

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Public Service, Thai Style: A True Story

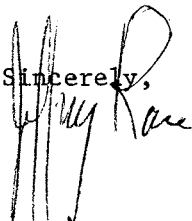
Mr. Richard H. Nolte  
Institute of Current World Affairs  
535 Fifth Avenue  
New York, New York

Dear Mr. Nolte:

While we were away on our recent trip to Malaysia and Singapore, the following story appeared in one of the local papers. This kind of account (for some good reasons and some bad) virtually never appears in the press, and since it provides a unique insight into the workings (or lack thereof) of the Thai government, I am sending it along to you.

The victim, or heroine, as she is styled in the account, has prudently chosen to remain anonymous, but names don't really matter. The main point is that an account like this is one response to the growing concern that many Thai have about the future of their country, given the new realities on the peninsula. The malfunctioning of their own government obviously figures prominently in this growing concern. Perhaps this account will contribute in some small way to understanding what is wrong and overcoming it. I am confident, at least, that that is the hope of its author. (I should note that two-thirds of the readership of the English-language paper in which this account appeared is Thai. They find things in the foreign press that they can't find in their own papers.)

On a different subject, I would like to say that I am extremely grateful to the many people who take the time and trouble to write me about my newsletters. Sometimes I'm a bit slow in replying, either because I'm travelling, or because of a backlog of work, but I always answer everyone. So if someone writes and doesn't hear after a reasonable length of time, it probably means the letter has gone astray somewhere in the world's mails.

Sincerely,  


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*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 in-*

EVERYONE has his own tale of frustration in attempting to deal with government bureaucracies, but isolated incidents don't add up to a diagnosis of what is wrong. Just what is, and why, may become clearer after reading the following absolutely true story of a dauntless female who want-

ed to build her dream house on the outskirts of Bangkok, and decided not to pay bribes for her electricity and her telephone.

Her story is a success story, for she proved that, if you have nerves of steel, and the patience of Job, and don't mind living without modern conveniences, you

can in fact get by without paying bribes. In fact, you will (eventually) find a lot of sympathetic and high-ranking people who want to help you.

One further point. Our young heroine grew up in a local family which has produced more than its share of eminent businessmen, ge-

# The nightmare m into a dream ho

## Saga of the Provincial Electricity Authority

April 1974: The plans for the dream house are ready, and construction is about to begin. Our heroine, then living in Bangkok, calls the PEA office to inquire about an electrical installation. "It takes one week; the total cost is 3,800 baht\*." She allocates this sum of her limited budget to the electricity and, secure in the knowledge it can be done so quickly and easily, orders the carpenters and masons to proceed.

June 1: Our heroine, we'll call her H, advises the owner of the house she is renting that she will be leaving on June 30.

Mid-June: It's getting close to moving date, and the workmen need electricity for their tools; it takes the 3,800 baht, family book, and other documents to the PEA head office, so the installation will be done in plenty of time, only to be told "you must make application at the district office. (This is a 40 kilometre drive.)"

Next day: H drives to the district office with the money and documents. The official tells her "No, you must make application at the provincial office."

This is a further 40 kilometres. Next day: H drives to the provincial office. An official gives her a bad surprise. It will take TWO weeks to do (thus missing the July 1 moving date), and it will cost 38,000 baht for the installation, 500 baht for the meter, and a 2,000 baht deposit. "How is this possible?" she protests. The official answers, "You live outside the distribution zone (the first time anyone has said anything about this) so you must pay in advance the full cost of a new transformer, pole, wire, and accessories. If you were in a distribution zone, the Government would subsidise 40 per cent of the cost." (No one ever explains why it costs 3,800 baht in one location, and 60 per cent of 38,000 baht, or 22,800 baht, in another just a few kilometres away.)

