Dr. Puey Ungpakorn is one of Thailand’s most distinguished economists and, until the military coup of October 6, was rector of Thammasat University in Bangkok. He himself narrowly escaped death at the hands of a right-wing lynch mob and managed to get on a plane to London, where I talked to him. He believes that “civil war is now inevitable” in Thailand. Thai democracy has been destroyed—in part by the institutions and the attitudes which the United States created in order, ostensibly, to “save the country for the free world.” Dr. Puey believes that “disputes within the army will increase, so will the gap between rich and poor. Relations with our neighbors will deteriorate and thousands of people who tried to make democracy work will join the insurgents in the hills.”

Other Thai democrats, such as Pansak Vinyaratyn, editor of the liberal paper \textit{Chaturath}, have been arrested and face years of detention in the new re-education camps the government has set up. The long-range intentions of the government, and the extent to which the army is united behind it, are still uncertain. So are the precise plots and ploys of all the interested generals and politicians in the weeks, days, and hours before and after the coup took place. Thai politics are not simple.\footnote{The rallying cry of the plotters was “the communist threat.” But, as is usual in Thailand, that threat was somewhat slighter than the forces marshaled against it. Indeed, an important aspect of the coup is that it illustrates the self-fulfilling nature of the policies of anti-communist containment and counterinsurgency that Washington has thrust upon this and other nations since the late 1940s. Even before all the facts are available, the way in which Dr. Puey’s students were murdered should be recorded.}

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Thailand is a monarchy which has been governed for most of the last forty years by right-wing military dictatorships. But the royal family has remained among the strongest cohesive forces in this mainly Buddhist nation. Absolute devotion to the throne, together with a commitment to Thailand’s territorial integrity, has been the watchword of all political groups, save the illegal Communist Party. Until recently, political power remained the perogative of a small bureaucratic elite.

In 1947 a left of center, democratically elected government was overthrown by supporters of Field Marshal Pibul Songgrom, the country’s wartime leader who had allied Thailand to the Japanese and declared war on the US and Britain. Pibul himself returned to power in 1948. The next year the CIA commenced America’s long, warm, and inglorious relationship with Thailand’s security forces, by equipping and training Pibul’s police.\footnote{One police specialty became the murder of democratic politicians.} Through the 1950s and 1960s extensive, if often covert, US aid helped to create a new and very cozy class of army and police officers who understood just how much they owed Washington. By the time American soldiers and civilian advisers began to arrive en masse in May 1962, Pibul, the ally of the Imperial Sun, had been replaced by General Sarit Thanarat; he was succeeded by two more officers, Thanom Kittikachorn and Prapas Charusathien. They were all equally obliging.

In 1964 the US began to build in Thailand the bases that were essential to the prosecution of the Vietnam war; the country was transformed into “a land-based aircraft carrier.” The bombing of Vietnam began from Thai bases in 1965; Thai troops (paid by the US) “volunteered” to fight in Vietnam and Laos. The use of Bangkok as a lucrative rest and recreation center for GIs began to corrupt the other classes as Washington had corrupted the military.

The US ambassador then was Graham Martin. As he was later to do in both Rome and Saigon, Martin enthusiastically supported the right-wing militarists against the center and left democrats and urged an extended counterinsurgency program. The centralized Communist Suppressions Operations Command (CSOC) was established at his suggestion.

\footnote{In his book \textit{War Without End} Michael Klare describes how Thailand now became the site where the US “could develop weapons and strategies for Vietnam-type wars without risking interference from the local population.” The first act of
armed insurgency by the Thai Communist Party, which has links with both Peking and Hanoi, was reported only in 1965. So, as the US government jargon of the time put it, “this program will mark the first time that R and D has been given a major role in supporting a counterinsurgency in a comprehensive way from the earliest stages of the conflict.” Thailand was to be a showplace of containment.4

By now there are about 10,000 insurgents under arms in the north, northeast, and southern provinces of Thailand. Not a very fast rate of growth, but one which has allowed the “research and development” to continue. Between 1967 and 1972, by contrast, the US trained almost 30,000 Thai police and army officers. In April 1973 Richard Moose and James Lowenstein (whose Senate Foreign Relations Committee reports on Indochina and Thailand are among the best chronicles of the Nixon doctrine) observed: “It is difficult to imagine how US-Thai relations would be structured if the insurgency did not exist.” Nor, indeed, would the military have found it so easy to justify their own control of government. The insurgents were a very convenient spot of bother.

