

Wartime Counterinsurgency Programs Essay

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PHOENIX

Wartime counterinsurgency programs are nothing new—the very nature of war creates the necessity for highly complex undercover operations. But rarely do such programs have the scope or the resultant public censure of what the Vietnam War gave birth to: Phoenix.

In 1967, at the height of the [Vietnam War](#), the United States military, under the auspices of the CIA, executed the comprehensive counterinsurgency program known as Phoenix. Military officials designed the program to reconcile the governments of North and [South Vietnam](#). History has not been kind to Phoenix, and the perspective of its defenders and critics clouds what limited information is available. At its best, supporters describe it as an extremely successful operation that effectively helped neutralize the Viet Cong intelligence apparatus. At its worst, Phoenix has become a metaphor for everything that was wrong about U.S. involvement in Vietnam.

The roots of Phoenix took hold during the Kennedy administration. President John F. Kennedy had serious misgivings about the structure of the CIA. Mostly in response to the CIA's bungled Bay of Pigs operation in April 1961, Kennedy felt compelled to overhaul the

CIA's purpose and practices. Both the public and Congress were becoming increasingly uneasy about the CIA's far-reaching covert operations, as well as its seeming immunity from State Department control. Kennedy gave the task of restructuring to his special assistant, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., who developed strict guidelines for CIA activities. Schlesinger ultimately directed that secret activities were permissible as long as they did not affect the principles and practices of our society. He further asserted that they ceased to be permissible when th...

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..., and incidents like My Lai would have been less likely to occur.

From the beginning, Phoenix had a fatal flaw: It was an American program operating in a foreign culture. Furthermore, the South Vietnamese government could not reconcile the military goals with the political goals. Even if Phoenix had successfully eradicated the Viet Cong insurgents, it is doubtful the GVN would have been capable of making the transition from a military struggle to a political one. The necessary governmental structure simply did not exist, and the result would have been anarchy.

That Phoenix was a program running contrary to the practices and principles of American society is indisputable. This type of covert operation was precisely what President Kennedy and Arthur Schlesinger tried to eliminate. It is a facet of government that makes most American citizens decidedly uneasy.

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