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Trial by Fire - Intelligence Operations during the Vietnam War, 1955–75.



ABSTRACT

The Vietnam war (1955-75) was a conflict that made its mark on global history. It was a truly multidimensional conflict, where the frontlines were not separate from the heartlands. To bring order to the chaotic situation created by the aftermath of French withdrawal from Indochina, the United States of America decided to involve itself in the pacification of South Vietnam. They wanted to create a stable US-aligned regime which would curtail communist efforts in the region. In order to achieve this, they launched multiple intelligence-gathering and pacification campaigns. But despite the considerable efforts and resources brought to bear, South Vietnam fell to communism in 1975. In this paper, I will give a brief overview of US pacification attempts, and the problems relating to fighting such a difficult battle, where there are no clear sides, and anyone can be a potential enemy. Given the nature of the subject, few such works have been made that attempt to compare the methods listed here.

KEYWORDS

Vietnam, Tet offensive, USA, Cold War, Guerrilla warfare

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The Vietnam War was one of the most significant conflicts in contemporary history. It was fought in Indochina, which by the beginning of the American part of the conflict had been at war for almost two decades. The constant threat of Chinese warlords, the Japanese invasion in World War II, and the French atrocities during the colonial era have created a generation of embittered, weary people, who were nonetheless eager to regain their freedom – no matter the cost. The Americans had to find this out the hard way.

What makes this subject a lot more interesting and complex however is that the US had maintained good relations with a number of Vietnamese resistance groups. During the Japanese occupation of Indochina these guerrillas were aided by American intelligence gathering and special operations groups, forming an effective fighting force that could keep considerable Japanese forces out of the fight with the United States, which was steadily gaining ground in its push towards the Japanese mainland.¹

This cooperation was not always easy, though. Some Vietnamese were willing to fight anyone to ensure their homeland was liberated, even the French – who were allied with the US – and other Vietnamese aligned with Western powers. There was never a unified front that could fit the needs of Washington. The victorious Allies have restored French colonial rule, hoping they can maintain order in the region. But relations quickly worsened, and the resentment and public disorder swiftly turned into an all-out war in 1946 and ended with the disastrous defeat of France. Adding to that fact, the 1954 peace treaty split the region into four countries: Laos, Cambodia, the (nominally) US-aligned South Vietnam and the communist North Vietnam. The latter housed the largest of the resistance forces, the Viet Minh (later also known as the Viet Cong), lead by Ho Chi Minh himself, who was a staunch ally of the Americans during the war. He was, however, a communist (more precisely, a Leninist), and although US leaders toyed with the idea of making him a sort of “Asian Tito” - a communist leader independent of the Soviet sphere - this never came to fruition.² His desire to see his homeland unified under the socialist banner was too much for Washington. A new conflict was inevitable, and it was to be fought on all fronts.

As the political and military leadership of the United States prepared for an escalation, they knew they had to obtain up-to-date intelligence of their enemies. Although they already possessed considerable information concerning various political groups in Indochina, they wanted to ensure total pacification well before another war would break out. Thus, a new intelligence operation was declared: Operation Footboy. But to understand the significance of this undertaking, we have to get to know the unit and circumstances behind it.

The operation was to be carried out by MACV (Military Assistance Command, Vietnam), a unit of the US Armed Forces created by the order of President John F. Kennedy in order to

¹ <https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/oss-vietnam-1945-dixee-bartholomew-feis>

² THE PENTAGON PAPERS, GRAVEL EDITION, VOLUME I. CHAPTER I. „BACKGROUND TO THE CRISIS, 1940-50.” 12–29.

