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INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

Eavesdropping on Ocean Vuong's New Book

By Kevin Nguyen. May 25, 2019
https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/25/books/ocean-vuong-earth-briefly-gorgeous.html

Before he sold his first novel, "On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous," for a hefty advance, Ocean Vuong was writing poetry. Which means he was broke. Which means he was making $8 an hour cleaning toilets at a Panera Bread.

If you worked your way to regional manager, you could make 60 grand a year. "That would be considered fancy where I'm from," Vuong says.

It's not clear what he means by where he's from. There's Ho Chi Minh City, where he was born and lived until he immigrated to the U.S. at age 2. Or Hartford, Conn., where he was raised by his mother and grandmother. Or he could simply mean people who didn't grow up with much.

After the success of Ocean Vuong's book of poetry, "Night Sky With Exit Wounds," people asked him when he would write his next collection. "For what?" he would say. "There's nothing left."

At Brooklyn College, where he studied American literature after dropping out of business school, he bopped around cheap sublets and couches of newfound friends in the poetry community. One of his teachers was the poet and author Ben Lerner.

"It was unclear if Ocean was aware of the immensity of his talent," Lerner says, "but everybody around him was."

As an undergraduate, Vuong worked on what would eventually be collected in *"Night Sky With Exit Wounds,"* published through an open submission competition by Copper Canyon Press. The poems are intensely personal, wrestling with Vuong's understanding of his own race, queerness and memory. For that vulnerability, he won the T.S. Eliot Prize and Whiting Award.

After the accolades, people asked Vuong when he would write his next collection. "For what?" Vuong would say. "There's nothing left." The novel that would become "On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous" started as an experiment, one Vuong never set out to finish. (It shares a title with one of the poems in "Night Sky.")

When he shopped the new book around to publishers, it surprised some editors, including one who admitted to never thinking about Vietnamese nail-salon workers also dining at their workplaces.

In "On Earth," there's a scene where Vuong's point-of-view stand-in, Little Dog, is served jasmine tea

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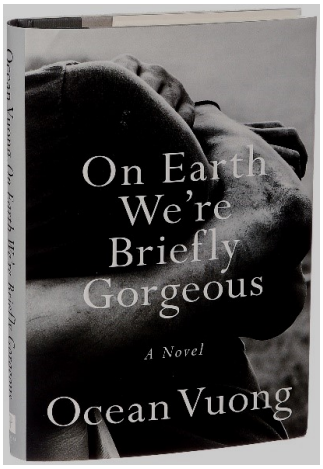
over rice. "True peasant food," his grandmother says. "This is our fast food, Little Dog. This is our McDonald's!" In the novel, being poor is portrayed not by its tragedy but by its rare moments of delight. Whereas poverty is often used in fiction as a plot mechanism, Vuong writes it as a texture, a fact of life.

Envisioning 'a new gaze'



Vuong, 30, lives in a handsome single-story home in Northampton, Mass., where he teaches creative writing at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst. When I visit, I am first greeted by his dog, a Shih Tzu-poodle mix named Tofu. We sit at a reclaimed wood dining table, where Vuong has laid out "Beloved," "Gilead," "Moby Dick" and other books that have inspired him. On the wall, there is an LP of Frank Ocean's "Blonde."

Vuong likes the quiet, domestic rhythms of living in Northampton. Before, he was living on Long Island, commuting two-and-a-half hours each way to teach poetry at New York University. He lived among roommates with kids. It was a noisy home, so Vuong would write in his bedroom closet. (As a queer author, he says, "The irony is not lost on me.") It was a refuge: a laptop, lamp and Vuong with his headphones on, likely listening to Frank Ocean.

Throughout the many revisions, the conceit was always clear: the novel would be a letter addressed to Vuong's mother, who is illiterate. It uses a narrative structure called kishōten-ketsu, commonly seen in the work of filmmaker Hayao Miyazaki, a form that refuses to deploy conflict as a means of progressing the story.

"It insists that a narrative structure can survive and thrive on proximity alone," Vuong says. "Proximity builds tension."

There are no villains, no victims, and no clear arcs. His goal: to create "a new gaze, a new attribution to American identity," he says.

As a writer, Vuong believes speaking Vietnamese gives him an advantage. It's a tonal language, which requires the listener to pay attention. He gives an example: *má*, *mả*, *ma*. In Vietnamese, they mean wildly different things: mother, grave, ghost. For him, hearing these distinctions translates to writing with that level of precision.

