

## **EMBRACING THE “ENEMY”: SOME ASPECTS OF THE MUTUAL RELATIONS BETWEEN THE UNITED STATES AND THAILAND UNDER FIELD MARSHAL PHIBUNSONGKHRAM, 1948–1957**

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JAN BEČKA

### **Abstract**

This article focuses on the relationship between the United States and Thailand under Field Marshal Phibunsongkhrum between the years 1948 and 1957. It first seeks to show how Phibun, who had collaborated with the Japanese during World War II and had at one time faced prosecution as a war criminal, was able to overthrow the post-war liberal government and gain acceptance in the United States. Next, it will present and analyze the basic tenets and principles of the Thai-American relationship in the context of the Cold War and the bipolar rivalry in Asia. Finally, it will explain the issue of Phibun's changing image in the United States and his attempts to make his government more “democratic” as part of his struggle to retain power and to quell the growing internal discontent with his regime.

**Keywords:** Thailand, United States, Field Marshal Phibunsongkhrum, Cold War, anti-communism, SEATO, democracy

### **Introduction**

The Cold War and the bipolar division of the world that began to emerge soon after the end of World War II had a very significant impact on the U.S. foreign policy in Asia. The colonial domains of Great Britain, France and the Netherlands were experiencing serious difficulties, and communist-affiliated, pro-independence groups and movements were gaining momentum in many countries of the Far East and Southeast Asia. The United States was in desperate need of reliable, stable, pro-Western allies in the region. The Philippines, officially independent

since July 1946, was definitely counted on as one such ally. The other country that the United States placed a great emphasis on was Thailand.<sup>1</sup>

Thailand was an ally of Japan during World War II, but since the resignation of pro-Japanese Prime Minister Marshal Phibun Songkhram in late July 1944, it had been led by a liberal, democratic, pro-Western government. The key figures in the early postwar politics of Thailand were leaders of the anti-Japanese resistance, such as Pridi Phanomyong, or former ambassador to the United States Seni Pramoj. The liberal government, despite being initially supported by the United States, encountered serious challenges. It was unable to solve pressing socio-economic problems that included shortages of basic goods and commodities, inflation and corruption. It also failed to punish the war-time collaborators with Japan (Phibun and his aides), and its popularity and support among the Thai population was quickly eroding. In November 1947, the Thai army staged a coup which overthrew the government and forced Pridi, the main representative of the liberal segment of Thai politics, to flee the country and go into exile. After a short intermezzo during which a caretaker civilian government of Khuang Aphaiwong took charge of the country, another coup came in April 1948, which put Marshal Phibun Songkhram back into the position of prime minister. Subsequently, Phibun managed to secure the support of the United States and make Thailand one of the most important U.S. allies in Asia. This article seeks to analyze the U.S. perception and eventual acceptance of Phibun's return, and to explain its significance for the mutual relations between the two countries. As it will be discussed, the changing U.S. image of Thailand in general and of Marshal Phibun Songkhram in particular also reflected and symbolized profound changes in the American foreign policy of the postwar era.

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<sup>1</sup> The traditional name of the country was Siam. In 1938, this name was changed by the government of Marshal Phibun Songkhram to Thailand, which according to his opinion better suited the nationalistic policies and the nation-building approach of his administration. After Phibun's resignation in 1944, the name was changed back to Siam but only until 1948, when Thailand was ultimately readopted. In this article, the word Thailand would be used except for direct quotations from contemporary sources, which use the word Siam. For a summary of the changes and an explanation of their possible underlying motivations, see for example, Charnvit Kasetsiri, "Siam to Thailand – A Historian's View," *The Bangkok Post*, June 23, 2009. For the political/nation-building aspects of this problem, see Michael R. Rhum, "'Modernity' and 'Tradition' in Thailand," *Modern Asian Studies* 30, no. 2 (May 1996): 331.

## The “Enemy”: Marshal Phibunsongkhram, His Role in Thai Politics and His Image in the United States prior to 1948

Field Marshal Plaek Phibunsongkhram was, beyond any doubt, one of the most controversial Thai politicians of the twentieth century.<sup>2</sup> A career soldier who spent several years after World War I at a military academy in France, he belonged to the group of young, Western-educated military officers and civil servants who were unsatisfied with the slow progress of political, economic and social change in Thailand, still an absolute monarchy in the first decades of the twentieth century. This group, which called itself *Khana Ratsadon* (People’s Party), ultimately carried out a coup in June 1932, after which Thailand became a constitutional monarchy with an elected parliament and limited powers and role of the king and the royal family. While Phibun represented the military wing of the People’s Party, Pridi Phanomyong, his close associate who later turned into his bitter rival, represented the civilian faction. Pridi, who by Thai standards was a very liberal politician and thinker, figured prominently in Thai political life after the coup. However, he quickly began to lose support after some of the steps he had proposed, mainly the Outline Economic Plan of 1934,<sup>3</sup> were attacked as anti-royalist and even “communist.” Following these accusations, Pridi left Thailand, and although he soon returned, he was not able to regain his former influence and standing. Instead, the more conservative, nationalistic political forces, headed by the army with Marshal Phibunsongkhram as its main representative, were gaining the upper hand. Eventually, Phibunsongkhram became prime minister in December 1938.

The political developments in the 1930s were important, among many other reasons, because of the impression of Thailand that they had created in the United States. The American media had been following the 1932 revolution with some interest and, at first, with great caution. For example, on June 27, 1932, The Washington Post reported: “Although King Prajadiphok [Rama VII, reigned November 1925–March 1935]<sup>4</sup> was one of the two remaining absolute monarchs in the world, he has never been a despot. Apparently there is no dissatisfaction with the king

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed, although rather subjective, account of the Marshal’s life, the reader may wish to consult Charun Kuwanon, *Chiwit Kantosu khong Chomphon P. Phibunsongkhram* [The Life and Struggles of Field Marshal P. Phibunsongkhram] (Bangkok: Aksoen Charoenthat, 1953).

<sup>3</sup> The plan, if implemented, would have brought government insurance for employees, would have aided in the establishment of industrial and agricultural cooperatives and would have nationalized some segments of the economy. The full text of the plan can be found in Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit, eds., *Pridi by Pridi. Selected Writing on Life, Politics, and Economy* (Chiang Mai: Silk-worm Books, 2000), 82–123.

<sup>4</sup> The additions to the direct quotations are made by the author, unless otherwise stated.

himself, but only with the economic conditions in which the country has found itself. When King Prajadiphok was in the United States, he outlined plans for extending suffrage of his people. [...] Those plans seem to have been completely upset by the military revolution which has fastened its grip upon the little country. The present revolt is an uprising of the army and naval forces, and not a popular revolution.”<sup>5</sup> The newspaper was right in stating that this was definitely not a popular revolution: by 1932, most Thais were not involved in the political life of the country and the very word for politics, *kanmuang*, sounded strange, even alien, to many people. Yet it was not just the army that was involved in the uprising and it was not just economic changes, but also political and social ones, that were sought by the leaders of the People’s Party. Despite the initial criticism, however, it was acknowledged in the United States that there was a chance that a more democratic government would eventually be achieved, especially after the new constitution was promulgated. In this respect, it was stated that “The document [constitution], the outgrowth of the brief revolt last week that deprived the King of his absolute powers, provides that the dictatorship shall be replaced by suffrage when the people have been educated in the responsibilities of self-government.”<sup>6</sup>

The constitution, along with other major political proclamations and documents of this period, was largely the work of Pridi. He represented, at least in the eyes of many Western observers, the main driving force toward modernization and democratization of the country. It should also be noted that some of his efforts, for example those included in the Outline Economic Plan, might have been appreciated by the Roosevelt Administration, which was also aiming at a major reform of the U.S. economy and society, although perhaps by less radical means. The American acceptance and support of the democratic government in Thailand was also evident from the fact that the United States was the first Western country to start negotiations of a new commercial treaty between the two countries, free of the “unequal privilege clauses” that were forced on Thailand in the past.<sup>7</sup> When Pridi’s influence waned and the military led by Phibunsongkhram came to the fore, it was certainly a disappointment for the Roosevelt Administration. It must be mentioned in this respect that the political and economic reform plans of Pridi were too far-reaching and radical for the Thailand of the 1930s and that he

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<sup>5</sup> “Revolt in Siam,” *The Washington Post*, June 27, 1932.

<sup>6</sup> AP, “Siam Gets Constitution,” *The New York Times*, June 29, 1932.

<sup>7</sup> The treaty was finally signed in November 1937. For the diplomatic correspondence regarding the treaty, see especially United States, Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States Diplomatic Papers 1937*. Volume IV. The Far East (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1954), 825–94.

would likely have failed regardless of the army's opposition. Besides, he was always somewhat detached from most of the population and perhaps did not possess the charisma necessary to create a strong base of supporters. Phibun's active role in transforming the country into a *de facto* military dictatorship in which only formal vestiges of democracy<sup>8</sup> were maintained, however, had made him the main culprit for the failure of Thai democratization in the eyes of the West. Those who believed in the spreading of democracy and western-style government into "less developed" parts of the world saw him as a reactionary, ultra-conservative figure, an assessment which would paradoxically help him in his political career after World War II.

