Shadow Warriors: The Phoenix Program, American Clandestine Policing in Vietnam and Authoritarian State Development

In November, 1967, Frank Armbruster of the Hudson Institute drafted a policy brief which provided a blueprint for the Phoenix Operation, whose goal was to dismantle the leadership of the Vietnamese revolutionary movement through improved coordination between police and intelligence agents. Written in cold, antiseptic language, the report included a favorable reference to a RAND Corporation study by Chong Sik-Lee on Japanese counter-insurgency during World War II and the U.S. led anti-Huk campaigns in the Philippines. Armbruster argued that current police operations were too lenient and badly organized to successfully infiltrate the VC apparatus, which had established shadow governments in villages and towns to rival the Government of Vietnam (GVN). In his view, the police should perform a similar function to the military in depleting enemy forces and weeding out the guerrilla infrastructure through effective intelligence collection, round-ups and interrogations allowing for a systematic classification of enemy operatives. Photography, ID cards and fingerprinting, as well as paid informants were crucial to the identification of VC cadres who easily blended into the civilian population. Defectors were needed to ensure the success of bounty-hunter operations. Effective counter-insurgents were best recruited from among the native population because they knew the terrain. Once identified, hard-core VC should be isolated and never allowed to return to their communities or executed outright. The rest of those detained could be won over through political indoctrination built around a counter-ideology.¹

Armbruster’s writings provide a window into the mindset of shadow government operators who in plotting clandestine operations had little qualms about employing methods most Americans would consider morally repugnant. Named after a mythical all-seeing bird which selectively snatches its prey, Phoenix was conceived as a clinically managed operation capable
of reinvigorating counter-insurgency while minimizing “collateral damage.” It is a paradigmatic example of the influence of Western states and Western imperialism in contributing to authoritarian state development. By providing extensive military and police aid targeting left wing subversives and other oppositionist movements, the U.S. government helped to fortify a series of authoritarian military governments valued for their anticommunism and for pushing the integration of South Vietnam with Japan and into the global capitalist economy.

From what I have read, much of the literature on democracy prevention and authoritarian state diffusion emphasizes the importance of authoritarian states like Russia in blocking democratic development among its neighbors. As Christian Van Soest points out, Russia’s main motivation appears to be geopolitical ambition and state interest rather than an ideological agenda of advancing an authoritarian international.²

The same self-interest guides the United States and other Western democracies which have a record too of helping to fortify authoritarian development, despite a professed commitment to democracy. One only has to look at the huge U.S. and Canadian and British arms sales to Saudi Arabia and its contribution to the entrenchment of the Saudi Royal family; or the vast U.S. military aid given over the years to dictatorships like Mobutu’s Congo, Suharto’s Indonesia, Pinochet’s Chile and Mubarak’s Egypt to validate this point.³

Taking a broad view of world affairs, democratic states like their autocratic counterparts pursue self-interest in international affairs despite high-minded rhetoric. Pressured by corporate interests who exhibit overweening political influence, they seek above all else access to raw minerals or surplus markets for trade, and advance grand geopolitical designs such as the accumulation of military bases, which can best be achieved by alliance with autocratic governments who can impose unpopular policies by fiat.
South Vietnam and Phoenix is a good case study for examining the influence of foreign military and police aid programs in institutionalizing political repression and state authoritarianism. Phoenix is interesting also because it provides a quintessential example of Parapolitics, a set of observations which suggest a strange, powerful, clandestine and apparently structural relationship between state security intelligence apparatuses, terrorism and organized criminal activity, sustaining in the case of Vietnam a fundamentally illiberal social order.  

Building off European colonial precedents, Phoenix originated in the top-secret 1290-d program, which was instituted by the Eisenhower administration to train foreign police in counter-subversion and was expanded upon by Kennedy under the United States Agency of International Development (USAID)’s Office of Public Safety (OPS). Embodying a U.S. imperial style grounded in the quest for serviceable information but not deep knowledge of the subject society, these programs were valued as a cost effective means of suppressing radical and nationalist movements, precluding the need for military intervention which was more likely to arouse public opposition or enabling the draw-down of troops. Violent methods were rationalized under a counter-terror doctrine which held that since guerrillas didn’t abide by legal norms, neither should the United States or its proxies – a doctrine familiar to experts here on authoritarianism and state repression around the world.