facilitate a stronger relationship with the South Vietnamese government and military.³ Established in 1962, the MACV was responsible for carrying out intelligence gathering operations in Indochina. At first however, they served in an advisory capacity to MAAG (Military Assistance Advisory Group), due to the restrictions of the Paris Peace Treaty.⁴ The MAAG had already been present in Indochina at the time of the French-Indochina War, as a way of showing that the United States takes the conflict very seriously. In 1964 MAAG came under complete MACV control, and as the conflict escalated into full-scale war, the unit grew from only a couple hundred men in Saigon to a military complex housing thousands of operatives and personnel. Although it was a joint operation they frequently suffered from all kinds of shortages – from qualified personnel to basic supplies. As the war dragged on, the situation did not see considerable improvement.⁵ There were also problems with coordination: the CIA (Central Intelligence Agency), the USAID (Agency for International Development), the US Information Service and the US Department of State all had separate agendas, and were responsible for carrying out their own plans without much supervision from either agency or the White House.⁶ To address these concerns a new agency was created: the Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support – CORDS, in 1967. This new agency was responsible for organizing and unifying the other agencies and to smoothen the relations between civilian and military operators. Led by Robert W. Komer and general William C. Westmoreland, the pacification efforts were handed over to the military, with civilian staff relegated to support roles. This arrangement seemed to work for a time, but it soon came under too much pressure.⁷

Meanwhile, the CIA was also tasked with coming up with ways to improve operational effectiveness. Although MACV seemed adequate for the task at first, Washington deemed it necessary to involve more resources in South Vietnam.⁸ The project was codenamed Phoenix Program and built on the experiences of the United States military as well as other sources of guerilla tactics and strategies. They came to the conclusion that one has to fight fire by fire – vis à vis, to fight the guerilla one must know how to fight like a guerilla. The methods of this CIA initiative were as simple as they were brutal: blackmailing, kidnapping, torture, murder. Nothing was too dirty, no price was too high and there was only one objective: break the Viet Cong at all costs.⁹

This partially answers the question: why wasn't Operation Footboy as successful as it should have been? First of all, the above mentioned operation was an umbrella term. Almost every InOps (Intelligence Operation) mission, from maritime, airborne, PsyOps (Psychological Operation) or other action with the purpose of intelligence-gathering was overseen by MACV and filed under that name giving its status a considerable bit of ambiguity. This also explains why it ran for such a long time (almost the entire length of the war) and why it is rather difficult to find specific details about it.¹⁰ So as to avoid the issue, this paper will focus on the methods by which the United States wanted to achieve their goals to fight the communists on all fronts.

³ LESTER 1988. 13.

⁴ STANTON 1987. 59.

⁵ LESTER 1988. 13–17.

⁶ ANDRADE 2006. 12.

⁷ ANDRADE 2006. 13-17.

⁸ SCHACHTNER 2018. 86.

⁹ WARD 2017. 341–343.

¹⁰ SCHACHTNER 2018. 91–92.

The first objective of any pacification campaign is to win the hearts and minds of the population. When the French withdrew, the US was left with a divided Indochina, a region left in chaos and disarray. The nominally allied South Vietnam was full of communist sympathizers who did everything in their power to sabotage and undermine the pacification efforts.¹¹ The aforementioned operational difficulties were another reason for the ultimately unsuccessful endeavor. Operation Footboy and the Phoenix Program were meant to bring an end to these failures, and I'll attempt to illustrate how they aimed to do so.

One of the key reasons for the overall failure of the US involvement in Vietnam was that they had to fight on two fronts, so to speak. As Henry Kissinger said: "The conventional army loses if it does not win. The guerrilla wins if he does not lose." What I mean by that is not only was the enemy waging a guerrilla war, but their main fighting force was also capable of measuring up to the combined US and South Vietnamese troops due to the growing Soviet and Chinese material support. Thus Washington faced a very serious problem: engage in conventional warfare to destroy the enemy, or focus on the insurgents with pacification tactics and strategies. This caused widespread debates and arguments, and although some solutions were found (like the aforementioned CORDS system), the reorganization and balancing of these two efforts were never carried out to their fullest extent, which resulted in the expected outcome of the US losing control of the situation.¹²