Phibunsongkhram's policies and political style, which he fully implemented after becoming prime minister in December 1938, were a mixture of intense, militant nationalism and an emphasis on modernization of certain aspects of Thai economic and social life. The Marshal drew inspiration from Nazi Germany, and even more from Fascist Italy, and the *duce/führer* concept seemed to influence him deeply. He envisioned the creation of a modern Thai state, which would be able to oppose the encroachments of the colonial powers, Great Britain and France, on its territory and sovereignty. The key to this was strong leadership, the building of a modern army and also the adoption of a "western lifestyle," which, somewhat in the fashion of Peter I of Russia, was mainly meant to prove that Thailand was not an "underdeveloped, barbarous" country that should be subjected to the tutelage of the "civilized" European states. As Phibunsongkhram proclaimed in August 1939: "We must be cultured as other nations, otherwise no country will come to contact us. Or if they come, they come as superiors. Thailand would be helpless and soon become colonized. But if we were highly cultured, we would be able to uphold our integrity, independence and keep everything to ourselves."<sup>9</sup>

Much more sinister, however, was Phibun's apparent tilt toward imperial Japan. This new foreign policy orientation was seen with great anxiety in Paris, London and Washington, as Thailand's strategic location could serve as a launching

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<sup>8</sup> The parliament continued to exist and it still had the power to pass laws, but it was the prime minister and the army who exercised real control over the country. On the other hand, the parliament often opposed Phibun's policies and plans, creating an almost perpetual tension in their mutual relations.

<sup>9</sup> A statement made by Phibun in a cabinet meeting he chaired on August 30, 1939. Quoted in Thamsook Numnonda, "Phibunsongkhram's Thai Nation Building Programme during the Japanese Military Presence, 1941-1945," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 9, no. 2 (1978): 234. The Phibun-style westernization, however, was rather superficial, as it consisted mainly of such things as adopting western clothing, greeting each other in western style or using western technological inventions and innovations.

pad for an attack on Burma, Malaya, Singapore and even the Philippines. The Japanese aggression in China and Tokyo's ambition to create the "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere" were clear signs of the coming confrontation between the colonial powers and Japan. With the outbreak of war in Europe in September 1939, it became evident to Phibun that war in Asia was inevitable. While he was not necessarily a friend of Japan, he saw possible advantages in cooperating with the Japanese – mainly the possibility of regaining the territories in Cambodia, Laos, Malaya and Burma that his country previously lost to France and Great Britain. Besides, compared to the rather withdrawn approach of the United States and Great Britain in their negotiations with Thailand, the Japanese moved at a much faster pace. In June 1940, a mutual non-aggression treaty was signed between both countries which granted Japan that Thailand would remain neutral in the coming war.<sup>10</sup> The British made a similar pact with Thailand, but negotiations with France were halted because of the latter's defeat by Germany. Phibun then used France's weakness to attack the Vichy colonial forces in Laos and Cambodia in November 1940 and, with the help of Japan, was able to occupy some of the disputed territories.<sup>11</sup>

This aggression added yet another dent to Phibun's already tarnished image in Washington and London. No longer only a nationalist, reactionary, and anti-democratic dictator, he was now also viewed as an anti-Western opportunist who used the defeat of France to pursue his own ambitions. By early 1941, the United States saw Phibun's Thailand as already lost to the Allied cause, although this was not publicly admitted. The American legation in Bangkok reported to Washington that "there is good reason to believe that Japanese propaganda in Thailand is being intensified and there are some indications that a Japanese fifth column movement is being organized for any eventuality that may arise in this area making it possible for Japan to control this country. [...] Thailand would thus be drawn definitely into Japanese orbit. [...] There is the other possibility of *coup d'état* in Bangkok resulting in the absolute control of Thailand by Japan."<sup>12</sup> While negotiations between Thailand and the Allies continued throughout 1941, much in the spirit of the traditional Thai maxim of "keeping feet on both sides of the boat," they were

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<sup>10</sup> League of Nations, "Treaty between Thailand and Japan Concerning the Continuance of Friendly Relations between the Two Countries and the Mutual Respect of Each Other's Territorial Integrity," in *Treaty Series 1941–1942* (Geneva: League of Nations, 1943), 132.

<sup>11</sup> A final treaty with the Vichy administration, which granted Thailand part of the territories claimed, was signed in May 1941. For the negotiations and text of the treaty, see Direk Jayanama, *Thailand and World War II* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2008), 356–72.

<sup>12</sup> United States, Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States Diplomatic Papers 1941*. Volume V. The Far East (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1956), 1.

hindered by misgivings and suspicions on both sides. Phibun Songkhrum believed the United States and Great Britain were too weak to help his country in case of a Japanese attack; he also knew that even if the aid from the Allies came, it would not be enough to stop the Japanese invasion. The Allies, on the other hand, were unwilling (but also unable to) offer any significant military aid to Thailand because they were afraid their weapons and supplies could be turned over to the Japanese.<sup>13</sup> It came as no surprise, then, that when the Japanese invasion of Thailand did start on December 8, 1941, the country was quickly overrun while it did not receive any significant assistance from the Allies. In the face of inevitable defeat, Marshal Phibun Songkhrum asked for immediate ceasefire and a truce, which came into effect on the same day. Japanese forces subsequently marched through Thailand in their drive south and west without further opposition.

This rapid capitulation could hardly be used against Phibun by London or Washington as the Thai forces had no chance of halting the Japanese advance. What made Phibun's position much worse, however, was that he signed a treaty with Japan on December 21, which laid the foundations for economic, military and political cooperation between the two countries. In a secret clause, Thailand promised to support Japan in the war against the Allies in exchange for the recovery of lost territories not only in Indochina but also in Burma and Malaya.<sup>14</sup> Even though Japan did not necessarily pressure Thailand to enter the war – its main importance for Tokyo lay in providing military bases and raw materials – Phibun Songkhrum made this fatal move and on January 25, 1942, Thailand declared war on the United States and Great Britain. The Marshal had thus made Thailand an official Japanese ally and in doing so he earned another label which would later stick to him – that of a “Japanese puppet.”<sup>15</sup> This step had also aroused strong opposition both at home and abroad. The Thai Ambassador in Washington Seni Pramoj even refused to deliver the declaration of war.<sup>16</sup> A resistance movement known as *Seri Thai* (Free Thai) had gradually been established, with its main centers in the Unit-

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<sup>13</sup> Great Britain did send the Thai army a limited quantity of airplane fuel, artillery equipment and ammunition. The request made by the Thai government to receive warplanes was not granted by either Washington or London – the former needed its planes to protect the Philippines, the latter for defending Singapore. James V. Martin, Jr., “Thai-American Relations in World War II,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 22, no. 4 (August 1963): 459.

<sup>14</sup> Jayanama, *Thailand and World War II*, 121.

<sup>15</sup> The American press was especially fond, for a time, of using this term. Reuter, “Siam Frees Puppet Head,” *The New York Times*, March 25, 1946; The United Press, “Japan’s Ex-Puppet at the Helm of Siam after Armed Coup,” *The New York Times*, November 10, 1947 etc.

<sup>16</sup> When Seni met the U.S. Secretary of State Cordell Hull, he stated: “I am keeping the declaration in my pocket because I am convinced it does not represent the will of the Thai people. With American help, I propose to prove it.” See John B. Haseman, *The Thai Resistance Movement During World*

ed States and Great Britain. In Thailand it operated underground and its leading figure was Pridi Phanomyong, who by now served as one of the regents for the absent Thai monarch Ananda Mahidol (Rama VIII).

Initially, Japan had achieved a number of significant military successes, which made Phibun's decision appear quite wise and beneficial for Thailand. As the fortunes of war began to change, however, and the situation in Thailand deteriorated due to worsening economic conditions, caused, among other reasons, by excessive Japanese demands, Phibun's position began to weaken. By the summer of 1944, he might have realized that he could not hold on to power much longer. He thus used a largely trivial matter – a dispute with the parliament over the establishment of new capital city in Petchabun and over the creation of “Buddhist city,” a center of Buddhist teachings<sup>17</sup> – and he summarily resigned.<sup>18</sup> Khuang Aphaiwong became the next prime minister, but it was Pridi and the *Seri Thai* who were now becoming the dominant force in Thai politics. Even though the *Seri Thai* did not get a chance to confront the Japanese in combat and thus prove their loyalty to the Allied cause, they were seen as the representatives of the “free,” “democratic” Thailand by the United States.

By the time the war ended, the *Seri Thai* leaders had taken over the Thai political life, and they now steered the country through difficult negotiations with Great Britain and France, restored Thailand's international prestige, and tried to meet the economic challenges at home. Phibun, who retired to a private life after his resignation, faced the danger of being prosecuted as a war criminal under the so-called War Crimes Act,<sup>19</sup> passed by the National Assembly in January 1946. In April of that year, the Thai Supreme Court decided to stop the trial on legal grounds,<sup>20</sup> allowing Phibun and his associates not only to escape punishment but also to return to politics. The result of the court trial was no doubt a disappoint-

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*War II* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2002), 22. As a result, the United States, unlike Great Britain where the declaration was delivered, did not consider itself at war with Thailand.

<sup>17</sup> David K. Wyatt, *Thailand: A Short History* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003), 249.

<sup>18</sup> For the exact developments surrounding the fall of Phibun's government, see Benjamin Batson, “The Fall of Phibun Government, 1944,” *Journal of the Siam Society* 62, no. 2 (1974): 89–120.

<sup>19</sup> The act was the work of Pridi Phanomyong and Seni Pramoj. The trial of war criminals was one of the demands of the United States and mainly Great Britain, but also a way for the new government to remove potentially dangerous opponents from political life.