“Suppressing Dissidence before Military-Type Action Was Necessary:” 1290-d, the OPS and Roots of Phoenix

Owing in part to an anti-colonial tradition dating to the revolution, the American empire as William A. Williams pointed out in The Tragedy of American Diplomacy is unique in the degree of its reliance on strategic proxies and informal mechanisms of control. After World War II, the United States pursued the creation of a stable international order dominated by American capital and open to free-trade and foreign investment. Democratization was pursued if and only
if it accorded with larger strategic interests.\textsuperscript{5} Clandestine police operations were crucial in the attempt to strengthen client regimes and root out groups resisting American power, including radical nationalists and socialists promoting independent development and resisting the expansion of an American military base network. With remarkable continuity, the United States trained police not just to target criminals but to develop elaborate intelligence networks oriented toward internal defense, which allowed the suppression of dissident groups across a wide range and in a more surgical and often brutal way. The United States in effect helped to modernize intelligence-gathering and political-policing operations in its far-flung empire, thus magnifying their impact. The programs helped to militarize the police and fostered, through rigorous ideological conditioning, the dehumanization of political adversaries and a sense of suspicion toward grass-roots mobilization.\textsuperscript{6}

Many of the techniques adopted under Phoenix were first applied during the U.S. occupation of Japan as part of efforts to consolidate the pro-west Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and suppress the Japanese Communist Party (JCP) following the so-called reverse course. Orrin DeForest, a CIA counterintelligence specialist and national police liaison who later sought to apply Japanese procedure in Vietnam, wrote in his memoirs that the Japanese were “fanatic collectors of information, always exerting themselves to achieve a comprehensive understanding of a person and his activities before making any overt moves against him. . . . Their goal was nothing less than total knowledge.”\textsuperscript{7} These comments point to the striving of American advisers for total information control, which was subsequently applied in Vietnam.

In another important precedent, military advisers developed police intelligence units in South Korea after World War II to hunt down left-wing activists, measuring success based on the number of enemy “captured, killed or neutralized.”\textsuperscript{8}
In 1955, the NSC formally inaugurated the top-secret 1290-d program (later Overseas Internal Security Program – OISP), whose central mission was to develop local police and security forces to “provide internal security in countries vulnerable to communist subversion” and to “aid in the detection of communist agents and fellow travelers” and “suppress local dissidence before military-type action was necessary.”

In an internal outline of 1290-d, Col. Albert R. Haney, an architect of the 1954 Guatemalan coup who ran secret agents into North Korea during the Korean War, stated that “an efficient internal security system is a fundamental aspect of any growing society and contributes substantially to its orderly progress and development.” In his view, American support for undesirable political regimes, including dictatorships and juntas, was necessary to prevent the loss to neutralism or communist control. “Confronted as we are against a deadly enemy who is highly disciplined and organized and dedicated to our capitulation, the U.S. cannot afford the moral luxury of helping only those regimes in the free-world that meet our ideals of self-government….For those who decry efforts to make over others in our likeness and those who oppose helping undemocratic regimes to entrench themselves in power, let it be said that American methods are in fact superior to most others in the world and if we are to help them combat communism we can contribute greatly to the adoption of American democratic ways in achieving this end.”

These comments exemplify the ideological mindset underlying what social scientist Ola Tunander characterized as the “deep state,” in which clandestine, often-extralegal and anti-democratic tactics have been adopted to advance American global hegemony. Staffed with men of like-minded views, the Kennedy administration expanded police training to new heights as part of an infatuation with unconventional warfare. In the wake of the Bay of Pigs, Kennedy
convened a Cabinet-level Special Group on Counter-Insurgency (CI), headed by his brother Robert and five-star general Maxwell Taylor, which championed the creation of police “hunter-killer” squads serving as a prototype for Phoenix. Robert W. Komer, a driving figure behind the USAID’s OPS who went on to run Phoenix stressed that the police were “more valuable than Special Forces in our global counter-insurgency efforts” and particularly useful in fighting urban insurrections. “We get more from the police in terms of preventative medicine than from any single U.S. program,” he said. “They are cost effective, while not going for fancy military hardware….They provide the first line of defense against demonstrations, riots and local insurrections. Only when the situation gets out of hand (as in South Vietnam) does the military have to be called in.”

Echoing British imperial strategists such as Winston Churchill, who wrote in 1954 that an “efficient police force and intelligence service are the best way of smelling out subversive movements at an early stage, and may save heavy expenditures on military reinforcements,” these comments illuminate the geo-strategic imperatives shaping the growth of the OPS, which is what accounted for significant human rights violations. Charles Maechling Jr., staff director of the Special Group on Counter-Insurgency acknowledged years later that in failing to insist on “even rudimentary standards of criminal justice and civil rights, the United States provided regimes having only a façade of constitutional safeguards with up-dated law-enforcement machinery readily adaptable to political intimidation and state terrorism. Record keeping in particular was immediately put to use in tracking down student radicals and union organizers.”