Throughout the 1960s, the main activities of the Americans in Thailand were to emphasize the threats from Peking and Hanoi, and to teach the methods of counterinsurgency. Between fiscal year 1967 and fiscal year 1972, AID invested $53.2 million in the Thai police forces. One of the institutions set up was the Border Patrol Police, whose communications system was devised by the Stanford Research Institute. This system worked very nicely in October when the BPP were summoned to help kill the students.

But Nixon’s détente with Peking and the Paris Agreement undercut the basis of the military government. In 1973 politics was taken, for the first time, away from the narrow bureaucratic elite. Students began to demand a democratic constitution and in October 1973 they staged the largest demonstrations in Thai history.

The police fired upon the demonstrators, killing at least sixty-five, and the military seized Thammasat University. But then the commander in chief of the army, Kris Sivera, refused to allow further bloodshed, arguing, “These are our children. They want democracy. We cannot shoot them.” More important still, he received the crucial support of the king. Thanom and Prapas were forced to flee. After forty years of political control, the military was out of power. Some officers around Kris Sivera accepted the new situation; but others began to conspire to return.

An interim government was formed, the immense personal property of the dictators was confiscated, political parties (except the Thai Communist Party) were legalized, and the brutality of CSOC was publicly investigated and condemned. The prime minister said of the students killed in October 1973, “They did not die in vain. Their death has brought us democracy which we will preserve forever.”

But the preservation of democracy requires at least some agreement on its basic value, and this did not exist. Democratic politicians were unable to work out a stable relationship with the military men they had replaced. Until his unexpected death in April 1976, Kris Sivera maintained some sort of equilibrium; indeed it was only his support of the democratic experiment that allowed politicians, army, students, and unions to coexist at all. Thai politicians, unused to power, were often indecisive.

In March 1975, after the first free elections since the late 1940s, the new premier, Kukrit Pramoj, called for the withdrawal of all US troops within a year. (Kukrit had acted a similar role, opposite Marlon Brando, in the film The Ugly American, which throughout 1975 played to delighted audiences in Bangkok.)

Prime Minister Kukrit discovered how serious were the country’s real problems (to which less R and D had been given). Among them were 24 percent inflation, widespread corruption, and failures to deal with land reform and unemployment. All were aggravated by a fall in foreign investment. Foreign corporations decided that since gold and ribbons had disappeared from ministerial jackets, “stability” must have been lost as well. Worst of all was the increase in political violence as the Thai military and political right responded to the student triumph of 1973 by promoting its own mass movements to counter the students, divide them, and split the king off from them.

Among these groups was Nawapol, formed by officers of the Internal Security Operations Command, ISOC (as CSOC had been renamed). Its swaggering front man, Watana Kiewvimol, is a self-proclaimed champion of the monarchy, Buddhism, and territorial integrity. He has described the student demonstrations of 1973 as KGB inspired, has blamed all labor unrest and political assassinations on international communism, and warned that Hanoi is about to seize the northeast. In fact, after April 1975 Hanoi showed little inclination to increase support for the insurgents.

Last year Watana declared that he wanted to polarize Thai politics so as to produce conditions that would make a coup d’état possible in 1976. In January 1976 he called for a military-backed government to preserve order. He claims to have
studied at Seton Hall University, in New Jersey, and Thai exiles in London believe he has links to the US government.

