

The Coup and The Phoenix: Spanning a Decade of Covert Operations

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ABSTRACT: In both the Phoenix Program and the coup of Diem the Central Intelligence Agency pushed the envelope of official United States foreign policy in Vietnam during the 1960s. The use of the CIA as a communication vehicle with the coup plotters against Diem resulted in the toppling of a foreign government and the assassination of its leader. The Phoenix Program was intended to target members of the Vietcong. On paper the program's official policy was lawful and just, yet to this day controversy surrounds the memories of those in the field who witnessed first hand the grave shortcomings of that policy. In the 1960s the CIA fought on the front lines of a cold war that for many grew too hot, too fast, and lasted far too long.

The 1960's proved to be a challenging period for the United States in its cold war effort. The primary testing ground of this effort was in Southeast Asia: primarily Vietnam. The struggle that began with the coup of Ngo Dinh Diem, and lasted throughout the decade, was the product of a global ideological battle waged by the Soviet Union and the United States. The cold war began soon after the conclusion of the Second World War, and lasted for four decades. A prime example of international relations during the cold war is the way the Central Intelligence Agency operated in Vietnam during the 1960's. This paper will examine two specific agency operations: the coup of Diem in 1963 and later in the decade, the Phoenix Program which took place from 1967-1969.

The extent of the cold war division that led America and the CIA into Vietnam is seen in a report by the National Security Council dated 18 June 1948. Contained within this report is the directive to establish an Office of Special Projects for the purpose of conducting covert operations. This office, to be formed within the Central Intelligence Agency, was deemed necessary due to the "vicious covert activities of the USSR, its satellite countries and Communist groups to discredit and defeat the aims and activities of the United States."¹ This cold war sentiment became apparent with the 1954 Geneva Agreement which resulted in Vietnam being divided into northern and southern zones. The North was controlled by the Communist government of Ho Chi Minh.

By the early 1960's the winding coastal nation of Vietnam became a testing ground of U.S. determination not to allow South Vietnam to fall into the hands of the Communists. The fear of this loss is expressed in a 1961 document authored by Secretary of State Dean Rusk and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara: "The loss of South Viet-Nam would make pointless any further discussion about the importance of Southeast Asia to the free world."²

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Here, we see the newly elected Kennedy administration assessing Vietnam within the scope of the wider cold war. Continuing this point, the document states, "we would have to face the near certainty that the remainder of Southeast Asia and Indonesia would move to a complete accommodation with Communism."³ The scrutiny of Communist intentions by the administration demonstrates their extreme desire not to be identified as the principals who allowed Communism to continue its global expansion.

The fear of this expansion was further explained by President Kennedy in a 1963 television news interview. When questioned if he believed in the concept of the domino theory Kennedy replied, "I believe it." He then elaborated on the danger of China which "looms so high just beyond the frontiers . . . would also give the impression that the wave of the future in Southeast Asia was China and the Communists."⁴ It was this overwhelming sentiment that set the stage for increasing American involvement in Vietnam during the 1960's. The United States government felt the necessity to defend Vietnam against the spread of Communism.

For President Kennedy this meant the necessity to exercise a hidden American influence in the affairs of the South Vietnamese government. The growing American discontent with the South Vietnamese developed out of that government's extreme repression of the Buddhists. The essential question forced by this repression was: How could the United States justify assistance to a government that abused and repressed its own citizens? Fearing a crisis situation, American policy makers throughout the summer of 1963 evaluated possible courses of action. They wanted to dispel the tension and bring Diem into line with American objectives. This was seen in a cable from the U.S. mission in Saigon to Washington; "Our best move at this juncture . . . is to press Diem directly and indirectly to accept Buddhist crisis as blessing in disguise."⁵

Later in the decade the United States would exercise its influence by deploying over 500,000 military personnel in South Vietnam. In 1968, with the war raging seemingly beyond the grasp of American military planners, the CIA was instrumental in operating a program to combat the Communist infrastructure. Before this large escalation, a pivotal event occurred which involved the covert operations of the CIA.

