the price of arousing South Vietnamese resentment. American advisers today face the same dilemma of whether to object to brutality against prisoners, as they again are given the conflicting requirements of respecting allied nations' sovereignty and discouraging their counterparts from violating Western rules of war.

Some American witnesses contended that the use of torture did not cause Communist prisoners to divulge accurate information. Many others, however, including all of

police to play a major role in executing the program, but South Vietnamese military officers often shunted the police aside; the military generally held the police in contempt, and military officers were usually more experienced and higher in rank than the corresponding police officers.

The biggest impediment to intelligence-sharing was the reluctance of the agencies to divulge their secrets. They feared, with good reason, that other participating agencies were infiltrated with Communist spies who would relay the shared intelligence back to the Communists. Alternatively, the information could be passed to one of the less competent action arms, which might act ineffectively or inappropriately on it. Agencies also were concerned that they would not get credit for the information if it were shared and that other organizations would recruit their sources. These same fears have hindered intelligence-sharing at the National Counter-Terrorism Center, which was created at the behest of the 9/11 Commission in response to the failure to share critical intel-

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the South Vietnamese veterans with whom I spoke, contended that torture did yield valuable information. These findings support the view, espoused in some current debates over the handling of terrorists, that coercive interrogation can achieve results that other forms cannot. Interrogators with extensive training in the techniques of their trade frequently succeeded in extracting information through kind treatment and rewards. The benevolent approach, which many Americans favored, often induced prisoners to share more information than tortured prisoners would generally yield—but it took longer than other methods, and thus the information sometimes lost its value by the time the interrogators elicited it.

The Phoenix program was, first and foremost, an attempt to achieve what in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is among the most desired and most difficult objectives of the U.S. Government: systematic sharing of information among intelligence agencies. From the inception of the Phoenix centers, the program ran into the sorts of troubles that are common among today's intelligence-sharing initiatives. Bureaucratic parochialism reared its head at once. The creators of Phoenix wanted the South Vietnamese

intelligence pertaining to the September 11 attacks.

Intelligence-sharing succeeded under the Phoenix program only when participating agencies operated under unity of command, rather than just professing a desire for unity of effort. CIA officers at the province level and the South Vietnamese district and province chiefs orchestrated sharing within, and outside of, Phoenix and Phung Hoang most easily, on account of their authority over multiple agencies. In some places, the CIA and U.S. forces shared information with each other despite the lack of unity of command, but not on a systematic basis. When unity of command did not exist, personal relationships were paramount. This experience suggests that future intelligence-sharing efforts are likely to fail if they do not involve a redrawing of lines of authority to establish unity of command.

Contrary to popular legend, allied forces rarely entered villages in the middle of the night to kidnap or execute people because of the probability of getting the wrong people or becoming involved in a blind gunfight with armed Communists. Allied forces frequently cordoned off a hamlet and searched it for the enemy, but such operations only occasionally

netted any Viet Cong because of the cadres' tendency to spend little time in the populous areas and to operate alongside Communist military units. The most fruitful methods of neutralizing the cadres were ambushes and patrols in the vicinity of villages. Superior combat organizations frequently received intelligence that allowed them to set ambushes at precisely the right times and places, obviating guesswork.

In areas where the Communists had large conventional forces, the primary responsibility for combating those forces and the Viet Cong cadres traveling with them fell to allied conventional forces, which alone had the air support, artillery, and organic heavy weapons necessary to defeat such opponents. Pacification forces could operate in these areas only if the conventional forces provided a "shield" by continuously chasing and attacking the big Communist units on the periphery of the populated zones and beyond. American and South Vietnamese commanders have been criticized routinely for using large conventional forces to seek out insurgent conventional forces away from the populous areas, but in fact these operations were essential to the sturdiness of the shield, for they wore down the Communist main forces and discouraged them from gathering in numbers large enough to overwhelm the pacification forces, which had to be dispersed

in order to maintain control over the villages. When allied forces waited until the Communist main forces came to the villages before engaging them, the Communists could and did concentrate in great strength at individual locations of their choosing. Under such circumstances, allied main forces often could not intervene before massed Communist forces finished overrunning a village and despoiling its pacification forces—and even when they could intervene, they were likely to damage the villages with heavy weapons fire, which might alienate or drive away peasants friendly to the government.

