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Original to be Filed in _____ Decentralized Files.

FILE DESIGNATION

A-351

NO.

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RS/AN
ANALYSIS BRANCH

TO : Department of State

Action Assigned to

Action Taken

DATE: June 22, 1970

FROM : Amembassy BANGKOK

Date of Action 7/13

SUBJECT : Sensitivity of Research Activities in Thailand

Action Office Symbol

REF :

Name of Officer

Several recent developments reveal the underlying sensitivity of the Thai to the extent and in some instances the nature of foreign-sponsored research activity in Thailand and, at the same time, have posed significant problems of conflict between the private actions of individual scholars and their USG-sponsored research activities. We are in the midst of a wave of public attention to these matters which at a minimum adds another element of friction to Thai-U. S. relations and which potentially could jeopardize the continuation of essential government-sponsored research activities.

Knowledgeable Thai have for some time been alert and sensitive to some aspects of foreign research in this country, of a private nature but particularly when government sponsored. Research activities must be approved by the National Research Council, and both approval and the Council's sponsorship of visa residence permit applications are frequently slow. There has been occasional public criticism of the "siphoning off" of Thai research talent into activities which are to the primary benefit of foreign countries rather than of Thailand. Some of the occasional criticism or questioning of the value to Thailand of "foreign experts" bears on research as well as advisory activity. It is in this climate that the Mission has maintained close scrutiny of government contract research, seeking to keep both projects and personnel to the minimum consistent with our objectives and necessary activities, and withholding approval

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for research projects of predictable political sensitivity. Despite these precautionary efforts, the dark clouds are now forming.

The first incident was publication in the prestigious Thai daily Siam Rath of a letter from Dr. Herbert Phillips of the University of California at Berkeley. Touched off by his opposition to the President's decision to send U. S. forces into the Cambodian sanctuaries, the letter is a bitter denunciation of U. S. policy and actions in Thailand over past years and at present; he predicts that the "military" will blunderingly lead the U. S. into further spreading of the Southeast Asian conflict and consequent destruction of Thailand and expresses the hope that publication of his letter will help persuade the Thai to demand American withdrawal. Dr. Phillips has visited Thailand repeatedly and, in the past, written responsibly on Thai affairs; he is therefore well known in Thai intellectual circles. He miscalculated the current temper of Siam Rath's Kukrit Pramoj, however, The result of his initiative was a column printed in conjunction with Phillips' letter in which Kukrit not only defended the President's decision strongly but ridiculed Phillips and his pretension to understand the Thai. (Texts of both documents were sent to the Department - EA/TB.)

Dr. Phillips' letter and the response have been the subject of further correspondence and comment in the press -- both helpful and unhelpful.

The episode is troubling on two counts. Without questioning his scholar's (or citizen's) right to criticize national policy, the deliberate incitement to disagreement between Thailand and the United States is disturbing, and particularly subject to misunderstanding among the Thai already overly concerned by the sounds of dissonance and discord coming from the U. S. Secondly, Dr. Phillips' most recent visit to Thailand was as a government consultant in connection with the preparation of NSSM-51. Although this fact has not emerged, he did refer in his letter to having given advice to the USG as a consultant which he now regrets. It is not unreasonable to assume that his present views, which he at no time conveyed in discussions with Mission personnel, took form in part in the course of this government-sponsored visit. In the Thai view, this amounts to abuse of confidences given him directly; in our view, it potentially raises questions about making available classified material (written or orally) which stems from our own relationships of confidence within the Thai community.

A second recent episode began on May 27 with publication, also in Siam Rath, of a letter from a Thai student at Northern Illinois University, forwarding to Kukrit a copy of the Student Mobilization Committee's "expose" publication on links between the universities, USG-sponsored research, and the

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military and CIA and commenting that the Thai Government ought to be more strict in examining the objectives of researchers in Thailand lest Thai national security be endangered by subsequent release or sale of "secrets". Kukrit, in his acknowledgment, referred to the Phillips episode and rendered the judgment that in expressing his anti-war views Phillips was simply trying to protect himself, but Kukrit indicated he was himself looking further into the question of foreign research activity.

This exchange spilled over into the English-language press and elicited an interview with the Secretary General of the National Research Council, Dr. Pradisth Cheosakul. Noting that all foreign research had to be approved by and the results submitted to the Council "to censor any content that might endanger national security," Dr. Pradisth nevertheless said that a government could not overcome the political views or ideology of scholars or prevent, as the Thai student had speculated, possible sale of research work to Communist agencies, and that the NRC had not investigated the background of foreign researchers assuming they would adhere to regulations. He denied any knowledge concerning a specific report that many American scholars had conducted research under sponsorship of "the controversial CIA".

More obliquely but possibly in the context of this discussion, Foreign Minister Thanat declared in a speech on "Education and Politics" before the Teachers Council in May that Thai students should beware of "mental intervention" by countries with different ideologies, citing the United States as a country currently troubled by such "mental intervention" which he characterized as more dangerous than military intervention.

A third round of this discussion was touched off by a June 10 press story attributing to Education Minister Sukich Nimmanhaeminda the belief that a number of foreign foundations have "hired" Thai researchers to sift confidential information about Thailand. He reportedly considered that a preference to work for foreigners in such fashion revealed a loss of patriotism and said many Thai students had been "lured into this trap" by scholarship offers. "Although the foreigners don't have full access to the top secrets of the country, they try to get as many confidential facts as possible through our own men," Sukich added according to the Bangkok Post.