These remarks provide a striking admission of the repressive consequences of the police programs, of which Vietnam and Phoenix was a paradigmatic example.

**Containing the “Virus” of Independent Nationalism: Police Training and “Nation-Building” in South Vietnam**
From 1955-1975, the United States spent over $300 million on police training in Vietnam – the largest total in the world -as part of the effort to build a client regime below the 17th parallel following the partition of the country under the Geneva accords. Bent on integrating Vietnam’s economy with Japan and stamping out the “virus” of independent nationalism which it feared would spread throughout Southeast Asia, the Eisenhower administration refused to allow for elections to reunify the country, knowing that Ho Chi Minh, who led the liberation movement against France, would win. It instead attempted to consolidate the southern rule of Ngo Dinh Diem, a Catholic anticommmunist who had limited popular backing and was referred by his own advisers as “egotistical, neurotically suspicious, stubborn, self-righteous and a complete stranger to compromise.” According to the CIA, Diem was so dependent on American support, “he would have fallen in a day without it.”

In May 1955, the State Department contracted the Michigan State University School of Police Administration at a budget of $25 million to provide technical assistance and training to the South Vietnamese police, stressing mass surveillance capable of monitoring subversion and dismantling the political opposition to Diem, including Binh Xuyen gangsters, the Hoa-Hao and Cao Dai religious sects. The police were controlled by Diem’s brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, an opium addict who according to the British ambassador attached “every bit as much importance to the apparatus of a police state as the most enthusiastic advocate of the social order of ‘1984.’”

The 1290-d planning group emphasized the necessity of bolstering police “counter-subversion” capabilities and their proficiency against the nationalist Vietminh, who resettled in the South following the victory at Dienbienphu and established shadow governments in the villages, extending “their influence to many who are not communist party members through a substantial network of front organizations covering all sectors of the population.” It further
warned that “internal security was at present poor” and there appears to be “little capability of opposition to Vietminh efforts to further internal chaos and eventually complete takeover probably through democratic means of free elections….The government’s survival will be determined in large measure by the degree of protection foreign sources will provide in guaranteeing its future.”

These comments provide a striking acknowledgment of the weakness of Diem and his reliance on foreigners, and of the strength of the Vietminh which was targeted for liquidation. MSU advisers, including a number of CIA agents, built-up the paramilitary civil guard in violation of the Geneva agreements which limited the size of the armed forces to 150,000, and worked closely with the Vietnamese Bureau of Investigations (VBI or Cong An), commanded by General Nguyen Ngoc Le, a 20-year French army veteran. Cultivating networks of informants, the VBI operated in plain-clothes and functioned principally as a “political police” and “political repression organization.” Its mission was to “correlate information regarding the security of the state, manage political information services” and “discover plots and activities capable of compromising public order.”

By providing modern weapons and technical support to police and promoting political operations, the MSUG was pivotal in contributing to the climate of repression that gave rise to the NLF. Art Brandstatter wrote to colleague Ralph Turner in 1961 that he “supported Diem’s position regarding the role of the civil guard in “neutralizing VC activity” and never agreed with the position that “we should try to help develop a ‘democratic police force’ under conditions of instability and insurgency….The responsibility for internal security belongs to the police.”

These comments epitomize how commitment to civil liberties and humane principles was
subordinated to the goal of fighting communism and securing what were perceived as American strategic interests. The Vietnamese people suffered grievously as a result.

“The Numbers Just Don’t Add Up:” Phoenix and State Terrorism in the Shadow War
As the war expanded, police training became even more central to American pacification efforts and contributed to the torture and killing of thousands of revolutionary fighters and civilians. The U.S. received guidance from the British who sent ten ex colonial police officers and secretly trained hundreds of South Vietnamese (along with Lao and Thai) police in riot control, jungle warfare and special branch intelligence in Malaysia. After the Ngo brothers were assassinated, the OPS worked to rebuild the police intelligence apparatus, backing Nguyen Ngoc Loan who gained notoriety for being filmed shooting a VC prisoner in the head. This epitomized the danger of creating violent warlords through these program.

After the 1968 Tet offensive (in which he was wounded), Loan lost his favored status with the CIA because of his lukewarm backing for Phoenix, whose aim was to eliminate the “Vietcong” infrastructure (VCI) through use of sophisticated computer technology and intelligence gathering and improved coordination between military and police intelligence agencies. The U.S. in turn elevated Loan’s successor, Tran Thien Khiem, the power-broker of Nguyen Van Thieu who ousted Nguyen Cao Ky (a political gangster and Hitler admirer backed by Loan) in a power struggle centered in part on control of the $88 million heroin trade.

