

STRATEGIC CHALLENGES FOR COUNTERINSURGENCY AND THE GLOBAL WAR ON TERRORISM

**Edited by
Williamson Murray**

September 2006

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ISBN 1-58487-247-0

CHAPTER 2

FROM THE ASHES OF THE PHOENIX: LESSONS FOR CONTEMPORARY COUNTERINSURGENCY OPERATIONS

Lieutenant Colonel Ken Tovo

The Vietnam War was the most controversial conflict in America's history; it wreaked havoc on civil society, colored a generation's perception of its government, and devastated the American military, particularly the Army. Its specter continues to cast a shadow over every American political debate about the use of force abroad. As the first defeat in the military history of the United States, most soldiers would prefer to forget it completely; when studied at all, they usually do so in a negative sense—what to avoid, how not to operate. After the war, disgusted with the inherently messy nature of counterinsurgency, the Army turned its attention to the kind of wars it prefers to fight—conventional, symmetric conflict.¹

While a number of civilian scholars examined the war, the Army focused on how to defeat the Soviets on the plains of Europe.² While academic historians often deride the military for trying to refight the last war, in this instance no one can accuse the Army of that sin. Through its doctrine, scenarios at its officer education system and national training centers, and almost every other aspect of force development, the Army has remained singularly focused on fighting a conventional conflict. The result has been spectacular performance in both conventional wars with Iraq. Today, however, the Army finds itself once again in the middle of a major counterinsurgency effort—this time on a global scale against the insurgent threat of militant Islamic fundamentalism. The current counterinsurgency involves major combat operations, such as in Afghanistan and Iraq, major advisory and training missions such as the Philippines, Georgia, the Horn of Africa, and North Africa, and numerous smaller missions around the world.

Unfortunately, such is the baggage still attending the Vietnam War nearly 3 decades after Saigon's fall, that senior military and

political leaders only speak the word “Vietnam” in sentences along the lines of “Iraq is not another Vietnam . . .” Yet the Vietnam conflict constitutes the longest and most intensive counterinsurgency effort in American history. For nearly 2 decades, the United States provided a spectrum of security assistance to South Vietnam in its battle against the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese sponsors. The best and brightest civilian and military minds in the government developed strategies and concepts to defeat the communist insurgency in Southeast Asia as part of an overall strategy of containment. Today, the United States contends with a similar challenge. It faces active insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan, both being fought within the context of a world-wide insurgency led by militant Islamic fundamentalists. As the United States seeks ways to defeat these new insurgencies, it is extraordinarily imprudent to ignore the lessons from the counterinsurgency efforts of the Vietnam War.

This chapter examines one major aspect of that conflict, the attack on the Viet Cong infrastructure, the Phoenix Program. It will provide the historical context and an overview of the Phoenix Program, describe the contemporary insurgency threat, and analyze strategic lessons for application in contemporary counterinsurgency operations.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The strategic rationale for America’s involvement in Vietnam remains the subject of significant debate. However, even those who argue the war represented a necessary element of national strategy agree that South Vietnam was not a vital American interest in and of itself; its importance lay as a symbol of American commitment and will.³

U.S. involvement in Vietnam spanned more than 2 decades, from support for France’s attempts to reinstate its colonial government in the aftermath of World War II, through an advisory period that began in the late 1950s, to the introduction of conventional forces in 1965, “Vietnamization” beginning in 1968, withdrawal of conventional U.S. military forces in 1973, and the collapse of South Vietnam in 1975.⁴ When the U.S. military implemented the Phoenix Program in 1967, 12 years already had passed from the first official American

military death in the war.⁵ After years of providing military advisors and equipment to the South Vietnamese government, the United States introduced major American ground forces in early 1965 to prevent the imminent collapse of South Vietnam.⁶ By 1967, 2 years of conventional force operations and the commitment of nearly 450,000 U.S. troops had prevented a collapse, but had failed to defeat the insurgency.⁷

As early as 1966, President Lyndon Johnson met with senior U.S. and South Vietnamese civilian and military officials in Honolulu to discuss placing an increased emphasis on winning the political war in South Vietnam, since it seemed unlikely that conventional military operations alone could produce victory.⁸ In the President's view, "the other war," the war for the support of the South Vietnamese population, was as important as the military struggle with North Vietnamese and Viet Cong main force units.⁹ While the civilian agencies and some military units had put considerable effort into pacification and development programs, such efforts remained largely uncoordinated and ineffective.

An initial attempt to unify the civilian effort in Vietnam under the Office of Civil Operations began in November 1966. Headed by a deputy ambassador, it was a short-lived failure. Consequently, in May 1967, President Johnson decided to unify all military and civilian pacification operations under an organization called Civil Operations and Rural Development Support, a component of Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV).¹⁰

OVERVIEW OF THE PHOENIX PROGRAM

MACV Directive 381-41, July 9, 1967, officially inaugurated the "Phoenix Program" as the Intelligence Coordination and Exploitation for Attack on Viet Cong Infrastructure (VCI), with the short title of "ICEX."¹¹ By late 1967, MACV had replaced the innocuous name ICEX with the codeword "Phoenix," a translation of the South Vietnamese, "Phung Hoang."¹² Phoenix did not initiate the attack on the Viet Cong infrastructure; instead, it centralized existing efforts and raised the level of attacks on the Viet Cong infrastructure to the mission of destroying the North Vietnamese Army and Viet Cong guerrilla forces. Phoenix embodied an understanding that an insurgency

principally represents a political struggle for primacy between competing political ideas. The insurgency first seeks legitimacy, and then supremacy for its political agenda in both the eyes of the populace and the outside world, while the counterinsurgency effort struggles to deny such legitimacy.