**A Variety of Forces**

Many types of allied armed forces harmed the Viet Cong shadow government. As mentioned above, conventional units contributed by attacking Communist main forces that were accompanied by Viet Cong cadres. At times, allied conventional forces broke into small units and operated in the hamlet areas, as if they were pacification forces, to root out enemy irregulars. They often performed effectively in this role, giving lie to the theory that conventional forces are ill suited to counterinsurgency operations, though they did lack the familiarity with the local people and environment that most pacification forces possessed. Their participation in counterinsurgency

operations, however, reduced their readiness for conventional operations. This drawback often receives insufficient consideration from present-day analysts who advocate massive increases in the U.S. military's counterinsurgency capabilities.

Of the pacification forces, the Regional Forces and Popular Forces were the most important, primarily by virtue of their size, which reached half a million by the early 1970s. The Regional Forces were mobile militia units that patrolled the districts from which they were recruited, while the Popular Forces were static militia units that guarded their home villages on a continuous basis. The best static militia forces occupied different positions near their villages each night in order to ambush the Communists and prevent large Communist forces from concentrating against them at fixed locations. As with all South Vietnamese forces, the quality of Regional Force and Popular Force units almost invariably was a function of the quality of their leadership; other considerations such as socioeconomic status or political views had little influence. South Vietnamese leadership improved across the board after the Tet Offensive of 1968, starting at the top and moving down, which for the militia forces meant that many more became



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adept at combating the Communists in the populous areas. In 1968, the South Vietnamese government created another militia called the People's Self-Defense Forces, composed of males too young or old to serve in other units. These forces usually were not very effective militarily, but their creation had the benefit of putting more people on the government side.

Regular policemen were too lightly armed to fight battles with the insurgents, a fact lost on the many counterinsurgency theorists who have lambasted the South Vietnamese government for inadequate emphasis on the police. While those theorists contend that the police were uniquely qualified to identify and neutralize the Viet Cong cadres, the paramilitary and military forces actually carried out these activities effectively on numerous occasions. This lesson had to be relearned in Iraq, as the United States

initially put too much emphasis on developing police forces and not enough on paramilitary and military forces, leaving the Iraqis with poor capabilities for dealing with the insurgents when they grew in number.

The most effective allied forces in the village war were the Provincial Reconnaissance Units (PRUs). Originally created in 1964, the PRUs were a highly secret paramilitary organization that operated in dangerous areas and at night more often than most South Vietnamese units. Most members served in their native areas and thus had familiarity and contacts. Because of their success in amassing intelligence and their tactical prowess, they typically dealt heavy losses on the enemy at low cost to themselves. The small size of the PRUs—the total nationwide strength never exceeded 6,000, a fraction of the strength of the militia forces and regular army—meant that they alone could not fundamentally alter the military situation in most provinces. They nonetheless inflicted remarkable damage, capturing or killing between 8,000 and 15,000 Communists per year.

The most important reason for the superb performance of the PRUs was the quality of the leaders. Although nominally under the authority of South Vietnamese officials, the units were in fact completely controlled by the CIA, making them the only South Vietnamese organization under direct American control. The CIA hired and fired commanders strictly on the basis of merit, in contrast to the South Vietnamese government, which frequently appointed leaders based on political and personal considerations.