<sup>20</sup> The reason for the court's decision was that the War Crimes Act, which was used as the basis for prosecution, could not be applied retroactively. See Frank C. Darling, *Thailand and the United States* (Washington, D.C.: Public Affairs Press, 1965), 51–52. The question whether it was really a decision reached independently by the court or if Pridi (for personal or political reasons) intervened on Phibun's behalf still remains (and will probably remain) unanswered by historians.



ment for the United States, but its policy of non-intervention in Thai domestic affairs as well as its preoccupation with other problems prevented Washington from exerting more pressure on the government on this particular issue.

The liberal government in general was seen in the United States as proof that Thailand was moving forward and that it could show the way to democracy to other Asian states, mainly those that were soon to gain independence. The return of King Ananda to Thailand in early 1946, the promulgation of a new democratic constitution,<sup>21</sup> the personal devotion of Pridi to democracy – all these were promising signs. Pridi, who became prime minister in April 1946,<sup>22</sup> was even hailed as “as Siam’s flaming liberal and an unswerving son of democracy.”<sup>23</sup> However, serious problems soon began to reappear. The government was unable to tackle corruption, inflation, rising costs of living and a shortage of important commodities, mainly rice. The accusations of being a communist again began to mount on Pridi, especially in relation to his support for the anti-colonial movement in Indochina and in Asia in general. This soured relations with France<sup>24</sup> and worried the United States, which was slowly beginning to see the anti-colonial movement it had previously supported through the lens of the Cold War.

A major blow for Pridi came on June 9, 1946, when the young King Ananda was found shot to death in his bedroom in the royal palace. Although the government immediately ordered an investigation, rumors were rife that Pridi was behind the deed and this further weakened his popular support.<sup>25</sup> He first

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<sup>21</sup> The constitution of 1946 incorporated many elements from the Constitution of the United States, as well as those of some other western nations.

<sup>22</sup> Since August 1944, there had been four prime ministers in office – Khuang Aphaiwong (August 1944–August 1945), Tawee Boonyaket (August 1945–September 1945), Seni Pramoj (September 1945–January 1946) and again Khuang Aphaiwong (January 1946–March 1946).

<sup>23</sup> Chun Prabha, “Siam’s Democratic King,” *Asia*, 1946 (March), 117.

<sup>24</sup> France repeatedly accused the Pridi government of actively assisting the rebels in Cambodia and Laos. For example, on June 3, 1946, the French embassy in Washington wrote to the U.S. Department of State: “The acts of these bands, which are well armed and organized, and certain of which have radio sets at their disposal, are possible *only* because of the *complacency* of the Siamese government, which does not limit itself to giving them refuge, but has *never made any attempt* to disarm them, or disperse them, or make them leave the border. What is more, it *permitted* them to recruit new contingents on its territory, and to establish training camps in the vicinity of the Indochinese territory, and numerous duly confirmed facts show that its benevolence with respect to them does not stop there.” United States, Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1946*. Volume VIII. The Far East (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1971), 1012. Italics added.

<sup>25</sup> In Thailand, the person of the king is extremely important and any misdeed against the royal authority is considered a serious offense. In this particular respect, it is thus possible to argue with the assertion “that domestic political events alone, played as they are in Siam almost wholly over the heads of the masses, would probably not have produced another coup d’état.” See Virginia Thompson, “Governmental Instability in Siam,” *Far Eastern Survey* 17, no. 16 (August 25, 1948): 186.

responded to these rumors by instituting censorship and by having several of his most vocal accusers arrested. He was aware, however, that the army, directed from behind the scenes by Phibun, and the conservative opposition represented mainly by the Democrat Party of Khuang Aphaiwong, would not let this opportunity pass. In these difficult circumstances, Pridi decided to resign on August 23, and was replaced by Thamrong Nawasat, his close political ally. Pridi then spent much time traveling abroad, hoping to gain support for the Thamrong government in the United States and Western Europe.

The political instability in Thailand and its possible ramifications for the stability of the country as such and for its resistance against communism were of concern to the United States. President Truman made his worries clear when he remarked on the occasion of receiving the Thai Ambassador in March 1947 that “a democratic and *stable* Siam can make a great contribution to the peaceful progress of mankind, especially in Southeast Asia. [...] Although since the war there have been *frequent changes* in administrative responsibility in your country [Thailand], *it is hoped* that as the war period becomes more remote there will be *fewer occasions* requiring governmental changes.”<sup>26</sup> The suspicions regarding Thailand’s vulnerability to communism were further deepened by several factors. In an effort to remove Soviet objections to Thailand’s entry to the United Nations, the Thamrong government repealed the pre-war Anti-Communist Act in November 1946.<sup>27</sup> In July 1947, the Thai government announced that it would not support the proposition of the Franco-Siamese Conciliation Commission<sup>28</sup> to create a joint Pan-Asian Union, which both France and the United States saw as a possible way to quell, with Thai help, the nationalist uprisings in Cambodia and Laos. The government declared that it would only join the Union if Cambodia and Laos were granted immediate independence.<sup>29</sup> Finally, in September 1947 Pridi announced that he would instead found a Southeast Asia League, which would support independence movements all across Asia. Rumors begun to circulate that Pridi was directly allied with the Communist Party of Thailand and was in fact preparing to establish a republic in Thailand.

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<sup>26</sup> “Truman, Receiving Envoy, Links Siam to Democracy,” *The New York Times*, April 19, 1947. Italics added.

<sup>27</sup> *Ratchakitcha* 63, November 11, 1946, 561.

<sup>28</sup> The commission was established in 1946, following the signing of the Franco-Thai peace treaty, to settle the remaining disputes and to continue the talks between the two governments. It was composed of two representatives of both Thailand and France and three neutral experts. Its main objective was to “examine the ethnic, geographic and economic arguments” of Bangkok and Paris regarding the disputed territories in Indochina. USDS, *FRUS 1946*, 1084.

<sup>29</sup> AP, “Siam Rejects Plan for a Regional Union,” *The New York Times*, July 6, 1947.

In the meantime, Phibun Songkhram was carefully polishing his conservative, anti-communist credentials and preparing, with other military officers, the army for a coup. He judged very correctly that he could not take over power by himself but that he needed to find a respectable person who would provide the necessary *façade* for the new regime. He also very correctly guessed that with anxiety about communism growing ever stronger in the United States, his coup would be much better accepted due to his much touted anti-communist credentials. He was proven right on both counts. On November 8, 1947, the army, led by *Khana Ratthaprahan* (Coup Group), consisting mostly of retired or lower rank military officials, captured Bangkok, proclaimed the Thamrong government overthrown and promised to set up an efficient administration of the country, free of subversive communist influence and founded on the traditional platform – Nation, Religion, King.<sup>30</sup> Pridi and many of his supporters fled the capital and Khuang Aphaiwong, leader of the conservative Democrat Party, was asked by Phibun to form a new government. For the time being, he provided the perfect cover for the Field Marshal.

The American public officials and media reacted with dismay to this turn of events, although the criticism could have been sharper and the tone more outraged. The *New York Times* contemplated the future of Thai democracy: “The Field Marshal [Phibun Songkhram] has tolerated few democratic processes in his previous years of command. There seems little hope that he has changed his way of thinking, although his first action in setting up a Privy Council of which he is not a member might indicate a decision to maintain at least *an outward semblance of democracy*. That move, however, may have stemmed more *from a fear of adverse British and United States reaction* rather than from any conversion to constitutional rule. His collaboration with the Japanese has not been forgotten in London and Washington.”<sup>31</sup> The American Ambassador to Bangkok, Edwin F. Stanton, expressed his disappointment over these developments and warned that they might lead to a civil war or other serious complications.<sup>32</sup> No action, however, was taken by either Washington or London – the refusal by either government to extend official recognition to the Khuang administration remained the only tangible form of disapproval with the coup.

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<sup>30</sup> W. Ch. Prasangsit, *Phaendin Somdet Phrapokklao* [The Reign of King Rama VII] (Bangkok: Aksonsan Press, 1962), 170–71.

<sup>31</sup> The coup was ever more unfortunate, the newspaper argued, because “Siam has made better progress than most countries of Southeast Asia. It is to be hoped that the present *setback* will only be *transitory* and that with the *aid of the United States*, the peace loving Siamese people can again turn to the task of making their country a *going democracy* and a prosperous country.” See “Setback in Siam,” *The New York Times*, November 11, 1947. Italics added.

<sup>32</sup> Edwin F. Stanton, *Brief Authority* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1956), 209.

While the Khuang government set to work on tackling such problems as the rice shortage (which it managed to resolve quite fast), Phibunsongkhram started to eliminate his opponents. In a calculated move, designed mainly for “western consumption,” he justified his actions by the need to suppress communism before it takes over the country. For example, on November 22, Phibunsongkhram announced that a planned coup by “800 revolutionaries from Northwest Siam” was discovered and foiled. He claimed that these revolutionaries had cooperated with China, which clearly indicated their communist affiliation. He also implicated the *Seri Thai* leaders in the plot, saying “I have no resentment against the Free Thai movement [...] but some of their leaders<sup>33</sup> used their powers improperly after the war – for instance, arming the wrong element.”<sup>34</sup> It soon became clear that the communist card was the right one to play at this particular time and Phibunsongkhram was quickly casting off the “wartime Japanese puppet” and “dictator” labels.

