

Supplementary Remarks by Mr. William E. Colby at the Fund for Peace Conference on CIA and Covert Actions on Friday, 13 September 1974

Phoenix

This subject has been badly misunderstood in public discussions. I testified fully on this subject in 1971, but selective quotes from that testimony have been used to indicate that I directed a program of assassination, murder, etc., resulting in the deaths of over 20,000 Vietnamese. I then denied and I still flatly deny such a charge or such an interpretation of this program.

Phoenix was one of a number of programs under the general pacification effort of the government of Vietnam. On detail from CIA to the Department of State, I was the principal adviser and supervised American support of the pacification program. The pacification program was focused on securing the willing participation of the population of South Vietnam against terror and invasion by the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong. The GVN's pacification program consisted of:

- Assistance to the local territorial forces to increase the security of the villages;
- The distribution of a half million weapons to the population to use in unpaid self-defense groups (I know of few governments in the world which would undertake such a venture and have it meet with such success);

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-- The inducement, reception and resettlement of over 200,000 defecting members of the Viet Cong;

-- The temporary support and return to village of hundreds of thousands of refugees;

-- The election of local village chiefs and provincial councils;

-- The decentralization of economic development funds and programs to locally elected officials and councils instead of Saigon bureaucrats.

One of these pacification activities was the Phoenix program, aimed at identifying, capturing, rallying and, if necessary, attacking the leadership elements of the Viet Cong enemy apparatus. A number of abuses took place in Vietnam over the years of war, as they have in other such situations, but the Phoenix program, starting in 1968, was designed and carried out to reduce and hopefully eliminate such abuses. Thus, under Vietnamese Government direction:

-- It distinguished enemy leaders from simple followers in order to reduce pressure on the latter;

-- It developed procedures for the proper and timely handling of captives and interrogees;

-- It revised procedures to ensure the participation of elected village chiefs and elected provincial council chairmen in decisions about detentions;

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-- It published the entire program in order to secure public support and public control, rather than letting it become a secret police operation.

The figures I testified to included members of the enemy apparatus who had been captured (28, 978), who had defected (17, 717), and who had been killed (20, 587). Of those killed, 87% were killed by regular and paramilitary forces and 12% by police and similar elements. Thus it is clear that the vast preponderance of those who were killed were killed in firefights, protective ambushes or similar military combat, and most of the remainder were killed in police actions attempting to capture them.

I have admitted that unjustified abuses took place, but I insist that these were few, exceptional, and against policy. I also recognize that procedural improvements were not instantly or wholly effective. However, the real purpose and effect of the Phoenix program was to bring as much regularity and propriety as possible to a war whose chaos and brutality on both sides must be charged more to its Communist protagonists than to its South Vietnamese defenders.