Another challenge that stood before the Americans was the terrain, and climate of Indochina. The peninsula is largely made up of mountainous regions, covered by thick jungle vegetation. The almost constant cloud cover and fog made aerial reconnaissance and identifying probable landing and/or drop sites very difficult. In addition, the area was full of hidden lagoons and marshes making ground operations much harder. The Vietnamese also had to suffer the terrain, but as it was their home they moved around more comfortably. The jungle was probably their strongest ally. The Americans had to learn to adapt to this climate if they wanted to achieve their goals.¹³

Yet another difficult situation was what comes with every insurrection and guerrilla war: the uncertainty. With no clear sides, anyone could turn out to be a rebel, a communist, or a saboteur. The Viet Cong utilized this to its fullest effect by sowing the seeds of discord between US and South Vietnamese people and by infiltrating almost every level of civilian and military life. An unseen battlefield is the most dangerous to fight on and trust between the allies was being eroded day by day.¹⁴

Operation Footboy was overseen by MACSOG-V (Military Assistance Command Special Operations Group – Vietnam). Throughout the 1960s, they carried out various tasks, but mostly relating to capturing intelligence and prisoners of war. With around 300 to 400 personnel and adequate numbers of suitable equipment they were proficient in air and maritime operations, even deeming the latter to be their best approach. Boats were used on the abundant river coastlines to cause damage to NVA (North Vietnamese Army) assets and personnel. Air units were provided by the VNAF (South Vietnamese Air Force) USAF (United States Air Force) and SOGs (Special Operations Group) own vehicles – mostly helicopters, categorized as transports and gunships.

¹¹ ANDRADE 2006. 9–10.

¹² ANDRADE 2006. 9

¹³ AHERN 2005. 33–34.

¹⁴ JOHNSON 1968. 435–447.

Their objectives were to drop agents, infiltration teams, and supplies in enemy territory, as well as rescuing the crews and pilots of downed aircraft. Most of the PsyOp missions were delegated to them as well. Such missions were designed to break the enemy fighting spirit and “persuade” the foe to give up. These involved dropping leaflets, radios pre-tuned to American propaganda channels, and “gift kits” – specialized deliveries created to demoralize the enemy by showing how much better off the Americans are when it came to food, recreation and other necessities and amenities. Such PsyOps were also meant to scare Hanoi, to create the image that America could reach anything, anywhere (author’s note: guerrillas are also expected to create such an atmosphere in order to weaken their enemies’ morale). Although the documentation reveals that these operations were carried out with resounding success most of the time, and the personnel were of increasing quality, casualties continued to mount – these reflect the dangerous nature of such missions. Many agents and support personnel were killed due to enemy activity, but about a third of them were lost to injury, disease, and non-combat related reasons.¹⁵ Towards the end of the war, their personnel were also directed towards field duties instead of recon leading to an overall loss of effectiveness and operational strength.¹⁶

Another type of mission was the sabotage of North-Vietnamese anti-air missile systems and launch sites. Although at first these were not widespread enough to cause much trouble by the late 1960s things took a turn for the worse for the Americans. Taking out the newly supplied Soviet anti-air defenses¹⁷ were important because of the huge losses suffered by US aircraft, and also because eliminating them meant that MACSOG-V operations could have had a larger reach and more approach vectors.¹⁸

The basic principle of Footboy, as well as any special or intelligence gathering operation, is the following: one needs a small but very well-trained team with excellent coordination and logistics which would frequently carry out high-risk missions deep inside enemy territory. Virtually cut off from friendly forces, having access to reliable lines of communication and helicopter support is a must. One report from the war also mentions this almost verbatim.¹⁹ Said document also details how such operations were expected to be completed, and how they were set up. It also mentions something that the US had largely failed to capitalize on. Many of the resistance groups already mentioned were divided and scattered after the battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954 where the French had suffered such a great defeat that it forced them to abandon Indochina. These groups and men were experienced guerrilla fighters and both North Vietnam and the United States wanted to enlist them. This became a sort of tug-of-war as both sides tried everything to ensure the loyalty or at least cooperation of said groups. How successful these efforts were is unknown.²⁰ What is known, however, is that not everyone believed the operation was even necessary let alone a success in any way.²¹

¹⁵ COMMAND HISTORY 1967, ANNEX G. G-1-5.