I ask if he's writing for Vietnamese Americans, and Vuong clarifies it's for *young* Vietnamese Americans, first and foremost. But what about older Vietnamese, like my parents and grandparents, the ones who have suppressed their firsthand experiences of the war? Vuong says it's hard for him to imagine, since his family can't read — he could barely read until the age of 16. But he understands. For many Vietnamese refugees, the war is too painful.

Memory is a theme that shows up consistently in the works of recently decorated Vietnamese-American authors: Diana Khoi Nguyen's poetry book "Ghost Of" (a National Book Award finalist), Thi Bui's graphic novel "The Best We Could Do" (an American Book Award winner) and Viet Thanh Nguyen's Pulitzer-winning novel "The Sympathizer," which challenged Americans' reflection of the Vietnam War.

"We have an obligation to remember, especially tragic, complicated pasts," Viet Thanh Nguyen says. "And yet at the same time, we need to move on. We need to *forget* in order to move on. How do you balance these two things?"

'I don't have to care about my book anymore'

Vuong says his mother doesn't care about the book. I find that hard to believe.

"She's very proud," he says. "She goes to my readings, and because she doesn't understand, she'll face the audience, because she wants to see the audience react. She wants to see older white folks."

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There is always the white reader. "On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous" may not have been written toward that sensibility, but Vuong knows most of his readers will arrive from there.

"In order to read the book, people have to eavesdrop as a secondary audience upon a conversation between two Vietnamese people," he says.

Vuong lives across from a cemetery, where he goes in the morning to perform a Zen Buddhist practice called "death meditation" that he's been practicing since he was 15. Among tombstones, he summons the saddest, grimmest thoughts he can — deaths of family members, of friends, of Tofu — as a means of cleansing his thoughts.

Recently, he's not had to extend his imagination much. Five weeks before our meeting in Northampton, Vuong's mother was diagnosed with stage four breast cancer. It had spread to the spine.

The doctor explained it to Vuong, who sobbed in the ER. His mother asked him what was going on. She couldn't understand the doctor's English, so Vuong told her in Vietnamese.

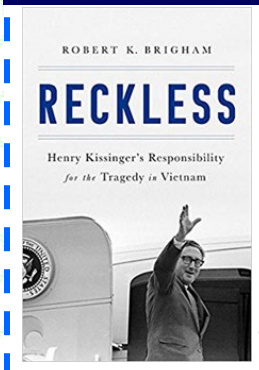
"The only silver lining in her diagnosis is that I don't have to care about my book anymore," Vuong says. "My mother has cancer. She's going to die. The novel, publicity, it's all just so small."

He would be content if his entire career is just one collection of poetry and one novel, and he is glad his mother got to see him succeed this much already. After the news of her health, Vuong considered canceling his book tour. He still might. But he is excited to perform his work. To him, the book is fossilized, but aloud, it can have another life.

Vuong says: "To read from the book is a second chance."

Reckless: Kissinger & the Tragedy of Vietnam

Robert Brigham



"Robert K. Brigham, drawing on many previously unpublished official transcripts and records, makes a scholarly and convincing case that Henry Kissinger's policymaking on Vietnam during the Nixon Administration was 'reckless.' Both in the secret peace negotiations with the North Vietnamese in Paris and in ordering massive bombing raids on their forces in Cambodia and Laos, and on Hanoi itself, Kissinger was ignorant of their determination to reunite their country at all costs. Ultimately, with no consultation with the US-supported regime in Saigon, he negotiated a peace agreement that freed US prisoners of war and completed the American military withdrawal in 1973, but allowed North Vietnamese military forces to remain in territory they had occupied in South Vietnam-dooming it, as President Nguyen Van Thieu knew it would, to defeat, which came two years later."—***Craig R. Whitney, Saigon correspondent and bureau chief of the New York Times, 1971-1973***

Available on Amazon: https://www.amazon.com/Reckless-Henry-Kissinger-Tragedy-Vietnam/dp/1610397029/

Behind the Phoenix Program

EDWARD MILLER; DEC. 29, 2017
https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/29/opinion/behind-the-phoenix-program.html

In late December 1967, the government of South Vietnam announced a reorganization of its war effort against the country's Communist insurgency. Effective immediately, all South Vietnamese counterinsurgency activities became part of a new program known as Phuong Hoang, a reference to a magical bird associated with royalty and power in Vietnamese and Chinese cultural traditions. In response to the South Vietnamese move, American officials in Vietnam began referring to their own counterinsurgency coordination efforts by the name that they deemed the closest Western analogue to the mythical creature: Phoenix.