Another right-wing paramilitary group is the Red Gaurs (bison), which contains veterans from the Thai units that fought for the US in Indochina. It also includes civil servants and vocational students. The latter have particularly resented their fellow students in the academic departments since the academic students led the demonstrations of 1973. The Red Gaurs are controlled by Colonel Sudsai Hasdin of the ISOC. They have, according to a statement by one of their leaders last August, more than 100,000 members. He claimed that both ISOC and the Special Police supported and trained his men. In the past three years the Red Gaurs has actively broken up urban strikes and peasant demonstrations.

The third main group is the Village Scouts, a strident patriotic group which appeals to popular love for the king and, in fact, enjoys his patronage. The king’s position has been vital; in the last eighteen months he is reported to have become alarmed at the revolutionary successes elsewhere in Indochina. He is said to have been personally horrified by the deposition of the king of Laos in December last year, and can have been no less concerned at Prince Sihanouk’s “retirement” in April this year.

One source of influence for all these groups was the support of dozens of the army radio stations throughout the country. During the last year the stations have become increasingly venomous in their attacks upon the left and the students, particularly during this year’s election campaign. More than thirty people were killed during that campaign. The most prominent was Dr. Boonsanong Punyodhana, a graduate of Cornell and leader of the Thai Socialist Party, who passionately believed that parliamentary government must be made to work. His murder was never solved, although many people in Bangkok attribute it to one of the vigilante groups.

The April elections resulted in a shift to the right and in Kukrit’s replacement by his older brother Seni, the leader of the centrist Democrat Party. Seni formed a coalition with the right-wing Chart Thai party, which has close ties to the security forces. The coalition was somewhat ineffectual and inherently unstable—the more so after General Kris Sivera’s death. In the summer officers began to maneuver for new positions in the annual fall military promotions. Left-of-center democrats also hoped at that time to remove several right-wing generals from important posts. Inevitably these intrigues, together with the final withdrawal of all US troops, encouraged the security forces and the Chart Thai Party to make their own plans for a coup.

Simultaneously the army broadcasts began to whip up feeling against the Seni government’s policy of détente with Hanoi; this campaign helped to prepare the ground for October’s anticommunist hysteria. When the Thai foreign minister visited Hanoi in August this year the army disrupted his visit by provoking simultaneous attacks upon thousands of Thailand’s Vietnamese residents.

In this uncertain atmosphere the strongmen of the years between 1964 and 1973 were encouraged to return by certain right-wing politicians, generals, and police officers, and perhaps by the royal family. When Prapas came back during the summer he was forced to leave again in August after angry (and predictable) student demonstrations. The return of Field Marshal Thanom Kittikachorn in September was a better organized provocation. It was done, says Dr. Puey, “at a high level.” Many believe the king, who had received Prapas, was involved.

Thanom stepped off the plane wearing the saffron robes of a monk, claiming he only wanted to see his dying father. Respect for the cloth muted student protest. The leaders of the main group of students, the NSCT, asked the government to expel him but organized no demonstrations to demand it. For a brief period Seni resigned in protest against Thanom’s return, but this did not break up the coalition. Seni declared he could not legally deport Thanom. The students grew more restless. Then, at the end of September, two young men, known for their left-wing activities, were found hanged outside Bangkok.

The NSCT immediately declared that the two men were victims of political murder by the police, and in fact the police soon after admitted responsibility for killing them. The students began to call rallies to demand Thanom’s removal. Parliament was divided. On Friday October 1 several Bangkok unions joined the students and called for strikes.

