GOODBYE TO THAILAND

Sir Anthony Rumbold to Mr. Brown. (Received 18 July)

SUMMARY

The Thais are as difficult to understand as other orientals. (Paragraph 1.)

The domination of Bangkok. (Paragraph 2.)

General contentment and lethargy. (Paragraph 3.)

The rigid structure of society and the rules which govern it. Unwillingness to assume responsibility and endemic corruption. (Paragraphs 4–6.)

The country is governed by a benevolent dictatorship without a dictator. A description of some of the leading personalities. (Paragraphs 7–11.)

If there are constitutional developments it will be because the Thais like to be thought up to date. (Paragraph 12.)

Boom conditions and prospects of indefinite economic progress. (Paragraph 13.)

Importance of not over-estimating the terrorist movement in the north-east. (Paragraph 14.)

The Thais are afraid of China and although they do not like to be dependent on foreigners they will tolerate the American presence as long as they feel that it keeps danger at a distance. If the Americans let go in Viet-Nam the Thais might change course. There is not likely to be a sudden revulsion against the Americans. (Paragraphs 15–16.)

Our stake in Thailand is the same as that of other West European countries. Our membership of SEATO makes no difference. Our export performance could be better. (Paragraph 17.)

The Thai tradition of sending children to England to be educated gives us a certain advantage. The best way we can help the Thais is in the field of education. (Paragraph 18.)

The pleasures of living in Thailand, the virtues of the Thais and a tribute to the Embassy staff. (Paragraphs 19–20.)


I am on the point of leaving Bangkok after a stay of two and a half years and have the honour to set down some thoughts about Thailand which I hope may be of some interest to my successor. They are thoughts rather than convictions. There is a theory that the Thais are rather easier for Europeans to understand than are other oriental people. I do not believe this theory. It seems to me that Sino-Indian/Malay/Thai ways of thought are so alien to ours that analogies between events in South-East Asia and events in Europe are nearly always misleading, that forecasts based on such analogies are bound to be wrong, that the motives of Asians are impossible for us to estimate with any exactness, and that Thailand and the Thais offer no exception
to these precepts. The general level of intelligence of the Thais is rather low, a good deal lower than ours and much lower than that of the Chinese. But there are a few very intelligent and articulate ones and I have often tried to get some of these with whom I believe myself to be on close terms to come clean with me and to describe their national characteristics as they see them themselves and to explain why they behave in this way rather than in that way. The result has never been satisfactory. Something always seems to be held back. Perhaps I am not on such close terms with them as I think I am. Perhaps they do not believe that I will believe them or even understand them if they were to be entirely frank. It may be that they are just determined for reasons unknown to retain a last barrier of reserve. There is also a handful of foreigners in Bangkok who have lived here for a long time and whose opinions about the Thais are worth listening to. But most of these confess to there being great areas of Thai mentality which they have long ago given up attempting to penetrate. My own thoughts about the character of the Thais and about the things they are likely to be up to next therefore have a strictly limited value.

2. There is one thing that nevertheless seems to me to be quite certain and that is that Bangkok dominates Thailand in the same way in which for centuries Paris dominated France. Events outside Thailand can obviously have an effect inside the capital and in some circumstances provincial developments might have a limited influence. But all political, economic and social changes of any importance in Thailand are the result of calculations and decisions taken by men in Bangkok and reflect the development of relationships between men or groups of men in Bangkok. There are historical reasons for this. Until recently it was the King who decided everything. It was only by being attached to the King's court that anyone could hope to acquire influence or money. The great courtiers and officers of state lived at the capital wherever it might be, Ayutthaya or Bangkok. They might be sent out to govern provinces or lead armies but although they received rewards in the form of land they never thought of living on their estates any more than did the courtiers of Louis XIV. There are no great country houses in Thailand and although the Princes of Chiangmai, Lampang and Nan still conduct a shadowy existence there is no provincial aristocracy. The Chinese merchants and money-lenders can make small fortunes in the provincial towns but if they want to get into the big league they must move into the city. There is no other city. Bangkok now has a population of 2½ million (it will be 6 or 7 million by 1980). The next largest town has a population of 100,000. Bangkok is the only real port for ocean-going vessels and when they build a new port they will build it near at hand. Industrial development is centred in the neighbourhood of the capital. A civil servant sent out to work in the provinces feels as if he had been exiled. Medical services in Bangkok are quite good, but in some provinces they scarcely exist at all, so reluctant are doctors and nurses to take up appointments outside the city and so small are the financial inducements to do so. There are some new provincial universities but the authorities are having great difficulty in getting them properly staffed. Bangkok sucks everything to itself. It is more over-remarkable how little the average citizen of Bangkok knows at first hand about the rest of his country. Those who can afford to travel for pleasure go to Europe and America. Apart from occasional visits to nearby seaside resorts or to Chiangmai which has a certain snob appeal they do not dream of travelling in any other part of the country. They are simply not interested.