An assessment by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) published in early 1969 aptly summarized the dynamic:

The struggle in Vietnam is in essence a struggle for political domination . . . The primary issue is control over people, not territory. Armed force . . . has long played a key role in the prosecution of this struggle; but our adversaries have seldom employed armed force, of any kind, for the classical military purpose of seizing and holding demarcatable plots of terrain . . . [O]ur adversaries have generally employed armed force . . . primarily as a political abrasive intended to cow the population into submission, collapse all political structures (from the local to the national level) they do not control, and erode the appetite for struggle of all who oppose [their] drive for political control . . . [T]he ultimate measure of success or failure will not be relative casualties inflicted, battles won or lost or even territory enterable with impunity but—instead—whose political writ runs (for whatever reason) over the population of South Vietnam.¹³

To pursue their struggle for political supremacy, the North Vietnamese had established a unconventional warfare force within South Vietnam. The nucleus of this force was a clandestine element of 3,000 political and 5,000 armed military cadre, who had remained in the south after the July 1954 Geneva settlement.¹⁴ The intent of these agents was to mobilize support for Ho Chi Minh and the Communists in the elections that were to occur in accordance with the Geneva Accords. Once it was clear that the South Vietnamese would not hold such elections, the North Vietnamese communists used this infrastructure to conduct an unconventional war against the Diem government.¹⁵

The Viet Cong insurgency, instituted, directed, and supported by the North Vietnamese, had two major components. The first consisted of armed Viet Cong guerrillas, augmented by soldiers of the North Vietnamese Army (NVA), who had infiltrated into South Vietnam. The guerrillas and NVA units were the main focus of American counterinsurgency efforts, initially conducted by the

South Vietnamese and their U.S. advisors, and later by American military forces after the introduction of conventional units in 1965.

The second component included Viet Cong personnel and organizations which performed support roles, such as recruiting, political indoctrination, propaganda and psychological operations, intelligence collection, and logistical support. American intelligence labeled the latter component as the Viet Cong infrastructure. The CIA assumed initial responsibility for attacking this component of the insurgency for a variety of reasons. First, anti-infrastructure operations were a logical adjunct to the State Department's pacification and civil support programs. As a CIA report noted:

In addition to the "positive" task of providing the rural population with security and tangible benefits sufficient to induce it to identify its fortunes with those of the GVN [Government of Viet Nam], the pacification program also involves the "negative" task of identifying and eradicating the Communist politico-military control apparatus known as the Viet Cong Infrastructure (or VCI).¹⁶

Second, the targeted personnel in the infrastructure were primarily civilians; consequently, as noted in MACV Directive 381-41, "[t]he elimination of the VCI is fundamentally a Vietnamese responsibility employing essentially police type techniques and special resources."¹⁷

Consequently, the primary South Vietnamese organizations to prosecute operations against the infrastructure were intelligence organizations, the police, and paramilitary organizations such as the Vietnamese Bureau of Investigation, the District and Provincial Intelligence and Operations Coordination Centers, the Special Police, the Field Police, and the Provincial Reconnaissance Units. The CIA largely was responsible for the creation of such units and organizations.¹⁸ To some extent, the task fell to the CIA by default. Key CIA leaders recognized the importance of fighting the political component of the enemy's organization. Unfortunately, senior military leaders, particularly during General William Westmoreland's tenure as MACV Commander, considered the Viet Cong infrastructure a peripheral issue.¹⁹

First initiated in July 1967, Phoenix aimed at providing U.S. advisory assistance to ongoing operations that targeted the enemy's

infrastructure at the corps, province, and district levels.²⁰ It became a more coordinated effort when the South Vietnamese created the Phung Hoang program in December, 1967. But it took the Tet and May Offensives in 1968 to highlight the critical role of the infrastructure in facilitating the enemy's main force operations.²¹ As a result, South Vietnam's president issued a decree in July 1968 which committed the South Vietnamese to establishment of structures at every level of government to coordinate operations against the enemy's civil infrastructure.²²

The Phoenix Program established committees and coordination centers at the national, corps, province, and district levels. In addition, it directed the participation of key representatives from civil government, police, security services, and military organizations operating in the area.²³ At province level and above, these committees served largely to provide guidance and policy direction.²⁴ They also established quotas at the province and district levels for efforts to destroy the enemy's infrastructure.²⁵ The national level Phoenix committee established evidentiary rules and judicial procedures, specified categories and priorities of a variety of targets, and defined incarceration periods tied to target category.²⁶

At province and district level, Intelligence and Operations Coordinating Centers (PIOCC/DIOCC) served as the foci of intelligence fusion on reports and operational planning to execute operations against the Viet Cong infrastructure.²⁷ The centers provided a mechanism to consolidate information from the numerous organizations operating on the battlefield, deconflict intelligence collection activities, and plan and coordinate anti-infrastructure operations. The United States primarily provided military advisors in the Intelligence and Operations Coordinating Centers. Advisory staffs at higher levels tended to have greater interagency representation. At the province level, the U.S. advisor received the tasking to:

. . . form and chair a Province PHOENIX Committee composed of all principal members of the U.S. official community capable of contributing effectively to the attack on the VCI [Viet Cong infrastructure] . . . [and] work in close conjunction with the counterpart GVN coordinating committee to bring together an effective GVN/U.S. team to optimize intelligence support and coordination of the dual effort against VC armed units and the VCI.²⁸

At the District level, which was the primary operational planning and execution element, the U.S. advisor was responsible for:

- providing timely military intelligence support to tactical units and security forces.
- achieving rapid, first-level collation, evaluation, and dissemination of VCI intelligence.
- generating police, military, or special exploitation operations to disrupt, harass, capture, eliminate, or neutralize [the] local VCI.²⁹

The understanding that the principal objective was to achieve legitimacy in the eyes of the population led inevitably to the realization that large-scale combat operations were counterproductive to pacification goals.³⁰ According to MACV Directive 381-41, the intent of Phoenix was to attack the enemy's infrastructure with a "'rifle shot' rather than a shotgun approach to the central target—key political leaders, command/control elements and activists in the VCI."³¹ Heavy-handed operations, such as random cordon and searches, large-scale and lengthy detentions of innocent civilians, and excessive use of firepower had a negative effect on the civilian population. Government forces often appeared inept and unable to meet the security and stability needs of the people—in other words, they were, on occasion, the main threat to these goals. Unfocused, large-scale operations usually failed to kill or destroy the infrastructure, which controlled large sections of the population or critical support functions; rather, they were more likely to net easily replaceable guerrilla fighters. The Phoenix approach also acknowledged that capturing the enemy's political operatives was more important than killing them.³² The prime source of information to identify and locate future targets was the capture of current enemy operatives and leaders. Focused, police-like operations were much more likely to achieve this end than large-scale military ones.

