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Phoenix Program

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For other uses of "Operation Phoenix", see [Operation Phoenix \(disambiguation\)](#).

The **Phoenix Program** (Vietnamese: *Chiến dịch Phụng Hoàng*, a word related to *fenghuang*, the Chinese phoenix) was a program designed, coordinated, and executed by the United States [Central Intelligence Agency](#) (CIA), [United States special operations forces](#), special forces operatives from the [Australian Army Training Team Vietnam](#) (AATV),^[1] and the [Republic of Vietnam's](#) (South Vietnam) security apparatus during the [Vietnam War](#).

The Program was designed to identify and "neutralize" (via infiltration, capture, [terrorism](#), [torture](#), and [assassination](#)) the infrastructure of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam (NLF or *Viet Cong*).^{[2][3][4][5]} The CIA described it as "a set of programs that sought to attack and destroy the political infrastructure of the Viet Cong".^[6] The major two components of the program were Provincial Reconnaissance Units (PRUs) and regional interrogation centers. PRUs would kill or capture suspected NLF members, as well as civilians who were thought to have information on NLF activities. Many of these people were then taken to interrogation centers where some were tortured in an attempt to gain intelligence on VC activities in the area.^[7] The information extracted at the centers was then given to military commanders, who would use it to task the PRU with further capture and assassination missions.^[7]

The program was in operation between 1965 and 1972, and similar efforts existed both before and after that period. By 1972, Phoenix operatives had "neutralized" 81,740 suspected NLF operatives, informants and supporters, of whom between 26,000 and 41,000 were killed.^{[8][9]}



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History [[edit](#)]

The interrogation centers and PRUs were developed by the CIA's [Saigon](#) station chief [Peer DeSilva](#). DeSilva was a proponent of a military strategy known as "counter terror" which held that terrorism was a legitimate tool to use in unconventional warfare, and that it should be applied strategically to "enemy civilians" in order to reduce civilian support for the Viet Cong. The PRUs were designed with this in mind, and began terrorizing suspected VC members in 1964.^[7] Originally, the PRUs were known as "Counter Terror" teams, but they were renamed to "Provincial Reconnaissance Units" after CIA officials "became wary of the adverse publicity surrounding the use of the word 'terror'".^[10]

In 1967 all "pacification" efforts by the United States had come under the authority of the [Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support](#), or CORDS. CORDS had many different programs within it, including the creation of a peasant militia which by 1971 had a strength of about 500,000.^[11]

In 1967, as part of CORDS, the Intelligence Coordination and Exploitation Program (ICEX) was created,^[11] from a plan drafted by [Nelson Brickham](#) partly inspired by [David Galula's](#) *Counterinsurgency Warfare* (1964), a book based on Galula's experiences in the [Algerian War](#) which Brickham was "very taken" with and carried with him around Vietnam.^[12] The purpose of the organization centered on gathering information on the NLF. It was renamed Phoenix later in the same year. The South Vietnamese program was called *Phụng Hoàng*, after a [mythical bird](#) that appeared as a sign of prosperity and luck. The 1968 [Tet offensive](#) showed the importance of the NLF infrastructure, and the military setback for the US made it politically more palatable for the new program to be implemented. By 1970 there were 704 U.S. Phoenix advisers throughout South Vietnam.^[11]

Officially, Phoenix operations continued until December 1972, although certain aspects continued until the [fall of Saigon](#) in 1975.^[13]

Operations [[edit](#)]

The chief aspect of the Phoenix Program was the collection of intelligence information.^[*citation needed*] NLF members would then be neutralized (captured, converted, or killed). Emphasis for the enforcement of the operation was placed on local government militia and police forces, rather than the military, as the main operational arm of the program.^[11] Historian Douglas Valentine states that "Central to Phoenix is the fact that it targeted civilians, not soldiers".^[14]

Neutralization took place under special laws that allowed the arrest and prosecution of suspected [communists](#). To avoid abuses such as phony accusations for personal reasons, or to rein in overzealous officials who might not be diligent enough in pursuing evidence before making arrests, the laws required three separate sources of evidence to convict any individual targeted for neutralization. If a suspected NLF member was found guilty, he or she could be held in prison for two years, with renewable two-year sentences totaling up to six years.^[11] According to MACV Directive 381-41, the intent of Phoenix was to attack the NLF with a "rifle shot rather than a shotgun approach to target key political leaders, command/control elements and activists in the VCI."

Heavy-handed operations—such as random cordons and searches, large-scale and lengthy detentions of innocent civilians, and excessive use of firepower—had a negative effect on the civilian population. Intelligence derived from interrogations was often

used to carry out "search and destroy" missions aimed at finding the enemy and destroying them.^{[15][16]}

Torture [edit]

Methods of torture used at the interrogation centers included:

Rape, gang rape, rape using eels, snakes, or hard objects, and rape followed by murder; electric shock (the Bell Telephone Hour) rendered by attaching wires to the genitals or other sensitive parts of the body, like the tongue; the 'water treatment'; the 'airplane' in which the prisoner's arms were tied behind the back, and the rope looped over a hook on the ceiling, suspending the prisoner in midair, after which he or she was beaten; beatings with rubber hoses and whips; the use of police dogs to maul prisoners.^[17]

Military intelligence officer K. Milton Osborne witnessed the following use of torture:

The use of the insertion of the 6-inch dowel into the canal of one of my detainee's ears, and the tapping through the brain until dead. The starvation to death (in a cage), of a Vietnamese woman who was suspected of being part of the local political education cadre in one of the local villages ... The use of electronic gear such as sealed telephones attached to ... both the women's vaginas and men's testicles [to] shock them into submission.^[18]

According to one former CIA officer few of the detainees who were interrogated survived—most of them were tortured to death, and those that survived the torture sessions were generally killed afterwards.^[19] The torture was usually carried out by South Vietnamese with the CIA and special forces playing a supervisory role.^[19]

Targeted killings [edit]

Phoenix operations often aimed to assassinate targets, or resulted in their deaths through other means. PRU units often anticipated resistance in disputed areas, and often operated on shoot first basis.^[20] Innocent civilians were also sometimes killed. *William Colby* claimed that the program never sanctioned the "premeditated killing of a civilian in a non-combat situation," and other military personnel stated that capturing NLF members was more important than killing them.^{[13][21][22][23]} *Lieutenant Vincent Okamoto*, an intelligence-liaison officer for the Phoenix Program for two months in 1968 and a recipient of the *Distinguished Service Cross* said the following:^{[24][25]}

The problem was, how do you find the people on the *blacklist*? It's not like you had their address and telephone number. The normal procedure would be to go into a village and just grab someone and say, 'Where's Nguyen so-and-so?' Half the time the people were so afraid they would not say anything. Then a Phoenix team would take the *informant*, put a sandbag over his head, poke out two holes so he could see, put *commo wire* around his neck like a long leash, and walk him through the village and say, 'When we go by Nguyen's house scratch your head.' Then that night Phoenix would come back, knock on the door, and say, 'April Fool, motherfucker.' Whoever answered the door would get wasted. As far as they were concerned whoever answered was a Communist, including family members. Sometimes they'd come back to camp with ears to prove that they killed people.

Strategic effect [edit]

Between 1968 and 1972, Phoenix "neutralized" 81,740 people suspected of NLF membership, of whom 26,369 were killed. A significant number of NLF were killed, and between 1969 and 1971 the program was quite successful in destroying NLF infrastructure in many important areas. By 1970, communist plans repeatedly emphasized attacking the government's pacification program and specifically targeted Phoenix officials. The NLF also imposed quotas. In 1970, for example, communist officials near *Da Nang* in northern South Vietnam instructed their assassins to "kill 400 persons" deemed to be government "tyrant[s]" and to "annihilate" anyone involved with the pacification program. Several North Vietnamese officials have made statements about the effectiveness of Phoenix.^[11] According to *William Colby*, "in the years since the 1975, I have heard several references to North Vietnamese and South Vietnamese communists who account, who state that in their mind the most, the toughest period that they faced in the whole period of the war from 1960 to 1975 was the period from 1968 to '72 when the Phoenix Program was at work."^[26] The CIA claimed that through Phoenix they were able to learn the identity and structure of the VCI in every province.^[17]

Public response and legal proceedings [edit]

One of the first people to criticize Phoenix publicly was *Ed Murphy*, a native of Staten Island, New York" in 1970.^[citation needed]

There was eventually a series of *U.S. Congressional* hearings. In 1971, in the final day of hearing on "U.S. Assistance Programs in Vietnam", a former serviceman named *K. Milton Osborn*, described the Phoenix Program as a "sterile depersonalized murder program." Consequently, the military command in Vietnam issued a directive that reiterated that it had based the anti-VCI campaign on South Vietnamese law, that the program was in compliance with the laws of land warfare, and that U.S. personnel had the responsibility to report breaches of the law.^[citation needed]

Abuses were common.^{[13][27][28]} In many instances, rival Vietnamese would report their enemies as "VC" in order to get U.S. troops to kill them.^[29] In many cases, *Phung Hoang* chiefs were incompetent bureaucrats who used their positions to enrich themselves. Phoenix tried to address this problem by establishing monthly neutralization quotas, but these often led to fabrications or, worse, false arrests. In some cases, district officials accepted bribes from the NLF to release certain suspects.^[11]

After Phoenix Program abuses began receiving negative publicity, the program was officially shut down. However, "several antiwar journals" alleged that another program of a similar nature, code-named "F-6", was initiated as Phoenix was phased out.^[30]

See also [edit]

- CIA activities in Vietnam*
- Edward Lansdale*
- Tran Ngoc Chau*
- Vincent Okamoto*
- William Colby*
- Nguyễn Hợp Đoàn*
- Pentagon Papers*
- Special Activities Division*
- Operation Speedy Express*
- Tiger Force*

- [Winter Soldier Investigation](#)
- [Vietnam War Crimes Working Group](#)
- [My Lai Massacre](#)
- [United States war crimes](#)
- [Russell Tribunal](#)
- [Operation Condor](#)

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- [Senate Review of Phoenix Program](#)
- [Counter-Revolutionary Violence - Bloodbaths in Fact and Propaganda](#) , by **Noam Chomsky** and **Edward S. Herman**
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- ["Focus on the Extrajudicial Killings in RP: Operation Phoenix's Long Shadow"](#) . By Joel Garduce. *Bulatlat*. Oct. 1-7, 2006. Republic of the Philippines (RP).
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<p>Categories: Central Intelligence Agency operations Dirty wars Forced disappearance Military operations of the Vietnam War Terrorism in Vietnam Terrorist incidents in the 1960s Terrorist incidents in the 1970s Torture in Vietnam War crimes in Vietnam Vietnam War Targeted killing</p>

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