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Daniel Fineman. *A Special Relationship: The United States and Military Government in Thailand, 1947-1958.* Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997. viii + 357 pp. $39.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8248-1818-0.

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The Special Relationship

U.S.-Thai relations have received little scholarly attention, a somewhat surprising fact considering how vital Thailand was to American political, economic, and military objectives in Southeast Asia during the Vietnam War era. At the height of the American war in Vietnam, there were nearly 45,000 U.S. military personnel in Thailand, along with almost six hundred aircraft. From a major B-52 base at Utapao and an array of other military installations throughout Thailand, the United States launched about 80 percent of the air strikes against North Vietnam and Laos between 1964 and 1968. Moreover, Thailand was a key political ally in Asia, an integral member of the Southeast Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO), Washington's model for economic development of the region, and the primary base for U.S. covert operations throughout Indochina from the early 1950s through to the mid-1970s.

Given this relative dearth of scholarship on U.S-Thai relations, Daniel Fineman's *A Special Relationship* is a welcome and important contribution. Based on his 1993 doctoral dissertation in history at Yale University (*The United States and Military Government in Thailand, 1947-1958*), *A Special Relationship* offers a detailed examination of both American foreign policy considerations in Southeast Asia and the entrenchment of military authoritarianism in Thailand during the 1950s. In fact, the interdependency between these two themes is central to Fineman's thesis. At the heart of his argument is the contention that in order to develop an anti-communist defence of Southeast Asia, the United States knowingly promoted and legitimised military government in Bangkok, which in turn retarded the democratization of Thailand and perpetuated over thirty years of political repression. As Fineman states, "[S]imply put, American policy aims were incompatible with Thai democracy" (p. 261).

Using a wide array of declassified United States government documents, Fineman argues that Thailand was of primary foreign policy importance to both the Truman and Eisenhower administrations. Comparatively more stable than other countries in Southeast Asia, Thailand became a focus of American efforts to stem the tide of communism in the region. Having never been colonized, Thailand did not endure the painful and divisive nationalist struggles that consumed its neighbours. With a fairly homogenous population, great reverence for the monarchy, and deep religious conviction, the Thais were considered by American officials to be less vulnerable to communism than people elsewhere in Southeast Asia. Consequently, Thailand was seen as a potential bastion for Washington in the midst of regional instability. This view resulted in dramatically increased economic and military assistance to the government in Bangkok throughout much of the 1950s, and the expansion of American covert operations throughout Indochina launched from bases in Thailand.

However, to secure the Thais' friendship and further its own foreign policy objectives in Southeast Asia, Fineman maintains that the United States actively promoted a military government in Thailand after 1945. Since the end of absolute rule by the monarchy in 1932, a struggle for power between civilian and military factions had dominated the Thai polity. During World War II, the military ruled the country led by Plaek Phibunsongkhram (Phibun), who pursued a vigorous anti-Western nationalism that eventually resulted in Thailand's war-time alliance with Japan. Despite such dubious credentials, after the war the military and Phibun eventually came to be seen in Washington as the best bet for Thailand's political stability, and the best guarantor of American policy objectives in Southeast Asia.

After a series of ineffective civilian-led coalition governments between 1945 and 1947, the military regained power in November 1947, eventually putting forth a reformed Phibun as the so-called Coup Group's leader. Fineman traces the career of Phibun and his main rival, Pridi Phanomyong, through the 1930s and 1940s,

and deals extensively with the 1947 coup and its aftermath. Then Fineman turns his attention to the development of Thailand's closer relationship with the United States, premised in the early 1950s from Washington's stand point on the need to contain communist expansion in Asia. However, abandoning the more traditional national security analytical paradigm, Fineman contends that an ideological convergence of American and Thai anti-communism was not the only, or even the primary, reason for the development of a closer relationship between Washington and Bangkok (p. 3). While fighting the spread of communism in Southeast Asia may have been the chief American concern, Fineman emphasizes traditional, non-ideological considerations in influencing the Thai perspective, such as concerns about Chinese expansionism, the vulnerability of Thailand's historic buffers, Laos and Cambodia, and the best course for Thailand's economic development. Above all else, Fineman focuses on domestic politics in Thailand as the most important factor shaping the Thai perspective on closer relations with the United States. Instead of treating them as separate entities as the national security model presupposes, Fineman argues that Thailand's foreign policy inclination and its domestic political situation were inextricably connected, and that during the late 1940s the Thai experimentation with democratic reform posed a fundamental challenge to Washington's anti-communist efforts in Southeast Asia.