Over time, the Phoenix program generated negative press coverage, accusations that it was a U.S. Government sponsored assassination program, and eventually a series of Congressional hearings. Consequently, MACV issued a directive that reiterated that it had based the anti-infrastructure 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.³³ That directive described Phoenix operational activities as:

Operations to be conducted against the VCI [Viet Cong infrastructure] by the National Police and other assigned agencies of the GVN [Government of Viet Nam] include: the collection of intelligence identifying these members; inducing them to abandon their allegiance to the VC and rally to the government; capturing or arresting them in order to bring them before province security committees or military courts for lawful sentencing; and as a final resort, the use of reasonable force should they resist capture or arrest where failure to use such force would result in the escape of the suspected VCI member or would result in threat of serious bodily harm to a member or members of the capturing or arresting party.³⁴

Clearly, the intent of these operations was not indiscriminate killing and assassination; unfortunately, decentralized operations in an uncertain, ambiguous environment did lead to abuses.³⁵

Officially, Phoenix operations continued until December 1972, although certain aspects continued until the fall of South Vietnam in 1975.³⁶ Like the Vietnam War that spawned it, the Phoenix Program was, and continues to be, a subject of controversy. To some, it was a U.S. Government-sponsored assassination program, carried out against innocents, and symbolic of the moral bankruptcy of the entire war.³⁷ For others, it was a benign coordination mechanism that offered “the best hope for victory” in the Vietnam War.³⁸ Like any controversial issue, the truth probably lies in between. Regardless, Phoenix was the largest and most systematic effort by the U.S. Government to destroy the insurgency’s political and support infrastructure—a critical element in a counterinsurgency campaign. Ultimately, the entire counterinsurgency effort in Vietnam was a failure for a variety of reasons; one critical factor was that the Viet Cong had established a large and effective support cadre throughout South Vietnam before the South Vietnamese and the Americans undertook a serious, coordinated effort to eradicate it.³⁹ While indications are that Phoenix achieved considerable success in damaging that infrastructure, it was too little and too late to change the war’s overall course.⁴⁰

TODAY'S INSURGENT THREAT

Vietnam was a classic example of a mass-oriented insurgency as defined in U.S. Army doctrine.⁴¹ The Viet Cong sought to discredit the legitimacy of the South Vietnamese government in the eyes of the population through a protracted campaign of violence, while developing and offering its own parallel political structure as a viable alternative to the “illegitimate” government.⁴² The “battlefield” in a mass-oriented insurgency is the population—both the government and the insurgents fight for the support of the people.

As one author has suggested, both sides in this type of conflict have two tools in the struggle for control and support of the populace: “. . . popular perceptions of legitimacy and a credible power to coerce.”⁴³ He goes on to note that the target of coercion, the populace, defines the threat’s credibility, not the employer of the threat.⁴⁴ Consequently, conventional military power does not equate necessarily to credible coercive power. The conventional force may possess state of the art weaponry and overwhelming destructive power. Nevertheless, if the populace believes this conventional power will not, or cannot, be used against them, it has limited coercive value—particularly if the insurgent has demonstrated the ability to locate and punish noncompliant members of the populace and reward supporters.

Field Manual (FM) 3-05.201 states that mass-oriented “[i]nsurgents have a well-developed ideology and choose their objectives only after careful analysis. Highly organized, they mobilize forces for a direct military and political challenge to the government using propaganda and guerrilla action.”⁴⁵ The militant Islamic movement, present throughout the Middle East and in many parts of Africa and Asia, is a mass-oriented insurgency that seeks to supplant existing regimes with its own religious-based political ideology. As espoused by al-Qa’ida, its ideology seeks reestablishment of an Islamic caliphate, removal of secular or “apostate” regimes, and removal of Western influence from the region.⁴⁶

The militant Islamic insurgency is inchoate; while nearly global in nature, it does not yet appear to be truly unified in a single insurgent movement, despite al-Qa’ida’s attempts to serve as a coalescing force. Rather, the current insurgency appears to be a loosely coordinated effort of multiple groups with nearly coincident goals and objectives,

who have not yet joined into a single unified front. Consequently, jihadist groups like Zarqawi's in Iraq may not respond directly to instructions from the al-Qa'ida leadership, but they share similar anti-Western, fundamentalist Islamic goals, and are likely receiving support from the same population base. Additionally, the level of development of the various Islamic insurgent movements varies from group to group, region to region.

Army doctrine establishes three general phases of development for an insurgent movement. It acknowledges that not every insurgency passes through each phase, and that success is not contingent upon linear progression through the three phases. In Phase I, the latent or incipient phase, the insurgent movement focuses on recruiting, organizing, and training key membership, as well as establishing inroads into legitimate organizations to facilitate support of its objectives. It establishes the clandestine cellular support structure that facilitates intelligence collection and operational actions, and infiltrates its supporters into critical positions within governmental and civilian organizations.⁴⁷ The insurgency normally avoids all but selected and limited violence during this phase in order to avoid provoking effective regime counterinsurgent operations before the insurgency can respond.⁴⁸

Once the insurgency has established its support infrastructure, it violently challenges the government. In Phase II, guerrilla warfare, the insurgent movement takes active measures to challenge the regime's legitimacy. This can include attacks, assassinations, sabotage, or subversive activities (such as information operations) to challenge governmental legitimacy.⁴⁹ In a rural-based insurgency, the insurgents often are able to establish relatively secure base camps to operate from, such as the Viet Cong did. In an urban-based insurgency, the members rely on the anonymity of urban areas to conceal their presence within the population.

