

Welcoming the Taliban with Open Arms: Defectors and Deception in Afghanistan

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This week, the U.S. Government began floating the idea of welcoming low and mid-level Taliban defectors into its war on terror against Al Qaeda. After waging an eight-year “dirty war” against the Taliban, U.S. military commanders and politicians are publicly acknowledging their “insurgent” enemy is actually part of the “fabric” of Afghan society.

U.S. and NATO officials are also offering bribes from a billion dollar “[Peace and Reintegration Trust Fund](#)” to Taliban fighters to defect.

Taliban leaders have condemned the buyout strategy as a “trick” to divide and conquer its forces, and said that offers of reconciliation were futile without a withdrawal of foreign troops.

This billion dollar buyout may, indeed, seem a bizarre reversal of fortunes, but only if one believes the U.S. genuinely wants reconciliation with the Taliban. In reality, defectors programs like the one proposed for Afghanistan are an essential part of the traditional U.S. pacification policy. For example, the so-called Chieu Hoi “Open Arms” program is touted by military historians as having produced positive results throughout the Vietnam War by offering “clemency to insurgents.”

Make no mistake about it: this too is propaganda. Defector “amnesty” or “clemency” or “open arms” programs are aggressive CIA intelligence operations and have nothing to do with reconciliation.

As former DCI William Colby told me, CIA political action teams in Vietnam (like Provincial Reconstruction Teams in Afghanistan) employed defectors whose job was to “go around the countryside and indicate to the people that they used to be Vietcong and that the government has received them and taken them in, and that the Chieu Hoi program does exist as a way of VC currently on the other side to rally. [Defectors] contact people like the families of known VC,” Colby said, “and provide them with transportation to defector and refugee centers.”

Master spy Colby would certainly agree that information management – language – is the essence of political warfare in general and defector programs in particular. The first step in either case is concocting a slogan that appeals to the sensibilities of the targeted audience, which is why defectors programs are given names like “amnesty” or “clemency” or “open arms.”

Such cleverly crafted slogans need have no basis in reality. Instead, by appealing to American (not Vietnamese or Afghan) sensibilities (or lack thereof), these slogans serve as the first step in creating deniability for the CIA's roll in organizing repression.

During Senate hearings into CIA assassination plots against foreign leaders, deniability was defined by the CIA's deputy director of operations Richard Bissell as "the use of circumlocution and euphemism in discussions where precise definitions would expose covert actions and bring them to an end."

Apart from using circumlocution and euphemism, and Madison Avenue style slogans, the CIA creates deniability, and thus garners public approval, by composing and planting distorted articles in foreign and domestic newspapers. It also composes "official" communiqués which appear to have originated within, for example, the Karzai government in Afghanistan.

To ensure the deniability necessary for public support of its repressive policies, the CIA conducts covert action under cover of Civic Action programs that are advertised as fostering freedom, patriotism, brotherhood, democracy.

Likewise, the Taliban defector buyout program is said to foster reconciliation.

In CIA jargon this manipulation of language is called "black propaganda" and is the job of political and psychological (PP) warfare officers in the covert action branch. "PP" officers played a major role in packaging the Phoenix Program for sale to the American public as a program designed "to protect the people from terrorism."

CIA disinformation campaigns persuade predisposed Americans to offer their tax dollars to pay for the massive military and aid programs that support the CIA's covert action programs. The proposed billion dollar Taliban defector program is just such a case.

Intelligence Potential

After arranging for deniability, the CIA will launch a covert action program like the Taliban defector program only if it has "intelligence potential." Such a program must be able to produce information on an enemy's political, military, and economic infrastructure or it will not be undertaken. The CIA after all, is not a "reconciliation" agency.

And defectors have superlative "intelligence potential."

Not only are defectors valued for their ability to sap the enemy's fighting strength and morale, but having worked on the inside, they are an accurate and timely source of intelligence on enemy unit strength and location. They also serve as guides and trackers, and after defecting, many are immediately returned to their area of operations with a reaction force to locate hidden enemy arms or food caches.

