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September 15, 1967

MEMORANDUM FOR THE SECRETARY

SUBJECT: Present Issues Concerning Thailand: MEETING WITH THE PRESIDENT AT 1900 THIS EVENING

I understand that the President has asked to meet with you, Secretary McNamara, and Mr. Rostow to discuss four issues concerning Thailand:

a. [redacted] Praphat, possibly in conjunction with Dawee, may be planning to oust Thanom just before or after a new Constitution is announced, which is expected to be December 5. As these reports run, the ouster would be through pressure and in the nature of a back-stage action rather than an overt military coup -- but the latter is plainly not excluded.

b. Martin's suggestion that, as one measure to head this off, we urgently consider an early invitation to Thanom -- extended within the next month -- to make an official visit here early in 1968.

c. A lesser but related action -- that the President personally see Thanat and Pote together when they are both here early in October. This happens to be exactly what he did last year, but the call relates to the broader picture in that it would tend to strengthen the hand of these two civilians, of whom Pote in particular is a target of possible Praphat action.

d. The broader issue of our support to the Thai military, and our role in counterinsurgency. This is not mentioned [redacted] as one

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of the issues that is driving Praphat to possible action, but Martin believes that forthcoming action on the military side could have a stabilizing effect politically, as well as being justified in itself. Martin is not suggesting any change in our role with respect to counterinsurgency. His pitch is wholly in terms of meeting the $60 million MAP level we have already given the Thai for planning purposes this year, and being prepared with additional equipment when and if the Thai agree to send additional forces to Vietnam.

In addition, there is a sensitive fifth issue, which I have covered in a separate memorandum to you. This, too, has a direct relation to Praphat's action, although I think the basic arguments for sticking with the action we have taken are sound in any event -- as I have argued in the separate memorandum.

Further detail on the relevant issues is:

Praphat Plot

Martin has given us a lengthy evaluation, which we attach [redacted] (TAB A). The gist is that Praphat's designs are plausible, but quite possibly not nearly so clear and firm as the reports, taken alone, would suggest. Martin's evaluation -- which we share -- is that Praphat taking power would be a serious blow to the possibilities of a Constitution and elections. I would myself add -- in far stronger terms -- that Praphat's general image and the picture of a true "military dictatorship" in Thailand could have an extremely serious, even disastrous, effect on the basic image of our policy in Thailand, with side effects in Vietnam.

In short, we all agree strongly that we should take those reasonable actions that will minimize the possibility of Praphat going through with it, or indeed even attempting it. One is reminded of the adage: "The watched coup never

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boils." But nonetheless it is all too clear that Praphat has a considerable power base and that he and Dawee could pull this one off.

Thanom Visit

We have long had a Thanom visit in mind in any event, and did not include it in our 1967 recommendations largely because the King was here in June. Moreover, the President saw Thanom at Manila and may see him again if there is another summit in late November. And of course the President visited Thailand last year.

Nonetheless, we do now believe that this additional Praphat factor tips the scales heavily in the direction of the early invitation that Martin recommends. It is of course clear that the President will be cutting back his official schedule of visitors by spring, and we therefore suggest a date in late February or March, which happens to coincide with a possible Michigan State degree for Thanom. The important point -- and our recommendation -- is that the President agree now to extend an invitation to Thanom. In a dignity-conscious society such as Thailand, the mere fact of this invitation could have a tremendous stabilizing effect and it is not at all out of line with our relations with Thailand, and its general priority, for the President to extend such an invitation.

We anticipate that the Constitution will be announced in December, and this would mean that national elections would be scheduled in Thailand probably for next October. Thanom would be the government candidate if all has stayed level, and there is therefore the question whether a visit by him would be taken as intervention and an endorsement. In a February/March time frame, we do not believe this would be the case, or that this constitutes a negative factor in any way. On the contrary, the visit could be played in the direction of our close relations with Thailand, with stress on the fact that they had announced a Constitution (under Thanom) and were moving toward elections -- a process we could heartily endorse without appearing to favor Thanom unduly.

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Call on the President by Pote and Thanat

This seems to us fairly straightforward. He saw them both last year for the same reasons and at the same time. The call was brief, but it gave them excellent exposure to the press as they left the White House, and I do not believe it was a serious burden on the President. In relation to the Praphat matter, the point is that the reports make clear that Pote is a major target on the grounds that he has been "ineffective". Our own beliefs are exactly to the contrary, and we believe the fact is that Pote is being attacked as a powerful civilian and as a symbol of the growing civilian influence that should attend the whole process of a Constitution and elections. Pote is also a symbol against corruption, which he has done a great deal to reduce -- to the point where it is now at tolerable levels in key areas of government, with the conspicuous exception of Praphat himself.

Military Assistance

As noted above, Praphat's grounds for action -- as reported -- do not include this factor. Nonetheless, we would agree with Martin that it is important to the position of the Thanom government that we fulfill the $60 million military assistance level for this fiscal year which Martin, with full authority, revealed to the Thai as a planning figure in February. As John McNaughton certainly understood, and I believe Secretary McNamara accepts, this "planning figure" was at least three-fourths of the way to a flat commitment. Since Thai MAP is now service-funded, fund availability is not affected by MAP cuts. We do not suggest that Unger make any strong noises on his immediate arrival, as we still have some leverage we may wish to use with the Thai military establishment. But we should understand in our minds that we are going to keep to the $60 million level, and we need Unger's advice on just how firm and final to make it, and how soon.

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The second military assistance issue relates to the possibility of additional Thai forces. Within the past two weeks, Thanom has given Martin a lengthy bill of particulars, which we have not studied. No decision is therefore possible at this time, and the most we can suggest is that we should be prepared -- along the lines of the President's conversation with the King -- to make a few additions to the program in key areas related to the counterinsurgency problem. There are other serious issues concerning an additional Thai contingent -- including the problem of overseas allowances and their heavy budgetary cost -- but these, too, are not ripe for present decision. Finally, the Thai may be asking us to help train and equip additional forces if they send an additional contingent to Vietnam. This is an issue we have played very cautiously, and must continue to do so until we have assessed the total picture, including the size of the additional contingent they propose. In short, there are serious potential issues in this area; we should not dig ourselves in on them, but should try to work them out over the next two months into a total sensible deal.

Finally, nothing in the Praphat reports or any of the rest of this need affect our policy view of our role in counterinsurgency. Agreed DoD/State instructions were recently completed that permit the continued highly selective use of US air transport to carry Thai officials about and otherwise support non-combat operations. The instructions look to the phasing down of even this very modest form of direct support. There is general agreement that we must play this in the same key as at present, with any exception being considered on a case-by-case basis. We also agree that Unger should be looking to the possibility of reducing our role as the level of the insurgency and the growth in Thai capabilities permit, and we believe this should be left to careful review as he appraises the situation.

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Recommendation

We recommend that you take positions in line with the above. Unger leaves early next week. He has seen and concurred in this memorandum.

William P. Bundy

EA: WPBundy:bmm 9/15/67

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