3. The Government is conscious of the dangers of this top-heaviness and with the help of foreign loans and advice is trying to open up the country as fast as it can. The construction of roads and the expansion of agriculture are the top priorities in its national development plans. But if we except the limited areas, chiefly in the north-east, in which years of neglect have contributed to the growth of a small and primitive Viet Cong type revolutionary movement, it is fair to say that in spite of Bangkok the peasants, who constitute more than three-quarters of the population, seem for the most part to be happy and by Asian standards prosperous. They suffer from plenty of illnesses such as tuberculosis and liver-fluke which combine with the climate in draining their energy. But there is little malnutrition except in some places, as the result of ignorance, among infants. The average peasant owns his own holding. He can grow enough rice to sell to the local Chinese middle-man, he owns a bullock or two and he is showing none of the grinding poverty and squalor that is the lot of most poor people in most of the less fortunate countries. Perhaps the most remarkable thing about him is the care and love he gives to his children, who are usually sent to school if they are not too old for it already. The King is quite conscious of the hundreds of thousands of poor children who are not in school and he is doing his best to provide more schools. Some years ago he made the workers in the factories and the city serve as a model and he has done the same with the government officials. He now wants to extend the system, and I feel the Government will be happy to do so as it will help to make the country as a whole more efficient and to promote the new spirit of co-operation between the elite and the masses that is the basis of the new conception of the monarchy.

4. The information I have gathered is that of the last few years, but of course it is now far more accurate than it was in the mid-1930s when the first interviews were made. I would go to the market at the end of the day and in some cases I would have several hours of conversation with the people I met. But of course it is not possible to get an accurate picture of the whole population, and even the facts about the educated class, precisely those people who are the most often possessed and used by the Government, are a minority. The King is, of course, the first among equals among the handful of educated people who play a role in government.
himself to be quite quick at learning how to grow other crops, though he is not generally very energetic or ambitious. Some of the new wealth created in the central by trade and industry percolates down to him although he gets less than his fair share of it. He even looks better dressed than he did two years ago. New roads and irrigation schemes bring him unlooked-for benefits however slowly. He is not interested in ideas and does not care much one way or the other about what happens in Bangkok. He has a vague feeling of loyalty to the King. He is almost impervious to political propaganda. For the next few years at least the foreigner who wants to follow what is going on in Thailand had best keep his attention fixed on Bangkok. Let him by all means travel around for his own pleasure to visit some of the 40,000 villages and to see the background against which the action in Bangkok is being played out. But let him concentrate on watching the actors in the front of the stage and dismiss from his mind the idea that they may suddenly be thrust aside by the incursion of a crowd of fresh actors from the wings. I do not believe that any such thing is likely to happen, at least not in the time of my successor for whose benefit I am writing this despatch.