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The Phoenix program would become one of the most controversial aspects of America's war in Vietnam. Sponsored by the C.I.A., Phoenix used paramilitary teams to target undercover Communist operatives in villages throughout South Vietnam. Witnesses claimed that members of the program's teams and their American advisers routinely carried out torture, murders and assassinations, accusations that American officials denied.

To date, the debate over Phoenix has focused mainly on the roles played by the C.I.A. and individual Americans in the program. But a vast majority of Phoenix personnel — soldiers, interrogators and analysts — were Vietnamese. Exploring the South Vietnamese role in Phoenix offers alternative perspectives on its origins and significance.

Of all the Vietnamese who contributed to Phoenix, perhaps the most influential was a South Vietnamese Army officer named Tran Ngoc Chau. As a young man, Mr. Chau had embraced the Viet Minh independence movement and its charismatic founder, Ho Chi Minh. But he refused to join Ho's Communist Party, and he became uncomfortable with the Viet Minh's growing emphasis on class struggle. In 1950, he defected to the French-backed anti-Communist government.

Mr. Chau eventually attracted the attention of President Ngo Dinh Diem, who assigned him to work on counterinsurgency strategy and tactics. In 1962, Diem appointed Mr. Chau as chief of Kien Hoa, a large province in the Mekong Delta. Mr. Chau spent much of the next three years in Kien Hoa, experimenting with alternative counterinsurgency methods.

Mr. Chau quickly saw that the government faced several overlapping problems in Kien Hoa. The province was known as the "cradle of revolution" because Communist cadres had organized one of the first local uprisings against Diem in one of its districts in 1960. Moreover, Mr. Chau later recalled, the government's intelligence system was "almost a joke" because it depended on informants who had served the state for years and who were often fed disinformation by the enemy. As a result, government forces in Kien Hoa often did not know who the insurgents were or where they were operating. In lieu of targeted strikes based on accurate intelligence, commanders resorted to firepower-intensive operations that killed or wounded local residents. Villagers' anger was further stoked by local officials and police officers, many of whom were incompetent, corrupt or both.

To remedy these problems, Mr. Chau devised the Census-Grievance program. This initiative dispatched teams of cadres to villages and hamlets under government control. After taking a census of the population, team members began conducting daily, compulsory one-on-one interviews with every adult resident. The questions were seemingly innocuous: Have you noticed anything unusual lately? What can the government do to help you and your family? In part, these queries aimed to elicit complaints about abusive local officials, whom Mr. Chau could then discipline or remove. But the ultimate goal was to collect more and better information about the enemy.

Mr. Chau's second innovation was the creation of what he called Counter-Terror teams, a precursor to Phuong Hoang. Created with support from the C.I.A., these teams consisted of small numbers of men trained to conduct clandestine missions in enemy-controlled territory. When Mr. Chau received intelligence on the identities and whereabouts of enemy operatives, he dispatched a Counter-Terror team to kill or capture them. In this way, Mr. Chau and his C.I.A. collaborators hoped to wear down and destroy what they would later call the Vietcong infrastructure — the network of Communist cadres and agents who lived undercover among the rural population.

Mr. Chau was well aware that his methods were susceptible to abuse. An unscrupulous village business owner might manipulate the Census-Grievance program to persuade the government that his local rival was a Communist. And the members of the Counter-Terror teams, if not properly trained and supervised, might feel and act as if they had a license to commit murder. To guard against such problems, Mr. Chau appointed inspectors to investigate reports of official wrongdoing. He also declared that the use of deadly force would remain a last resort, taken only after efforts to persuade enemy operatives to defect to the government had failed.

Although Mr. Chau spoke English with a heavy accent, he could present his ideas about counterinsurgency in a plain and common-sensical manner, which made him popular with American advisers. Daniel Ellsberg, the RAND Corporation analyst who

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later became an antiwar activist, met Mr. Chau in the mid-1960s and considered him "the leading Vietnamese expert on the pacification process." Mr. Chau also interacted and worked with John Paul Vann, William Colby, Edward Lansdale and other prominent figures in American counterinsurgency circles. These Americans particularly liked Mr. Chau's insistence that it was possible to conduct counterinsurgency in a humane and ethical way, and to minimize collateral damage to civilian lives and property.