For the Agency this role was one of close contact with the Vietnamese generals who felt Diem had to go. To this end the CIA operated as the unofficial and hidden policy

making arm of the United States. The Ambassador to South Vietnam, Henry Cabot Lodge, worked closely with CIA agents to determine if a coup was possible. Primarily, contact between coup plotters and the United States was made through CIA agent Lucien Conein. In August 1963, the CIA made contact with General Khiem who they believed to be dissatisfied with Diem's government. Conein was told that another general, General Minh, held a meeting of generals to determine what action they might take against Diem. Conein informed Khiem that the United States would support the families if anything happened to go wrong; "General Khiem asked for and received assurances that the U.S. would do all in its power to assist the families of the Generals engaged in the coup plot in the event of its failure."⁶ On 29 August 1963, General Khiem held a meeting between Conein and General Minh. Conein used this meeting to ask Minh what the generals would consider a sign of support from the United States. Minh responded that a suspension of economic aid "in order to force Nhu's hand" would be received as a sign of U.S. support for the coup.⁷ Here we see direct contact between the coup plotters and the CIA. American ambassador Lodge was using Conein and the CIA as a vehicle of communication. This is seen further in a cable of August 28 from the CIA Station Chief John Richardson, "Conein's meeting with General Khiem reveals that overwhelming majority of general officers are united."⁸ Thus, we see the CIA as having a front row seat with respect to the planning of the coup. Also, in the same cable Richardson expresses the possibility that the agency may need to get in the game; "we all understand that the effort must succeed and that whatever needs to be done on our part must be done."⁹ Certainly, such activity as the overthrow of a foreign government could not be conducted above the table. The CIA provided a convenient covert opportunity to channel American policy.

Primary to this task was the contact between the discontented Vietnamese generals and Conein. The results of these meetings were communicated to Washington through the CIA station in Saigon. Conein was first contacted in July of 1963 about the possibility of a coup. By late August the generals seemed to be gathering steam to push ahead with coup plans. Conein was instructed by CIA headquarters in Washington to discuss coup plans with the generals.¹⁰ As seen in a telegram of 26 August 1963, "Conein will ask Khiem's advice on Conein's talking with General Tran Van Don."¹¹ Thus the Agency was careful about who they spoke with concerning the coup. Conein was further instructed to present certain points to Generals Khiem and Khanh. Among these points were the following:

Solicitation of further elaboration of action aspects of present thinking and planning . . . We will provide direct support during any interim period of breakdown central government . . . If Nhus do not go and if Buddhists' situation is not redressed as indicated, we would find it impossible continue military and economic support.¹²

Through agent Conein, the CIA was funneling information to the Vietnamese generals who were most likely to move against Diem. The United States could not take part in such discussions openly. In order to successfully operate behind the back of official U.S. policy, Kennedy and his administration relied on what the CIA had to offer: contacts cloaked in secrecy.

Not all American officials involved were convinced of the necessity of such secret operations. William Colby, who had returned from Vietnam in 1962 to become deputy of the Far East Division, described a White House meeting of October 29 between the State Department opinion that Diem had to go; "And the Pentagon's (and McCone's and my) view that Diem was better than anyone on the horizon."¹³ Colby's opinion is noteworthy when one considers his involvement in another CIA operation which took place long after the coup of November 1963 that resulted in the assassination of Diem and his brother Nhu.

The CIA's covert influence in Vietnam began in 1967 and lasted until June 1969. The CIA played an active and controversial role in the Vietnam War. Its role centered primarily around the American effort of pacification. This effort was considered the other war, which some describe as winning the hearts and minds of the people. The CIA developed highly covert operations in hopes of winning this other war. These operations centered around the Phoenix Program. This was an effort to gather and coordinate information about the Vietcong. It attempted to assemble lists (referred to as blacklists) about the Vietcong.¹⁴ The idea was to send Provincial Reconnaissance Units to the suspect villages and round up members of the Vietcong. These units, known as PRU's, were mercenary forces controlled by the CIA.¹⁵ The central question that has plagued the Agency since the end of the war concerns the activities of these units and the Phoenix Program in general. Did the CIA sponsor and control activities that took the lives of civilians? Despite spirited defensive arguments to the contrary, evidence in fact supports the conclusion that the CIA was heavily involved in covert operations that resulted in the loss of life for many civilians.

