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DEPARTMENT OF STATE

AIRGRAM

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TO : DEPARTMENT OF STATE

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FROM : AmEmbassy BANGKOK — DATE: February 11, 1971

SUBJECT : Deputy Prime Minister Pote Sarasin comes in second best in "Meet the Press" interview with Kukrit Pramoj

REF :

In a Thai historical first, Pote Sarasin, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of National Development agreed to be interviewed by Thailand's quick-witted and sharp-tongued newspaper man, Kukrit Pramoj in a "meet the press" TV program on January 29. While the program was clearly intended from the government point of view to serve an educational purpose in explaining development projects, Kukrit's approach in his questions left an impression of bumbling and poor handling of corruption both by Pote and the government in general. As a consequence Pote's personal reputation was tarnished and it is doubtful that other ministers would be willing to appear in similar programs in the near future.

Kukrit launched the program with a series of questions on the political future of the country, the next Prime Minister (would it be General Praphat), and corruption within the Department of Irrigation. Reportedly, Pote had been warned that the questioning would be sharp, and had in fact invited Kukrit to ask about anything he was interested in. However, Pote was obviously not prepared for Kukrit's tenacious and probing attack. Pote did manage to field the questions on the future of political developments and the identity of the next Prime Minister by giving typically vague and evasive answers. However, he fared less well in the questioning on corruption within the Department of Irrigation. Referring to a long-pending case in which officials in that Department are accused of enriching themselves through cement purchases and forest clearance programs, Kukrit charged Pote with ignoring the recommendations of

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two different committees named to examine charges of corruption; and in failing to suspend the two officials involved.

Kukrit took advantage of the unwillingness of the TV announcer to attempt to moderate the questioning and gave full play to his own wit in pressing Pote, to the latter's obvious confusion and embarrassment. Objective observers of the debate generally agree that Kukrit acted unfairly and "beat too far"; at the same time it is quite obvious that Pote came out second best leaving the viewing audience with the impression he had been less than vigilant in controlling corruption within his Ministry.

The program has drawn a surprising amount of public and private comment. The press and several MP's have criticized the poor showing of Pote. According to press reports General Prapat, while praising the idea behind the program, complained that it was handled in a way to cause misunderstanding among viewers and conflict between the people and the government. The Prime Minister has also indicated his own unhappiness with the results of the program and told the press he felt the interview was of little use to the people. (In the meantime, the Commander of the Criminal Suppression Division in the Police Department has ordered police to speed up the investigations of the officials in the Irrigation Department.)

Even the King is reported to be concerned about Pote's performance. In a private audience with former U.S. Ambassador to Thailand, Kenneth Young, the King expressed displeasure over the program in which he believes Pote made the entire government look bad. The King told Ambassador Young he was increasingly troubled by the question of corruption and the failure of the present government to solve the problems of the country. Ambassador Young quoted the King as saying that "something must be done soon, the government must be changed". Again referring to Pote, the King remarked "the man only thinks about cement deals and is mad about dams, roads, etc." In an aside to Ambassador Young's son, Steven, the King's ADC, Admiral Chaiyasaeks Diskul, said he thought the King may well have put Kukrit up to the attack on Pote. (This we are inclined to doubt as such an action would not accord with the King's own character.)

Comment: There is certainly little doubt that Pote's reputation suffered as a result of his appearances on this TV program. This incident is one in a series of events resulting in considerable slippage in Pote's personal reputation which was once thought by many to be unassailable. In addition to complaints over his handling of corruption within his own Ministry, Embassy sources in recent months have accused Pote of being involved in some rather shady deals with Thanom's son Narong, accepting bribes and kick backs from Japanese investors, having a penchant for heavy gambling, and passing privileged information to his son who heads the local Coca Cola company prior to the tax increases of last year.

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