



The Phoenix Program even used a comic book to hammer its message into the hearts and minds of the South Vietnamese.

Counterinsurgency Comics

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It was a war waged not only against guerrillas but also to capture the "hearts and minds" of the people. The U.S. counterinsurgency effort in Vietnam relied heavily on both violence and propaganda, and often the two were intertwined to enhance each others' effectiveness. In the case of the Phoenix Program, U.S. military and intelligence officials staged all manner of psychological operations (PSYOP) to expand the reach of what would become the most notorious assassination operation of the war. Even comic books were used to encourage South Vietnamese villagers to turn rebels over to the government.

Launched by the CIA in the 1967, the Phoenix Program was a vicious set of "internal security" measures designed to eliminate the Viet Cong, the armed resistance to U.S. forces and the government of South Vietnam. The program targeted the Viet Cong leadership, in the hopes that by "neutralizing" these key players the insurgency would sputter out. According to William Colby, a CIA official who for a time oversaw Phoenix and later became CIA Director, the program resulted in the extrajudicial killing of at least 20,000 suspects. Other estimates suggest that the total number of Phoenix assassinations may have run as high as 40,000.

Though originally designed and directed by the CIA, official responsibility for the Phoenix Program was eventually passed to the Defense Department. In practice, both U.S. military and intelligence personnel were involved in the operation throughout its existence. In cooperation with South Vietnamese police, intelligence and army units, the U.S. managers of the Phoenix Program gathered intelligence on Viet Cong operatives, prepared computerized "blacklists" of suspects in each village or province, and then dispatched "hunter-killer" teams -- elite military units -- to apprehend or execute the targets. (For more information on Phoenix, see the [useful](#)

bibliography compiled by Ralph McGehee, a former CIA officer and critic of the agency.)

Described by the CIA men as "counter-terror" methods, the tactics of Phoenix were designed to not only crush the Viet Cong but to intimidate Communist sympathizers as well. Among the tools for scaring villagers into submission was a massive military PSYOP program that made use of all forms of media. In his 1990 book *The Phoenix Program*, Douglas Valentine describes the range of propaganda measures that were put to use:

"[B]ecause fear of Phoenix was an effective means of creating informers and defectors, an intensive publicity campaign called the Popular Information Program began in October 1969. Under the banner of 'Protecting People from Terrorism,' U.S. and [South Vietnamese] psywar teams crisscrossed the countryside, using Phoenix-supplied radios, leaflets, posters, TV shows, movies, banners, and loudspeakers mounted on trucks and sampans to spread the word."

This onslaught of counterinsurgency propaganda included an unusual item, a PSYOP comic book that reminded villagers that the Phoenix Program was bent on exterminating resistance. With drawings and a simple narrative, the comic, "Mr. Ba's Family and the Phoenix Operation," made the case the ordinary Vietnamese people could help crush the Communists by closely monitoring the PSYOP materials for the names of suspected Viet Cong, and then alerting the authorities to the whereabouts of the rebels.

The comic portrays the Phoenix Program as a benevolent security operation, designed to secure South Vietnam against "the cruel Communists" -- of course no mention is made of the dirty war tactics that Phoenix later became infamous for. Perhaps the most striking aspect of the comic is its repeated emphasis on other Phoenix PSYOP projects, suggesting that a major purpose of the booklet was to encourage villagers to pay attention to U.S. propaganda. The hero of the story, Mr. Ba, is shown receiving, absorbing and commenting on Phoenix posters, leaflets, and radio broadcasts.

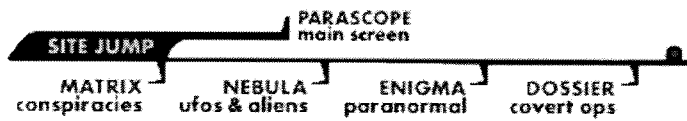
On page 12, as airplane-dropped leaflets flutter into Mr. Ba's home, he tells his wife that he will reveal the location of the Communist operatives named in the flyer. "I am determined to report to the Phoenix Operation Committee because I know their hiding place," he says. After the government captures the Communists, Mr. Ba is contacted by officials and told that "you will be rewarded accordingly."