The Khuang government might have initially hoped to prevent the power from slipping completely into the hands of the military and to preserve at least some form of parliamentary democracy. The elections of January 1948, which the Coup Group had allowed to proceed, brought a great victory to Khuang’s Democrat Party, while the Tharmathipat Party, founded and supported by Phibun, miserably failed.<sup>35</sup> The newly emboldened Khuang, whose government was finally recognized by the United States,<sup>36</sup> made plans for drafting new constitution and for strengthening the position of parliament *vis-à-vis* the Coup Group. All hopes were dashed, however, when on April 7 the prime minister was visited by a group of military officers, sent by Phibun, who asked him to “reconsider” his government, i. e. resign, within the next 24 hours.<sup>37</sup> Without any means to resist this pressure, Khuang resigned the next day and on April 8, Marshal Phibunsongkhram became prime minister. The reaction from London and Washington was rather muted. Even in the media, the change was obvious – Phibunsongkhram was now the “strong man” of Thai politics.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> This would be most likely Pridi, although he is not openly named here.

<sup>34</sup> U.P., “Siamese ‘Plot’ Thwarted,” *The New York Times*, November 23, 1947. This wrong element would be the communist sympathizers and adherents.

<sup>35</sup> The Democrat Party won 53 seats in the 100-member parliament, the Independents 30 seats, the Prachachon Party 12 seats, the Tharmathipat Party only 5 seats. See Darling, *Thailand and the United States*, 63.

<sup>36</sup> The exchange of notes took place on March 6, 1948. See United States, Department of State, “Press Release,” *The Department of State Bulletin XVII*, No. 154 (March 14, 1948): 360.

<sup>37</sup> Thak Chaloehtiarana, *Thailand: Politics of Despotic Paternalism* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2007), 34.

<sup>38</sup> AP, “Siam’s ‘Strong Man’ Is Picked as Premier,” *The New York Times*, April 9, 1948.

The fall and rise of Phibunsongkhram, or the rise and fall of the liberal government in Thailand in the post-war years, could be attributed to a number of factors. As in 1932, Thai society, despite the initial enthusiasm, was not prepared for the perils and frustrations of democracy. The Pridi and Thamrong governments had clearly failed in solving some of the most pressing problems of the population, which in turn started to listen to those who offered quick “solutions.” The inherent conservative nature of the society also generated a negative perception of most ideas and concepts, which were considered untraditional, radical or even “communist.” This made the position of Pridi, who was an outspoken liberal, ever more difficult.

Some authors have argued that the United States, the key supporter of Thailand in the post-war years, could have done more to support the liberal government and to bolster its position. It has also been suggested that due to American opposition, the position of the Thai army, the main base of support for Phibunsongkhram, had not been seriously weakened and thus it preserved much of its influence as one of the most important forces in Thai politics and society. Had the British plans<sup>39</sup> for reorganization of the army been adopted, the liberal government might have survived longer, but it is still reasonable to believe, in the light of the previous pages, that it would have eventually succumbed to the conservative opposition and that the army would have regrouped and emerged triumphant. Besides, the British had their own interests, both security and economic, and their recommended reforms of Thai politics were no doubt intended to strengthen their own position in Thailand, of which the United States was aware and which it sought to prevent at all costs. The disagreements between the former wartime allies were evident from the very outset, and on a number of occasions the Thai government managed to use them to its advantage.

Finally, the nascent Cold War and the danger of communist insurgencies caused the United States to reevaluate some of its priorities. Pridi was a “flaming liberal” – a positive characteristic in 1946, but much less positive in 1948. Now, the devotion to progress, democracy and liberalism was no longer as important as stability, traditionalism and anti-communism. From this point of view, Phibun was a much more suitable leader than Pridi, despite his wartime past.<sup>40</sup> With the benefit of hindsight, an impartial observer could call the ensuing partnership of

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<sup>39</sup> Some of these plans went so far that they would have actually placed the Thai army under direct British control, which was unacceptable both for the Thai government and for Washington. See Jayanama, *Thailand and World War II*, 210–13.

<sup>40</sup> It is difficult in this respect not to mention a possible parallel with General Franco and the change in the American approach to Spain in the post-war years.

Phibun and the United States a “triumph of pragmatism.” As an official publication of the U.S. government duly concluded: “difficult economic conditions, corruption and the mysterious shooting death of King Ananda Mahidol caused many Thais to welcome the change in government, and, after some delay, the United States extended recognition. With communist strength waxing in China, insurgencies flaring in the neighboring colonial states and the Cold War getting colder in Europe, Pibul’s regime at least offered some hope of stability.”<sup>41</sup>

### **The Trade-Offs: The Role of Phibunsongkhram’s Thailand in the Asian Strategy of the United States**

When Marshal Phibunsongkhram became prime minister in April 1948, the international situation seemed very bleak from the American perspective. In February, the communist takeover had taken place in Czechoslovakia and the country became a firm part of the Eastern bloc. In Italy, there was a danger of communist victory in the elections, though it did not materialize in the end. In Asia, the outlook was even gloomier. In China, the Kuomintang was losing battle after battle and Mao’s forces now controlled large sections of the country. In Vietnam, the French started negotiations with the former emperor Bao Dai to lead a “sovereign” state as a part of the newly established French Union, while at the same time the insurgent forces were growing stronger in all of Indochina.

In Bangkok, Phibun was closely watching these developments. He knew that despite his current success in eliminating the opposition and rising to the office of prime minister, his position was not unassailable. Without the support of the United States, not only moral, but also military and economic, he would find it difficult to withstand a possible challenge from the Democrat Party or even from within the ranks of the armed forces (the plot by army officers in October 1948 and especially the so-called “Manhattan Rebellion” of June 1951 attested to the lingering resentment of Phibun’s return as well as to the deep divisions between the various branches of the armed forces – the army, navy and air force – and within the army itself).<sup>42</sup> Pridi’s supporters were also still active, as became evident in February

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<sup>41</sup> Vimol Bhongbhibhat, Bruce Reynolds and Sukhon Polpatpicharn, eds., *The Eagle and the Elephant* (Bangkok: United Production, 1982), 90.

<sup>42</sup> The “Manhattan Rebellion” was an attempt by the navy, which was dissatisfied with the prevalence of army and air force, to remove Phibun and his supporters and to install its own government. Like all the other coup attempts it was foiled and brutally suppressed. For accounts of the coup, see Thak Chaloemtiarana, ed., *Thai Politics, 1932–1957* (Bangkok: Social Science Association of Thailand, 1978), 594–673.

1949, when an attempted coup by the *Seri Thai* loyalists took place.<sup>43</sup> The easiest, and in fact the only way to secure American support, was to continue playing the role of the staunch anti-communist. For Phibun, anti-communism became not only a matter of personal choice or conviction, but in fact of political survival. He thus made sure that he reminded American audience of his resolute opposition to communism whenever the opportunity presented itself, as in May 1950, when he told *The New York Times*: “Our people cannot accept a Communist regime or foreign domination willingly. [...] Under existing circumstances, the only threat to us could come from the Communists.”<sup>44</sup>

It remains to be ascertained to what degree the United States realized that Phibun’s anti-communism was at least partially a pragmatic way of ensuring that he would stay in power. It is likely that this fact was well-known to the officials of the Truman and later the Eisenhower Administration, but from their point of view, the concern for the political situation and democracy in Thailand was now secondary to that of stopping communism from spreading on the Asian mainland. In October 1950, the State Department summed up the situation as follows: “The principal US objectives in Thailand are: to strengthen ties of friendship and trust between Thailand and the US; to include Thailand, as a supporter of US policies, wherever possible in the various organizations of the UN; and to help Thailand establish itself against Communist forces in the Far East by encouraging it in *every feasible way* to achieve (1) *internal political stability*, (2) *a strong and solvent economy*, and (3) a situation wherein the average Thai citizen might have the maximum benefit possible for *modern technological advances*.”<sup>45</sup> There were no more references to democracy, to liberalization, to western-style government. The security issues have clearly overridden all other concerns regarding Thailand’s political development – which was a near-ideal situation for Phibun.

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<sup>43</sup> For details of the so-called “Palace Rebellion” coup, see Samut Surakhaka, *26 kanpattiwat thai lae ratthaprahan 2089–2507* [26 Thai Revolutions and Coups, 1546–1964] (Bangkok: Sue Kangphim, n.d.), 445–69. Pridi himself came back to Thailand to lead his supporters, but had to flee again after the coup was suppressed.

<sup>44</sup> The Marshal also proposed he would seek “military alliances with the United States, Great Britain and France.” Other than flaunting his anti-communism, the main reason for this interview was to remind the United States of the promises of military and financial assistance, which it had made previously and which had not yet arrived. See C. L. Sulzberger, “Thailand to Seek Western Pacts in Move to Forestall the Communists,” *The New York Times*, May 6, 1950. The timing of the publication of this interview, less than two months before the start of the conflict in Korea, later gave the Marshal’s words even more weight.

<sup>45</sup> United States, Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1950*. Volume IV. East Asia and the Pacific (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1976), 1529. Italics added.