4. The outward aspect of Bangkok has undergone some regrettable changes during the last few years. When I caught a glimpse of it in 1955 it was a pretty place of canals and trees and scarlet-and-gold temples. It is now fast becoming one of the ugliest towns in the world, indistinguishable from the meaner parts of Tokyo or Los Angeles. But there have been no corresponding changes in the habits or attitudes of the inhabitants though there are of course many more of them. The traveller Henri Mouhot described the whole of Siamese society in the mid-19th century as being "in a state of permanent prostration, every inferior receiving his orders from his superior with signs of abject submission and respect". This is metaphorically still true of Bangkok and in some details still literally true. But I would go so far as to make the unfeasible assertion that the most steadfast feature in the body politic of Thailand is irritating and even repulsive though it may be. In precisely this sense of his place in society possessed and accepted by each and every individual. The god-like position of the King is questioned by nobody, not even by the handful of Thai exiles who compose seditious propaganda (at least not openly). Foreigners get sickened by the unctuous servility with which the local press reports the daily doings of His Majesty; and conversely even Europeanised Thais are quick to resent any off-hand references to the King or the Queen in the foreign press however well intentioned these may be. Below the King, very far below him, the individuals who control the nation are ranged in their respective places each one knowing exactly how he or she stands in relation to each other. These relationships are perfectly clear to the Thais themselves and are on the whole accepted as part of the natural order of things. The foreigner must not try to unravel and define them in all their complexity because the task is too difficult. The best he can do is to try to understand the general rules by which they seem to be established.

5. Since the revolution of 1932 which put an end to the absolute monarchy, though scarcely affecting the veneration owed to the monarch, proximity to the source of military power has been the most important factor in assuring influence and position. In that year there was a sort of cataclysm in the Siamese universe producing a new magnetic field and setting the stars on new courses. The shock-waves are still felt to-day although their force has diminished since the death of Field-Marshal Sarit in 1963. Money is another important factor. All Thais love money and the possession of it is regarded as a sign of virtue or merit. They call it vitamin M. The amount of it and the use made of it is of more significance in their eyes than the method by which it has been acquired. Family connections are very important. Even good birth is still a factor to be reckoned with, for weight is still given to titles and honorifics and the rules of social precedence continue to be strictly regarded. Nearly all those who have handles to their names are descended from one or other or both of the great 19th century Kings, Mongkut or his son Chulalongkorn, each of whom had about 100 children. Moreover until 1932 the State was almost entirely administered by this royal nobility with the result that the public service came to be regarded and is still regarded not just as respectable but as the most honourable of all possible careers. On great State occasions when everyone is dressed up as though he were at the court of King Babar the senior civil servants wear the same white uniforms as the couriers.
and are indistinguishable from them. And the tradition of obsequiousness which might be proper or at least understandable in a royal court has been carried over into the Civil Service. Independence of mind is frowned upon and willingness to take responsibility is firmly discouraged. But the making of money by the exploitation of official position is accepted as normal provided certain understood limits are not exceeded. This has always been so and it is natural that it should continue to be so, so long as the public service confers more prestige than do other occupations and yet remains miserably paid.

6. At the end of the list of factors which determine the rules of relationship is the collection of human qualities or assets, intelligence, good education, hard work, single-mindedness and so forth which we ourselves pretend to prize. In Thailand these qualities count for a certain amount but they count for very much less than they do in Europe or America. As time goes on perhaps they will come to count for more. The affairs of the country become more complicated as it develops and the men who are called upon to regulate have to have a certain equipment which is not necessarily possessed by a general however tough or a princieling however near the throne. Some of the top civil servants are men of ability, trained for the most part in Europe or the United States. But naturally gifted and hard-working and even honest as they may be they are still a long way from playing the part which we would think it proper for them to play. And they themselves are still too much affected by the rules which govern Thai society to claim such a part as their right or to feel any deep resentment about the handicaps under which they suffer. Many of them feel frustrated and they will talk about this frustration quite openly, but they are still a long way from contemplating any action to redress their complaints.