In Phase III, mobile warfare or the war of movement, guerrilla forces transition to conventional warfare and directly confront government security forces. If properly timed, the government has been weakened sufficiently to succumb to assault by insurgent forces. This phase takes on the character of a civil war, in which the insurgents may control and administer significant portions of terrain by force of arms.⁵⁰

Due to its widespread nature, assessment of the developmental progress of the Islamic insurgency is dynamic and regionally dependent. For example, in Iraq, the Islamic insurgency (in loose coordination with other nationalist-based insurgent elements) is largely in Phase II, the conduct of active guerrilla warfare. In Saudi Arabia, recent attacks suggest the insurgency is transitioning from Phase I to Phase II. In Egypt, government control has kept the insurgency in Phase I, with Islamic dissident groups conducting propaganda operations, but rarely able to use violence. Based on the global nature of attacks initiated by militant Islamic organizations, the insurgency has already spent significant time and effort in Phase I; as a result it has developed insurgent infrastructure capable of supporting operations in selected locations throughout the world.

As in the early years of the Viet Cong insurgency, the violent component of the Islamic insurgency captures the majority of current attention, and has been the focus of regime counterinsurgency operations.⁵¹ Spectacular attacks such as September 11, 2001 (9/11), the embassy bombings in Africa, the attack on the *USS Cole*, and the Madrid subway bombings, or the now-routine daily guerrilla warfare in Iraq and Afghanistan focus attention on the paramilitary element of the insurgency. Yet, as with the Viet Cong, the armed Islamic elements cannot survive without a support infrastructure. In fact, many of the attacks are suicide operations. The perpetrators are expendable foot soldiers. Investigation of the high profile attacks indicates the presence of a widespread support network for intelligence collection, material support, finance, and movement of insurgents.⁵² However, these “direct support” cells represent only one component of the overall militant Islamic infrastructure.

The militant Islamic infrastructure also has a “general support” component. It includes religious/political infrastructure consisting of Islamic scholars and mullahs who “justify” violent actions by their interpretation of the Koran and Islamic law, and use the pulpit to recruit, solicit funds, and propagate the insurgency’s information campaign themes.⁵³ This component is critical to providing the insurgents with the stamp of religious legitimacy. Recently, the lead Islamic insurgent in Iraq, Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi, issued an audiotape, castigating religious leaders for flagging allegiance to the

insurgents, thus underlining how seriously the insurgents view the importance of such support.⁵⁴

The general support component of the militant Islamic infrastructure also includes Islamic nongovernmental organizations that solicit money on behalf of al-Qa'ida and other terrorist organizations, as well as funding fundamentalist madrassas and mosques throughout the world. Such religious institutions serve as recruiting centers and platforms to spread their propaganda messages. This component also includes media organizations and web sites that provide fora for the insurgents' psychological operations and assist in the furtherance of their information campaign objectives.⁵⁵ The infrastructure directs, supports, and sustains the execution of violence against the regime and Western enemies; it constitutes the insurgency's center of gravity.

There are several disincentives to attacking this source of power; however, it must be neutralized to defeat the insurgency. The infrastructure component frequently is harder to find than the armed elements and is less susceptible to normal U.S. technology-focused intelligence collection methods. Rules of engagement are less clear-cut, as the targets frequently are noncombatants in the sense that they do not personally wield the tools of violence. Consequently, the risk of negative media attention and adverse public reaction is high. Moreover, infrastructure targets are likely to fall into interagency "seams." While armed elements in Iraq or Afghanistan clearly are a military responsibility, responsibility for infrastructure targets, particularly those outside a designated combat zone, can cut across multiple agency or departmental boundaries. Despite these obstacles, attacking the infrastructure represents a critical component of overall counterinsurgency efforts to defeat the militant Islamic insurgency. Consequently, lessons drawn from the Phoenix Program can offer important guidelines.

CONTEMPORARY INFRASTRUCTURE ATTACK

Five years of operational experience against the Viet Cong infrastructure yielded significant lessons at the tactical, operational, and strategic levels. The focus of the remainder of this chapter is on those strategic lessons most relevant to an attack against the militant

Islamic infrastructure. One can classify those lessons into three major categories: command and control, operations, and legal/ethical issues.

Command and Control.

Identification of Objectives. The most basic function of command is to define objectives for the organization. During the Vietnam War, the belated identification of the infrastructure as a center of gravity allowed the Viet Cong an insurmountable time advantage. For the current struggle, this has two implications. First, and foremost, U.S. strategic leadership must acknowledge the nature of the war which it confronts. A militant Islamic insurgency, not “terrorism,” is the enemy.⁵⁶ Second, the United States must wage a comprehensive counterinsurgency campaign that includes neutralization of the insurgency’s infrastructure as a critical component of a holistic campaign. By focusing solely on the operational element of the insurgency (the terrorist or insurgent “operator”), the United States risks paying too little attention to the “other war” and thus, repeating the mistakes of Vietnam.

Unity of Command. One of the most significant successes of the Phoenix program lay in the establishment of unity of command among disparate civilian agencies and military organizations previously uncoordinated and often working at cross-purposes.⁵⁷ The Phoenix Program, led by a civilian deputy in the Civil Operations and Rural Development Support department under the Commander, MACV, essentially created an interagency command element to unite civilian and military lines of command.⁵⁸ The intelligence and operations coordinating centers provided a mechanism to enable interagency cooperation and coordination in anti-infrastructure operations at the operational and tactical level. Unfortunately, there was no mechanism to enforce cooperation. Consequently, while senior leaders synchronized civilian and military policies and objectives at the highest level, organizations might still be working at cross-purposes at lower levels. This was particularly true in the intelligence arena, where organizational rivalries often resulted in a failure to share intelligence, as agencies treated their best sources and critical pieces of intelligence in a propriety manner.⁵⁹ Timely and accurate

intelligence is essential for counterinsurgency forces to execute focused operations that neutralize the insurgent and avoid negative consequences on the population. Compartmented or stove-piped intelligence processes impede development of a comprehensive picture of the insurgent's infrastructure—a picture that one only can "assemble" by compiling the various "pieces" collected by all the various participants in the regime's counterinsurgency effort.

The U.S. Government must unify today's counterinsurgency effort at every level. The United States should establish a single interagency organization or task force, empowered to promulgate policy, establish objectives, set priorities, and direct operations for the global counterinsurgency effort. The current decision to unify the nation's various intelligence agencies under a single director represents a useful first step in establishing unity of the intelligence effort; however, the United States must wield all the elements of national power in a coordinated fashion. Currently, the National Security Council is the only integrating point for the various departments; it does not possess the design or staff to plan and execute the detailed application of national power required to defeat a global insurgency.