Thanks partly to the support of his American friends, Mr. Chau was assigned in late 1965 to lead a new counterinsurgency training program for South Vietnamese cadres. His promotion was part of a C.I.A. push to devise a nationwide counterinsurgency strategy for South Vietnam — efforts that would eventually produce the Phoenix program. In designing Phoenix, C.I.A. officials incorporated Mr. Chau's Census-Grievance concept to collect intelligence from villagers. Mr. Chau's influence was also evident in what became the most controversial component of Phoenix: the elite counterterrorism teams known as Provincial Reconnaissance Units. Recruited and trained by the C.I.A., these units carried out tens of thousands of "capture or kill" missions against enemy operatives from 1968 to 1972.

Somewhat unexpectedly, however, Mr. Chau did not participate in the actual design or fulfillment of Phoenix. As head of the South Vietnamese national cadre training program, he soon became frustrated with the endless political infighting among senior South Vietnamese leaders. In 1967, Mr. Chau left his official position and successfully ran for a seat in the South Vietnamese National Assembly.

In the wake of the 1968 Tet offensive, Mr. Chau began to call for a negotiated settlement of the war. This earned him the enmity of the South Vietnamese president, Nguyen Van Thieu, who had Mr. Chau arrested, tried and jailed on charges of treason. He spent the rest of the war in prison or under house arrest. After the North Vietnamese victory over South Vietnam in 1975, he was imprisoned again, this time in a Communist re-education camp. He was released in 1978 and emigrated to the United States with his family.

In the decades since the end of the Vietnam War, Mr. Chau and his American supporters have lamented his downfall as both a betrayal and a missed opportunity. In their view, Mr. Chau devised a counterinsurgency formula that worked: By engaging the local population in Kien Hoa via the Census-Grievance program, he won their hearts and minds while also collecting the intelligence that his Counter-Terror teams used to target the enemy's clandestine networks. Yet Mr. Chau also believed that the senior leadership of the C.I.A. had failed to grasp the core elements of his approach.

Although the Phoenix program borrowed some aspects of the Kien Hoa model, he concluded that it placed too much emphasis on the use of force and not enough on the mobilization of the population. As a result, Mr. Chau and his American friends came to see Phoenix as a "perversion" of his original ideas. Mr. Chau has presented this interpretation in interviews, in his 2012 *English-language memoir*, and in the recent documentary film "The Vietnam War" by Ken Burns and Lynn Novick.
But what did Mr. Chau actually accomplish in Kien Hoa? His American supporters often cited official statistics to demonstrate his success: During his first year as province chief, the estimates of the number of civilians living in government-controlled areas of the province rose from 80,000 to 220,000 (out of a total population of more than half a million). Yet Mr. Chau himself often noted that such gains counted for very little if local residents could not be persuaded to identify with the government and its claims to national sovereignty — a goal that proved exceedingly difficult in South Vietnam during the mid-1960s. The fleeting quality of Mr. Chau's achievements was revealed after his departure from Kien Hoa, when Communist forces quickly recovered most of the territory and population they had lost.

Mr. Chau's most tangible achievement in Kien Hoa was the Census-Grievance program. As a C.I.A. historian later noted, the program proved an effective means of generating actionable intelligence on enemy operatives and forces. But its effectiveness derived less from the winning of popular support than from its surveillance of the population.

Indeed, the program did not merely collect intelligence on the "Vietcong infrastructure." It compiled detailed information on every resident of every hamlet and village in which the program operated — information that included data about kinship ties, political and religious affiliations and property ownership. As Mr. Chau acknowledged, this information was often used to pressure families and entire communities to comply with the government's directives. In this regard, the program was less

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benign and more coercive than its promoters acknowledged.

The use of the Counter-Terror teams in Kien Hoa also sometimes failed to conform to the high-minded principles that Mr. Chau preached. By targeting specific Communist cadres for "neutralization," the program increased the military and psychological pressure on the enemy. Communist commanders responded by offering special bounties to any of their men who killed a Counter-Terror team member. The struggle between the two sides quickly devolved into community-level internecine warfare in which Mr. Chau's promise to use violence only as a last resort often went by the boards: When Communist propagandists distributed fliers celebrating a guerrilla sniper who killed an American military adviser in Kien Hoa, Mr. Chau ordered a Counter-Terror team to infiltrate the enemy-controlled hamlet where the sniper lived. Team members killed the sniper by tossing grenades into his house while he slept.

