

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

JEF-22

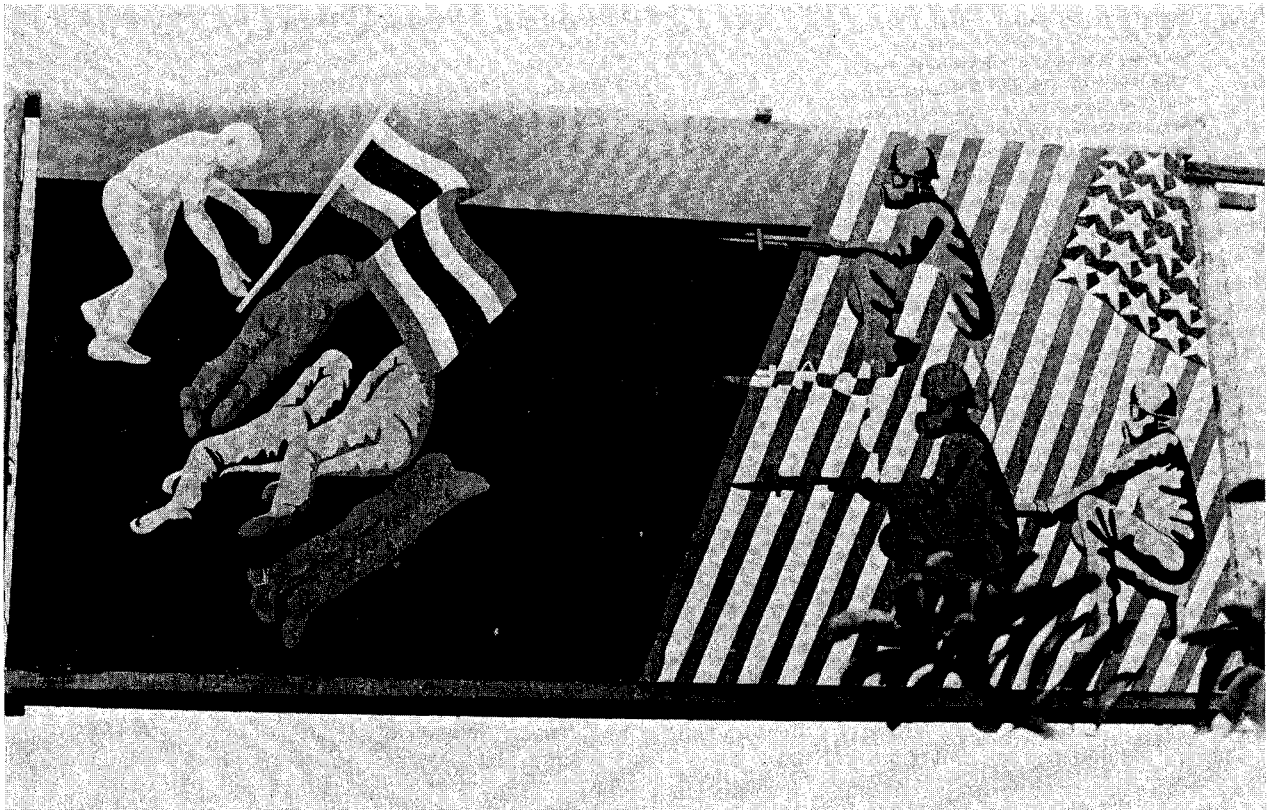
Choosing Life: Part Three

150 Soi 20 Sukhumvit Road
Bangkok 11, Thailand
September 30, 1975

Mr. Richard H. Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
535 Fifth Avenue
New York, New York

Dear Mr. Nolte:

Outrage has been the response of many to the large poster, pictured below, erected in downtown Bangkok to commemorate the October 14 uprising which overthrew the Thai military dictatorship two years ago. One reader wrote to a local paper, that he was "appalled and disgusted" by this poster, and he went on to say, "The implications of the uniformed soldiers against the background of an American flag shooting down the students holding a Thai flag are sickeningly obvious When the American flag was publicly defiled and urinated upon recently, I was deeply humiliated, but said nothing because I recognize that as being a 'right' in a free society. However, to use the flag in such a deceitful and slanderous manner as depicted in this poster is a grave insult to the principles of honesty and integrity which form the cornerstones of democracy. I sincerely hope that the warped viewpoint



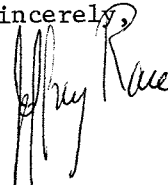
Jeffrey Race is an Institute Fellow studying how the institutions of the past influence people's behavior toward one another today. His current area of interest is Southeast Asia.

of the [National Student Center] does not represent the true feelings of the future leaders of Thailand."

Is the viewpoint warped? Is there anything to the notion implied in the poster? A close look at the evidence can give us some answers, answers which have an important bearing on the larger issue, raised in my two previous letters, of the values which American foreign policy has affirmed in Southeast Asia. These answers suggest, I believe, that affirming life is more complicated than talking loudly about it, and affirming death works out in more complex ways than those suggested by our controversial poster.

What follows is adapted from a paper I have written titled "Political Change in War Time: Thai Elite Responses to Stress," presented at the September 1975 annual meeting of the American Political Science Association. The paper itself is available from University Microfilms, Ann Arbor, Michigan, or I can arrange to have copies sent to interested readers.

Sincerely,



Jeffrey Race

A prominent American scholar, Barrington Moore, has suggested that one fruitful approach in understanding political change is to examine the coalitions which four groups may make in the struggle for domestic political dominance: the crown/administration; the nobility; the bourgeoisie; and the peasantry. I propose to explore a variation on Moore's theme: that one of the groups may instead form a coalition with an external actor, in preference to an alliance with any other local group.

Thailand has for many decades been led by military/bureaucratic elites heading a powerful centralized administrative structure which in past centuries subjugated the Thai nobility. (I discussed this subjugation in JEF-6 through 9.) The evidence suggests that during the period 1950-1973 this group entered into a coalition with a foreign power to strengthen its hand in resisting pressures from abroad and against demands from the two other major groups it had to deal with domestically: the bourgeoisie and the peasantry. Since late 1973 this coalition has begun to come apart, in response both to internal changes and to the declining interest of the foreign power in continuing the coalition.

In JEF-19 I reviewed the response of the Thai military/bureaucratic elite to a perceived external threat: one of cooperation with American elites in attempting to weaken and divide Vietnam. Their response to an internal axis of stress I would put under six headings:

Against the bourgeoisie/urban actors

* OR1. Proscription of public presentation of demands. This was accomplished by legal bars to the formation of political parties; manipulation of the legal system; use of appointive legislative bodies or their abolition and rule by decree.

* OR=Old Response

Against the peasantry

OR2. Military suppression. This was carried out in all regions of the country, with large amounts of American assistance, advice, and physical support, and employing Thai conventional forces garrisoned in the provincial towns and in Bangkok.

OR3. Border security. An extensive border security system was designed for the Thai government by the Stanford Research Institute under the sponsorship of the Advanced Research Projects Agency of the US Department of Defense. As finally installed the system consisted of navy patrol boats and radar surveillance devices. The US government supplied the boats, radar, and funding for system design.

OR4. Police penetration of the countryside. There was for centuries a well-understood distinction in Thailand between the sphere of local autonomy (muban, or village, and tambon, or commune), and the sphere subject to central direction (amphur, or district, and above). At the former levels leaders are chosen by local residents from among local residents. At the latter, i.e., part of the central government's administrative system, they are chosen by national officials from civil service lists. Officials so chosen are transferable throughout the kingdom, in keeping with the practices of centralized bureaucratic systems.