Others defectors, after being screened and interrogated by security officers, are turned into

double agents. Defectors who return to their former positions inside enemy military units or political organizations are, as Colby explained, provided with a “secure” means of contacting their CIA case officer, to whom they feed information leading to the arrest or ambush of enemy cadres, soldiers, and secret agents.

Defector programs also provide CIA “talent scouts” with cover for recruiting criminals into counter-terrorist and political action programs. Burglars, arsonists, forgers, and smugglers have unique skills and no compunctions about preparing wanted posters or conducting interrogations.

In Vietnam, the entire Fifty-second Ranger Battalion was recruited from Saigon prisons.

With Obama’s surge and additional NATO forces providing cover for more expansive CIA covert actions, CIA political and psychological warfare experts are moving to the forefront of the occupation; and of course, their Provincial Reconstruction Teams are, as noted in a previous article, at the forefront of this “intelligence” surge. That is why the Taliban defector buyout program is being launched now.

Let me repeat: what makes such an intelligence operation “covert” is not any false impression on the part of the Taliban, but rather the CIA’s ability to deny its involvement in the defector buyout program to the American public.

A Case Study

Under cover of Civic Action, the CIA is waging a plausibly deniable dirty war against the Taliban using black propaganda, defectors, criminals, selective terror, indefinite detention and a slew of other devious tactics disguised as bringing freedom and democracy, but in fact designed to provide internal security for the puppet Karzai regime.

The CIA perfected this practice in Vietnam, where it waged clandestine political and psychological warfare with the U.S. Information Service (USIS).

Ostensibly the overseas branch of the U.S. Information Agency (which performed the same propaganda and censorship functions inside America), the USIS had as its *raison d’être* promotion of the “American way.” In its crusade to convert the world into one big happy Chamber of Commerce, the USIS employed all manner of “media,” from TVs, radios, and satellites to armed propaganda teams, wanted posters, and terrorism.

Frank Scotton, a CIA officer masquerading as an USIS officer, played a large role in political and psychological operations (psyops) in Vietnam. A graduate of American University’s College of International Relations, Scotton received a government graduate assistantship to the East-West Center at the University of Hawaii.

According to legendary CIA officer Lucien Conein, it was there that Scotton was recruited into the CIA.

About the CIA-sponsored East-West Center, Scotton said, “It was a cover for a training program in which Southeast Asians were brought to Hawaii and trained to go back to Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos to create agent nets.” After passing the Foreign Service

exam, Scotton was persuaded to join the USIS, which “dealt with people,” unlike the State Department, which “observed from a distance.

After arriving in Vietnam in 1961, and initiating his vast agent net, Scotton turned his attention to “energizing” the Vietnamese through political action that advanced American policies.

In looking for individuals to mold into unilateral political cadres, Scotton turned to the CIA’s defector program, which in April 1963 was placed under cover of the Agency for International Development and named the Chieu Hoi (Open Arms) amnesty program.

There Scotton found the raw material he needed to prove the viability of CIA political action and psywar programs. Scotton worked with Vietnamese Special Forces Captain Nguyen Tuy (a graduate of Fort Bragg’s Special Warfare Center who commanded the Fourth Special Operations Detachment) and Tuy’s case officer, U.S. Special Forces Captain Howard Walters in Pleiku Province.

As part of a pilot program designed to induce defectors, Scotton, Walters, and Tuy set up an ambush deep in Vietcong territory and waited till dark. When they spotted a VC unit, Scotton yelled in Vietnamese through a bullhorn, “You are being misled! You are being lied to! We promise you an education!” Then, full of purpose and allegory, he shot a flare into the night sky and hollered, “Walk toward the light!”

To his surprise, two defectors did walk in, convincing him and his CIA bosses that “a determined GVN unit could contest the VC in terms of combat and propaganda.”