## Schedule shattered

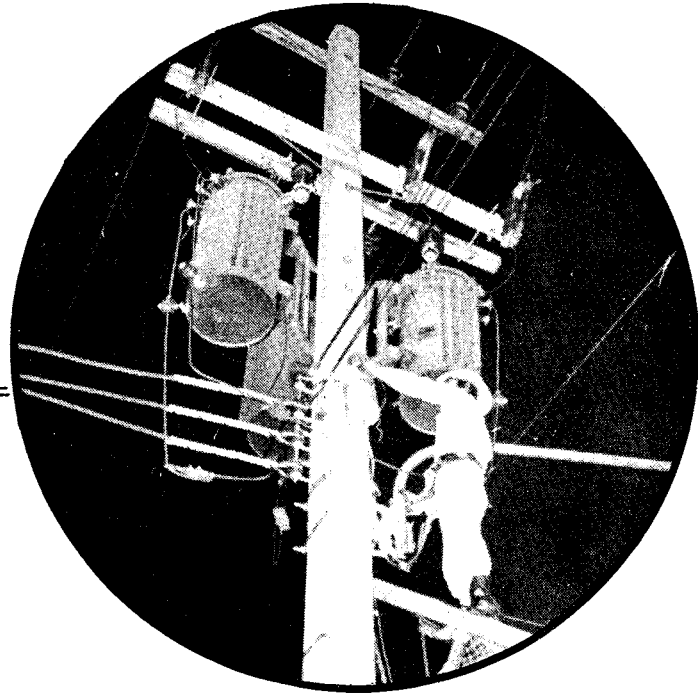
Her budget and her schedule shattered, H retires to consult her cousin, an electrical engineer. He discovers that many of the items on the bill of materials are unnecessary. Armed with this knowledge, H makes another 80 kilometre round-trip, and negotiates an installation fee of 30,000 baht. While stopping at the local lumber yard she recites her troubles. The owner tells her he had to pay a bribe of ten thousand baht for his installation. Even the district officer (no inconsiderable figure in the locality) is reported to have had to pay a bribe.

July 4: H pays the fee (fortunately a kind-hearted PEA official helped her gain permission to pay part in instalments).

July 5: H submits the application at the provincial office, and is assured the installation will be complete by July 15. However, this deadline can be met only if she herself takes the application to the "khwaeng" (region) office at—for approval. (This is 70 kilometres past the provincial office.) Otherwise it will take two-three weeks longer. She drives out right

\* 3,800 baht=US\$190

nerals, educators, and public servants. In particular, this family is known for raising women who don't take back-talk from anyone, especially men. As to what will happen to you if you want something from the bureaucracy, and you don't qualify by these special criteria, well, read on .....



# oving use

away, is told to come back tomorrow. "But I live in Bangkok," she protests, "Sorry, it can't be done today," is the reply. All that is necessary is a signature and a stamp. "PlI wait," she says. Half an hour later, she is on her way back to the provincial office with the approved forms. She is reassured of the July 15 installation date.

Unfortunately, life at home is getting difficult. She can't move out of her old house, but the new tenants have already moved in, and personalities grate. Worse, the additional unbudgeted 28,000 baht she must pay the PEA means that she cannot finish the house.

July 15: In the morning H expectantly drives out to her new house, not yet done, but livable if there is power, and waits for the PEA to show up. Noon arrives, but no workmen. One pm. Two pm. Three pm. Four pm. Necessary to return to sharing the rented house with the new tenants.

## Mutual dismay

July 16: The first of many long-distance calls to Mr X, the manager of the PEA provincial office. What hap-

pened? "We were unexpectedly delayed. We will be there in a day or so." A refrain to be repeated every day or so.

July 22: Another call to Mr X. "I must go abroad this week and will be returning the 30th. I MUST move when I return since I have given up the lease on my old house and the new people have already moved in. Will the power be in?" "FOR SURE we'll have the power in by the 30th--go right ahead and move," assures X.

July 25-29: H's driver and her staff move everything she owns to the new house.

July 30: Seven pm. H arrives at Don Muang airport. Her driver meets her. "No electricity" he tells her, to their mutual dismay. Having no choice, our heroine drives to her dream house. It's too late to call the PEA. She spends the first night without power. Dinner by candlelight may be romantic, unpacking, reading and working by kerosene lantern less so.