Focused initially in the revolutionary stronghold of Kien Hoa as part of Operation Speedy Express which claimed over 10,000 Vietnamese lives, Phoenix (Phung Hoang in Vietnamese) was implemented after Tet as an extension of the police programs. Run by the OPS and CIA at a cost of between $7 million and $15 million a year, it adopted wanted posters, blacklists, disguises and other psychological warfare techniques such as the playing off superstitions, spreading disinformation and stringing corpses on hooks for intimidation. Navy Seals were
mobilized alongside specialized Provincial Reconnaissance Units (PRUs) recruited among ethnic minorities with deep grievances against the communists and criminal elements to “neutralize” high-value targets, including civilian officials running local administrations under NLF jurisdiction.\textsuperscript{20}

Believing that the “Vietcong” were monstrous yet effective in their “application of torture and murder to achieve psychological advantage,” American clandestine warriors sought to emulate their tactics, which included selective assassination, inducing defections and winning over the population through civic action and political education. Third country nationals were used for the dirtiest tasks, including South Korean, Chinese and Filipino mercenaries willing, in the words of one CIA officer, to “slit their grandmother’s throat for a dollar eighty-five.”\textsuperscript{21}

A lot of the violence by the PRUs was indiscriminate, eroding support for the GVN. Political scientists Stathis N. Kalyvas and Matthew A. Kocher estimated that Phoenix victimized thirty eight innocents for every one actual Vietcong agent. NLF fighters had access to things like safe houses that enabled them to evade capture, giving young men the incentive to join the NLF which had a well developed political infrastructure and skillful political organizers that according to one Phoenix veteran, no political organization in the United States could remotely match.\textsuperscript{22}

Thieu and various district chiefs at times used Phoenix to eliminate political rivals, including the non-communists opposition. Targets were also at times selected by the NLF which widely penetrated the state security apparatus. One of Thieu’s top intelligence advisers, Vu Ngoc Nha, who neutralized people that had nothing to do with official Phoenix goals, was found guilty of espionage and became a General in North Vietnam’s secret service. He may have at one time been paid by the CIA to bring down Thieu’s government.\textsuperscript{23}
Theodore Shackley, CIA Station Chief in the late 1960s wrote in his memoir that CIA officers generally found Phoenix “repugnant. They felt that the dossiers were based on dubious information….All too frequently, arrest efforts turned into firefights and more so-called VCI were killed than detained for processing.”24 Declassified field reports point to the wide-scale corruption of PRU cadres who used their positions for revenge and extortion, threatening to kill people and count them as VCI if they did not pay them huge sums. When CIA officer John Stockwell reported that his police liaison was torturing and murdering suspects who could not pay ransom, he was threatened with reassignment.25

Atrocities were committed by “VC avenger units” prone to rape, pillage and body mutilation.26 While the quantity of “neutralizations” was reported to be high in many districts, the quality was “poor.” Adviser Charles N. Philips lamented that there was a large number of “phantom kills” which hampered good Phung Hoang statistics. There were also “flagrant” cases of report padding, most egregiously in Long An province where CIA operative Evan Parker Jr. noted “the numbers just don’t add up.” Dead bodies were being identified as VCI, rightly or wrongly, in the attempt to at least approach an unrealistic quota. The catalogue of agents listed as killed included an inordinate number of “nurses,” a convenient way to account for women killed in raids on suspected VC hideouts.27

The CIA instructed the PRU in sophisticated psychological interrogation techniques designed to emphasize the prisoner’s helplessness and dependence on his captor. These methods led to systematic abuse, including an incident where officers planted electrodes in a prisoners’ brain, and another where a detainee was kept in an air-conditioned room for four years to exploit his fear of the cold.28
Phoenix’s catastrophic impact was compounded by the atrocious conditions in the GVN’s prisons, where overcrowding was rampant and many died from malnutrition, disease or torture. The total of political prisoners was estimated at 200,000, the highest total in the world.

Some of the worst abuses took place at the infamous Con Son prison, located on an archipelago 180 kilometers off the southern Vietnamese coast, where inmates reported being worked nearly to death in the fields, severely beaten by trustees and left on the verge of starvation. Prisoner Thep Xanh wrote of his experience, “Deep in my heart I remember nights at Con Son, the echo of the creaking door, the beatings, the crying out at midnight, the shouting of guards, you ask me where is hell; where on earth people cannot live as human beings, where people with heart and soul live like beasts.”

In 1970, after veering from the itinerary during a congressional tour, International Voluntary Service (IVS) employee Don Luce found detainees crammed into six-foot windowless pits or “Tiger Cages,” where they were forced to subsist on three handfuls of milled white rice and three swallows of water per day and had lime thrown in their faces, causing lung disease and tuberculosis.