It is important to note that the American Government had pledged to abide by the four Geneva Conventions of 1949. These conventions were concerned with the protection of civilians in time of war.¹⁶ By funding and running such operations as the Phoenix Program, the CIA violated these Geneva Conventions.

The civilians that the CIA targeted were considered hostile to the American war effort. These civilians did not direct or control main battle forces, but worked on the village level.¹⁷ It was the countryside that the CIA set its sights upon. Civilians working for or with the Vietcong were considered infrastructure and were called the VCI. In a statement submitted for the record during the Senate hearings before the Committee On Foreign Relations, (1970) William Colby offered this definition; "The VCI supports military operations of VC and North Vietnamese Army Units by providing guides, caches of food, clothing, weapons, medical supplies and other war materials."¹⁸ Further, in *Lost Victory*, his book about the war, William Colby identified the VCI as "an inherent part of the war effort being waged against the GVN."¹⁹ Colby continues to outline the purpose of the Phoenix Program:

The Coup and The Phoenix

Operations against the Viet Cong Infrastructure include the collection of intelligence identifying these members, inducing them to abandon their allegiance to the Vietcong and Rally to the government capturing or arresting them in order to bring them before Province Security Committees for lawful sentencing, and as a final resort, the use of military or police force against them.²⁰

Colby is certainly careful to point out the lawfulness of such an operation. This wording presents the Phoenix Program as a fairly organized and effective means of attacking and destroying the VCI, with force used solely as a "final resort."

Others, however, greatly disagree with Mr. Colby's outlook. Among them is the author of a series of articles published in Saigon in 1970-71 and now contained in the Yen Ching Library at Harvard University. Written under the alias Dinh Tuong An, the articles entitled "The Truth About Phoenix" portray a much darker picture of the Phoenix Program. An writes, "In the sky are armed helicopters, but on the ground are the black uniforms, doing what they want where the helicopters and B-52's do not reach . . . Americans in black uniforms are the most terrible."²¹ An also writes that the CIA sent in PRU teams to capture people and that members of these teams would bring back bleeding ears. This is hardly the last resort mentality referred to by Colby.

In order to understand fully the genesis of these two different views concerning the CIA and the Phoenix Program, it is important to examine the beginnings of Phoenix. In May 1967, CIA officer Robert Komer was appointed by President Johnson as deputy for Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development, known as CORDS. The Phoenix Program and the PRU's were contained within the framework of CORDS. Komer earned the nickname 'Blowtorch' for his highly energetic and ambitious style. It was his responsibility to coordinate intelligence in order to destroy the effectiveness of the VCI. In CORDS, he was given the rank of deputy, a position in which he only answered to MACV commander William Westmoreland and Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker.²²

Komer believed strongly in the important role of pacification. In order to be successful, he believed in the necessity of effective intelligence organization. When he arrived in Vietnam he discovered a fragmented pacification effort. The military was not terribly interested in pacification, believing it to be an operation belonging to civilians. The State Department's pacification effort, the Agency for International Development (AID), was ineffective due to the cumbersome bureaucratic limitations inappropriate for winning the civilian component of the Vietnamese war. To combat this situation Komer relied on the advice of CIA analyst Nelson Brickham. Brickham would provide Komer with the structural foundations that by 1968 were transformed onto the workings of the Phoenix Program.²³ These infant Phoenix blueprints were known by the name Intelligence Coordination and Exploitation (ICEX). They were centered on the need for a clear and effective means to use intelligence as a weapon against the VCI. The situation was simply expressed by Brickham: "We didn't need more intelligence; we needed better intelligence, properly analyzed and collated."²⁴ Brickham expressed his frustration that intelligence about the enemy

existed, but just was not applied correctly. Working under Komer, this was the situation that Brickham was commissioned to address.