Formerly tambons were responsible for their own law and order, but in the late 1960's the decision was made in Bangkok to expand the central police bureaucracy down into the tambons. That is, rather than (as one possibility) providing funds to tambons to hire their own policemen, the policemen under the new scheme were recruited centrally and paid by and responsible to the district police chief. The approach was thus one of strengthening central organs and furthering penetration of the countryside, rather than strengthening local organs and enhancing self-government and local responsibility. This program was also designed, advised, and partly funded by the US government, through its local Public Safety Division.

OR5. Extension of the central road network into the countryside. Another major use of American funding was the Accelerated Rural Development Program. Approximately one-half of the budget for this effort went into road construction, and another 40% or so into provision of water for the dry Northeast. The public rationale for road construction was the expansion of market opportunities, bringing isolated rural communities from the subsistence into the commercial sector. However another motivation never far from anyone's mind was the advantage the road network would provide in moving troops into rebellious areas. Needless to say, the advantages of such a road network for the enhancement of central control have been understood by rulers for thousands of years; we have this insight of the Roman conquerors to thank for many fine highways which survive in Europe even today. The purpose of the road network is equally well understood by the rebels: they have succeeded in slowing or halting construction of three major strategic roads in the last two years.

OR6. Development programs. According to one US government document, "It is assumed that a close and positive relationship exists between socio-economic development programs in rural areas, and the creation of favorable security conditions." Hence such programs were carried out to increase "identification" with the government since "in the absence of such identification there cannot be effective counter-insurgency."

Another important aspect of this "development" side of counterinsurgency was

the psychological warfare program, supported by the Joint US Military Advisory Group and the US Information Service. A USIS memorandum describes one psywar means, the Mobile Information Team, which "bring[s] organized Royal Thai Government presence to the rural population" and which should "provide real services, survey needs, disseminate information, and represent the concern of the RTG through face to face communication between officials and citizens."

Let me now provide an inventory of "disposing conditions" toward rebellion, which I have culled from the literature.

- DC1. Advances in literacy, communications, and transportation;
- DC2. blockages to social mobility for those advancing on other value dimensions;
- DC3a a highly centralized bureaucratic structure penetrating the countryside and extracting the surplus to support the cities;
- DC3b the corollary, lack of channels of political participation, i.e., a mechanism for coopting aspiring members of the elite, who then choose anti-system activity;
- DC4. ineffectiveness of military and bureaucratic organs, so that they are incapable of suppression;
- DC5. counterproductive military response, due to inappropriate structure of military organization;
- DC6. the combination of growing population, exhaustion of new cultivable land, and stagnant rice technology;
- DC7. external support.

Comparing the old regime's responses to this catalog of disposing conditions, can we identify significant inclusions and omissions? I think we can, and I would suggest the following:

Inclusions

DC1 - - → OR1, OR6: the attempt to prevent the articulation of demands by banning organizations which would articulate them; and, to some extent, by offering cosmetic assistance while not permitting the institutionalization of permanent channels for upward communication (e.g. the Mobile Information Teams, which "surveyed needs," then left, leaving behind no established mechanism).

DC4 - - → OR2, OR4, OR5: the attempt to solve ineffectiveness by an expansion in size of and support for the bureaucracy and the military and police, and an improvement in their mobility into the countryside.

DC7 - - → OR3: the attempt to solve infiltration by physical barriers.

Omissions

We see that the old response did not deal with:

DC2: Blockages to social mobility.

DC3a: The extractive nature of the politico-economic system. The direct economic processes involved in the flows from the countryside to support the cities and

especially urban elites are well known: (1) the regressive structure of the tax system; (2) the rice export tax, an income transfer mechanism from the rice farmer (low income) to non-rice farmers (comparatively higher income); (3) maintenance of a prebendal bureaucracy whose income is supplemented by levies on the population, for whom there is no practicable recourse in the legal structure; (4) transfers of provincial bank deposits for investment in the metropolis. The indirect contributory factors are less well understood but in general known, principally government policies on regional allocation of investment and current spending, e.g. on educational facilities. (Note also that OR2, OR4 and OR5 tended to aggravate the prebendalism problem.)