The mutual cooperation between the two countries began to increase in 1949. In accordance with one of the objectives stated above, Thailand became a member of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund in May 1949. Not only was Thailand as an American ally gaining more reputation and a stronger position on the international scene, but the membership in these particular organizations also opened the way for massive loans which could be used to upgrade the country's infrastructure. In February 1950, a special fact-finding mission of Ambassador-at-Large Phillip C. Jessup arrived to Bangkok and, as a result of this visit, the United States approved a grant of USD 10,000,000 in military aid alone, with even more funds coming through the Economic Cooperation Administration.<sup>46</sup> In July and August 1950, three agreements were signed between the United States and Thailand – The Educational and Cultural Exchange Agreement, The Economic and Technical Cooperation Agreement and The Military Assistance Agreement. The amount of aid from the United States then began to grow steadily. The military grants provided to Phibun's regime between 1950 and 1957 amounted to approximately USD 200,000,000; the technical cooperation aid reached USD 27,000,000 between 1952 and 1955 alone.<sup>47</sup> The provision of aid was again justified by referring to the overall American objectives – the gaining of Thailand's trust, building a strong and viable economy, and thus making the country resistant to the dangers of communist subversion. President Truman, when presenting the aid proposal for approval to the Congress, remarked in 1952: "The basic objective of the United States in Thailand is to support a *friendly government* which has *unreservedly committed itself* to the cause of the free world in maintaining *stability* in this country situated not far from China's Red Army, and bordering on unsettled areas of Indo-China and Burma. It is one of the world's greatest rice producers and exporters, *on whose supply many countries of the free world depend*, and it is also a source of a number of *critical materials*."<sup>48</sup>

Two crucial events had made Thailand even more important in the American foreign policy strategy in the region. The first came in June 1950 when the conflict in Korea started. Phibun's Thailand decided to send Thai troops to fight in the war (the offer was made on July 21), and thus became one of only two Asian nations to be directly involved.<sup>49</sup> Although the impact of the deployment

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<sup>46</sup> Darling, *Thailand and the United States*, 69–70.

<sup>47</sup> Chaloeontiarana, *Thailand*, 58 (f. 60).

<sup>48</sup> Bhongbhibhat, Reynolds and Polpatpicharn, eds., *The Eagle and the Elephant*, 96. Italics added.

<sup>49</sup> This, of course, does not include the two Korean belligerents. The other Asian state was Philippines, another staunch ally of the United States. China ROC also offered troops, but these were not deployed in Korea.



of Thai army on the battlefield was limited due to the relatively small size of the contingent dispatched,<sup>50</sup> the decision carried a strong symbolic significance. For the United States, it was a proof of what President Truman later called “unreserved commitment.” The Department of State commented on Phibun’s decision in the following manner: “It has been traditionally Thai procedure to balance political forces which beset Thailand in order to remain independent. If one force became strongly dominant, Thailand in the past has opportunistically made terms with that force in order to survive. [...] Thailand’s government, however, made a departure from its traditional policy of balancing political forces. [...] A [...] decisive move was made by Thailand on July 21, 1950, when it became the second nation (China was the first) [China ROC is meant here] to offer ground troops to the United Nations in support of UN forces in Korea. Thailand has thus irrevocably severed its ties with Communist countries and committed itself positively to the cause of free nations.”<sup>51</sup> It is rather paradoxical that Phibun, who was almost an epitome of political opportunism, was credited here with leaving the traditional opportunistic line of Thai foreign policy.

Proclamations such as the one quoted above must of course be viewed in the context of the period in which they were made and in the light of the overall American priority, which was the fight against communism. Phibun’s government was among many other right-wing dictatorships that the United States had cooperated with at this particular time and pragmatism and opportunism were present on both sides. The authors of the memorandum, however, also made the following remark: “The Thai government is apprehensive of mounting Communist threat in the Far East and has generally cooperated with efforts of the western powers to block Communist expansion. The *degree to which these efforts are successful* in checking the Soviet imperialism will be a *determining factor* in shaping the pattern of Thai foreign relations,”<sup>52</sup> which seemed to contradict their previous statements about the resoluteness of the Thai stance.

The second very important moment for Thai-American relations was the establishment of SEATO (Southeast Asia Treaty Organization). SEATO was founded during a conference in Manila in September 1954. The organization was to be

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<sup>50</sup> Thailand sent infantry (a total of approximately 6500 Thai soldiers served in Korea), five frigates and additional transport vessels and airplanes. See Gordon L. Rottman, *Korean War Order of Battle. United States, United Nations, and Communist Ground, Naval and Air Forces, 1950–1953* (Westport: Prager Publishers, 2002), 120–21.

<sup>51</sup> USDS, *FRUS 1950*, 1529–1530. The other “proofs” of the Thai commitment to the “free nations” was the Thai decision to recognize the non-communist governments in Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam, and conversely, not to recognize the People’s Republic of China.

<sup>52</sup> USDS, *FRUS 1950*, 1538. Italics added.

modeled after the example of NATO, but the fact that many of the Asian nations rejected the offer of membership made its practical value rather limited from the outset.<sup>53</sup> The preamble of the Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty stated the goals of SEATO rather vaguely, as could be expected on such an occasion: “The Parties to this Treaty [...] uphold principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples, and declaring that they will earnestly strive by every peaceful means to promote self-government and to secure the independence of all countries whose people desire it and are able to undertake its responsibilities; [...] to strengthen the fabric of peace and freedom and to uphold the principles of democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law, and to promote the economic well-being and development of all peoples in the treaty area; [...] to declare publicly and formally their sense of unity, so that any potential aggressor will appreciate that the Parties stand together in the area, and [...] to coordinate their efforts for collective defense for the preservation of peace and security.”<sup>54</sup> Both the United States and Thailand were strong and resolute defenders and proponents of the project, but their motivations were rather different.

For the United States, SEATO was primarily a means to support and bolster the non-communist governments in former French Indochina. After the Geneva conference of 1954, a cease-fire was signed in Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam. Vietnam was provisionally divided into two states, with the south under Bao Dai and later Ngo Dinh Diem remaining free of communist control. The governments of Cambodia and Laos were also not communist, though strong communist presence persisted in both countries. The Eisenhower Administration, guided by the principles of the “domino theory,” wished to prevent the communist forces from winning in either of these countries. On the other hand, the president wished to avoid direct American intervention, and thus SEATO was created as a suitable collective security organ through which communism could be contained<sup>55</sup> – with American help, but not unilaterally. The American focus was of course on the

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<sup>53</sup> Members of SEATO were Australia, France, New Zealand, Pakistan, Philippines, Thailand, United Kingdom and the United States, with South Korea and South Vietnam as associated members. India, Indonesia as well as Burma had refused to join. See Warren I. Cohen, *The Cambridge History of American Foreign Relations*. Volume IV. America in the Age of Soviet Power, 1945–1991 (Cambridge, London and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 96.

<sup>54</sup> “Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty (Manila Pact): September 8, 1954,” *The Avalon Project. Documents in Law, History and Diplomacy*, [http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th\\_century/usmu003.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/usmu003.asp) (last accessed on August 13, 2010).

<sup>55</sup> This containment-of-communism objective, as was the case of Thailand several years before, had forced the United States to accept and support regimes which were undemocratic and sometimes openly authoritarian (the case of Ngo Dinh Diem fits well into this picture). This was one of the reasons why SEATO was in general not very popular even among those nations which it was intended

countries that were directly threatened by the “communist menace” – from this point of view, Thailand was far more secure than Vietnam or Laos, and thus it was expected that it would play a more active, “protector” role, rather than a passive, “protected one” role.

For Thailand, the number one priority, at least from the foreign policy perspective, was the continuation of American military assistance, but also guarantees for its own security. Phibun had already declared his intention to sign a defense treaty with the United States in 1950. This, however, would be a bilateral defense treaty, not a collective defense treaty. These efforts on part of the Thai government continued. For example, during a meeting at the Department of State in January 1951, the Thai Ambassador to the United States Prince Wan Waithayakon asked the Assistant Secretary of State Dean Rusk the following question: “if Thailand were attacked, would the United States come to their support while they were fighting the enemy [in this context it was the ‘Chinese Communists’] or would Thailand have to do as in the last war [World War II] when overrun by enemy – establish an underground which would cooperate with the United States and work toward their liberation with us. The Ambassador reaffirmed that his government saw eye to eye with the U.S. Government and wanted to know how to lay its own plans in order to meet the potential threat.”<sup>56</sup> The United States gave a non-committal answer at that time, but Phibun kept raising the same questions repeatedly and his efforts intensified when the Eisenhower Administration came into office in January 1953. In fact, in the early 1950s, there was not much of a threat of a direct attack on Thailand, with the exception of minor incursions and clashes on the border. Phibun’s demands and his use of the “siege mentality” tactics were intended to ensure Thailand and he personally remained indispensable to the policy-makers in Washington. He was given a good opportunity to show how “threatened” Thailand was when in January 1953, a “Thai Autonomous People’s Government” was officially established by the Chinese government among the Tai tribal population in Yun-nan province of Southern China.<sup>57</sup> This move could hardly have

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to protect from communism. See Stephen W. Hook and John Spanier, *American Foreign Policy Since World War II*. Eighteenth edition (Washington, D.C.: C. Q. Press, 2010), 72.

<sup>56</sup> United States, Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1951*. Volume IV. Asia and Pacific (in two parts), Part 2 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1977), 1594.