July 31: Another long-distance call to X. "Where's the power you promised me on the 30th for my 30,000 baht?" "Very sorry, we've had a delay; we don't have the transformer you need for your installation. We'll get it as soon as possible and let you

know when it is here." Another slight delay, thinks H. At least she got a reason this time. "Thank you," she says. "Which day do you think it will be?" Mr X: "Well, we have to order it from abroad. Somebody else in your area, Mr ---, has been waiting about a year for his now. We're working on it and will get to it as soon as we can. I can't tell you exactly when."

H begins to lose her temper.

"BUT I'M LIVING IN THE HOUSE NOW. YOU PROMISED ME I'D HAVE ELECTRICITY NOW." Silence. "And besides, if --- has been waiting for his transformer for a year, then you knew when you promised me the power on the 30th that you didn't have the transformer. Why did you tell me to move out here when you knew I wouldn't have any power?" Silence again.

Our heroine retires for another technical consultation. Impossible that this common transformer exists nowhere in the entire kingdom. She drives to the head office of the PEA and asks from office to office if someone can help. Someone can. She stands by him as he radios to the provinces, one by one, asking whether they have the transformer in stock. --- answers, "We have

five." "Send them all to X tomorrow," radios the head office in reply.

The next day: Our heroine drives 40 kilometres to see X, who has in the meantime been advised by the PEA headquarters of the delivery of the transformers he has been trying (not very hard) to get for a year. H asks him when the power will be installed. "The transformer isn't here yet." A lie; it's sitting in his stockyard outside. H confronts him. "Miss H, why do you press me so? I went to a lot of trouble to get that transformer for you." Another lie. Leery of vague generalities after his previous performance, H asks for a final installation date. ABSOLUTELY, she is assured, by Friday, August 16. Possibly before.

August 16: The day passes uneventfully.

August 19: Eight am. Sick of living and working by kerosene lantern, and determined to bring this nonsense to a halt, our heroine drives to PEA headquarters to see the Boss. She recites her tale. He is genuinely shocked, calls X on the phone at once, and when he can't get through, on the phone, sends for him. An hour later, X walks in, having not the least idea why he has been summoned so peremptorily. He realises as soon as he walks in. Crafty to the last moment, his opening words are, "Good morning, Miss H, I just sent the trucks this morning to install your transformer." Enraged, H replies, "That's a LIE. I was there and there were no trucks." X begins to feel trapped. When asked by the Boss why he has lied all along, X sets forth his astonishing conception of the public servant's job, "It's my duty to lie to the public," he says simply.

He is told in no uncertain terms to install the power tomorrow. "Yes sir, I'll install the transformer right away." H senses another ploy. "What ELSE is necessary," she asks X, to actually be able to USE the electricity?" X hesitates. "You must also have the written authorisation from the khwaeng. We must wait for that." The Boss interjects, "We are responsible for this entire area including the khwaeng and this office just told you to do it. Now do it!"

August 20: Sure enough, the next morning the pole is up, the transformer is in, everything but the meter. This is the responsibility not of X but of one of his subordinates at the district office. Just a few more hours of candlelight, kerosene lanterns, and

seven o'clock bedtimes!

August 21: The district PEA man arrives with the meter in the morning. It is connected. Everyone is standing around in readiness, waiting to enjoy the first surge of power that will bring the new house into the twentieth century. Unbearable excitement, the long agony is finally over! Wait, something is wrong. No power. H's technical adviser sees that the high tension fuses have not been installed. Why not? "Oh, we didn't even bring along the special tool for connecting them, because you don't have the written authorisation from the khwaeng," explains X's subordinate. "You will have to wait for that from Mr X at the provincial office."