In response, Brickham compiled his ideas for Komer in a paper known as "A Proposal for the Coordination and Management of Intelligence Programs and Attack on the VC Infrastructure and Local Irregular Forces." This paper aptly spelled out the purpose of ICEX: "to insure that basic programs conducted by different organizations and components, as they relate to the elimination of the VCI, are made mutually compatible, continuous, and fully effective."²⁵ Thus Brickham identified the previous shortcomings of pacification efforts, mainly that intelligence wasn't shared between various organizations. ICEX as written by Brickham was essentially a structural program designed to regulate the flow of intelligence and thus allow an expedient and concise process of 'elimination' to take place. ICEX was formalized on July 9, 1967 under the directive MACV 381-41.²⁶

Komer named Evan Parker, who had joined the CIA after World War II, as ICEX's first director. Parker's task was to develop ICEX into a working program. This involved the building of District Intelligence and Operations Coordinating Centers (DIOCC). These were places where intelligence was to be channeled. Here, the operation of interpretation was to take place in order to react swiftly. The idea was to determine the pattern of a suspect's action each day and then decide who would receive the information. This is expressed by CIA agent Jim Ward who assisted in the writing of MACV 38-141; "what we had to do to bring everyone together who was collecting intelligence and that everybody should be channeling intelligence into the DIOCC."²⁷ The CIA was fundamental in writing the structure that would streamline intelligence gathering operations in South Vietnam. This was essentially the intelligence structure that evolved into the Phoenix in 1968.

The Phoenix Program was designed to be a joint American / Vietnamese effort. This was the main difference between ICEX and Phoenix. The name Phoenix identifies the cultural differences between the two nations. For the Americans the name Phoenix means a bird rising out of the ashes. For the Vietnamese, Phoenix possessed slightly different connotations. The Vietnamese mythical bird was called Phung Hoang. It was one of four sacred animals representing grace, peace, and concord in Vietnamese mythology. Physically, the Phung Hoang was a combination of several characteristics. These included the neck of a snake, breast of a swallow, back of a tortoise, and the tail of a fish. According to the myth surrounding Phung Hoang, it was a bird that appeared only during periods of peace and went into hiding in times of trouble.²⁸

Further cultural differences arose when the Americans were attempting to help the Vietnamese organize their part of the program. This difficulty centered around the word "infrastructure." American interpreter Robert Slater, who was present at meetings which attempted to smooth out the differences, recounts the major problem. The Vietnamese didn't have an equivalent term for infrastructure. The closest term was 'ha tang co so,' which meant the lower layer or underlying foundation. What this cultural difficulty represented is

noted by Slater, "If the South Vietnamese government cannot get across to the South Vietnamese people the danger of the VCI through an adequately descriptive word, then how can they hope to combat them?"²⁹ Here we see the main underlying difficulty of the intelligence gathering effort. These cultural differences are important when one considers that the main CIA operation aimed at the VCI involved Vietnamese under the direction of Americans.

These operations were known as Provincial Reconnaissance Units. Funded and designed by the CIA, they were the CIA's action arm against the VCI. Contained within the framework of the Phoenix Program, these PRU'S consisted of Vietnamese with American advisors who decided when and where to go out and find the VCI. The American PRU advisor answered to the CIA province officer. The idea behind the operation of the PRU's was to get the VCI in their own villages. The manner in which this was carried out has led to a number of discrepancies between the official policy and what many who took part in the program recount as the reality of the operation.³⁰

This is recalled by a member of the Navy SEAL team Lieutenant John Wilbur. Some members of the SEAL's were assigned to the CIA in Vietnam and worked for the PRU's. Wilbur recalls that the biggest difficulty he faced was the pressure from above to capture members of the VCI; "the targets in many cases were illusionary . . . we never really knew who the VC district chief was."³¹ This implies that confusion may have been the norm of operation. Wilbur continues with a point that is central to the ineffectiveness of the PRU'S, "To get a district chief, you may have to isolate an agent out there and set in motion an operation that may not culminate for six months. It was much easier to go out and shoot people."³² This account appears in direct opposition to official policy as outlined by Colby in his "Instructions to U.S. Personnel Concerning Phoenix Activities."

U.S. personnel are under the same legal and moral constraints with respect to operations of a Phoenix character as they are with respect to regular military operations against enemy units in the field. Thus, they are specifically not authorized to engage in assassinations or other violations of the rules of land warfare.³³

Here we see grave differences between the wording of policy from a high official and what occurred in the field. This is further noted by another member of the SEAL team assigned to the CIA. Mike Beamon worked in the Phoenix program from 1968 through 1969. He reports a somewhat different account of the operation than Colby put forth, "I can remember ambushing a lot of tax collectors . . . you'd hit them in the morning and rob them of the money and, of course, kill them."³⁴ This first person account suggests that Colby's policy may have been little more than empty platitudes unheard and inoperable in the field.