¹⁶ Comments on MACSOG’s operations and intelligence. B-n-142-143.

¹⁷ DRENKOWSKI 2007. 3.

¹⁸ Comments on MACSOG’s operations and intelligence. B-n-42.

¹⁹ Comments on MACSOG’s operations and intelligence. B-n-121-123.

²⁰ Comments on MACSOG’s operations and intelligence. B-n-64-65.

²¹ RESKE 1995. 30–36.

The CIA's Phoenix Program worked on the same terms, but operated with much more insidiousness. The agency was tired of the constant infighting going on between their compatriots and supposed allies. The South Vietnamese parliament was full of communist sympathizers jeopardizing the war effort and US-supported pacification efforts were in constant danger of sabotage from hidden insurrectionists.²² The CIA was also responsible for the chaotic situation in a big way: it has been revealed that the coup against, and following assassination of then-president of South Vietnam, Ngo Dinh Diem in late 1963 was allowed to take place in order to create a sense of urgent necessity of the United States military presence.²³

It fell upon Komer to organize this new initiative, but he was facing a unique issue. The Phoenix Program aimed much higher than "simple" pacification. They were looking for ways to infiltrate the highest echelons of the communist leadership in Hanoi and to achieve that the agents assigned to the program were slowly taking control of key personnel and facilities throughout South Vietnam.²⁴ They were way more likely to turn to backhanded methods when it came to the destruction of the enemy. Although capturing and/or killing proven or suspected communists was always an option they also used underhanded tactics. One example details how a village finance chief was accused of stealing community funds by forging false taxation documents and signatures and then allowing the North Vietnamese to take care of the issue. Small things like these, as they saw it, were perfect to slowly erode the trust between insurgent and civilian and to smear the reputation of the Hanoi government.²⁵

Then in 1968 everything changed. The NVA and the Viet Cong launched a massive joint assault that became known as the Tet Offensive. On the eve of the Vietnamese New Lunar Year, on 30th January, the North Vietnamese attacked virtually every significant US and South Vietnamese city and installation. They believed that the enemy would not be able to muster an immediate response due to many soldiers and personnel being away on R&R for the holidays. They were proven correct.²⁶ The battles raged on for many weeks but despite causing considerable shock to the defenders, the main objectives of the attackers were not met. There was no general uprising against the government²⁷ - Saigon remained under US control, most major bases were operable shortly after the battle and the casualties were grave: the Viet Cong has almost completely been wiped out²⁸ and the NVA was decimated. US and ARVN losses were comparatively lower and they achieved a great tactical victory.²⁹

But despite the success, this was also the turning point of the war. Although North Vietnam was badly bloodied and the chance to end the war on much better terms for the US and South Vietnamese was close at hand, things were changing behind the scenes. The general public on the home front was getting tired of the war. The civil rights movements were becoming stronger, anti-war protests were more and more commonplace. The draft system was met with public

²² AHERN 2001. 279–283.

²³ THE PENTAGON PAPERS, GRAVEL EDITION, 1971. PART IV B5. 1-3.

²⁴ AHERN 2001. 292.

²⁵ AHERN 2001. 304–305.

²⁶ NGUYEN 2006. 24.

²⁷ AHERN 2001. 309.

²⁸ PRIBBENOW 2002. 249.