Back in camp, Scotton told the VC defectors that they had to divest themselves of untruths. “We said that certainly the U.S. perpetrated war crimes, but so did the VC [substitute Taliban]. We acknowledged that theirs was the stronger force, but that didn’t mean that everything they did was honorable and good and just.” In this manner, Scotton indoctrinated cadres for his political action teams.

The chief of CIA covert action programs, Tom Donohue, recognized the value of intelligence obtained through defectors, and authorized the establishment of Chieu Hoi programs in each of South Vietnam’s provinces. In typical CIA style, there was nothing in writing, and nothing went through the central government.

The CIA’s security officer would oversee the Chieu Hoi Program in any particular province and select different defectors for different jobs, working with agents at the district level and into the villages.

If a defector had potential, the province security officer put him on an airplane and sent him to the central CIA re-indoctrination center, where he was plied with special attention and wowed with CIA gadgetry. The food was spectacular, full of protein, and the bullets weren’t flying. The training was vigorous, but the defector was treated for infections and put on weight. Other defectors then explained the beauty of the American Way, and other applicable lessons of the day.

This brainwashing is “precisely” what political warfare is all about: Having been selected into a “special” program and given “special” treatment, defectors are taught the corporate

sales pitch, cross-trained as interchangeable parts for efficiency, then given one last motivational booster shot of schmaltz.

Scotton called his program “motivational indoctrination.”

This is deadly serious business, and conducted secretly at high security CIA bases in Afghanistan. All defector debriefing reports are certainly sent to the CIA station in Kabul for analysis and collation. Translations are, typically, never considered accurate unless read and confirmed in the original language by the same person, but that rarely happens. Likewise, interrogations conducted through defectors are rarely considered reliable, for significant information is generally lost or misrepresented. And thus, the defector program will likely be exploited by Taliban secret agents, just as the Chieu Hoi program was penetrated in Vietnam.

According to Douglas McCollum, who monitored the Chieu Hoi program in three provinces in Vietnam, “It was the biggest hole in the net. They’d come in; we’d hold them, feed them, clothe them, get them a mat. Then we’d release them, and they’d wander around the city for a while, and then disappear.”

What McCollom is referring to, “the revolving door syndrome,” is another reason the CIA is turning to the Taliban buyout program at this particular time, when Obama’s surge will produce thousands of more detainees and prisoners.

The CIA was plagued in Vietnam, as it is in Afghanistan, by overcrowding in prisons, defector, interrogation, and detention center. In Vietnam by 1966 there was little space available in the prison system for actual “Communist offenders.” And as more and more people were captured and placed in pens, a large percentage was necessarily squeezed out. Hence the revolving door.

Defectors and the Phoenix Program

In June 1967, the CIA’s Chieu Hoi defector program was incorporated within its newly established Phoenix Program, as it was organized by CIA officer Nelson Brickham, who appreciated Chieu Hoi as “one of the few areas where police and paramilitary advisers cooperated.”

The Phoenix program was designed to coordinate all intelligence programs in South Vietnam so the CIA could more identify and neutralize Viet Cong political cadre. As Brickham said, “My motto was to recruit them; if you can’t recruit them, defect them (that’s Chieu Hoi); if you can’t defect them, capture them; if you can’t capture them, kill them.”

Brickham also emphasized that Chieu Hoi was a means for the CIA to develop “unilateral penetrations unknown to the [South Vietnamese] police.”

In other words, the Taliban defector buyout program will be conducted unilaterally by the CIA, apart from the Karzai government.

From 1967 onwards, all “rallied” VC cadre were included in Phoenix neutralization statistics,

and by 1969 more than a hundred thousand defectors had been processed through 51 Chieu Hoi centers. The Chieu Hoi program was managed from 1966 until March 1969 by Ogden Williams, and then by Eugene P. Bable, a career CIA officer who had served in the Flying Tigers.

The Phoenix Program sought to resolve the “revolving door syndrome” by arranging through the SIDE (Screening, Interrogation and Detention of the Enemy) Program the construction of permanent detention facilities; a registration system coordinated with Chieu Hoi programs; and judicial reform aimed at the rapid disposal of pending cases, as devised by Robert Harper, a lawyer on contract to the CIA.