H loses her temper again. The

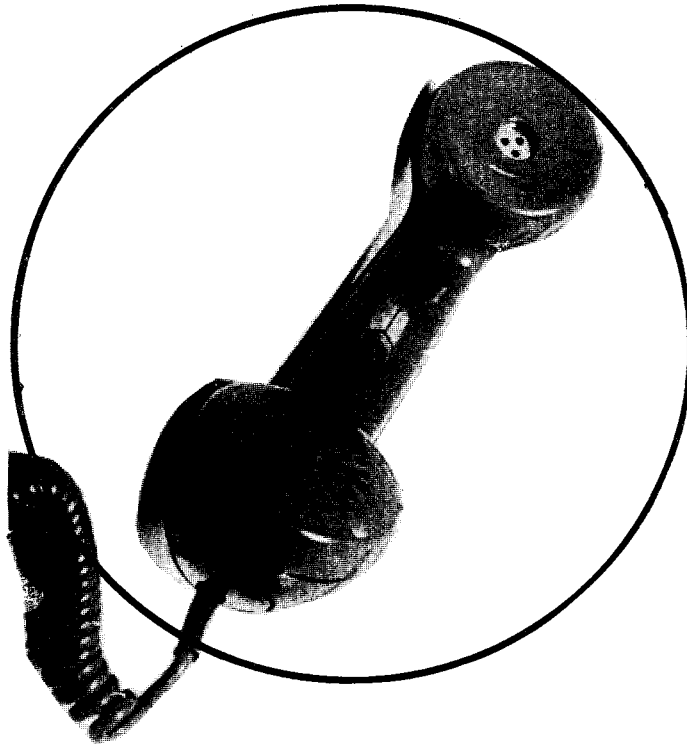
same old ploy. "Why did you come to install the meter if you are not going to connect it. If you want we can drive to see the Big Boss right now. My car is outside!" Sensing trouble for nothing, the official relents, drives back to his office and gets the tool, and returns. At 12:35, one month and six days after it was promised, and 28,000 baht over the original figure, the power is gloriously on.

Our heroine consoles herself. Although the house can't be finished at least she has her electricity. "Maybe this nightmare was just an isolated incident," she thinks. "I met a couple of rotten apples." In fact, the telephone nightmare was just about to begin.

## The easy way...



**...but our heroine  
elected not to pay**



## Saga of the Telephone Organisation of Thailand

June 17, 1974: Like the PEA story, this saga begins with an application, this time at six am in a long queue at the local phone exchange.

August 28: A letter arrives announcing that there are no available cable pairs in the vicinity, but ToT will reconsider the matter in due course.

One day in September: Our heroine calls to find out how one goes about a reconsideration. She is advised that a new exchange will be installed nearby on January 1, 1975, which will make more lines available. Wait until then.

January 1: The new exchange is installed on schedule, H reads in the paper. She waits for ToT to get in touch.

January: )  
 February: ) Silence  
 March: )

One day in April: A repairman is working on the cable in front of her house, and H asks if there are any spare pairs in the cable. "Oh yes, plenty; if you want a phone just go down and ask for one."

The next day: H drives to the telephone office to see what can be done. She demands to see the waiting list, and a reluctant official goes over it with her and says yes, for some reason three people further down the waiting list have already had phones installed in her area. He suggests submitting a written request to ToT for reconsideration, pointing out these facts.

A short time later: H calls the telephone office to get the results of the reconsideration. "No lines available." How is this possible? No one can give an answer.

A short time later: Another attempt. She goes up the hierarchy to a Medium Boss. Yes, it's all been a mistake! There were lines all along! The phone will be in by May 10, and H even gets the number.

May 10: A day like any other day, as, it turns out, are all the rest of the days in May.

May 29: H goes abroad, leaving behind explicit instructions at the house where to install the phone when the workmen come. While abroad she confidently gives the new number to her foreign friends and colleagues, explaining that the phone must be in now and they can use the number any time.

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## Give me your name

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July 6: H returns to Bangkok. No phone. Wait.

August 4: Alert! A technical adviser learns over the preceding weekend that ToT is about to run out of "drop wire", used from the pole to the house. If the phone is not installed in the next few days, it possibly can't be done for months, despite the availability of a number and cable pairs. H rushes to ToT first thing in the morning. "Yes, we just sent the installers a little while ago," she is told. "They are on their way. If you are not home when they arrive, you go to the bottom of the list. Be sure to be there!" H skips her office, rushes home, waits. No one comes. Nor on the 5th, nor the 6th, nor the 7th.