Critics of American counterinsurgency practices in Vietnam would most likely treat the sniper story as proof that Mr. Chau's activities in Kien Hoa constituted an assassination program, pure and simple. He and his defenders might reply that such killings were necessary and were justified by the Communists' use of targeted killings, and that his occasional deployment of such tactics should be evaluated in the context of his broader efforts to win "hearts and minds." But both of these arguments discount critical elements of counterinsurgency warfare as it was practiced in Vietnam.

Mr. Chau did not propose to defeat the Communists in Kien Hoa merely by assassinating them. He created the Census-Grievance teams specifically as a means to enlist the population in the fight against the enemy. However, the process by which he proposed to ensure the cooperation of villagers was not one that depended on gaining their consent or willing participation. The Census-Grievance teams provided the government with a way to impose a system of surveillance and control over entire communities and to extract intelligence from individual residents. While Mr. Chau hoped that residents would provide this intelligence voluntarily, his overriding goal was to acquire the information needed to expose and destroy the enemy's clandestine networks. Moreover, while the pursuit of this goal included efforts to capture enemy operatives or to persuade them to surrender, it also involved plenty of intimidation and deadly force — including some assassinations. In all of these aspects, the model that Mr. Chau devised in Kien Hoa bore more than a passing resemblance to the later Phoenix program.

Tran Ngoc Chau's career points to some larger truths about counterinsurgency in Vietnam, and about the history of counterinsurgency warfare in general. Like his American counterparts, Mr. Chau promoted what is now known as population-centric counterinsurgency — an approach that emphasizes the protection and control of civilian populations. The advocates of this approach invariably portray it as a humane mode of warfare that is entirely in keeping with the laws of war and with American liberal convictions.

Mr. Chau's approach was undoubtedly less destructive than the tactics of South Vietnamese and American commanders who preferred to engage the enemy with artillery and airstrikes. But his methods were far from bloodless, and the victory he aimed to achieve did not turn on the winning of hearts and minds. Instead, his approach relied much more on manipulation, coercion, fear and killing. Americans will do well to remember these qualities when contemplating the counterinsurgency wars that their country continues to wage today.

Comment by Frank Scotton

Ed Miller is a distinguished student of Viet Nam history, but there are some deficiencies with respect to his referenced New York Times essay.

The late 1967 Republic of Viet Nam counterinsurgency reorganization, in response to the shaping up of MACVCORDS on the American side, situated Phuong Hoang as an important action element of counterinsurgency; but did not make all other counterinsurgency activities part of Phuong Hoang. American officials and field operators (like myself) did not refer to overall American counterinsurgency coordination as Phoenix. Phoenix was a distinct activity whereas CORDS was overall coordinator.

The census-grievance teams initiated by Chau did have ultimate goal to identify communist operatives and sympathizers; but eliciting complaints about abusive officials was bedrock because removing or disciplining guilty persons demonstrated that government could be corrective by being responsive to hamlet residents.

Dispatching a counter-terror team to capture or kill a communist agent was not the first step. That would only be if attempts to bring about surrender trough contact via family members failed. The operative order of steps was always stressed by Chau.

Although Chau was approached in late 1965 to serve as national director for pacification cadre, he did not begin until early 1966 and very

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quickly conflicted with CIA/GVN leadership. By mid-1966 he had been replaced by Nguyen Be and sidelined.

There are small details not worth mentioning because Miller probably wrote (as I do now) with word count constraint. But Chau did not emigrate with his family following release from communist detention. He actually escaped by boat at great risk to life, and then was allowed settlement in America.

It is true that Chau's accomplishments in Kien Hoa were not durable; but that was in part because his tenure was interrupted by service as Mayor in Danang during the 1963 Buddhist-Government confrontation…when in that city he successfully maintained non-violent interfaith relations and effective administration. And In 1965 and 1966 communist forces in almost every other province were also ascendant as the war shifted to maneuver operations between battalions and regiments of both sides.

Yes, the Chau model and contemporary Quang Ngai commando units, had some resemblance to the later Phoenix Program, but Phoenix owed just as much to the format for collection of local level intelligence pioneered by CIA officers in Quang Nam Province and later codified by ICEX.