It was during the weekend of October 2-3, Dr. Puey told me, that students began to organize. “ Relatives of those killed in 1973 moved their demonstration against Thanom into the university grounds—they complained that the police harassed them.” On Sunday many students boycotted their exams. “At midday on Monday,” Dr. Puey told me, “the students and their relatives organized a rally in the university. I tried to stop them but it was too late.” Then two students from the drama group dressed up as the murdered activists; they acted out the hanging.
This was to be a crucial incident. On Tuesday the right-wing papers published photographs of the scene and claimed that one of the students had been made up to look like the crown prince. The press and radio stations immediately claimed that the NSCT was full of communists bent on destroying the monarchy. They demanded punishment for this “lèse-majesté.” It was no such thing, Dr. Puey said; the resemblance between the actor and the prince was entirely a coincidence. But the right-wing press and radio seized on the skit of the hanging as a way of stirring up popular anger. Throughout Tuesday they attacked the students. The Seni government announced an investigation.

Students continued rallying in the university on Tuesday; by now all classes had been suspended and the faculty had moved out. Dr. Puey told me the crowd, on Tuesday evening, had grown to some 10,000. Speeches, music, and entertainment continued through the night.

Between Tuesday morning and Wednesday night the links between the security forces and the right-wing vigilante groups such as Nawapol became vividly clear. Throughout the night the broadcasts of the Armoured Brigade Radio grew more and more strident despite the prime minister’s appeal for moderation on the air. Just after 11 PM on Tuesday the radio announced that the leader of the right-wing Chart Thai Party had telephoned the prime minister to demand action against the students. Then, at about 1 AM on Wednesday, the radio, once again attacking the students for “lèse majesté,” declared:

Now is the time for Thai patriots to rise up and fight…. Nawapol men throughout the country are urgently requested to contact Nawapol coordinators in their provinces. In the Bangkok area they should report at once to Operations Centres…. [They] must be prepared to carry out activities in co-operation with government authorities.”

But the government authorities were slower than the vigilantes. At 1:45 AM the radio warned that the police were not yet supporting the Nawapol. “This means that the police do not side with the people in defense of the monarchy.” Then, when the Nawapol men had assembled in Bangkok, the radio announced that if the government did not move against the students, “Nawapol will take action to defend the nation, the religion and the monarchy.”

The message was received. At 2:40 AM the radio declared, “The police are now doing their duty…. The public should stay away from the university.” The Border Patrol Police had arrived, making good use of the “communication system” devised by the Stanford Research Institute.

The ominous warning on the radio was seriously meant. By now, Dr. Puey told me, the railings around the university were jammed with police and right-wing forces from both Nawapol and the Red Gaurs. Until 7 AM they poured bullets and mortar fire through the rails into the university buildings. To Dr. Puey’s dismay the students returned the fire, although only with small arms.

At 7 o’clock on Wednesday morning, Dr. Puey said, there was a lull in the shooting. One of the NSCT leaders slipped out of the university with the student who had resembled the crown prince. They rushed to the prime minister’s house to explain that no lèse majesté had been intended. Seni had already left for an emergency cabinet meeting. By telephone he ordered their arrests.

The respite at the university was short. At about 7:30 AM, the Border Patrol Police and the vigilante mob broke down the railings and began to storm the campus. The radio then warned, “Stay away from the area since machine guns and grenade launchers are being used.” The radio ordered highway police to search all cars coming into Bangkok for student reinforcements.

The students were set upon by the police and the crowds, including thousands of right-wing students. Some were dragged out of the buildings, and forced to strip off their shirts and crawl under police guard onto the football field. The stands around the ground were filled with vigilantes and right-wing young people cheering wildly. Other students attacked by the mob were strung up and beaten to death with chairs, axes, and guns. Wounded young men and women were dragged off stretchers and pummelled to death; the Buddhist images they wore were torn from their necks, “because communists are not Buddhists.”

By the middle of the morning about fifty people had been killed (the exact number is still not clear). Some 1,500 students were arrested and many of them were subsequently beaten up in detention. The Border Patrol Police celebrated the fall of the campus by spraying it one last time with machine gun bullets.

At a cabinet meeting Seni agreed to the demands of the right that he fire three so-called left-wing ministers and reinstate
two rightists. (The words “left” and “right” hardly describe the cabinet members accurately; in fact all the parliamentary
governments were right of center.) But the coup had already begun.