Unity of command should extend down to the tactical level. Fora based on cooperation, such as the intelligence and operations coordinating centers in Vietnam, are largely personality dependent—they only work well when the participants "mesh;" they fail when personalities clash. Organizational structures, empowered to direct interagency counterinsurgency tasks, must exist at every level. While this might seem an usurpation of departmental responsibilities, the global counterinsurgency campaign needs singularly focused direction and supervision, by an organization empowered by the president to direct departmental cooperation at all levels.

Metrics. Evaluating operational effectiveness is another basic function of command. Commanders can use two types of metrics, measures of effectiveness and measures of performance, to assess their organization's effectiveness. Measures of performance evaluate how well an organization executes an action—it does not judge whether the action contributes to long term objectives; measures of effectiveness evaluate whether an organization's planned actions yield progress towards the objectives. For example, the Phoenix

Program levied infrastructure neutralization (killed, captured, or rallied) quotas on the intelligence and operations coordinating centers and used the total numbers of infrastructure personnel neutralized to determine if the campaign were successful.

There were two problems with such an approach; first, it confused measures of performance with measures of effectiveness. Numbers of neutralizations that a subordinate element executed might be a valid measure of performance; i.e., it demonstrated whether or not the organization actively was pursuing infrastructure personnel. However, neutralization numbers also confused actions with effectiveness. The objective of the Phoenix Program was to limit the infrastructure's ability to support operations and exercise control over the population. Neutralization numbers did not measure whether the overall campaign was making progress towards these objectives.⁶⁰

The second problem with the Phoenix quotas was that they caused dysfunctional organizational behavior. Driven to achieve neutralization quotas, police and military units often detained innocent civilians in imprecise cordon and sweep operations.⁶¹ The overburdened legal system then took weeks or months to process detainees; the jails and holding areas provided the Viet Cong with an excellent environment for recruiting and indoctrinating previously apolitical civilians.⁶² The quota system bred corruption, as families paid bribes to secure the release of their relatives while others settled personal scores by identifying their personal enemies as members of the Viet Cong infrastructure.⁶³

While reforms eventually corrected many of the deficiencies in the Phoenix Program, the lesson for current counterinsurgency operations is clear. Metrics designed to measure organizational effectiveness and performance can significantly influence the conduct of operations, both positively and negatively. It is critical to establish measures of effectiveness tied to operational objectives. Simple attritional numbers, while easily produced, more often than not are meaningless. For example, neutralizing 75 percent of al-Qa'ida's leadership might seem to indicate effective operations. However, without considering issues such as replacements, criticality of losses, or minimum required personnel levels to direct operations,

one cannot truly assess the effect of operations. Useful measures of effectiveness require a significant understanding of the enemy, the ability to collect detailed feedback on effects, and a major analytical effort. Consequently, the tendency may be to fall back on more easily collected, attrition-focused statistics. The experience of the Phoenix Program suggests that it may be better not to use metrics at all, rather than to use inappropriate ones.

Operations.

Combined Operations. Analysis of the Phoenix Program suggests that operations against the insurgent infrastructure are best done in a combined manner, with U.S. military and civilian organizations in a support or advisory role to host nation counterparts. In order to achieve its aim of a “rifle shot,” Phoenix operations more closely resembled police operations than military ones.⁶⁴ Such focused operations require a level of cultural understanding and local knowledge that only a native can achieve. Attempts to operate unilaterally without such expertise can result in indiscriminate use of force and firepower, lost opportunities, and a disenchanting, anti-American civil population.

Combined operations, but with clear American primacy, tend to send the message that indigenous organizations are inept or incapable. In the battle for legitimacy, it is critical that the regime not only is effective, but that the populace believes it to be effective. Overt U.S. presence often provides the insurgent with ammunition for his information campaign; insurgent groups in Iraq have leveraged charges of neo-colonialism against the United States to good effect in order to rally nationalists to their cause. The less a regime appears to have surrendered control of basic governmental functions to the United States, the better it can deflect the insurgent’s propaganda messages and gain or retain the allegiance of the populace.

The experience in Vietnam demonstrates that there is significant incentive to avoid or minimize combined operations with indigenous forces. The Viet Cong infiltrated the South Vietnamese government and security apparatus at every level, which decreased operational effectiveness.⁶⁵ This, coupled with the belief that U.S. forces were

more capable than the host nation forces, resulted in an American tendency to marginalize South Vietnamese operational participation, and inhibited a wider dissemination of intelligence, even between U.S. organizations.⁶⁶

Americans must avoid the temptation to do everything themselves; unilateralism or operational primacy hinders overall operational effectiveness by inhibiting the development of indigenous counterinsurgency expertise and undermining the legitimacy of the host nation regime. It also requires a greater commitment of limited U.S. resources, particularly personnel. U.S. military and civilian security organizations must establish and use common procedural safeguards, such as standards for vetting of indigenous personnel, to ensure operational security, while not incentivizing unilateral operations.⁶⁷

Advisors. One of the most significant limiting factors in the Phoenix Program was the competence of the U.S. advisors detailed to serve with the South Vietnamese military and civilian security organizations tasked with executing anti-infrastructure operations. For a wide variety of bureaucratic reasons, the Phoenix advisors were often young, inexperienced, and lacking in appropriate skills to advise their South Vietnamese counterparts properly.⁶⁸ This problem severely limited the Phoenix Program from reaching its full potential. As the program matured, efforts occurred to increase the quality and experience level of U.S. advisors through training programs and improved personnel selection policies.⁶⁹ Unfortunately, the U.S. effort lost valuable time before the implementation of changes, and the problem remained largely unresolved; however, the Phoenix advisory effort provides some key lessons for advisory efforts in support of an attack against the militant Islamic infrastructure.