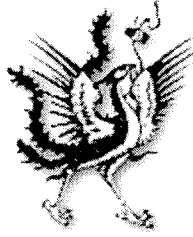
Mr. Ba's happy ending closes out a nice story, but the comic book probably did little to coax Vietnamese citizens into informing on the Viet Cong. Such PSYOP gambits did help spread the pervasive political terror that was at the foundations of the U.S. "pacification" effort. The comic puts the best possible spin on the Phoenix Program, but given the operation's legacy of brutality, very few Vietnamese were persuaded of its role in "protecting" them.

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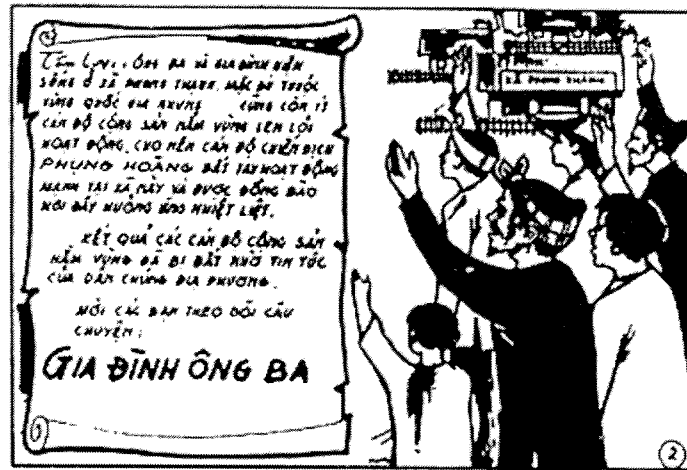
Phoenix Program PSYOP Comic

This comic book, prepared and disseminated by U.S. forces in South Vietnam, presents the fictional story of "Mr. Ba," who informs the government where Viet Cong cadre are hiding in his village. The comic was part of a broad "psychological operations" offensive designed to increase the effectiveness of the Phoenix Program, a CIA-designed operation that resulted in the executions of at least 20,000 suspects.

**Comic and translations courtesy of Douglas
Valentine.**



Mr. Ba's Family and the PHOENIX OPERATION



Mr. Ba and his family are presently living in Phong Thanh village. This village is actually part of the nationalist territory but is still infiltrated by a number of Communist elements; therefore, Phoenix leaders have taken military action against them. They received enthusiastic cooperation from the villagers. As a result of this, and through accurate information provided by local people, many Communist cadres have been arrested. These circumstances help you follow the story of Mr. Ba's family.



The cruel Communists kill innocent people again.



Following is the news: "This morning at nine a.m., a Lambretta was blown up by a Communist mine five kilometers outside Phung Hiep village. Two children were killed, three women wounded. The Communists continue to terrorize people!"



"Hello, sister Tu!"

"Why are you so late?"

"Hello, brother and sister. I am sorry I am late. I left early this morning, but we had to stop at the bridge because it was destroyed by a Communist bomb. We had to wait for the bridge to be repaired by a military engineering unit."

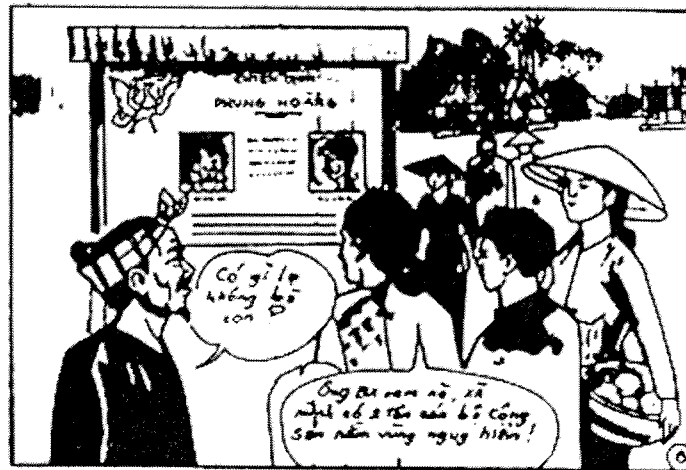


"Mr. Ba, you are asked to pay farm tax to the Liberation Front!"