<sup>57</sup> The Thai people belong to the Tai language group, which also includes the Lao, Shan and others. It is believed that the Tai peoples migrated to Southeast Asia sometime during the sixth and seventh centuries A. D. Some of the Tai remained in China and have been living there up to the modern day. For evolution of the individual Tai language and the ethnic subgroups, see for example Luo Yongxian, “The Subgroup Structure of the Tai Languages: A Historical Comparative Study,” *Journal of Chinese Linguistics*, Monograph Series, No. 12 (1997).

threatened Thailand's security and was mostly intended as a propaganda gesture by Beijing, but Phibun and some of the hardliners in the U.S. Department of State presented it as a preparation on the part of China to start guerrilla warfare against Thailand.<sup>58</sup> While the Geneva Conference was in full swing, Thailand made yet another series of dramatic appeals to the United States for more help. Pote Sarasin, the Thai Ambassador to the United States, informed Secretary of State Dulles that "the Communists were pressing forward in Indochina while some of the Western allies argued whether they should do nothing until the outcome of the Geneva conference on Far Eastern affairs was known. [...] Unfortunately, the Communists are not waiting."<sup>59</sup>

Subsequently, also in the light of the need to further upgrade Thailand's military capacity for potential use within the SEATO, the Eisenhower Administration significantly increased the military aid to Thailand and pledged to continue the investments in vital infrastructure projects, such as highways, railroads or modern airports.<sup>60</sup> Once more, the appropriation of this aid was defended by pointing to the menace of communism hanging over Thailand and by the need to support the Phibun government which was seen as an anti-communist bastion in the area: "It was *inevitable* that a *deteriorating* situation in Indochina should speed up the plans for the strengthening of Thailand. [...] The government in Thailand has been and is strongly anti-Communist. But militarily Thailand is not yet strong enough to be a bridgehead that can be held against a southward and westward Communist advance. The need for our help, therefore, is *plain*. Fortunately, we are dealing with a people and a *Government* to which it can be given with *confidence*."<sup>61</sup> Despite the apparent subjectivity of this and other claims, which served as justification for yet another increase in help to Thailand, similar arguments were commonplace during this time period. The communist threat to Thailand was in general presented as so grave that it would have been enough to justify almost any increase in spending, especially in military and defense aid. But even at this time, there were some in the United States who doubted that aid in such large amounts was necessary or that it was wisely and effectively spent.

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<sup>58</sup> Edwin F. Stanton, "Spotlight on Thailand," *Foreign Affairs* 33, no. 1 (October 1954): 78–79. Stanton, who was still serving at this time as the American Ambassador to Thailand, was writing the article after the Geneva accords were signed. He argued that "The Communist triumph in Geneva – for I think we should frankly face the unpalatable fact that it was indeed a major triumph for the Communists – turns the spotlight on the rest of Southeast Asia and in particular upon Thailand [...] the heart and citadel of the region." *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>59</sup> Walter H. Waggoner, "Thailand Bids U.S. Send More Arms," *The New York Times*, June 6, 1954.

<sup>60</sup> Darling, *Thailand and the United States*, 102.

<sup>61</sup> "Strengthening Thailand," *The New York Times*, July 16, 1954. Italics added.

In 1950, for example, a study conducted in the Thai countryside discovered general discontent with the slow pace of change and the general lack of attention the Phibun government paid to farmers. Since Thai farmers were seen as those who, along with the Chinese minority and radically-minded students, could be perhaps the most susceptible to communist propaganda, the suggestion to spend more aid to improve their lives seemed to be logical. The study contended that “The rural Thai, who represent the future as well as the present, have started upon a new and irreversible way, having been stirred particularly during the past decade by the varied and often intangible influences of modernization. Yet, they have not been reached by international, national, or any other agencies with an effective program of economic or political development.”<sup>62</sup> Despite these findings, confirmed by additional studies and surveys, most of the finances provided to Thailand were spent boosting the military and police force, and even those spent on development projects only seldom reached the farmers who in the 1950s still comprised the largest segment of Thai society.

It was also criticized that the U.S. aid was in fact helping to tighten the Thai military’s grip on the country, and, as was bound to happen, that much of the aid was in fact being misappropriated by various government and military officials.<sup>63</sup> As early as in August 1952, John H. Ohly, an assistant director at the Office of the Director of Mutual Security, who was in charge of administering the U.S. military assistance to Thailand, wrote that he had “considerable doubts concerning (a) the precise objectives of, (b) the wisdom of maintaining and particularly, (c) the wisdom of maintaining at such high levels, the military assistance program for Thailand. Recent reports to the effect that arms were being delivered from Thailand to the Karens [an ethnic group in Burma] in exchange for wolfram and that certain Thai military authorities were in touch with Chinese Communists in Hong Kong, together with the recurrent participation over the past two years of several Thai services in military coups in support of different fractions, have strengthened these doubts at least to the point of believing that we should make a thorough reassessment of the purpose of this program and the desirability and, if so, at what level, of continuing this program in FY 1953 and FY 1954.”<sup>64</sup> Ohly’s arguments, however,

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<sup>62</sup> Lauriston Sharp, “Peasants and Politics in Thailand,” *Far Eastern Survey* 19, No. 15 (September 13, 1950): 161.

<sup>63</sup> Wyatt, *Thailand*, 262.

<sup>64</sup> United States, Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1952–1954*. Volume XII. East Asia and Pacific (in two parts). Part 2 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1987), 649.

were judged by the State Department to be based on “unconfirmed reports”<sup>65</sup> and rejected.

The arguments listed above questioned the distribution and actual use of American aid but not necessarily its continuation and the general justification for it. Some of the critics went further, however, and questioned the very claim that Thailand was threatened by communism, especially by internal communist subversion. Writing in 1950, at the same time when Phibun Songkhram claimed that communism was the “only danger” for his country, American scholars Virginia Thompson and Richard Adloff concluded that the Thai society was inherently resistant to communist ideology, that the Communist Party of Thailand was an absolutely powerless organization and that the number of communist sympathizers – Thai, Chinese and Indochinese – who actually lived in Thailand, numbered in the hundreds rather than in the thousands or even the tens of thousands.<sup>66</sup> Four years later, in 1954, after the already mentioned expansion of aid to Thailand, the U.S. National Intelligence Estimate, commenting on the possible developments in the country, concluded: “Thailand is relatively stable politically, with power closely held by top military and police leaders. Although inefficiency and corruption limit Government’s effectiveness, the Communist movement is weak and no undercurrents of serious unrest or dissatisfaction are apparent in the population.”<sup>67</sup>

These arguments were categorically rejected by both Marshal Phibun Songkhram and the hardliners in the American foreign policy establishment. Phibun was still using the tactic of justifying his crackdown on any anti-government opposition with claims of alleged communist plots to overthrow his government. For example, in November 1951, during the so-called “Radio Coup” or “Silent Coup,” which led to the dissolution of the parliament and the suspension of the constitution, the population was informed by radio that communists were infiltrating the parliament and the government (!) and that this problem could not be solved unless the constitution was suspended.<sup>68</sup> To further emphasize the recurrent need to be on guard and to suppress the communist element within the coun-

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 650.

<sup>66</sup> Virginia Thompson and Richard Adloff, *The Left Wing in Southeast Asia* (New York: William Sloane Associates, 1950), 50–59.

<sup>67</sup> The authors of the survey saw as the greatest danger a possible communist attack from abroad. They warned, however, that “even with large increase in foreign and technical assistance, Thailand will not be able to develop security forces adequate to discourage a major Communist invasion or to delay more than briefly such an invasion if launched.” This definitely cast even more doubt as to the effectiveness of spending even more funds on building up the Thai security forces. USDS, *FRUS 1952–1954*, 741–42.

<sup>68</sup> Pla Thong, *Phak kanmuang thai* [Thai Political Parties] (Bangkok: Kaona Press, 1965), 190.

try, a new Anti-Communist Activities Act was passed in 1952.<sup>69</sup> The New York Times, reporting on the passing of the bill by the parliament, quoted Police Chief Phao Sryianond, who argued that the bill was necessary because “plotters had planned to seize control of the country at the end of this year [1952] after forcing the King to abdicate or killing him in case of refusal [...] Russia and Communist China were involved in the plot, which [...] had been hatched recently in Peiping [Beijing] when the delegates of Southeast Asian countries had decided at a conference that the time was ripe for a coup here.”<sup>70</sup> The American Ambassador in Thailand Edwin F. Stanton, while informing his superiors about yet another arrest of 145 people in November 1952, among them journalists and students, remarked that it was a “blow” for the “real left-wing” and “pro-Commie” elements and praised Phibun for ordering these arrests, which “may be first important instance of genuine strong anti-Commie program after four years of hollow promises.”<sup>71</sup>

The preceding pages, while being only a brief sketch of the Thai-American relations between the years 1948 and 1957, make it possible to identify some of the basic principles and important aspects of this mutual relationship. From the American perspective, Thailand’s stability and its continued anti-communist foreign policy orientation were an important part of the overall policy in Southeast Asia and the Far East. To achieve and bolster this stability and continuity, Washington was prepared to provide the undemocratic, militaristic government of Marshal Phibun Songkhram with significant military assistance, as well as technological and economic aid. The foundations for providing this assistance were already laid during the Truman Administration and were later reaffirmed and enhanced after Dwight D. Eisenhower became president in 1953. It seems to be clear that at least some American officials were aware of the fact that the communist threat to Thailand was not as grave as its leader would make the United States believe, especially when the actual strength of communist movement and its adherents within the country was concerned. On the other hand, it was important for the United States to keep Thailand as a loyal, committed ally in the region (for practical but also for propaganda purposes), and the prospect of the discontinuation or even any major cuts to the aid provided was seen as adverse to that purpose. For the same reason, the United States in general refrained from sharp criticism of the domestic affairs of Thailand, even though it was clear, especially after the coup of 1951, that the last

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<sup>69</sup> For the full text of the act, see Chaloemtiarana, ed., *Thai Politics, 1932–1957*, 819–21.

<sup>70</sup> “Stiff Anti-Red Bill Adopted in Thailand,” *The New York Times*, November 14, 1952.

<sup>71</sup> USDS, *FRUS 1952–1954*, 655–56.

vestiges of democracy were slowly dismantled and that the military was tightening its grip on power.