7. Thailand is governed by a benevolent dictatorship without a dictator. It is benevolent in the sense that it does its best according to its lights to promote the welfare of the people and that the rule of law prevails. Apart from minor changes made necessary by death or extreme old-age the composition of the Government is the same as it was four years ago. I can see no good reason for supposing that it will not be the same four years from now (though the Minister of Agriculture and the Minister of Industry are both getting a little dodderly and the Minister of Economic Affairs may be sent abroad as an Ambassador). The orbits in which members of this Government move are fixed by the rules to which I have referred.

8. The more important Thai leaders are worth considering individually. The one with whom I have had most to do has been the Foreign Minister, Colonell Thanat Khoman. In spite of his prefix he is not a military man but a diplomat, the son of a judge and with Chinese blood in his veins. He is quite comfortably off and has a rich wife. He retains his position principally through the protection of the King, who began to take an interest in him a year or two ago, as well as through his unquestioned abilities. He is also on good terms with the Prime Minister. But he is vain, touchy and disputatious. Most of his colleagues in the Government dislike him for his intellectual arrogance and because he lets everybody including themselves know that he despises them. He keeps everything to himself and is beastly to his subordinates. He sees himself as the great anti-apperson, the spiritual descendant of the opponents of Munich to the lessons of which he continually refers. Any allusion to peace talks in Viet-Nam makes him shiver. He is a strong adherent of the American alliance and supporter of American policies, though his attitude towards the United States is qualified by xenophobia and the Americans find him difficult to handle. He is a vigorous promoter of all forms of regional co-operation. I think he is ambitious and would like to be Prime Minister one day and I feel fairly confident that the King sees him in this light. But without the backing of the King, and for the time being at any rate of the Prime Minister, he would soon be cast aside. There are some who think that he has already steered his country too far away from the traditional Thai policy of non-involvement for his own future good and that retribution will one day overtake him. His obsession about "liberals", about the French and about Cambodia sometimes make one wonder whether he is altogether sane. But he is not entirely repulsive. He quite likes the British, indeed he worked with us in the war, but he regrets our present weakness and our tendency to appeasement as he sees it.
9. There are two other civilians worth mentioning who can be expected to play important parts in their country's future. One of these is Nai Pote Sarasin, a former Prime Minister and at present Minister of National Development. The other is Dr. Puey Ungpakorn, Governor of the Bank of Thailand. They are both outstandingly able and between them deserve to share most of the credit for their country's present prosperity and for the prospects of undiminished growth which are plain for all to see. Pote who is almost pure Chinese is conventionally ambitious and would be willing to perform almost any political service which the military might ask of him. He is a very rich man but owes his position mainly to the good grace of the military and if ever some sort of political party life were to develop he might emerge as the leader of the Government party or even as Prime Minister again as the nominee of the military. Dr. Puey who incidentally has an English wife and a first-class war record is quite a different type. He is unique and seems to owe nobody any favours. He has reached his position by sheer ability and by his well-deserved reputation for incorruptibility. The strength of the currency is his monument. He is known for his independence of mind and for his readiness even to criticise the Government in public if he really feels driven to doing so. But since he has no special link with the military and is neither well off nor well born I cannot see him succeeding to the leadership in present circumstances. He knows his place just as any other Thai does. But my successor will do well to cultivate him not only for his own sake but also because if there were some unpredictable convulsion leading to a further modification of the rules Dr. Puey might be brought forward as a sort of national saviour. He is the only individual about whom it is possible for this to be said and he must be conscious of it.

10. Brief mention must be made of Prince Dhani, President of the Privy Council and one of the only scholars in this lowbrow country. Over 80 and of an amiability bordering on feeble-mindedness he is worth considering for what he represents. He is the guardian of arcane court lore and the regulator of royal custom and procedure. The military do not venture into the field over which he presides. They stand in awe of him without at all resenting him because he represents the royal principle which they also respect and feel the need of. Prince Dhani will in due course be succeeded by some other old gentleman whose position will entitle him to the same consideration.

