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THE CHIEF OF PROTOCOL
DEPARTMENT OF STATE
WASHINGTON

11540

June 29, 1967

MEMORANDUM FOR THE PRESIDENT
THE WHITE HOUSE

SUBJECT: Private Conversation with the King of Thailand

During conversations with the King, primarily in the automobile yesterday and today, I learned that while he was most grateful for this visit and the chance he and the Queen had to see the country, he was very concerned, if not depressed, that the U. S. Government did not fully appreciate and take into proper account the needs, primarily the defense needs of the Thai people, i.e., helicopters and safe modern jet planes.

The King said that he is thought of as a person who cannot get down to the level of his people because of his high station and the protocol requirements attached to it. Indeed, he said, when he visits the provinces and approaches people, they withdraw out of shyness and fear that those whom he may recognize or greet would be the victims of community jealousy. Thus the King makes private arrangements to see petitioners. It is in this clandestine way that he learns what their needs, fears, and hopes may be. But on the surface he is not assumed to have direct, pertinent information about them, so his opinions about their welfare are not given weight even among the "experts" of his own country.

It is difficult, in fact, for him to make his views known in a straightforward manner. For example, his Defense officials planned a fly-over of jets to discourage a rumored student riot which he knew would add fury to the fire rather than put it out. But since his views are considered academic on such matters, he resorted to the subterfuge of having his staff request that no such fly-over be made at the appointed time because it would awaken the King from a much needed rest.

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The riot did not occur. His sensitivities, therefore, rather than his judgment were honored. On another occasion he was being shown an earthwork dike which was described as very strong; he pointed out that it needn't be because no water would be found in the intended irrigation system to fill it. This observation was later corroborated by tests.

Domestic reservations about his judgment coupled with accents in the foreign press on less substantive interests such as jazz music tend to undermine his position as a serious and capable leader, he said. He remains impassive in the face of gossipy press commentary such as his alleged tardiness at the White House Dinner but this demeanor conceals a live sensitivity to the cumulative impact both at home and abroad of such trivial reports. It is a little thing, he said, but chips away at his dignity.

The King was ironic about the "freedom" of the American press which on the one hand talks foolishly about a non-existent gold saxaphone and on the other hand reveals Top Secret understandings with the American Government which jeopardize the freedom and security of his country. He said though we were a "United States" we are not exactly a "united people" in that our press seems to represent a world of its own at times. The Queen touched him gently, and with a smile, saying, "that is a free press."

The Queen then told me that a personal report is made to the King of the death of every Thai soldier and that he in many cases supports their rather large families with his personal funds, knowing that the pensions do not suffice.

The King said that a number of Thai soldiers have died defending free Laos but that their death goes unrecorded because they abandoned their identity and changed their name. He said that the North Vietnamese and/or Viet Cong infiltration into Northern Thailand has increased from bands of 20 to bands of 200 and that his people are generally very diligent in their resistance to this and their reporting of it, but with only three supporting helicopters in the area and other inadequacies, it was difficult for his government to promise protection and security to informers, one of whom recently was assassinated.

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Many officials in responsible positions are improperly trained at present and their judgment is therefore of modest value. However, he said that many young Thais were studying in England and the United States as well as Thailand and will fill the ranks of officialdom with a more competent level of performance.

He hoped that the American Government and people would continue to try to understand Thailand's commitment to freedom, the sacrifice it is making, and the need for our sensitive understanding and support.

I had the impression Ambassador Martin shares the King's concern.

James W. Symington

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