Although Minister Sukich did not name any specific foundations in his comments, one Thai-language version led some readers to infer a reference to such American activities as the Fulbright Foundation. The Post of June 11 then carried an interview with the Fulbright Executive Director Douglas Batson, which defended his and other American foundation activity in Thailand and in effect challenged Sukich to make his charges specific.

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This third episode seems to have been quite unnecessary. Minister Sukich has said in private that his remarks were quite distorted, that he in fact had reference to the activities of (unspecified) Chinese organizations and not to American-supported foundations or research activity. And Batson, it turns out, had been victimized by an official of the National Education Council who, unbeknownst to him, "moonlights" for the Bangkok Post and to whom, in a casual conversation, he made some but not all of the provocative statements attributed to him. Private clarifications have been made, but the general public effect of this reported exchange is as unfortunate as if the accounts had been reliable.

The (predated) June 22 issue of the weekly Thai-language Bangkok Times, which specializes in politics, sex and sorcery, carries a scurrilous feature keyed to the Phillips and Sukich matters, alleging that it was primarily to the Asia Foundation that Sukich referred. The story re-plows old ground on the outsting of the Asia Foundation from India and its tone is adequately indicated in a lead-paragraph statement about foreign foundations in general: (They) "also send in CIA units to neighboring countries to mastermind the ouster of governments in those countries, as well as to seduce almost all female recipients of the scholarships into sexual activities." The next rebound, chronologically, was an interview reported in the English-language World on June 17 with Lt. Gen. Saiyud Kerdphol, Chief of Staff of the Communist Suppression Operations Directorate, which was beneficial to the extent of defending the value of research activity to Thailand and expressing confidence that Thai employees would not give away secrets, but refueled the embers by agreeing that previous cooperative work with the U. S. should be restudied to determine whether the charges of leakage are correct: "We must find out whether the purportedly confidential information is really being gathered, how it is going to be used, and whether any intention of injuring the interests of the country is present." The Post on June 19 says "Sukich Ready to Pounce on 'Spies'" in a story largely repeating the earlier interview as if it were news but adding an attributed comment that some foundations had tried "to approach me to reach a compromise but I refused to negotiate with them." The same issue also carried a signed commentary (Suthichai Yoon) which, while more critical of Sukich than of "foundations" and "research", again re-hashes all the recent publicity.

Dr. Puey Ungphakorn, Governor of the Bank of Thailand, raised the reported Sukich interview in conversation with the Ambassador, reflecting his concern at the eruption of such an issue. He deplored the statement (as apparently generally misconstrued) as much too sweeping. At the same time, reflecting his generally liberal views, Puey also criticized the vigor of Kukrit's riposte to Professor Phillips, tending to defend the latter's right to express dissenting opinions. His main point, however,

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was to deplore the politicization of research activity. He was aware of reported violence to property of the much respected Professor David Wilson and mentioned his fear that another friend, a Professor Paul Bart Trescott, would become tarred with the same brush despite the non-political nature of surveys he has undertaken here on behalf of Thammasat University.

The latest example of the "much-ado-about nothing" propensities of any public attention to local research activities or researchers in the present climate stemmed from an address June 11 to the Siam Society by Professor Roger Smith of the Ford Foundation. Smith, who is an acknowledged scholar on Cambodia, gave a dispassionate and unexceptional lecture on the evolution in Cambodian affairs leading to the events of March 18 and subsequent. Kukrit Pramoj, however, picked up a passing reference to the historic Cambodian fear of Thailand and the Vietnamese (accent on the latter), and blew it up in an editorial comment in Siam Rath to criticize Smith for remarks that sow discord between Thailand and Cambodia at a time of peril.

The episodes recounted above seem manageable in themselves, but there is a potential for escalation. This is in part because of Thai dismay, previously mentioned, over the overt manifestations of dissent in the U. S., particularly when it relates to Thailand. There is thus some connection in Thai minds between such activities as Dr. Phillips' letter and the earlier publicized impulse (not acted on) of some Peace Corps Volunteers to demonstrate in protest against U. S. policy. A second important factor is the more restrictive interpretation given by most Thai than by most Americans to "national security" matters. The question of "leaking secrets" is a highly volatile issue and, should public discussion on this aspect continue, will reinforce the negative reaction to publication by the Symington Sub-Committee of the proceedings of hearings on classified matters in executive session.

These two factors in combination have a considerable potential for mischief. If official and public attention to these matters persists or is repeatedly triggered by fresh events, the Thai will become increasingly wary about sharing with visiting or resident researchers material they consider of a security nature. Particularly in those instances when the Mission is in the position of sponsoring consultations by scholars with RTG officials, we would suffer along with them if the Thai subsequently come to feel that confidences have been abused. In cases involving USG-sponsored research of an identifiably classified nature, the RTG would insist that such confidences not be violated. Even short of a specific security matter, the Thai would expect that those given access to privileged information should not exploit it publicly for policy purposes contrary to those of the informant. Foreign Minister Thanat, who has

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come to accept the disturbing reality of press and Congressional criticism, would become difficult indeed should individuals accredited to him subsequently, in his view, expose him.

The first case in point since these recent incidents will be the impending visit of Dr. Bernard Gordon (State 82462), another American scholar with established credentials in Thailand. But the potential ramifications are much broader, extending to programmed research conducted under ARPA auspices and at least some of the projects proposed under SEADAG sponsorship.

The Mission will continue to review all U. S. Government-supported research in terms of suitability and sensitivity to unfavorable exposure. We will report any further significant developments and remain alert for ways to tamp down Thai concerns.

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