August 8: Our heroine calls 11 different numbers to find the person responsible, finally succeeds. "They went out Monday but couldn't find the house." (A lie; the application form included a detailed map down to the last 50 metres, and besides everyone in the neighbourhood knows the house.) To prevent further prevarication, H offers to guide the installers to her house. The person at the other end agrees. "Be at the Exchange at eight am on the 12th,

I'll have the installers waiting for you." To make sure she can follow up, H asks the person's name. They refuse, hang up. (Phone companies everywhere in the world instruct their female employees not to give out their names so as to prevent harassment, but they give them numbers instead, so as to trace responsibility. ToT goes one better: no names AND no numbers.) H calls back, gets someone else on the line, who warns that there are indeed lines, but they are all defective. No phone is going to be put in on the 12th, he says.

August 11: H drives in to Bangkok to spend the night, so as to be sure to be at the Exchange early.

August 12: 7.30 am. The head of the section informs H that no one has told him she is going to be there to guide the installers to her house; and it can't be done today anyway. She says it was promised for today. He says "Please wait a moment."

Ten am. The installers are beginning to drive out in their trucks. H is still sitting quietly. Nothing is happening on her case. She gets up and walks over to the section chief. "Please, I've been waiting here for two hours, and I have to go to work, I don't have time to wait any longer." One of his subordinates apparently having seen too many people begging for phones, pipes up, "Who are you to complain about time? We don't have time." H's training immediately asserts itself. "WHO ARE YOU TO SPEAK TO ME THAT WAY! LET ME HAVE YOUR NAME!" The subordinate suddenly realises his mistake. No ordinary citizen would dare reproach a government official, even a government enterprise worker, like that. This young woman must be either a high-ranking government official herself or someone highly connected. His hauteur instantly changes to the demeanor automatically used toward social superiors. The section chief intercedes hastily, saying the installers will definitely go out to her home today. H retires and waits.

Four pm. The installers do indeed arrive, and sure enough, the cable is bad. No phone today. They warn, "If we report the cable as bad, no one will be interested. It could be months. If you want a phone you'd better follow this up yourself."

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## They lie to us too

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August 13: Eight am. H visits the cable repair department. She makes a point of talking to no one but the head of the department himself, who agrees to have the cable fixed by the 15th.

August 15: Right on schedule, the cable repairmen arrive. One hour later and the line is fixed. "The installers will come tomorrow to install your phone."

August 17: Still no phone. A drive to the exchange reveals that they have never been instructed to connect this number.

August 18: H calls ToT. The cable team forgot to report to the installers that they had fixed the cable. H informs them instead.

August 19: It works! Unfortunately, not after it rains, due to terrible static. Repeated calls to repair service (17) succeed only in eliciting the comment, "Yes, that's right, you can't use the phone after it rains." No one with this philosophy of service will give her name.

September: H becomes acquainted with another Medium Boss. He is very sympathetic, promises to fix the cable, and actually gets the repair team out a couple of times.

Early October: The static continues.

October 15: Three pm. The repairmen come. "We've found the trouble. It's too late to do today, but we'll fix it tomorrow for sure." Three thirty pm. The phone goes completely dead. Not even static.

October 28: Two weeks of complaints to 17 have brought no restoration of service. The technical adviser himself visits the Medium Boss. The latter is shocked, orders the phone to be repaired by the next day.

October 29: Still not even static.

October 30: The technical adviser revisits the Medium Boss. He calls a number, asks a question, gets an answer, hangs up. "The repairmen came back yesterday and reported that they went all the way out to the house and fixed the line, and that it works fine now." The technical adviser says no, he was there all day waiting, no one came, and it does not work, just as it has not for the past two weeks. The Medium Boss calls the repair section again, instructs the chief to go out that very afternoon and fix the line himself. (He does.) Hanging up, the Medium Boss leans forward and says, "I am sorry. You must understand. They lie to us too."

Bangkok Post  
January 4, 1976

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