When providing counsel, U.S. advisers generally were most effective when they offered suggestions that led their counterparts to reach the conclusions themselves. When the Americans tried to apply pressure, the South Vietnamese tended to become less receptive. U.S. advisers tried to apply pressure with unfortunate frequency, usually because they did not understand South Vietnamese psychology and had a greater sense of urgency than the South Vietnamese. Similar problems have plagued American advisory efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan. The cures, then and now, are heightened cultural awareness and the selection of advisers with the right personality traits. Accompanying South Vietnamese forces on operations substantially increased an adviser's chances of influencing his counterparts, for it enhanced personal relationships and demonstrated commitment. Casualty-

averse authorities forbade U.S. advisers from going on operations late in the war. Hopefully, the United States will not undermine current advisory programs by making the same mistake, considering that final victory in Iraq and Afghanistan can come only through the actions of indigenous security forces.

Advisers also had the option of reporting on ineffective South Vietnamese leaders up the American chain of command, and those advisers who possessed the necessary cultural awareness and motivation often made such reports. As a result, the top CORDS officials succeeded in convincing the South Vietnamese to replace a considerable number of leaders. Indeed, the participation of CORDS advisers in the replacement of leaders was their most significant contribution to the war. The importance of this function provides one of the most compelling reasons for today's American military to increase its training and education in the areas of language, culture, and interpersonal skills.

### **The Loss of Good Leaders**

The allies arrested, captured, or killed a large fraction of the shadow government's cadres from 1967 to 1972, on top of the substantial number neutralized during the 1968 Tet Offensive. Hanoi attempted to replace its losses through recruitment in the South and infiltration of personnel from North Vietnam. These manpower sources, however, yielded too few individuals to prevent the overall size of the shadow government from shrinking drastically. The sharp decline in Communist recruitment not only inhibited the replenishment of Communist forces but also helped the Saigon government expand its enlistment of the rural populace. In addition, the failure of the shadow government to collect agricultural taxes, offer logistical support, gather intelligence, and provide guides seriously undermined the functioning of Communist conventional forces in the South Vietnamese countryside and contributed materially to the failure of the Communists' 1972 Easter Offensive.

The strategic impact of the shadow government's destruction highlights the importance of shadow governments to insurgencies. It also contradicts the theory of some counterinsurgency analysts that the population or the insurgent political program constitutes the insurgents' "center of gravity." Strong leadership was the most important factor in the success of the Viet Cong, as it has been for most other

insurgents. The loss of good leaders can be crippling because they cannot normally be replaced quickly, especially in a case such as the Viet Cong, where leadership resided exclusively in an elite party that added members through a slow and selective process.

Ultimately, Hanoi would be able to overcome the debilitation of the shadow government by building up its massive logistical networks in Laos and Cambodia and sending hundreds of thousands of North Vietnamese regulars to attack the South Vietnamese army, which faced the impossible task of defending vast amounts of territory at a time when the U.S. Congress was slashing its military assistance and preventing the American President from living up to his promises of emergency U.S. air support. While South Vietnam's pacification forces had taken control of the populous rural areas and fully utilized the resources of the villages, they were too dispersed and too lightly equipped to stop large Communist main forces armed with tanks and artillery.

The war against the Viet Cong provides proof that no insurgency is invincible. The Viet Cong were among the most potent insurgents in history, thanks to the dedication and skill of the Viet Cong shadow government and generous support from North Vietnam, China, and the Soviet Union, yet allied forces brought the insurgency to ruin between 1965 and 1970. The American military played a major role in subduing the Communist armed forces, but the critical goal of establishing a permanent security presence in most villages could not have been reached without the considerable assistance of South Vietnamese forces. In Iraq, the United States has slowly relearned that indigenous forces are much more effective than foreigners at quelling local subversion, and it is attempting to take advantage of that fact by handing over responsibility for population security to Iraqi forces. The great question is whether the local forces can become strong enough to establish and maintain security on their own. In Iraq and Afghanistan, as in South Vietnam, the success of the indigenous government ultimately will depend on its success in bringing good military and political leaders to power while maintaining governmental cohesion, and the United States must therefore do everything possible to help both countries attain this end, as it did in Vietnam in the late 1960s and early 1970s. **JFQ**