"This year the crop is poor, but the Communists still collect taxes. It is a miserable situation. I have heard there is much security in Phung Phu village. There taxes are not collected by the Communists any more thanks to the Phoenix operation. I wonder why such an operation has not come to our village?"

"Perhaps because nobody provides them with information! This afternoon the Phoenix operation agents posted a notice at the intersection. I will go and see it tomorrow."



"What is new, my friends?"

"There are two dangerous Communist cadres hiding in our village."



Here are the two communist cadres sought by the Phoenix Operation. The wanted poster says: "Dear Compatriots, If you know the hiding place of the two above-named Communist cadres, please notify the national police or the armed forces. You will be rewarded, and your name will be kept secret."

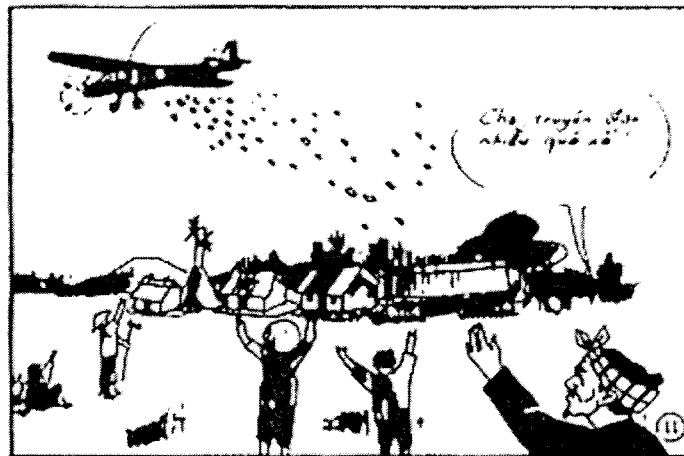




Radio: "Compatriots, please help your government by providing information indicating the hiding place of two Communists, Ba Luong and Hai Gon. You will be rewarded, and your name will be kept secret."

"Did you hear that on the radio?"

"I knew it already. It is exactly the same as it has been posted on the wall at the intersection of the village."

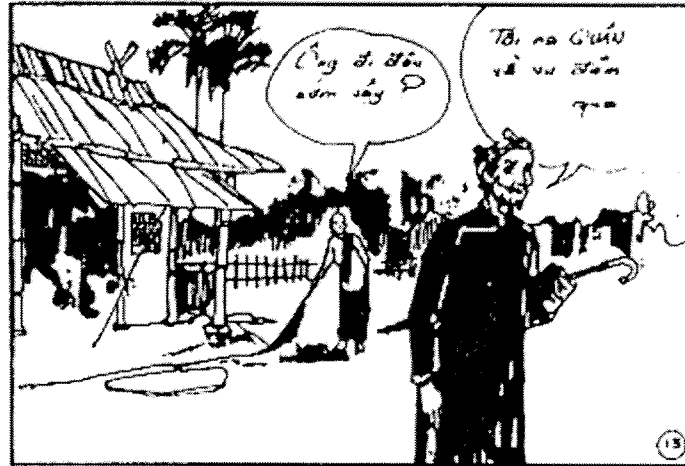


"See, there are so many leaflets!"



"Honey, what do they say in those leaflets?"

"They are the same as those wall posters, as well as the announcements on the radio yesterday. The two Communists Ba Luong and Hai Gon are presently hiding our village in order to collect taxes. I am determined to report to the Phoenix Operation Committee because I know their hiding place."