Dr. Puey heard that leaflets accusing him of wishing to destroy the monarchy were circulating in the city. The University
Council agreed to accept his resignation, which he had anyway been intending to make. Rather than go into hiding he
made for the airport. “I was allowed through immigration after they checked with Bangkok. But the flight to Kuala
Lumpur was delayed.”

When the formation of the “Administrative Reform Council” was announced, at about 6 PM, an immigration official
came up to Puey. “He told me the radio had denounced me and had warned the airline not to carry me. I was told that the
Village Scouts were rushing out to the airport to get me.” He was then arrested by a police officer who said that three of
Dr. Puey’s students had denounced him as a communist.

The policeman took Dr. Puey’s diary, address book, and his copy of the Father Brown stories by G.K. Chesterton. He
said the rector would have to walk out through the mob of Scouts. But Dr. Puey was allowed to call his lawyer, who
managed to contact members of the Privy Council. The plotters were then in a state of confusion and allowed Dr. Puey’s
release. He got on a flight to London.

The new prime minister, Thanim Kravichien, is a fiercely anticommunist former judge. He is said to be honest, and has
made much of his plans to clear up corruption, something the previous governments all failed to do. But, as the
Washington Post reported, he “has a reputation among leftists as a witch hunter in the style of the late Senator Joseph
McCarthy.” He has lectured on anticommunist tactics to the Thai National Defense College and to ISOC.² His
government contains almost no one of political experience (even the Chart Thai Party was in the event excluded), and
rests only on support of the military right wing and the palace. Since the coup at least 3,400 students, intellectuals,
journalists, and others have been rounded up by the police, whose powers of detention are now virtually unlimited.
“Subversive” books and newspapers have been burned in public bonfires, all newspapers are now heavily censored.
Chaturath, the weekly edited by Pansak Vinyaratyn, who is now in detention, has been closed down.

Schools and universities are no longer allowed to teach politics and the government has declared that the country has no
need for democracy in the next twelve years. Strikes have been outlawed; the Americans highly praised. Hanoi has
denounced the coup as a CIA plot. Clashes along the border with Laos have increased.

Politically the most significant casualty of the coup will perhaps prove to be popular loyalty to the king, especially
among those Thais who have been hurt by the coup or appalled by it. As the authority of the monarchy is undermined
there is good reason to suppose that the Thai Communist Party will develop a “national liberation front” with a much
more widespread political appeal than hitherto.

Recent reports from Bangkok suggest that this was a coup in which the generals outflanked their colleagues in the police
and the Chart Thai Party. The new dictatorship may well be succeeded by another. But whatever the outcome for the
power competition on the right, the left-wing and centrist students and politicians who managed to escape have been
slipping into the hills and across the Mekong since October 6. They have been welcomed in Vientiane. For the first time
the Thai Communist Party’s clandestine radio, based in China, has been broadcasting statements from non-communist
Thai politicians who have now fled. One, from a former member of parliament, Kaisaeng Suksai, said the parliamentary
road to democracy has now failed and only “armed struggle” was left for those who wish to achieve a “genuine
independence and democracy.”

The simple lesson is nevertheless worth repeating: it is not the Communist Party itself that will have achieved this result.
The conditions for civil war in Thailand have been created by the antidemocratic forces so long nurtured there, as in
other countries, by Democratic and Republican administrations in Washington.

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2 The Indochina Resource Center, Washington, DC and The Thailand Information Project of the Southeast Asian Studies Department at Cornell recently published pamphlets on US-Thai
relationships. Both are used here.
5 The IRC’s study by Thadeus Hood of Santa Clara University has considerable information on these groups; it quotes from Pansak Vinyaratyn’s weekly paper Chaturath.  

6 These radio quotations are all from the BBC monitoring on the dates in question.  

7 See the report in the October 22 issue of The International Bulletin, published in Berkeley, California.