For Marshal Phibunsongkhram, the support of the United States was one of the few possible ways to stay in power, since his position, even after the defeat of Pridi, was relatively weak. His professed anti-communism, while also stemming from his conservatism, was thus largely motivated by personal political ambitions. In the same manner, it could be said that contrary to the American assessment that the Thai foreign policy was no longer as opportunistic as it often was in the past, Phibun's tilt to the United States and to the "free world" was again an opportunistic move, designed to ensure the survival of Thailand and of the Marshal personally. It could be argued that he now saw the United States as a "strongly dominant force" and thus found it wise to "make terms with that force."<sup>72</sup> This view was not necessarily shared by some of the other top ranking politicians and military officials in Bangkok, and soon accusations of a too one-sided foreign policy began to pile up against Phibun, especially after 1954.<sup>73</sup> It has to be noted, however, that even after the Marshal was removed by another coup in 1957, nothing much had changed in Thai-U.S. relations, which is a proof that the foundations of this relationship that were laid in the preceding period were strong and that even the new regime of Sarit Thanarat found some common ground with Washington. It must also be noted that Phibun was quite successful in his dealings with the United States and, while falling short of securing a bilateral security pact, he ushered in a new era of the mutual relations between the two countries and in general raised these relations to a much higher level.

## **The Image: Marshal Phibunsongkhram – A "Democracy-Loving" Dictator?**

Marshal Phibunsongkhram was definitely supported by Washington for reasons other than his "love" for democracy and western-style government. His often ruthless, dictatorial approach to governance was, as had been mentioned several times before, justified by the need to consolidate the country and to purge it of

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<sup>72</sup> See quotations on the previous pages (f. 51).

<sup>73</sup> Bhongbhibhat, Reynolds and Polpatpicharn, eds., *The Eagle and the Elephant*, 103. The 1954 Geneva conference brought hopes, albeit brief, of a possible peaceful settlement with the communists in the Far East and especially Southeast Asia. China's stance on some of the divisive issues (for example Vietnam) also seemed to be more reasonable for some time, but that was mostly caused by China's own interests rather than by a genuine desire to seek peaceful accommodation with the United States.



subversive communist elements. On the other hand, Phibun was aware that at least certain democratic elements should be preserved and that he should present himself as a man who has respect for democracy and for the rights and liberties of his fellow citizens. The rationale behind his actions was twofold. On the one hand, he did not want to completely alienate Thai people, who had gotten used to some measure of democracy during the previous years, even if they had not fully grasped all the principles of democratic government. On the other hand, professing respect, if not love, for democracy could have made his position and his image better in the United States, where he was still seen as an old-school type of dictator. Phibun realized that Thailand, especially during the early post-war period, was viewed in the United States as role-model for other Asian countries, as a nascent democracy, the land of progress, and a home of freedom-loving people. By maintaining at least an outward *façade* of democratic government, he could not only improve his own image, but he could make it easier for the United States to defend its support for his government.

Phibun set out to build his new image almost immediately after he became prime minister in April 1948. In one of his first public statements regarding his new government, he claimed that “the Siamese people can remove him from office whenever they want to do so” and that he was now a “constitutional monarchist.”<sup>74</sup> Although a crackdown on some elements of the opposition was instituted, the parliament continued to function, a new constitution was promulgated, and elections continued to be held. The “tolerated” opposition, however, was often coerced into supporting the government’s policy and its options to confront the military and police were severely limited. In an additional move to control the situation, the *Sahaphak* (United Front) was created, which incorporated the parties supporting the government. These parties were then granted a certain number of positions in the government. The result was that the actual distribution of ministerial positions very seldom reflected the election results. For example, in the elections of June 1949, the results were as follows: the Democrat Party (still led by Khuang Aphaiwong) gained 40 MPs, the Prachachon Party 31 MPs, the Issara Party 14 MPs, Phibun’s Tharmathipat Party 12 MPs, and the Independents took 24 seats. In the government, however, Democrats received only two posts while the Tharmathipat occupied 5.<sup>75</sup> Phibun was often unable to control individual parties within the *Sahaphak* and their MPs; he also had to deal with growing tension between

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<sup>74</sup> He also used the opportunity to again reassure everyone of his own anti-communism. The government was to be “neither of the left nor of the right” but the Marshal said he personally was “anti-Communist.” See “Siam Premier to Follow People’s Will,” *The Washington Post*, April 12, 1948.

<sup>75</sup> Chaloeintiarana, *Thailand*, 46.

the army and the police. To an outside observer, the politics of this time period must have appeared convoluted, void of ideas and ideology (except perhaps for anti-communism) and marred by power struggles and personal feuds. It was most likely the frustration with this situation, which led the Coup Group to execute the already mentioned “Radio Coup” of November 1951. After this coup, the Constitution of 1932 replaced the Constitution of 1949, meaning that political parties were banned and candidates ran for the elections on an individual basis. As a result, by 1952, when the next elections were held, the military junta (still loosely organized in the Coup Group) secured control of both houses of the parliament.<sup>76</sup> The elections were then followed by the promulgation of yet another, even less democratic constitution. Phibun thus managed to gradually dismantle all that was left of the experiment with the liberal government from the post-war years and only the most rudimentary elements of democracy remained, often void of actual content.

By this time, Phibun was confident that criticism from the United States regarding his undemocratic policies would only be muted, if any at all. He was not far from the truth. The reaction to the coup of November 1951 from the American perspective dealt almost solely with the expected stability/instability of the new government and with possible impacts on its foreign policy. American *chargé d'affaires* in Bangkok Turner cabled to the Department of State on November 30: “Govt announced Coup purely internal and foreign policy will remain unchanged. Probably true inasmuch mil leaders desire foreign recognition and continuance US aid. First impression new Govt under Coup party less stable than previous, however, necessary not to underestimate Phibun’s polit acumen.”<sup>77</sup> The New York Times offered a more critical assessment of the situation, but not nearly as critical as it could have been: “Thailand is now under virtual military rule. The liberal 1948 Constitution has been replaced by the 1932 Constitution, which [...] facilitates the curtailment of the press and political freedoms and authoritarian control. [...] The coup group has pledged a more vigorous policy against internal communism, but some observers fear that the new regime may breed rather than check communism by squelching genuine democratic opposition and running a corrupt and oppressive government. [...] But the life of the Thai masses goes on without much disturbance, and baring inter-service strife [between the police and the army]

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<sup>76</sup> The members of the Democrat Party boycotted the elections after calling them undemocratic. In the end, supporters of Phibun’s government gained 85 seats, Independents 9 seats and those who declared themselves to be in opposition to the government 29 seats. Many of the “opposition” MPs later defected to the government fraction. Darling, *Thailand*, 118.

<sup>77</sup> USDS, *FRUS 1951*, 1640.

Thailand's new Government may turn out to be no worse than its predecessors. Indeed, some Thais see the possibility of a stronger and more effective administration.<sup>78</sup> There was no hint at a possible discontinuation or at least limitation of the American assistance to Thailand – the dismantling of the liberal state and the *de facto* destruction of democracy were taken as a given fact, disappointing perhaps, but a one that has to be accepted and counted with. Similarly, after an amended version of the 1932 Constitution was readopted in March 1952, The Washington Post reported in a matter-of-fact fashion that the new constitution was “backed by the military junta” and that “it is considerably less liberal than the constitution thrown out after the coup d’etat of last November 20.”<sup>79</sup>

The position of Marshal Phibunsongkhram was actually somehow weakened by the coup of November 1951 and by the subsequent militarization of the government. He was no longer in control of the more aggressive members of the Coup Group and was unable to resolve completely the lingering disputes between the police and the army chiefs. It was likely that he was not even an ardent supporter of the coup itself, although that does not make him less complicit in setting up of the undemocratic government that followed in 1952. From the perspective of Thai-American relations, one of the most important results of these developments was that Phibun was even more dependent now on the United States and on its support. As The New York Times correctly pointed out, “the coup group needs Marshal Pibul’s *international and domestic prestige* and his *practiced ability* at balancing off political elements and mediating political squabbles.”<sup>80</sup> It was especially the first part, the matter of international and domestic prestige and image, which was important for Phibun’s political survival. Even though he was never a democrat, he was still more acceptable to the United States and more presentable on the international scene than people like Police General Phao Sryianond, who lacked the necessary charisma and experience. Ironically, much like Khuang Aphaiwong provided the democratic *façade* for Phibunsongkhram in 1947 and 1948, the Marshal found himself in a similar position now – serving as a prime minister of a government that was in fact more and more under the control of the hardliners within the armed forces and police.

It is interesting to note that even after the coup of 1951, Phibun still tried to appear, both to the domestic audience and to the United States, as a supporter of democracy and of a western-type government. The *de facto* military take-over

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<sup>78</sup> “Rule of Thailand in Military Hands,” *The New York Times*, December 11, 1951.

<sup>79</sup> AP, “New Thailand Constitution Signed by King,” *The Washington Post*, March 9, 1952.