11. The dictatorship is emboldened jointly in the two military leaders, Field-Marshal Thanom Kittikachorn, Prime Minister and Minister of Defence, and General Prapass Charsathiana, Minister of the Interior and Commander-in-Chief of the Army. The main levers of power, that is to say the army and the police, are firmly in the hands of General Prapass. But Field-Marshal Thanom has the backing of the King and enjoys a greater degree of general popularity and goodwill than does General Prapass, although the latter also has the common touch. These in simple terms are the factors that for a number of years have made it convenient to this rather ill-assorted pair to work in harness. They are quite different one from the other. Thanom is benevolent, accommodating, cautious, not spectacularly rich, very Thai in appearance and manner. Prapass is a gambler, rough and decisive, he and his wife have accumulated a fortune (though not on the Sarit scale) and he looks and would if necessary act like a Japanese war lord. Prapass does not carry quite enough general goodwill to topple Thanom and Thanom is not quite strong enough to dispense with Prapass. Their alliance of convenience was sealed some time ago by a marriage between their children. Stories of political plots to take over the Government used before my time to form one of the main subjects of Bangkok conversation. And when I first came here there were still some going around. They are never heard now. The fact is that there is no other officer or policeman in sight who can aspire to be the rival of either of these two. And anyway the days of the coup d'état are probably over for good. Material considerations apart anyone who attempted a coup d'état would certainly incur the displeasure of the King as well perhaps as being deterred by the fear of arousing the ridicule of foreigners. Changes at the top can now only be made by arrangement. Both Thanom and Prapass are in good health (Prapass' eye trouble is no worse than General de Gaulle's) and there is no reason why the duumvirate should not continue for a long time to come. It is not a vigorous administration and there are some who regret the days of Sarit. The machine works slowly. Few decisions of importance are taken below the level of the Cabinet for the
12. There is at present an interim Constitution in force of an openly authoritarian character. A constituent assembly was appointed in 1959 with the task of drafting a permanent Constitution and they have been at it ever since. The official theory is that the draft will be completed in time to be presented to the King on his 40th birthday next December. If this happens then the situation in the north-east or the international situation could still be used as an excuse for postponing the elections which should in theory follow the promulgation of the Constitution by the King at an interval of six or nine months. Elections would present a problem to Tha nom and Prapass. There would presumably have to be a Government party to win them but this would have first to be got going and somebody would have to be appointed its leader. Attempts have been made during the last year or so to organise some sort of party life but they have run into the sand. And Tha nom, Prapass and Pote have each of them at one time or another and with a greater or lesser degree of disingenuousness disclaimed any desire to be the leader of a Government party although there is no other very obvious person who could do it. The fact is that almost nobody in Thailand is interested in the idea of party politics in the sense in which these are understood in the West. There have been political parties as well as elections in the past in Thailand but they have been artificial affairs. I have only met two Thais, one a constitutional lawyer and the other the discredited leader of the defunct “democratic party” who have shown any signs of sincerity in expressing the hope for constitutional development. Some Thais pay lip-service to the idea in the hearing of foreigners because they think it is what they ought to do. But even the rather phoney elder statesman Prince Wan who is chairman of the constitutional commission occupied with drawing up the new Constitution, although greatly enjoying the intricate arguments which accompany his work, seems not to be remotely disturbed by the thought that it may never be completed or that if completed may never be put into use. He is quite cynical in his conversation on the subject and anyway he is himself on the side of the generals. One wonders therefore what all the fuss is about. If the Thais stick on the whole content with the present system why do the authorities continue to bother about a new Constitution in which nobody is interested? I think it is because they feel rightly or wrongly that the outside world and in particular the Americans expect them to modernise their political institutions as they are modernising their economic and (to a much lesser extent) their social institutions. I am sure that the King feels this strongly. Moreover, neighbouring countries, including even South Viet-Nam in the middle of its war, have parliaments and elections of a kind. The Thais must feel that comparisons are being drawn by foreigners to their disadvantage. They mind a great deal about what foreigners think of them, though they resent any interference by foreigners and I am sure that the United States Government has never put any direct pressure on them in this matter. Why should it want to? The Thais of course attach great importance to forms. They might therefore genuinely feel more comfortable if it could be made to appear that they were governed in what passes for an up-to-date way even though it might not really suit them and they had no genuine desire for it. Everybody who is not a manual labourer in Bangkok now possesses a 37 million dollar’s worth of arms and it is certainly not a little more than a matter of some moment when the war is over. American equipment is particularly unnecessary. The Thais are at present deploying their newly acquired armament in the North areas, for reasons which are unconnected with other, and they are not doing so. And so it may be that when a forced peace comes to the village, and to the rest of Viet-Nam, the Thais will, as long as their position is still secure, be as they are now, as long as the North Viet-Namians are what they now are. It is absurd to think of any rash on the just.
it. Not only is the output of rice expected to increase considerably but so is that of almost every other crop including even that of rubber in spite of the low price it now fetches on the world market. The relative importance of agriculture will nevertheless decline. It is expected that by 1971 the value of Thailand’s industrial output will be more than half the value of its agricultural output. Twice as many ships now call at Bangkok as did 10 years ago. The foreign currency reserves are enough to pay for 14 months’ imports. The Thais have no difficulty in attracting investment from abroad and foreign businessmen and investors need have no fear of being unable to remit their profits. The International Bank has described Thailand as “the perfect debtor”.