DC3b: Lack of channels of political participation which would coopt aspiring leaders. At the local level this is quite clear, for example in the choice to organize the police as an extension of the central bureaucracy rather than as part of the local government. In principle there were commune councils, but they remained largely dormant for lack of funds or high-level interest.

DC5: Counterproductive nature of the suppressive response.

DC6: Combination of growing population, exhaustion of new cultivable land, and stagnant rice technology. As for the first, the opposition of the military leaders (especially Prapat) to family planning was well known, despite the fact that Thailand has one of the highest population growth rates in Asia. The second results from natural causes, Thailand being fortunate that the problem has occurred so late. The reasons for the third are well understood: low educational level of Thai farmers, a consequence of the inadequacy of rural education facilities and budgets; official apathy toward expansion of irrigation facilities for double-cropping and water control; and distortion of price incentives due to the joint effect of the rice export tax, reducing farm-gate rice prices, and the government-imposed monopoly on the import of nitrogenous fertilizers, which raised the price of fertilizers.

It should be noted that international institutions attempted for years to persuade the generals to reduce or abolish the rice export tax, without success. This argument was made both on equity grounds (Dan Usher's work concludes that the export tax was equivalent to a 22% income tax on the sector of the productive population with the lowest incomes in the kingdom), and on production grounds, as just discussed. These same institutions also argued unsuccessfully for the abolition of the fertilizer monopoly. Not only did they fail in persuading the military/bureaucratic elite to abolish the monopoly on the import of nitrogenous fertilizer, but in the final days of the military dictatorship in 1973, arrangements were being made to establish a total monopoly on the import of all fertilizers (nitrogen, phosphate and potash) under a joint Thai-Japanese firm called Thai Central Chemicals. The final documents would have been approved by the Cabinet in a matter of weeks, had not the October 1973 revolution intervened. What makes the incident even more revealing is that the generals were prepared to go forward with the enlarged monopoly despite being warned in advance that the World Bank would cease agricultural lending operations in Thailand if they proceeded with this scheme.

In short, the general thrust of the responses was to perpetuate the existing distribution of wealth and power by the use of tighter central controls and, where these failed, by physical violence. This was feasible because the rising level of domestic stress could be satisfactorily repressed by inputs from the external member of the coalition: US elites.

We might well ask what interest American elites had in supporting such a repressive, non-participatory, and economically unjust program, since they received from it none of the generous personal benefits flowing to the Thai military/bureaucratic elites. I think the general nature of the exchange between the two elite groups is fairly clear. For various reasons at various times, American political elites have felt it important to maintain the favor and cooperation of Thai leaders. The Vietnam War is only the latest incident in a long history of Thai-US elite collaboration, going back to the period immediately following the end of World War II. Thai elites, for their part, have needed large resource flows into the country to support the expansive life styles to which they aspire, and assistance in containing the threats to their peaceable enjoyment of these flows. Thus the nature of the exchange: American leaders provided these substantial resource inputs (economic and military aid) and the technical and military assistance to suppress threats to continued autocratic rule, i.e. the counter-insurgency, military assistance, and "public safety" programs. In particular the insurgency was of crucial importance to the Thai-American elite alliance, as the occasion for transferring such a large quantity of resources, and as the "threat" justifying a whole series of measures barring the articulation of demands against the military/bureaucratic elite. According to one official US report in 1973, the insurgency was "such an important and continuing theme in US-Thai relations that it is difficult to imagine how these relations would be structured if the insurgency did not exist." American elites further provided international support to Thailand in world councils, as any stronger power does for its clients. In return the Thai elites gave the US and its allies a fairly free hand within Thailand (US airbases, facilities for Taiwanese intelligence operations against China), stifled domestic protest, and protected the secrecy of the arrangements. Secrecy and repression were essential for the success of the exchange, because the policy of tight alliance with the US entailed certain obvious risks for Thailand which the leaders could not afford to have publicized. (It will perhaps occur to the reader that secrecy and deception were equally essential in the US, as is now clear, but the means had to be different: the Thai, with a tradition of autocracy, could with US support bar open politics; American elites were obliged to permit politics as usual but had to lie about or conceal the true nature of the activities being carried out in Southeast Asia.)