Advisors must possess a basic level of regional expertise and language capability that they further develop once deployed. Advisors who understand their operating environment can assess the impact of operational techniques, avoid pitfalls that might alienate the population or provide the insurgent with ammunition for his propaganda campaign, and design operations that will target the insurgent infrastructure effectively, while enhancing the regime's reputation. A language capability often allows the advisor to verify

the accuracy of translators and host nation intelligence products, as well as judge the effectiveness and trustworthiness of host nation counterparts. In an environment where the population fears contact with host nation security forces due to corruption or insurgent infiltration, civilians may provide information directly to an advisor who speaks their language.⁷⁰

Advisors must be ready to operate under vague and uncertain circumstances and within broad procedural guidance. Advisors must be intellectually and professionally comfortable with the concept of applying police-like methods instead of normal military means to attack the militant Islamic infrastructure. Towards the end of the Phoenix Program, senior leaders recognized that not all military personnel met these requirements; MACV Directive 525-36 allowed personnel assigned as Phoenix advisors to opt out of the assignment without prejudice if they found the nature of the “. . . operations repugnant to them personally. . . .”⁷¹

The qualities necessary to be a counterinsurgency advisor are resident in the special operations community and the CIA's paramilitary organizations. While CIA operatives are generally more familiar with the interagency environment, their organization lacks sufficient personnel strength to operate on a global scale without significant augmentation. Additionally, advisory teams should include expertise from the law enforcement investigatory agencies, such as the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Regardless of the source of advisors, the Department of Defense should establish a specific training program to prepare advisors for the task of identifying, tracking, and attacking infrastructure targets.

Legal/Moral Considerations.

Legal and moral issues are of paramount concern in an attack on the militant Islamic infrastructure. These issues have the potential to wield considerable influence on the population's perception of legitimacy. Operations must stand the long-term scrutiny of world and U.S. popular opinion. Perceptions of the Phoenix Program as an immoral assassination operation drew intensive scrutiny from Congress and the media, and weakened the legitimacy of the governments of South Vietnam and the United States. The inability of

the South Vietnamese legal system to house, process, and adjudicate the large numbers of detainees generated by the Phoenix Program dramatically hampered its overall effectiveness.⁷² In many cases, the system became a revolving door, with hard-core members of the infrastructure being released prematurely. In other cases, lengthy detainment of innocents abetted the enemy's recruitment effort.⁷³ Interrogation of detainees provided the best source of information for future attacks; however, accusations of torture and inhumane treatment resulted in a considerable loss of legitimacy for the regime.

A fair, responsive, and firm judicial system must be available to deal with insurgents captured in a campaign against the infrastructure. The United States can influence this issue directly with those insurgents captured under its jurisdiction; it can influence indirectly the issue with those governments to which it provides aid and advice. To retain legitimacy, the United States must maintain the moral high ground. For example, while the unilateral and indefinite incarceration of al-Qa'ida detainees in Guantanamo may be legal, it may not be in the long-term best interest of the counterinsurgency effort. It has negatively impacted relations with coalition partners and contributed to a negative image of the United States in the world.⁷⁴ Agreements that return captives to their nation of origin for disposition, while still allowing U.S. intelligence agencies access for interrogation purposes ("rendition"), has been one method currently used to minimize U.S. exposure to continuing criticism.⁷⁵ However, this procedure invites accusations that the United States merely is using a surrogate to do its "dirty" work. In the long term, the United States must establish a process in cooperation with its coalition partners which yields intelligence for future operations and prevents detainees from rejoining the insurgency, while meeting basic legal and ethical standards that do not jeopardize popular perceptions of legitimacy of the counterinsurgency effort.

CONCLUSION

Twenty-six years after the fall of Saigon signaled the ultimate failure of U.S. counterinsurgency efforts in South Vietnam, the United States found itself thrust into another major counterinsurgency

effort by the attacks of 9/11. The counterinsurgency against militant Islamic fundamentalism requires operations on a much broader scale than the U.S. effort in Southeast Asia, and the stakes are significantly higher. The communist insurgency in South Vietnam attacked a government of only symbolic importance to the United States. The current militant Islamic insurgency directly threatens vital U.S. national interests – potentially the most vital of its interests, national survival. The United States must recognize and identify this threat in order to engage and defeat it. Words matter; when the National Security Strategy for Combating Terrorism identifies a technique, terrorism, as the enemy, it only can lead to strategic and operational confusion.⁷⁶

Once the United States acknowledges the threat posed by the militant Islamic insurgency, it must plan and conduct a holistic counterinsurgency campaign. This chapter has focused on only one component of such a campaign, the neutralization of the insurgency's infrastructure. This component is critical – the longer the United States delays effective infrastructure neutralization operations, the more difficult they will become, as militant Islamic movements further develop clandestine infrastructure throughout the world.

Neutralization of insurgents and their supporting infrastructure is only one line of operation in a counterinsurgency strategy. The United States and its coalition partners also must protect populations from the insurgent's coercive methods, pursue social and economic development to eliminate root causes, and mobilize populations to support counterinsurgency efforts. Each of these lines of operation can succeed. Yet the overall counterinsurgency effort can fail without an information campaign that both supports them and capitalizes on their success. The battleground of an insurgency lies in the minds of the populace. The United States and its coalition partners only can defeat the militant Islamic insurgency when they can convince the overwhelming majority of the people in the Muslim world that free, representative, and open societies that export goods and services instead of violence and terror best serve their interests – and that the United States stands ready to help them develop such societies. As it executes its counterinsurgency campaign, America must maintain moral ascendancy over its opponents and never lose sight of its democratic principles.

ENDNOTES - CHAPTER 2

1. William Colby and James McCargar, *Lost Victory: A Firsthand Account of America's Sixteen-Year Involvement in Vietnam*, Chicago, 1989, p. 9.

2. Dale Andrade, *Ashes to Ashes: The Phoenix Program and the Vietnam War*, Lexington, MA, 1990, p. xiii, asserts that the Viet Nam War is the best documented conflict in history, if one judges by sheer volume.

3. Mark Moyar, *Phoenix and the Birds of Prey: The CIA's Secret Campaign to Destroy the Viet Cong*, Annapolis, 1997, p. 6. Moyar provides a succinct discussion of the U.S. interests weighed by the Johnson administration in its decision to intercede in the Vietnam conflict.