The second and third parts of *A Special Relationship* focus on this symbiotic relationship between domestic political developments in Thailand and their effect on the country's foreign policy inclination towards the United States. Through his command of the Thai language, Fineman brings to bear an impressive array of Thai documents, including those obtained from Thailand's National Archives and Foreign Ministry Library. While acknowledging the considerable organizational disarray that exists in Thai government sources, and the Thai military's predilection for "back-room" decisions without accurate note-keeping, Fineman nonetheless weaves together a fascinating narrative that accounts for the Thai perspective. His discussion of the emerging rivalry between Phibun and his powerful Minister of the Interior, Phao Siyanon, is particularly effective in demonstrating how domestic politics, and not just Cold War conceptions, influenced Thailand's diplomacy in the 1950s. Both Phibun and Phao played a dangerous game by trying to woo increased American military and economic aid while simultaneously pursuing democratic reforms and (albeit covertly) even a possible rapprochement with the People's Republic of China, all in the hope of enhancing their own political positions within the Thai polity. Such confusing twists and turns illustrate the traditional flexibility of Thai politics and foreign policy, and the frequent reluctance of even military hard-liners like Phibun to abandon Thailand's historic non-alignment with foreign powers.

Fineman also addresses the crucial role that the CIA and other American agencies played in Thailand. As early as 1951, the U.S. military established bases for conventional and covert operations in Indochina, in the process drawing close to particular factions within the Thai armed forces. The CIA was especially influential through its support of Phao and his many, often nefarious, business interests. In contrast, Fineman portrays the American Embassy in Bangkok as frequently lacking leadership and direction, not to mention the important political connections enjoyed by the CIA or U.S. Army. According to Fineman, American intra-agency rivalries contributed to the inherent factionalism of the Thai polity, hastening the return to a military dictatorship. Such was the case in June 1951 during the so-called Manhattan Coup, in which the CIA, without consulting U.S. Embassy officials, played a vital role in the Thai Army's defeat of a Navy plot to seize power (pp. 149-51).

Fineman argues that open divisions within the Thai military, as well as the flirtation with political reform and a diplomatic accommodation of communism, came to an end in November 1957 with yet another coup. From the shadows of the Coup Group emerged Army General Sarit Thanarat, who, while uncertain of the American resolve to oppose communism in Southeast Asia, became convinced that a closer relationship with the United States was in Thailand's best interests. Rigidly anti-communist and fearful of Chinese expansion, Sarit abandoned democratic reforms and instituted a frequently harsh dictatorship that dominated Thailand through to the mid-1970s. Fineman concludes that while military authoritarianism most definitely had its roots in Thai political culture, irrespective of American influence, the fact remains that U.S. economic and military aid after World War II solidified the position of the Thai armed forces in politics. Thus the American containment policy and military authoritarianism in Thailand were inextricably linked, and as the 1950's and 1960's unfolded, mutually reinforcing.

A Special Relationship offers a thoroughly researched, effective presentation of a complex subject. Fineman's arguments are compelling and challenge most of the available scholarship on U.S.-Thai relations. Viewed solely within the context of the Cold War or the conflicts in Indochina, the convergence of anti-communist interests between the United States and Thailand seems

to be predominant. But viewed within the context of traditional Thai foreign policy considerations, domestic politics, and Thai culture, the U.S.-Thai relationship takes on added dimensions. By extension, Fineman's argumentation also undermines the idea that Thailand's role in the Vietnam War era was motivated simply by ideology or mercenary tendencies. While American economic and military aid were unquestionably important considerations for Thailand throughout the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, there was much more at stake for Thailand, just as there were many more factors that shaped Thai foreign policy. *A Special Relationship* also brings into focus the importance Thailand had for American policy objectives in Southeast Asia in the fifteen years after World War II. Overshadowed by the conflicts in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, Thailand has usually received only peripheral attention, and in this regard Fineman's work represents an important contribution to existing scholarship in American diplomatic history.

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