<sup>80</sup> “Rule of Thailand in Military Hands,” *The New York Times*, December 11, 1951. Italics added.

was presented as only a temporary measure, dictated by external circumstances beyond Phibun's control. American Ambassador Edwin F. Stanton later recalled that when talking to the prime minister in the spring of 1952 about the undemocratic changes that took place, the Marshal argued that "the country was not yet ready for full democratic government and that some of the *elected* members of the Lower House had been obstructive. [Phibun and his friends] professed to be supporters of democracy but asserted that dangers surrounding the country called for strong leadership."<sup>81</sup> The argument that the Thai people were simply not prepared to live under democracy was given quite often as yet another explanation of the military coup, in addition to the need to counter the communist threat. For example, in April 1952, when responding to the criticism of his new military-controlled government, Phibun "asked for patience regarding Thailand's democracy. He said the process of establishing democracy had taken generations in other countries, even Britain."<sup>82</sup>

While these assurances and promises appeared rather hollow in view of the actual steps taken by Phibun and the Coup Group, they gave the United States some additional pretext for its continuous support of Phibun. It was no longer his anti-communism alone which made him indispensable – by 1952, virtually all members of the cabinet and a majority of the important figures of Thai political life could call themselves conservative and anti-communist. Phibun's allusions to democracy, questionable as they were, gave him an edge, an "added value" compared to, for example, his future successor, Marshal Sarit Thanarat. Sarit publicly proclaimed that western democracy was not the right type of government for Thailand and instead advocated a return to the traditional *pho-luk* (father-children) leadership model of the Sukhothai period.<sup>83</sup>

Phibun was thus keen to bolster his image of a "lover of democracy" in the eyes of the American government and public. He often emphasized the need for the Thai people and for himself personally to learn about the western democracy first hand and then to apply what had been learned in Thailand. Thus, when his visit to the United States was being prepared in the spring of 1955, the Thai Ambassador in Washington Pote Sarasin informed the U.S. Department of State that the chief reasons for the visit were "that he [Phibun] felt necessary to become familiar at first hand with the governments in Asia and Europe with whom he had aligned himself in the United Nations against the Communist aggression. [...] the

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<sup>81</sup> Stanton, *Brief Authority*, 270.

<sup>82</sup> Tillman Durdin, "Thailand's Regime Shows Its Defects," *The New York Times*, April 6, 1952.

<sup>83</sup> Chaloeintiarana, *Thailand*, 94.

Prime Minister would like to come directly to Washington in early April [1955] for a few days visit and then spend several weeks travelling informally to the principal points of interest in the United States.”<sup>84</sup>

The Marshal’s visit to the United States in May 1955, followed by a visit of several European capitals, was arguably one of the greatest foreign-policy achievements of his post-war career. He was received personally by President Eisenhower, who had conferred the Legion of Merit on him for his resolute opposition to the communist danger.<sup>85</sup> Phibun spoke in both the House and the Senate, where he assured the legislators that “my country will always be on your side. [...] Thailand had sent soldiers to Korea to fight side by side with the United States and the United Nations against aggression.”<sup>86</sup> He repeatedly emphasized that Thailand belonged to the “free nations” and “free world” and stated that “the spirit of freedom is strong among Thai people. [...] We are clear in our minds as to what kind of life we want, just as you are clear in your mind that the American way of life is what you cherish. Let there be no mistake about our intention to belong to the free democratic nations.”<sup>87</sup> Phibun’s entire American tour thus served as a way to promote himself as well as the achievements of Thailand under his rule. The Eisenhower Administration, feeling sort of indebted to Phibun, decided to play along and thus, to an uninformed observer, the Marshal, as portrayed by certain articles in the American press and public declarations of some U.S. government officials, would have appeared as a truly outstanding, democratic leader.

The trip, although seemingly successful, marked, rather ironically, the beginning of Phibun’s downfall. Following his return to Thailand, the prime minister had instituted some minor reforms to make his regime appear more democratic. These “reforms” included regular press conferences, somewhat relaxed censorship of the media and the setting up of a Thai “Hyde Park” (a section of Sanam Luang, an open space in central Bangkok, was designated for this purpose), where criticism of the government could be publicly voiced.<sup>88</sup> A Political Party Act was passed, which again permitted the creation and operation of political

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<sup>84</sup> United States, Department of State, *The Foreign Relations of the United States, 1955–1957*. Volume XXII. Southeast Asia (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1989), 807. The Department of State was not initially favorably inclined to this visit, officially because of a very busy schedule of President Eisenhower and Vice-President Nixon. In the light of the Ambassador’s arguments, however, the officials of the department promised to “do everything possible to arrange to receive the Prime Minister”. *Ibid.*, 808.

<sup>85</sup> Bhongbhibhat, Reynolds and Polpatpicharn, eds., *The Eagle and the Elephant*, 103.

<sup>86</sup> “House and Senate Hear Thai Premier,” *The New York Times*, May 5, 1955.

<sup>87</sup> “War Inevitable, the Chief Says,” *The New York Times*, May 11, 1955.

<sup>88</sup> Chaloeintiarana, *Thailand*, 71.

parties.<sup>89</sup> It soon became clear, however, that many of these steps were taken primarily with a view to discredit political opponents – for example, in “Hyde Park” Phibun permitted and even encouraged criticism of Phao Sryianond, who was increasingly difficult to control. When such results failed to materialize, these measures were abandoned.<sup>90</sup> Quite contrary to Phibun’s expectations, these “democratic” reforms did not gain him more popularity but instead enabled, albeit for a short time, his critics to attack his government. Especially vocal were those who were returning from abroad. A Fulbright exchange student complained in 1955 that “I came back from America full of ideas and enthusiasm to help my country. But every day I see that nothing is being done here except by personal influence and favoritism. Every bit of policy is controlled by the people put into their jobs by political friends, regardless of their ability. They are always making promises but never fulfill them.”<sup>91</sup> Anti-American feelings also began to surface, with Phibun being accused of tilting too far toward the United States.

The fall of Phibun finally came in August 1957. Several events preceded his removal – a scandal surrounding the sale of timber in Tak province, the inability of the government to help the victims of a drought in Thailand’s Northeast – but the most serious of these was the elections of February 1957. Desperate to add to the legitimacy of his government and bolster his position, Phibun allowed the elections to be held, claiming that “[i]n the past I came into power through coup d’etat. From now on I shall not seek power through a coup. I shall seek election.”<sup>92</sup> As with the other “democratization” attempts, this experiment backfired. The government party, Seri Manangkhasila, easily won the elections by taking 83 seats, while the main opposition Democrat Party, led by the indomitable Khuang Aphaiwong, only gained 29; the remaining seats were divided between six other parties and independent candidates.<sup>93</sup> Intimidation of voters by police was omnipresent before the elections and the results were so obviously rigged that they created a massive outrage. The government initially denied the claims of “cheating,”<sup>94</sup> but

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<sup>89</sup> For the full text of the bill, see Chaloemtiarana, ed., *Thai Politics*, 880–84.

<sup>90</sup> Thong, *Phak kanmuang thai*, 223–29.

<sup>91</sup> James Macgregor, “The Tragedy of Thailand,” *The Progressive* (November 1954), 13. Quoted in Darling, *Thailand*, 129.

<sup>92</sup> Bernard Kalb, “Thai Rule Facing an Elections Test,” *The New York Times*, February 25, 1957.

<sup>93</sup> Albert Pickerell and Daniel E. Moore, “Elections in Thailand (II),” *Far Eastern Survey* 26, no. 7 (July 1957): 106. A total of 160 seats were up for grabs in the elections. Slightly different results (85 seats for Seri Manangkhasila, 28 for the Democrats) are listed in Chaloemtiarana, *Thailand*, 72.

<sup>94</sup> This allegation was first made by Khuang Aphaiwong immediately after the election results were announced. Bernard Kalb, “Premier Leading in Bangkok Vote,” *The New York Times*, February 27, 1957.

in the face of growing protests, joined by pro-democracy activists and students, Phibun finally resorted to declaring martial law on March 3 (lasting until March 14), with the army commander-in-chief Sarit Thanarat given the responsibility for maintaining order. The American Embassy in Bangkok observed with increasing concern the instability of the Phibun government, remarking in a dispatch dated April 22 that Thailand was engulfed in the “most serious political crisis since November 1951.”<sup>95</sup> Anxiety was apparent in Washington regarding the possible outcomes of this situation and its impact on the Thailand’s anti-communist foreign-policy orientation. From this point of view, however, the final resolution was satisfactory for the United States. On September 16, 1957, the army, led by Sarit Thanarat, staged another coup, removed Phibun from power and sent him into exile in Japan. The new Thai leadership, while instituting a rather different political style, remained friendly to the United States and was equally committed to fight communism. The remarkable political career of Marshal Phibunsongkhram, which spanned over three decades, thus finally ended.

## Conclusion

This article’s main objective was to identify some of the main trends and defining moments of the relations between the United States and Thailand in the period of 1948–1957. For this reason, it was necessary to show what the main American priorities were during this era and how they gradually changed. The initial U.S. support for liberal government in Thailand was eventually set aside as fear of the infiltration and expansion of communism began to occupy an ever more prominent position in the American foreign policy strategy. This in turn enabled Marshal Phibunsongkhram, a war-time dictator and collaborator with the Japanese, not only to come back to power but to become a “friend” and “ally” of the United States, his former enemy. The underlying motivation on both sides was primarily pragmatism. Phibun was expected to maintain stability in Thailand and to side with the United States in its fight against communism. The United States, on the other hand, was expected to prop up Phibun’s government by the means of massive military assistance and economic aid and to help him maintain his position. As the preceding pages have shown, in general both sides kept their part of the bargain, though arguably it was Phibun who benefited more from the deal. On the other hand, the limits of American “friendship” became apparent when Phibun’s influence began to wane and his regime’s cherished stability began to

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<sup>95</sup> USDS, *FRUS 1955–1957*, 913.

erode. The American approach to the 1957 political crisis was purely pragmatic and as soon as the continuation of Thailand's foreign policy orientation was affirmed, Phibun was largely forgotten – a very fitting conclusion to a relationship that was based on pragmatism, and virtually only on pragmatism, from the very outset.