4. Arlington National Cemetery Website, "A. Peter Dewey, Lieutenant Colonel, United States Army," available from www.arlingtoncemetery.net/apdewey.htm; internet; accessed November 17, 2004. The author indicates that an approximately 128-man MAAG began supervising equipment transfer to the French in Vietnam on September 17, 1950. Two U.S. airmen on contract to the CIA were KIA over Dien Bien Phu in 1954. The first U.S. advisors arrived in South Vietnam on February 12, 1955.

5. *Ibid.*, identifies Lieutenant Colonel A. Peter Dewey, U.S. Army, Office of Strategic Services, as the first American killed in Vietnam. Lieutenant Colonel Dewey was killed in action by the Communist Vietminh forces on September 26, 1945, near Hanoi. The Defense Department has set November 1, 1955, the date the MAAG was officially established, as the earliest qualifying date for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. Air Force Tech Sergeant Richard B. Fitzgibbon, Jr., who was murdered in Vietnam by a fellow airman on June 8, 1956, is considered the first American officially to die in the Vietnam War under these criteria.

6. Colby and McCargar, p. 180; Moyar, p. 6; and "Named Campaigns—Vietnam," U.S. Army Center for Military History, available from www.army.mil/cmh-pg/reference/vncmp.htm; Internet; accessed November 17, 2004; hereafter cited as "Named Campaigns."

7. "Named Campaigns." By June 30, 1967, total U.S. forces in SVN had risen to 448,800.

8. Andrade, p. 53.

9. Colby and McCargar, p. 205.

10. Moyar, p. 48, discusses the brief-lived Office of Civil Operations and subsequent decision to establish the Civil Operations and Rural Development Support (CORDS).

11. U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, "Phung Hoang (Phoenix) Program, 1969 End of Year Report," February 28, 1970, Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, PA, p. 1. Hereafter referred to as "Phoenix Program 1969 End of Year Report."

12. U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, "Intelligence Coordination and Exploitation for Attack on VC Infrastructure. Directive 381-41," July 9, 1968, w/Change 1 Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, PA, p. 2. The document identifies "PHOENIX" as the short title for ICEX. Hereafter cited as "MACV Directive 381-41." Douglas Valentine, *The Phoenix Program*, New York, 1990, p. 122. Valentine provides a detailed discussion of the program names. He states that, according to a Vietnamese myth, Phung Hoang was a legendary bird of conjugal love that only appeared in peacetime. He goes on to state that the Americans translated this "peaceful" program into the Phoenix, ". . . an omnipotent, predatory bird that selectively snatches its prey—a symbol of discord rather than harmony."

13. Central Intelligence Agency, "The Situation in Vietnam: Overview and Outlook," January 24, 1969, No. 0550/69, p. A-1. Hereafter cited as "The Situation in Vietnam."

14. Andrade, p. 5. Under the terms of the peace agreement, all Viet Minh forces were to withdraw to the northern half of a divided Vietnam.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

16. CIA, "The Situation in Vietnam," p. 7.

17. MACV Directive 381-41, p. 2.

18. See "Phoenix Program 1969 End of Year Report," p. A-4, for the official description of each of these organizations. See Valentine, for an in-depth analysis of each organization.

19. Andrade, pp. 12-13, 57.

20. William L. Knapp, "Phoenix/Phung Hoang and the Future: A Critical Analysis of the U.S./GVN Program to Neutralize the Viet Cong Infrastructure," Student paper, Carlisle Barracks: U.S. Army War College, March 1971, p. 45. Hereafter cited as "Phoenix/Phung Hoang and the Future."

21. Valentine, p. 177. Valentine notes that:

. . . Tet proved to the world that the VCI shadow government not only existed, but was capable of mobilizing masses of people. . . Tet revealed . . . the intrinsically political nature of the Vietnam War. Even if the U.S. and South Vietnamese governments found it impossible to admit that the outlawed VCI was a legitimate political entity, they could not deny that it had, during Tet, dictacted the course of events in South Vietnam. And that fact pushed Phoenix into the limelight.

See also *Ibid.*, pp. 180-181.

22. "Phoenix Program 1969 End of Year Report," p. 1.

23. Knapp, pp. 51-52. Knapp identifies the 15 different organizations required to participate in the PIOCCs and DIOCCs.

24. "Phoenix Program 1969 End of Year Report," p. A-5.

25. "Phoenix Program 1969 End of Year Report," p. A-8, discusses GVN establishment of operational goals. It defines "neutralization" of Viet Cong infrastructure as "VCI who rally or are induced to rally, those who are captured and sentenced and those who are killed in the course of security operations. The desirability of capturing VCI is stressed, for the intelligence and other values they can offer." Note that detainees could not be counted until they were found guilty.

26. Knapp, pp. 55-56; and "Phoenix Program 1969 End of Year Report," p. A-4.

27. "Phoenix Program 1969 End of Year Report," p. A-7.

28. "MACV Directive 381-41," p. 7.

29. *Ibid.*

30. Andrade, pp. 100-101, provides an example of a typical firepower intensive sweep. John Shy and Thomas W. Collier, "Revolutionary War," *Makers of Modern Strategy from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*, Peter Paret, ed., Princeton, NJ, 1986, p. 856. Shy and Collier argue that the U.S. military never really came to this realization.

31. "MACV Directive 381-41," p. 3.

32. Andrade, p. 153; and Phoenix Program 1969 End of Year Report," p. A-8.

33. U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, "Military Operations, Phung Hoang Operations. Directive 525-36," November 5, 1971, Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, PA, pp. 1-2. Hereafter cited as "MACV Directive 525-36."

34. *Ibid.*, p. 1.

35. Valentine threads accusations of an assassination program throughout his book. See pp. 311-314 as an example. Many of the accusations of "assassination" were based on the idea that a "targeted kill" equaled assassination. Valentine, p. 319. As Andrade, p. x, notes, infrastructure attack involved ". . . shades of warfare that Americans would prefer not to think about. Most of the Viet Cong Infrastructure (VCI) were, strictly speaking, civilians." Moyar, pp. 224-232, addresses the issue of Phoenix as an assassination program in great detail and counters many of Valentine's primary sources. See Andrade, p. 123, in regards to charges of brutality and torture.