Through Phoenix, the CIA also began a policy of offering Chieu Hoi status to informers.

From the language of the Phoenix reports, one could easily think that the Chieu Hoi program was a great success. But many Chieu Hoi defectors simply regurgitated the American line in order to win amnesty, make a quick visit to their families, enjoy a few home-cooked meals, and then return to the war for independence, fat and rested.

Legitimate Chieu Hoi defectors were pariahs who were not accepted back in their villages.

Jim Ward, the senior CIA officer in charge of Phoenix in the Delta (1967-1969) described Chieu Hoi as “a great program. Well done.”

Ward explained that most Chieu Hoi advisers were from the U.S. Information Service, although some were State Department or military officers. “

Ward describes the defection process as follows: Upon arriving at the Chieu Hoi center, the defector was “interviewed” and, if he had information on the VCI, was sent to the CIA’s Province Interrogation Center; if he had tactical military information, he was sent to military interrogators.

Next came political indoctrination, lasting from 40-60 days, depending on the individual. “They had a formal course,” said Ward. “They were shown movies and given lectures on democracy.” Upon graduation each was given an ID card, a meal, some money, and a chance to repent. Political indoctrination was handled by defectors who said they had been well treated by the Americans and had decided it was better to live for a free Vietnam than to die for the totalitarian North Vietnamese.

“Chieu Hoi had lots of guys who had been with the enemy before,” Ward continued, “who knew how to talk to these people and would persuade them to join the Territorial Forces or the PRU.” Others joined armed propaganda teams, which went back into VC territory to contact Vietcong families and recruit more Vietcong defectors.

“The great thing about the Chieu Hoi program,” Ward noted, “is that we didn’t have to put people in jails or process them through the judicial system, which was already overcrowded.

Political and Psychological Warfare

Despite his praise for the Chieu Hoi program, Ward said that “Americans should have been targeted only against the North Vietnamese and left the South Vietnamese forces to handle

the insurgency,” even though such a strategy would have precluded Phoenix.

The same lesson applies in Afghanistan. The U.S. has no legitimate reason to be there, and thus it must rely on psychological ploys, rather than any appeal to nationalism, to win the Afghans over to the American Way of doing things.

That is how High Value Reward and bounty programs become business as usual. That is why the U.S. is instituting a defector program, with a publicity campaign managed in the field by psyops teams replete with radios, leaflets, posters, banners, TV shows, movies, comic books falling from planes, and loudspeakers mounted on trucks to spread the word.

<http://web.archive.org/web/20000302113211/www.parascope.com/articles/0497/phxcomic.htm>

On January 22, 1970, thirty-eight thousand of these leaflets were dropped over three villages in Go Vap District. Addressed to specific VCI members, they read: “Since you have joined the NLF, what have you done for your family or your village and hamlet? Or have you just broken up the happiness of many families and destroyed houses and land? Some people among you have been awakened recently, they have deserted the Communist ranks and were received by the GVN and the people with open arms and family affection. You should be ready for the end if you remain in the Communist ranks. You will be dealing with difficulties bigger from day to day and will suffer serious failure when the ARVN expand strongly. You had better return to your family where you will be guaranteed safety and helped to establish a new life. “

This is how defectors will be created in Afghanistan as well. Psyops leaflets aimed at creating defectors will portray the Taliban as a socially disruptive force that can only be stopped by America.

But Americans can only reach the Afghan “people” only through “media” like leaflets and loudspeakers – an indication of just how far removed the CIA is from the reality of life in Afghanistan’s rural villages.

And while the CIA relies on cartoons to sell itself, the Taliban go from person to person, proving that technology was no substitute for human contact. Ultimately the U.S. was defeated in Vietnam for just this reason.

The Taliban defector buyout program heralds just such a development in Afghanistan – defeat – and nothing more.

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