14. Against this background of political stability in Bangkok and of unremitting economic expansion it seems to me a mistake to make much of the acts of banditry and terrorism which continue to plague the inhabitants of some limited areas in the north-east and in the south, though these are what mostly interest foreign journalists. The “subversive threat” is on a very small scale. Even Prassap in whose interest it lies to exaggerate the threat has estimated the number of “terrorists” under arms as not more than 1,300 in the whole country (population 31 million rising to 37 million in 1971). The authorities are certainly slow in reducing the threat to entirely negligible proportions as with a little more energy, better organisation and some more special equipment including in particular helicopters and communications equipment they could quite easily do. The Americans are now providing much of the equipment that is needed. But the Thai authorities are lazy, they are not used to deploying soldiers and policemen in remote areas, the rival intelligence organisations are uncordoned and jealous of each other, and the whole thing is expensive. And so it drags on and catches the headlines whenever a village headman is murdered or a forced propaganda meeting is held in a village, and the Americans with memories of Viet-Nam in 1958 get downcast. But so long as there is no collapse of the American position in the rest of Indo-China, and so long as the trained infiltrators from China, North Viet-Nam and Laos are numbered as they now are only in handfuls, it would be absurd to get too worried about this little rash on the healthy body of Thailand. The Thai Communist Party can scarcely be said to exist and such as it is is becoming more and more vulnerable to penetration. There is no indigenous Communist menace. The régime is more likely to be troubled in years to come by the discontent which normally beset a city that grows too fast, proletarianised country-boys and educated or semi-educated unemployed. But these troubles are a long way off and will have nothing directly to do with Communism or China.

15. Practically all Thais however genuinely feel menaced by China. Though they have successfully assimilated most of the Chinese in their midst their bones are chilled by the thought of this vast country almost on their doorstep outnumbering them by twenty times, soon to possess effective thermonuclear weapons and apparently gone quite mad. For as long as can be foreseen they will therefore cling to their American protectors. There is no division of opinion about the need to do this. There are only different degrees of regret that it should be necessary since it is contrary to their tradition to depend upon one ally and before the Japanese came in 1941 they had never for long willingly allowed a foreign Power to implant its presence among them. So they hope that the Americans will go away one day when the world is safer. But they are not likely to want to dispense with the American presence before that day comes, unless they decide that it attracts more perils that it averts. This they might be inclined to think if the American resolve to maintain South Viet-Nam in the American sphere of influence were to weaken. The Thais do not see their country as a forward bastion of the “free world.” They prefer to be well behind the battlements at a safe distance. They want the Americans to intensify the war in Viet-Nam and peace talk makes them nervous. Moreover the Viet-Namites are their old enemies as the Chinese are not. They are therefore quite glad to see North Viet-Nam being destroyed though they do not say so aloud. The horrors of the war do not move them. The fact that they are perpetrated by white men on Asians makes no difference. Thus I believe in the application of the domino theory to Thailand in the sense that the Thais would not willingly allow the Americans simply to fall back behind their borders. If there was any question of falling back the Thais would probably change course with alacrity and seek some new and less committed
status. They would not “go Communist” whatever that means and it is quite possible that the same individuals, including even Thonat, might in such an event lead Thailand along a path very similar to the one followed by the much abused Prince Sihanouk.