"Where are you going so early?"

"I am going to the district headquarters to report about what happened last night."



"Dear Sir, the two Communists you want are hiding in my village. They are hiding in the house number 80/2 by my village boundaries. They only go out at night. If you succeed in arresting them, please keep my name secret!"

"Thank you, Mr. Ba, your name will be kept secret."

Sign: THE PHOENIX OPERATION PROVIDES SECURITY AND PROSPERITY TO THE PEOPLE



"Why are so many soldiers entering our village?"

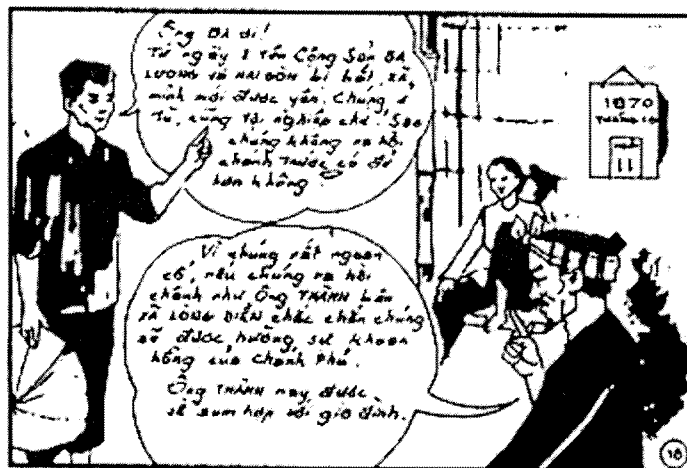
"Perhaps they are conducting a military operation against the Communists in hiding."



"The two Communists are very dangerous. We can only have peace and security when they are captured."



"Ladies, do you know that the two Communists are captured? From now on our village will be secure. There will be no more assassinations or tax collectors. The Phoenix operation is very effective!"



"Mr. Ba, since the two Communists are captured, our village is at peace. Too bad they are in jail! If they returned to our side beforehand, it could have been better for them!"

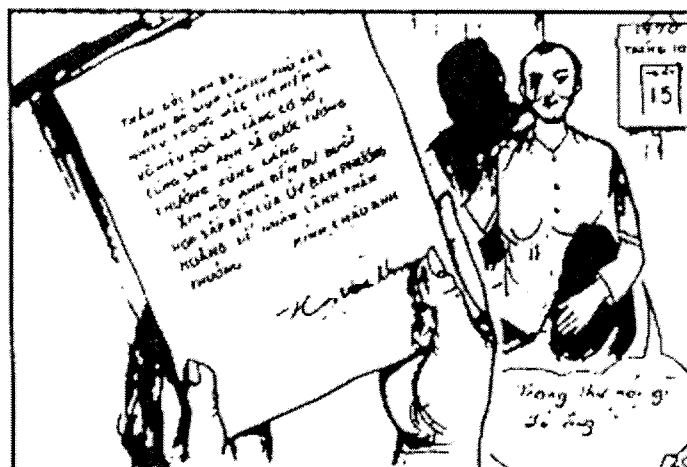
"They are obstinate indeed. Had they returned like Mr. Thanh from Long Dien village, they certainly would have enjoyed the government's clemency. Mr. Thanh is now united with his family."



"Mr. Ba, you have some mail."

"I wonder who sends this mail?"

"Wait and see!"



"What does the letter say?"

Letter: "Dear Mr. Ba, Since you have helped the government by providing information and undermining the local structures of the Communists, you will be rewarded accordingly. You are invited to attend the coming meeting of the Phoenix Operations Committee to receive your award. Sincerely yours."



Poster: "Mr. Nguyen Van Thanh, former guerrilla at Long Dien village, Gia Rai District, Bac Lieu Province, has returned to the national side. He therefore is allowed to be reunited with his family."

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