I think a dispassionate analysis will reveal that Thai military/bureaucratic elites were no fools in this bargain; indeed, they did very well by it. Vietnam was weakened and divided in the short term; demands at the center for broader sharing of power were successfully resisted until 1973; and senior government leaders and their business associates profited handsomely (though at great cost to their country) in their power and material wealth -- how handsomely in terms of the latter we now know from the size of the estates confiscated from Thanom, Prapat and Narong after their flight into exile. By and large American leaders have not done badly either. I leave it to the reader to determine who has gotten the short end of the bargain.

There have been certain other long-range consequences of this exchange between Thai and US elites. These are: the continued growth of the rebel movement and increasing government losses; stagnation of Thai rice agriculture; rapid growth of population; increasing ineffectiveness of government; and ultimately alienation first of the students and intellectuals and later (and decisively) of conservative business leaders and the army.

In JEF-5 I discussed the background leading up to the October 1973 uprising.

Let me here just briefly recapitulate some important points.

First, popular support for the rulers, understood specifically to mean senior military leaders, was declining in the year or so before the uprising among those who thought about politics, especially students.

Second, support was declining among the media. This was clear from the way government leaders were referred to in the press and on television. As an example, in mid-1973 Kukrit Pramoj, then proprietor of Thailand's most prestigious paper, Siam Rath, openly condemned the government for lying and branded it as lacking in "moral authority."

Third, support was declining among the conservative business community. This was clear from accusations of "misgovernment" in conservative financial publications and public attacks on the integrity of the generals by such establishment figures as Boonchu Rojanasathien, then executive vice president of the Bangkok Bank, the nation's largest bank and in fact one of the largest in Asia.

It is unnecessary to emphasize that the generals lost the support of the monarchy, for they never had it, the king having been a virtual prisoner of the military all during his reign.

Thus as October 1973 approached, the two surviving pillars of the regime were the army and the American Embassy, and on October 15 the former gave way, leaving only the support of foreign elites. The instruments of violence that these foreign elites had provided were in fact used, but they proved insufficient without the cooperation of the senior generals. These latter made their own judgment on the final day as to the lineup of support from relevant groups, and decided not to answer Thanom's call for reinforcements from outlying military units.

It is easy to conclude that a series of fortuitous circumstances -- the crash of an army helicopter, some ill-timed arrests -- brought on an uprising which need never have happened. In fact these events were fortuitous only in a limited sense, because the bumbling which brought down the regime was the inevitable consequence of a political structure which denied participation to significant actors and precluded feedback to government leaders themselves.

Today it is common to hear from Bangkok critics that the old regime has been reconstituted, that everything is the same but three faces. This view is very appealing, and absolutely wrong. Many very important things have changed. Let me enumerate some of them.

New responses

NR1. The new government has requested the withdrawal of American military forces, established diplomatic relations with the PRC, removed Taiwanese intelligence units from the North, and initiated discussions toward a normalization of relations with the DRV. This represents a very significant shift from the previous policy of tight anti-Chinese and anti-Vietnamese military alliance with the US, and is an alternative solution to the problem of external stress from the one chosen by the old regime.

NR2. A democratic constitution has been promulgated, as a result of which free elections were held in January 1975. In the resulting government the above-mentioned Kukrit Pramoj is prime minister, and Boonchu Rojanasathien finance minister. The prohibition on political party organization has also been lifted.

NR3. The press, now no longer self-censored, is one of the freest in Asia.

NR4. The fertilizer import monopoly has been abolished.

NR5. The rice export tax has been reduced, and plans are being discussed to, in effect, abolish it, as part of a price stabilization scheme.