16. But none of this is likely to happen since the Americans are unlikely to relax their grip on Viet-Nam. Speculation on the subject is therefore perhaps rather pointless. What is more to the point is to try to estimate how long, assuming that there is no great change in circumstances outside Thailand, the Thais are going to tolerate the undoubted affront to their national self-respect represented by the presence of so many thousands of Americans sprawling all over the five great air bases, breathing down their necks in every corner of their Administration, pushing up the rents and corrupting the girls. There has been a faint murmur about this ever since I have been here and it has grown a little louder lately. In the course of their history the Thais have more than once suddenly rounded on the presumptuous foreigner. The idea of Thais being always gentle and patient is only valid up to a point. They are given to explosions of anger and the most appalling crimes of violence are recorded daily in the Press. My French colleague who has been here for eight years expects a sudden revulsion against the Americans at any moment. It is true that it was only with extreme reluctance that the Thai Government recently acknowledged what everyone knew about the use being made by the Americans of Thai bases for bombing Viet-Nam and that this was because it disliked admitting that the Americans were using Thai soil as a convenience and because it did not wish the record of its involvement with the Americans to be unambiguously clear. But I think M. Clarac’s judgment is due to wishful thinking. My own view is that the Thais will tolerate the American presence in its existing form for just as long as it seems necessary to keep the Chinese and Viet-Namese enemies as far away from Thailand as possible.

17. Our own stake in Thailand is no different in kind than that of any other West European country. It is just as much in the interest of France or Germany as it is in the interest of the United Kingdom that Thailand should preserve its independence and prosperity. The fact that we belong to SEATO is beside the point. If we had been sufficiently far-sighted in 1954 we would not have joined in founding such an organisation. As our forces are withdrawn from Malaysia and Singapore so will “force declarations” to the various SEATO plans have to be modified. Anyway they are not commitments. The only SEATO commitments we have are those which flow from the Manila Treaty itself and we can interpret these in any way we wish. I say these things about SEATO only to dispose of the suggestion which is sometimes heard that our connection with it invests us with a greater responsibility and concern for the welfare of Thailand than are possessed by our European neighbours. We are all of us interested to the same degree. There is no reason why the United Kingdom should concern itself particularly in order to aid Thailand. We owe the Thais no special debt. Thailand is no longer so poor a country as to make a unique claim on our unselfish generosity. The main justification for our continuing to provide Thailand with some modest economic help is that if we alone among the major developed nations allowed our aid to tail off this would affect the goodwill which we now enjoy and our commerce would eventually suffer. The Thais are past-masters at taking it out on foreign interests which have incurred their displeasure and conversely they respond quickly to quite small gestures. Our main concern ought to be to enlarge our trade and we should shape such modest aid programmes as we can afford with this selfish end firmly in view. As it is the figures for our exports go slowly up but the market is expanding the whole time and we are barely managing to retain our relative share of it. British firms are displaying more interest in the Thai market than they did even a year ago and there is therefore some reason to expect an improvement in our commercial performance. But there will have to be continual prodding in London and if we want to land any big contracts we must be much more liberal with our credit.