²⁹ WILLBANKS 2007. 32–54.

outrage and many people did everything they could to avoid being sent to the armed forces.³⁰ The war became too much of a hassle for Washington to handle, and under President Nixon, “Vietnamization” was put into effect: the US would withdraw by 1973 and only provided Saigon with indirect support instead of ground forces.³¹

There are many factors and explanations as to how the US intelligence forces with all their considerable resources failed to notice the immense preparations on the northern side of the border. Faulty intelligence, North Vietnamese concealment tactics, disinformation, the rest. And most importantly, although intelligence was beginning to trickle down by the end of 1967 the timing of the offensive remained a mystery until the attack actually began.³² Moreover, the Tet offensive has shown that the Viet Cong infrastructure is stronger than believed and was a very serious threat to US efforts despite the huge losses suffered by the insurgents. This threat had to be dealt with in whatever ways possible – thus, while MACSOG-V had diminished in scope and strength the CIA was stepping up to ensure internal security in South Vietnam.³³

Between 1968 and 1972 Phoenix officially “neutralized” (that is to say imprisoned, persuaded to defect, or eliminated) 81,740 people suspected of VC membership, of whom 26,369 were killed. South Vietnamese official statistics estimated that 41,000 were disposed of. The program was also quite successful in achieving its main goal: the destruction of the VC infrastructure in many important areas of South Vietnam. 87 percent of those killed in the program were attributed to conventional military operations by South Vietnamese and American forces; the remainder were killed by Phoenix Program operatives.³⁴

By 1970 communist plans repeatedly emphasized attacking the government’s pacification program and specifically targeted Phoenix officials due to the threat they posed to their operations. The Viet Cong also imposed assassination quotas. In 1970 for example, communist officials near Da Nang in northern South Vietnam instructed their assassins to “kill 1,400 persons” deemed to be government “tyrant[s]” and to “annihilate” anyone involved with the pacification program.³⁵

Several North Vietnamese officials have made statements about the effectiveness of Phoenix. According to William Colby: “in the years since 1975, I have heard several references to North and South Vietnamese communists who state that, in their mind, the toughest period that they faced from 1960 to 1975 was the period from 1968 to ‘72 when the Phoenix Program was at work.”³⁶ The CIA said that through Phoenix they were able to learn the identity and structure of the Viet Cong in every province.³⁷

In the words of Stuart A. Herrington, retired intelligence officer: “Regardless of how effective the Phoenix Program was or wasn’t, area by area, the communists thought it was very effective. They saw it as a significant threat to the viability of the revolution because, to the extent that you could ... carve out the shadow government, their means of control over

³⁰ WESTMORELAND 1976. 361–362.

³¹ HAGOPAIN 2009. 10–14.

³² AHERN 2001. 308–310.

³³ MACSOG Documentation Study Appendix A to Appendix C. 1970. C-a-14-20.

³⁴ ANDRADE 2006. 17–21.

³⁵ ANDRADE 2006. 20–21.

³⁶ Interview with William Colby, 1981.

³⁷ RUTH 2009. 50.

the civilian population was dealt a death blow. And that's why, when the war was over, the North Vietnamese reserved special treatment for those who had worked in the Phoenix Program. They considered it a mortal threat to the revolution."³⁸

Despite such considerable successes, the Phoenix Program fell victim to the most devastating danger for any intelligence operation: it became public. The people in both the United States and South Vietnam were disgusted and outraged by what the CIA has been doing to their captives. More unscrupulous citizens abused the system by reporting their rivals or personal enemies as insurgents, hoping that their "problem" disappears in the CIA dungeons and interrogation facilities.³⁹

To summarize: the United States tried every method it could think of to create a stable Indochina but the careful balancing of pacification and direct military action was a tough act to follow. Constant infighting between different agencies, the continuous underestimation of the strength of Viet Cong insurgents and growing public and official dissatisfaction have led to the United States withdrawing from Indochina leaving it up to Saigon to protect itself against North Vietnamese aggression. The mistakes made by the US resulted in the complete opposite of their intentions: the region was almost completely overrun by communists, Laos and Cambodia fell into anarchy; North Vietnam achieved a crushing victory. But one cannot say that there weren't any important lessons to learn. It became abundantly clear that without complete organization and mutual understanding, no counterinsurgency effort will work.

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³⁸ WARD 2017. 342. compare to AHERN 2001. 334–335.

³⁹ ANDRADE 2006. 19–20.

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