36. Moyar, p. 55.

37. See note 35.

38. Valentine, p. 126. Moyar, pp. 245-246, has some excellent reports from former Viet Cong on Phoenix effectiveness. Also see Andrade, p. 278.

39. Moyar, p. 11, highlights a 1967 CIA estimate of the VCI at 80,000 to 150,000 personnel. "Phoenix Program 1969 End of Year Report," p. 9, estimates the total of VCI at 74,000 personnel. Despite Phoenix's increasing effectiveness over time, the VC had been given too long to establish themselves nearly unmolested within South Vietnamese society.

40. See Valentine, p. 414. See also Andrade, pp. 263-4, 268-270, 278; and Moyar, p. 245, on the overall effectiveness of the Phoenix program.
41. Department of the Army, "Special Forces Unconventional Forces Operations", Initial Draft, Field Manual 3-05.201, Vol 1, Washington, DC, November 2001, p. 1-9. Hereafter referred to as Field Manual 3-05.201.
42. *Ibid.*
43. Dr. Larry Cable, "Reinventing The Round Wheel: Insurgency, Counterinsurgency, and Peacekeeping Post Cold War," *Journal of Small Wars and Insurgency*, Vol. 4, Autumn 1993, p. 229. Hereafter cited as "Reinventing the Round Wheel."
44. *Ibid.*, p. 230.
45. Field Manual 3-05.201, p. 1-9.
46. Michael Vlahos, "Terror's Mask: Insurgency Within Islam," Laurel, MD: Johns Hopkins University, 2002, p. 1. See also "Al Qaida Threat Brief: Executive Summary," Decision Support Systems, Inc. Reno, NV, 2001. Available from the internet at www.metatempo.com/AlQaidaThreatBrief.PDF, p. 2.
47. FM 3-05.201, pp. 1-7.
48. Shy and Collier, "Revolutionary War," p. 850.
49. FM 3-05.201, p 1-7.
50. *Ibid.*, p 1-8.
51. For the purposes of this chapter, the regime is defined as the coalition of governments working against the militant Islamic insurgency.
52. National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States*, Washington, DC, 2004, pp. 365-366.
53. For example, prior to the attack on Fallujah, the Sunni clerical Association of Muslim Scholars declared that resisting the American and Iraqi government forces was a duty and issued a fatwa prohibiting followers from supporting the regime forces in any war. Fadel Al-Badrani, "Insurgents in Iraq Launch Deadly Attacks: Attacks Carried Out Across Central Iraq, Killing Over 30." *Reuters*, from [AOL ar.atwola.com/link/93197704/1096675187](http://AOL.ar.atwola.com/link/93197704/1096675187), accessed November 6, 2004.
54. "Al-Zarqawi Tape Criticizes Muslim Scholars," AP, Baghdad, Internet, available at www.usatoday.com/news/world/iraq/2004-11-24-zarqawi-tape_x.htm?csp=34, accessed December 10, 2004.
55. Nick Wadhams, "Insurgents Step Up Violence," *Harrisburg Patriot*, January 4, 2005, sec A, p. 3, reported that a videotape found in Baghdad shows a former Al-Jazeera manager telling one of Saddam Hussein's sons, Uday, that "Al-Jazeera is your channel." The Qatar-based television station has been the recipient of al-Qa'ida's videotaped messages and consistently has served as an outlet for insurgent propaganda.

56. George W. Bush, "National Security Strategy for Combating Terrorism," Washington, DC, February 2003, p. 1. The NSS states that "The enemy is not one person. It is not a single political regime. Certainly it is not a religion. The enemy is terrorism—premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents."

57. Moyar, p. 48; Andrade, p. 57.

58. Moyar, pp. 48-49.

59. Valentine, pp. 183, 204, 225, 325, 369-371; Moyar, p. 340.

60. Valentine, p. 274. See also Moyar, pp. 189-193, on the use of neutralization quotas.

61. Andrade, pp. 96-97.

62. *Ibid.*, p. 206.

63. Valentine, p. 108. Valentine provides examples of U.S. advisors who stated that informants were manipulating the Phoenix Program for personal motives. *Ibid.*, p. 154, discusses how the judicial backlog caused corruption. Andrade, p. 123, discusses the downside of quotas; pp. 218-222 summarizes the problems and their effects of corruption and an inadequate legal system.

64. Valentine, pp. 206-207, provides an example of a typical "rifle-shot" operation.

65. *Ibid.*, pp. 213 and 363. Valentine provides estimates of the extent of this infiltration.

66. *Ibid.*, *The Phoenix Program*, pp. 182-183, 213, 225, 300-301, 354. See also Andrade, p. 50.

67. See Moyar, pp. 154-155, reference operational security procedures. See *Ibid.*, p. 340, for his ideas on how to force intelligence sharing.

68. Valentine, pp. 225, 353, 364, on advisor problems and solutions. See also Andrade, pp. 138-140; and Knapp, p. 51.

69. Lieutenant Colonel Leo Kennedy and Lieutenant Colonel Marty Anderson, "An Examination of Vietnam War Senior Officer Debriefing Reports," Military Studies Paper, Carlisle Barracks: U.S. Army War College, May 1986, pp. 26-27.

70. See Valentine, p. 229, for the difficulties that can arise when the advisor cannot speak the language. See also *Ibid.*, p. 108, for the idea that all counterinsurgent personnel must be intelligence collectors.

71. "MACV Directive 525-36," p. 2.

72. Andrade, pp. 219-222, argues that the inadequacy of the judicial system to meet the workload, lenient sentencing, and a generally inept legal system was the critical weakness of the Phoenix Program. See also Knapp, p. 56.

73. Andrade, pp. 206, 221.

74. Neil A. Lewis, "U.S. Sets Stricter Ban on Torture," *Harrisburg Patriot*, January 1, 2005, sec A, p. 9.

75. Dana Priest, "U.S. Seeks Long-Term Solution for Detainees," *Harrisburg Patriot*, January 3, 2005, sec A, p. 3.

76. Bush, "National Security Strategy for Combating Terrorism," p. 1. See note 56.