18. One of our assets here is that a large proportion of the ruling class has been educated in England. The tradition of English education goes back a long way and shows few signs of declining. The King is having his only son educated in England because he believes strongly that the Thai youth is in need of the kind of discipline which only our schools can provide. In terms
of actual numbers more Thais now go to the United States than to England mainly because there is more money available for scholarships. But most Thais would send their children to England for preference. They still have a touching faith in the character-building qualifications of English schools. The whole top crust is strongly marked by the imprint of the English educational tradition. At the biggest "public school" in Bangkok the boys play fives and sing "forty years on" and at luncheon with the board of the Bank of Thailand the talk is about the county cricket championship. One must accept all this without scoffing because it all helps. But we can do more in the field of education than just benevolently encourage old-school-tie sentiments among the rich and privileged. Precisely because of the growth of population and the spread of wealth it is in the field of popular education that the Thais most need help and if money were no object it should be the British who should give them this help since they are accustomed to learning from us. The civil service is not only over-manned and under-paid but with the exception of its leaders is abysmally ill-equipped. If any Thai Government tried to imitate the Government of Burma and introduced State control over every activity the result would be catastrophic. The inefficiency of the lower ranks of the civil service does enough harm as it is in this strongly capitalistic economy. It is in fact the greatest obstacle to further economic progress (and therefore to bigger markets and therefore to more British exports). The hierarchical and submissive attitude of the Thais to which I have referred is partly responsible but the main reason is plain lack of education. Although the number of students in the universities has increased by 50 per cent in the last five years there has been no improvement in the standard of teaching. Moreover in most of the disciplines it is necessary for the advanced student to know English. There are no Thai text books on such subjects as engineering. But taken as a whole the Thais are poor linguists and there are very few good Thai teachers of English. The best thing we could do for them while serving our own interests at the same time would be to step up the help we give them in the field of education generally and in the field of English teaching in particular. I do not undervalue the help we give them in the field of agriculture (in particular cotton production) from which we should ourselves benefit in the long run by greater sales of agricultural machinery and fertilisers. Nor do I object to our providing the Thais with various specialist services from time to time. But teaching and in particular language teaching is by far the most important of the fields in which we can help the Thais. Every pound spent would bring more direct benefits to the Thais and indirect benefits to us than many pounds spent on more grandiose engineering or road-building projects. We can leave these to the Americans and the Australians and the World Bank. If we concentrate our little aid effort on education we would be working in a domain in which the Thais have for generations been used to following our lead. Within a few months I hope that the British Council will be installed in some brand-new premises specially built for their purpose. If I have done nothing else here I am glad to have played some part in promoting this particular project and I am confident that my successor will take full advantage of it. If anybody still thinks in terms of influence and prestige when considering the British stake in Thailand, he should be concerned with this sort of thing and with the commercial exploitation of the great opportunities offered by the requirements of the Thai development plan. He should forget about the threadbare trappings of the SEATO military alliance.

19. I have very much enjoyed living for a while in Thailand. One would have to be very insensitive or puritanical to take the view that the Thais had nothing to offer. It is true that they have no literature, no painting and only a very odd kind of music, that their sculpture, their ceramics and their dancing are borrowed from others and that their architecture is monotonous and their interior decoration hideous. Nobody can deny that gambling and golf are the chief pleasures of the rich and that licentiousness is the main pleasure of them all. But it does a faded European good to spend some time among such a jolly, extrovert and anti-intellectual people. And if anybody wants to know what their culture consists of the answer is that it consists of themselves, their excellent manners, their fastidious habits, their graceful gestures and their elegant persons. If we are elephants and oxen they are gazelles and butterflies. On the other hand I am glad not to be staying here longer because I am certain that the deterioration in my mental processes is due not only to

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the onset of old age but more particularly to the enervating effects of the climate which no amount of exercise and airconditioning can nullify.

20. Finally I must express my gratitude to the staff of this Embassy without whose cheerfulness and industry I could not have had so agreeable a stay.

21. I am sending copies of this despatch to Her Majesty's Ambassador at Vientiane and to the Political Adviser to the Commander-in-Chief Far East at Singapore.

I have, &c.

A. RUMBOLD.