Another person with experience in the field was Barton Osborn. He testified before the House Subcommittee on Government Operations: U.S. Assistance Programs in Vietnam. Mr. Osborn prefaced his testimony with the information that he had been trained for 6 months at Fort Holabird,

MD, "in covert classified program of illegal agent handling, which taught us to find, recruit, train, manage and later terminate agents."³⁵ (Mr. Osborn explained the word 'terminate' was used "with" or "without prejudice," and "with extreme prejudice" meant to murder the person immediately.) He operated in Vietnam from September 1967 to December 1968. During this time he states that he worked with the Phoenix program and the CIA. His main occupation was to look through the files of construction companies under American contract and find Vietnamese who could speak English. It was from this main source that he developed agents.³⁶

Mr. Osborn's testimony includes various accounts of abuses in the Phoenix system. These range from the use of 6-inch dowels pushed into the ear canals of suspects, to starving to death a woman thought to be involved with "local political education."³⁷ Mr Osborn's experience with the Phoenix program certainly does not match Colby's idea of the program. In response to a question concerning the make up of the PRU's, Osborn states that they were mostly Vietnamese with American advisers. He then continued to give more detailed information about the function of the PRU's.

I never saw an official directive that said the PRU's will proceed to the village and murder the individual. However, it was implicit that when you got a name and individual you didn't need to go through interrogation; find out, establish any kind of factual basis leading to the conclusion that this individual was, in fact, Vietcong infrastructure.³⁸

According to this testimony before the House Subcommittee the PRU's, funded and operated under CIA policy, did not function in line with the official directives outlined by Colby. It is easy, of course, to argue one person's word against the other. We must ask ourselves what motivation would Mr. Osborn, along with the numerous other accounts of discrepancy, have in fabricating this information. These individuals were present and must have been cognitive of actions that occurred around them. Although Colby was present in Vietnam as well, he either was not privy to such experiences or simply felt the necessity to present a much more positive side of the Phoenix program.

Before the same subcommittee, Colby answered many inquiries concerning the operation of the Phoenix program. One exchange between Colby and Congressman Reid involved the issue of civilians killed during Phoenix operations. Mr. Reid asked if Colby could "state categorically that Phoenix has never perpetrated the premeditated killing of a civilian in a non-combat situation." To this Colby responded, "No, I could not say that, but I do not think it happens often."³⁹ Here we see to a minor degree that Colby acknowledged abuses in the Phoenix system. He continued, however, to defend the program during questions about the role of American personnel in Phoenix. He was asked, again by Mr. Reid, if Americans performed arrests or simply selected individuals for the blacklists. Colby answered that Americans "help on filling out the dossiers, working out techniques for how the dossiers are handled." He added that Americans did not arrest and did not have that authority.⁴⁰

The Coup and The Phoenix

Again Colby's statements appear in direct conflict with those individuals who were on the ground conducting operations. Pertaining to this is the testimony by Michael Uhl which followed Colby's.

Mr. Uhl was in Vietnam from November 1968 to May 1969. He worked with Military Counter Intelligence which received information about suspected members of the VCI through Phoenix sources. Mr. Uhl directly counters the testimony of Colby concerning Americans arresting individuals. "We could arrest and detain at will any Vietnamese civilians we desired."⁴¹ Mr. Uhl continues, "But the impact of this oversight in Ambassador Colby's testimony pales when compared to his general lack of understanding of what is actually going on in the field."⁴² Considering all the other accounts, this statement best sums up the discrepancy between Colby's official line and the individuals who experienced the dark and violent reality of the Phoenix program.

In both the Phoenix Program and the coup of Diem the Central Intelligence Agency pushed the envelope of official United States foreign policy in Vietnam during the 1960s. The use of the CIA as a communication vehicle with the coup plotters against Diem resulted in the toppling of a foreign government and the assassination of its leader. The Phoenix Program was intended to target members of the Vietcong. On paper the program's official policy was lawful and just, yet to this day controversy surrounds the memories of those in the field who witnessed first hand the grave shortcomings of that policy. In the 1960s the CIA fought on the front lines of a cold war that for many grew too hot, too fast, and lasted far too long.

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