NR6. An agreement has been reached with the country's banks to channel credit into the rural areas, to counteract the existing tendency of the banking system to take deposits from the rural areas and channel them to Bangkok.

NR7. Plans are being developed for an overhaul of the taxation system and a tightening up in the collection of personal income taxes.

NR8. A budget of \$125 million has been appropriated and expended as direct cash grants to tambons (\$25,000 each) to be spent on local development as the tambon authorities, not the central bureaucracy, direct; the present government has also declared its intention to make this an annual grant, in effect partially offsetting the drain of the capital on the countryside.

NR9. The army has been largely withdrawn from counterinsurgency missions, and the government is developing a plan to create a militia under local control.

NR10. Plans are being developed for the decentralization of power from the central bureaucracy to new expanded organs of local self-government.

NR11. Land rental and land reform laws have been passed.

NR12. Formation of unions has been legalized.

While Thailand has not suddenly become an earthly paradise, this is nevertheless a rather impressive list of changes and contemplated changes in policy in such a short time, addressing many of our disposing conditions listed above. It is all the more impressive when one realizes that the proponents of these measures are members of a conservative business-military-royalist elite. Whether these changes will achieve successfully their goal of dealing with the two axes of internal and external stress is beside the point; our concern is with the factors accounting for this new set of responses.

The variables that have shifted in our case study since October 1973 are the following:

S1. Urban (as opposed to rural) citizens have demonstrated (by the 1973 uprising and the events leading up to it) that much higher levels of violence and disruption will have to be employed to continue to exclude them from participation. (The rising curve of rural violence was apparent long before 1973.)

S2. Three former high officials have gone into exile: Thanom, formerly prime minister and commander of the armed forces; Prapat, formerly deputy prime minister, deputy commander of the armed forces, and commander of the army; and Narong, son of Thanom, son-in-law of Prapat, and heir-apparent.

S3. Vietnam has been reunified under a communist government; and both Cambodia and Laos now have communist governments as well.

S4. American economic and military spending are declining rapidly, and it appears to Thai leaders that American interest in Southeast Asia as a region of special security concern is disappearing permanently.

S5. Experience in four Southeast Asian countries -- Thailand, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam -- now demonstrates conclusively that both American air power and American counterinsurgency doctrine are at best ineffective in countering peasant revolution, and at worst counterproductive.

With these changes in mind, let us summarize the old set of responses once more. The previous military/bureaucratic elites perceived: (a) that US assistance was desirable in itself to enhance their income and power; (b) that US assistance was effective in suppressing demands for sharing of power and wealth both at the center and the periphery; (c) even were it ineffective, it would be sufficient to keep the then leaders in power to enjoy the flows resulting from (a) -- indeed, they had no reason to shrink at the prospect, terrible as it might be for the nation, of increased budgets, increased development aid, accelerated promotions, an enhanced role for the military, and a greatly enlarged scope of government operations; (d) US assistance would continue to be effective in weakening Vietnam. In effect then a coalition developed between US political elites and Thai military/bureaucratic elites, in which the former provided external resources to the latter to suppress demands for sharing, while the latter permitted the use of Thai territory for American purposes. As exchange theory tells us, both were made better off by the deal.

On the contrary the new set of responses has attempted to satisfy many demands for the sharing of power (NR2, NR3, NR10, NR12) and of wealth (NR4-8, NR11); and it seeks to conciliate neighboring countries (NR1). Ironically during the 60's the US government had hundreds of people in Bangkok lashing their Thai counterparts to "get serious about the insurgency" (more than 500 at one point in the ARPA unit, dozens in the Embassy, in USOM, and in JUSMAG; an undetermined number with the CIA). Only when these hundreds left, with their resources, did the Thai begin to "get serious about the insurgency."