The Chau approach characteristically relied on demonstrating government responsiveness to hamlet citizen grievances, and less on manipulation, coercion, fear, and killing. Checking article assertions with people who worked with Chau (still a few of us around) would have allowed more accurate description.

Frank Scotton
(field operations officer 1962-1966; subsequently
special assistant to Robert Komer and Bill Colby)

Wikipedia: *https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phoenix_Program*

The **Phoenix Program** (Vietnamese: *Chiến dịch Phụng Hoàng*) was a program designed and coordinated by the United States Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) during the Vietnam War, involving cooperation between American, South Vietnamese and Australian militaries.

The program was designed to identify and destroy the Viet Cong (VC) via infiltration, torture, capture, counter-terrorism, interrogation, and assassination.[1][2][3][4] The CIA described it as "a set of programs that sought to attack and destroy the political infrastructure of the Viet Cong".[5] The Phoenix Program was premised on the idea that infiltration had required local support from non-combat civilian populations, whom was referred to as the "political branch" whom coordinated the insurgency [6] including propaganda, recruitment and assassination of South Vietnamese officials and others associated with the government.

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Throughout the program, Phoenix "neutralized" 81,740 people suspected of VC membership, of whom 26,369 were killed and the rest surrendered or were captured. A number of criticism arose regarding the Phoenix Program, including the unknown number of neutral civilians killed, the nature of the program which critics have labelled as a "civilian assassination program"[6], the use of torture and other coercive methods as well as being exploited for personal politics. Nevertheless the program was described as suppressing Viet Cong political and revolutionary activities. [6] Disclosure of the program publicly had caused significant criticisms including congressional hearings and the CIA was pressured to shut-down the Phoenix Program, although a similar program "Plan F-6" continued under South Vietnamese authorities.

History

The major two components of the program were Provincial Reconnaissance Units (PRUs) and regional interrogation centers. PRUs would kill or capture suspected VC members, as well as civilians who were thought to have information on VC activities. Many of these people were taken to interrogation centers and were tortured in an attempt to gain intelligence on VC activities in the area.[7] The information extracted at the centers was given to military commanders, who would use it to task the PRU with further capture and assassination missions.[7] The program's effectiveness was measured in the number of VC members who were "neutralized",[8] a euphemism[9][10] meaning imprisoned, persuaded to defect, or killed.[11][12][13]

The program was in operation between 1965 and 1972, and similar efforts existed both before and after that period. By 1972, Phoenix operatives had "neutralized" 81,740 suspected VC operatives, informants and supporters, of whom between 26,000 and 41,000 were killed.[14][15]

The interrogation centers and PRUs were developed by the CIA's Saigon station chief Peer de Silva. DeSilva was a proponent of a military strategy known as counter-terrorism, which encompasses military tactics and techniques that government, military, law enforcement, and intelligence agencies use to combat or prevent terrorist activities, and that it should be applied strategically to "enemy civilians" in order to reduce civilian support for the VC. The PRUs were designed with this in mind, and began targeting suspected VC members in 1964.[7] Originally, the PRUs were known as "Counter Terror" teams, but they were renamed to "Provincial Reconnaissance Units" after CIA officials "became wary of the adverse publicity surrounding the use of the word 'terror'".[16]

In 1967 all "pacification" efforts by the United States had come under the authority of the Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support, or CORDS. CORDS had many different programs within it, including the creation of a peasant militia which by 1971 had a strength of about 500,000.[17]

In 1967, as part of CORDS, the Intelligence Coordination and Exploitation Program (ICEX) was created,[17] from a plan drafted by Nelson Brickham partly inspired by David Galula's *Counterinsurgency Warfare* (1964), a book based on Galula's experiences in the Algerian War which Brickham was "very taken" with and carried with him around Vietnam.[18] The purpose of the organization centered on gathering information on the VC. It was renamed Phoenix later in the same year. The South Vietnamese program was called *Phụng Hoàng*, after a mythical bird that appeared as a sign of prosperity and luck. The 1968 Tet offensive showed the importance of the VC infrastructure, and the military setback for the U.S. made it politically more palatable for the new program to be implemented.[*citation needed*] By 1970 there were 704 U.S. Phoenix advisers throughout South Vietnam.[17]

Officially, Phoenix operations continued until December 1972, although certain aspects continued until the fall of Saigon in 1975.[19]

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