These are clearly the methods of a brutal dictatorship. Phoenix and its antecedents can ultimately be seen to embody the repressive parastatal structures underlying American global hegemony. Financed in part through illicit channels, the Phoenix concept grew out of a larger web of clandestine policing operations which aimed to root out leftist and revolutionary movements threatening U.S. interests. Under the small wars doctrine, it was felt that costly military engagement could be avoided through carefully calibrated political policing operations designed to liquidate the revolutionary opposition. In Vietnam, however, these goals prove to be untenable, owing in part to deep-rooted support for the revolutionary movement and the
absence of institutional correctives for false identification and inflated statistics. The Thieu government and U.S. war effort was in turn undermined, with the NVA-NLF forces liberating the country by 1975.31

Despite being publicly repudiated after its exposure, Phoenix served as a templar for future CIA operations, first in Central America during the 1980s and most recently in the War on Terror. With a large sector of the population opposed to large-scale military commitments and a revival of the draft, neo-conservative policy-makers and traditional elites bent on restoring U.S. hegemony after Vietnam, relied on the sub-contracting of counter-insurgency, largely to ensure deniability. I don’t have time to go into all the sordid details here of the consequences of these efforts in places like El Salvador, Iraq, and elsewhere, but the implication is clear in that the methods of U.S. state craft have helped to advance repression and political autocracy in many countries despite the professed goal of democratization. The high minded rhetoric designed to paint the United States in a better light than geopolitical adversaries like Russia and China masks a deceptively brutal modus operandi in which nation building operations have been underlain by violent repression and the fortification of autocratic client regimes that serve larger state foreign policy interests (often those of dominant corporate entities).


15


19 Valentine, The Phoenix Program; 262; McCoy, The Politics of Heroin, 279.

20 See Monika Jensen-Stevenson, Spite House: The Last Secret of the War in Vietnam (New York: Norton, 1997); Daniel Marvin, Expendable Elite: One Soldier’s Journey into Covert Warfare (Walterville, OR: Trine Day, 2003); Daniel Hopscicker, Barry & the Boys: The CIA, the Mob and America’s Secret History (Oregon: Madcow Press, 2001), 188; Jerry L. Lembcke, CNN’s Tailwind Tale: Inside the Vietnam War’s Last Great Myth (New York: Rowman& Littlefield, 2004). Lembcke casts doubt on the notion promoted in the film Apocalypse Now that Americans were ever targeted under Phoenix. Without paper documentation we are reliant on oral history testimonials which could be unreliable, though it is hard to tell.

21 Virgil Ney, Col., “Guerrilla Warfare and Modern Strategy” in Modern Guerrilla Warfare, 25-38; Valentine, The Phoenix Program, 25; Thomas L. Ahern Jr., The CIA and Rural Pacification in South Vietnam (Washington, D.C.: CIA, Center for the Study of Intelligence, 2006), 58; Peer De Silva, Sub Rosa: The CIA and the Uses of Intelligence (New York: Times Books, 1978). Nebraska Senator and presidential contender Bob Kerrey (D) was among the Seals who participated in Phoenix and was implicated in civilian massacres exposed in the late 1990s.


24 Theodore Shackley with Richard A. Finney, Spymaster: My Life in the CIA(Dulles, VI: Potomac Books, 2005), 233; Douglas Blaufarb, The Counterinsurgency Era: U.S. Doctrine and Performance, 1950 to the Present (New York: Free Press, 1977), 247. CIA agent Frank Snepp said after the war that “I was in charge of lists of targets. A lot of people who shouldn’t have been, were hit…and it was a sin.”


26 Alfred W. McCoy has suggested in a History News Network review of Nick Turse’s, Kill Anything that Moves: The Real American War in Vietnam (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2013) that some of the atrocities may have been staged by NLF double agents who penetrated Phoenix as part of psychological warfare operations designed to discredit the ARVN and U.S. invaders. The converse was also no doubt true.


“Summary of Problems of Phung Hoang Program-Recommendation for Turning it Over to the National Police,” Secretary of State to American Embassy, PSD, OPS East Asia, (1971-1973), NA, box 280; McLintock, *Instruments of Statecraft*, 190-92; Kalyvas and Kocher, “How ‘Free’ is Free Riding in Civil Wars?” The latter uses Phoenix as a case study in showing how civilians often suffer greatly in war and benefit from joining revolutionary guerrilla movements for status and protection. In their view, it is thus often more dangerous *not* to join the insurgency than to join because death squads often target the vulnerable.