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The Phoenix Program  
and Contemporary  
Counterinsurgency

William Rosenau, Austin Long



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## Summary

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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