Let me now advance the proposition that this shift in approach is the rational response to the changes S1-S5 noted earlier. The conjunction of S1 and S4 has entailed the need to share power at the center; the conjunction of S4 and S5 has entailed the need to share power in the rural areas; and the conjunction of S3 and S5 has entailed the need for a new foreign policy of accommodation. Since Thai leaders can no longer form a sufficiently effective alliance with American elites against their own people, they must now form new alliances both domestically and abroad. To the extent that this proposition is correct, it suggests that American military and economic assistance slowed the progress of Thai domestic reform, democratization of the political system, and equalization of wealth and income. Equally, it hindered efforts to increase productivity in Thailand's basic agricultural crop, rice.

At this point we might be congratulating ourselves on the determination with which Thai leaders began to democratize once urban forces spoke decisively and the US made clear it was losing interest. Other countries in the position of Thailand a few years back, burdened with externally supported military dictatorships, might then rejoice at their happy prospects. Unfortunately the matter is not so simple. Why, for example, did ~~the~~ same trend toward democratization not take place in southern Vietnam after 1972, by which time it was clear that changes parallel to S1, S4 and S5 were taking place?

One explanation is that the new people at the top in Bangkok in late 1973, simply by virtue of being new people, and regardless of their affiliations, could adopt new policies because they had no ego-investments in the old ones. Thus, as

applied to Vietnam, if there had been new faces at the top in 1972, even new military faces, a different outcome might have ensued.

A second interpretation is that it was not just new faces but new interests at the top: Thanom and Prapat, both field marshals with long careers in the military, were replaced (as prime minister) by a wealthy conservative member of the royal family, active in the media and the banking profession; and (as deputy prime minister) by a long-retired general who is a wealthy industrialist.

Looking to the rational calculation of profitable coalitions, it is plain that the extractive ability of Thanom and Prapat and the interests they represented was effective virtually regardless of the level of domestic production. (Recall the Thai Central Chemical monopoly scheme: it would have enriched those associated with the project despite the continued stagnation of Thai rice culture.) Furthermore, since their incomes came not from productive fixed assets but from extortionate levies on trade, production and foreign assistance, they could have a much shorter time perspective than the new political leaders. If times grew difficult, they could always flee -- which they did.

On the other hand, the new groups' income and power come from control of productive assets (textiles, mining, the media, trade and banking) which are immovable; the leaders must stay with their assets. Their interests are thus identified with domestic peace and prosperity, not war, and their perspective is a longer one. Put differently, the new leaders can pluck the Thai goose only if it is fat and healthy; their predecessors were plucking a different goose.

If this second interpretation is correct, what conclusions can we draw? One is that for policy changes to ensue from a reduction of American support to military/bureaucratic elite groups, personnel changes may be necessary. And, on the basis of experience in Southeast Asia, these personnel changes are unlikely to come from American urging. In Vietnam the forecasting ability of American elites was so bad that they did not seek the removal of Thieu until the very last days before total military collapse. In Thailand the American Embassy was similarly taken by surprise at the overthrow of its clients.

I can see nothing which dictates that American elites must, or even like to, deal with native military/bureaucratic elites; on the contrary, there seems to be a widespread repugnance against doing so. American purposes vis-a-vis Japan are worked out in alliance with commercial elites, and in fact this seems to be the rule, to which Thailand and Vietnam were among the relatively few exceptions. The two kinds of alliances have different rules, procedures, and expectations, however, and the problem for American elites seems to come in making the switch. We may view the Nixon Doctrine as an attempt to plot a strategic shift to this new kind of alliance on a world scale. The illusory assumption, at least for Vietnam, was that such a willing and intelligent commercial elite can be called into existence on a moment's notice from Washington.

I have tried here to spell out some patterns which I see in international cooperation and coalition formation among elites. I believe that the hypotheses I have advanced are plausible on the basis of the data noted here, and deserving of further investigation in other contexts. Beyond this, I believe that these hypotheses, if supported, have important implications for the intelligent and humane conduct of human affairs. As to what these specific implications are, I think they are clear enough, for those with the inclination to seek them out.