

## Quit moaning and fix Thailand's problems (Full text)

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Historically, the US is not thrilled by military coups, particularly those which it does not orchestrate. They are anathema to the US foreign policy dictum of "love only democracies". Why such coups occur is of minor importance.

As to the May 22, 2014 Thailand coup, my personal, and probably controversial, view as a long term American resident in "Amazing Thailand", is that the Thai military did the right thing. Short of an outbreak of civil war, then brewing, there was economic standstill and a dearth of other viable options to untangle the Gordian knot of the Thai political turmoil.

Let's not further rehash the negatives of the US lambasts directed at Thailand and the Thai reaction of resentment at being lectured by the US, coupled with the Thai "loss of face" precipitating the so-called usual Thai denial of responsibility and their blame-someone-else responses/reactions; while the authorities appoint another committee to investigate. Instead, I would like to bring to the forefront the positive ongoing achievements and contributions by both the Thai and the Americans to promote/repair/cement the long standing relationship between the US and Thailand. Given the evidence I am aware of, it is flourishing. That age old world alliance and partnership does not falter nor fall apart just because of periodic publically announced criticism. In terms of the passage of time, what is happening now is just a hiccup. H.E. the Thai Prime Minister knows this and has reacted accordingly. In this respect he has been level-headed and stabilizing.

While I disagree with a number of the actions of both Thailand and the US emanating from the coup of May 2014 and its aftermath, (by the way, that was the 13th coup I have experienced during my sojourn here), and accepting that the Thai economy is lacking, I am supporting the continuing efforts by both sides to build the ideal Thailand world we all hope will arrive.

My advice to all is: Don't be derailed by the occasional outbursts of critical rhetoric, even if they are not the wisest form of discreet diplomacy. Neither country in this arena is perfect or without their own share of missteps, faults and failures. Both parties in any relationship have to do what has to be done to achieve legitimate objectives, to revitalize and to reinforce that relationship. They have to get on with it. And, despite opinions to the contrary, that is what is happening between Thailand and America today.

Give Thailand the time and the slack it needs to change for the better, as is the stated policy of this government, to undo the many decades of accumulated abuses, defects, corruption, money politics and neglect by an endless line of previously democratically elected governments, politicians, civil servants, the business community, the military and the police.

Get real - substantive instant solutions do not exist. The right end result goal cannot be achieved overnight, or even in a few months or perhaps years. Perfection requires patience to get it right. "Thai-style" democracy, or the perceived abatement thereof, appears to be at the heart of this discourse. Yes, there have been and will be mistakes, back sliding, misdirections, oversights, excesses and failures along the path of learning the most effective ways to prevail and reach the target, consistent with local and international expectations.

Bear in mind what history has taught us - "... that governments too often do not act or pursue policies which are in their own best interests". Attributed to the American historian Barbara W. Tuchman in her book, *The March of Folly*.

Since first proposed by President Woodrow Wilson back during World War I, 100 years ago, the US has espoused the foreign policy of "Saving the World for Democracy". This fundamental policy took hold in the 1930s and guided the US through stopping the spread of Nazism and fascism in the West and Japan's militancy in the East before and during WWII. The Truman Doctrine of 1946, the Marshall Plan and Churchill's "Iron Curtain" counter-policies set the course of the Cold War for 5 decades, inclusive of the Korean and Vietnam conflicts – in its simplest synopsis of being democracy/capitalism vs communism. Those were wars of ideology for the hearts and minds of people and nations, as well as wars of economics. Today, a new war of crimes against humanity has emerged and grown against the spread of fundamentalist Islam's onerous attempts to impose their ideology on others.

As said earlier, in its endeavours to spread democracy around the world, the US has not always been right in all that it says or does, far from it. Hypocrisy and duplicity and just plain ignorance have not been lacking in the US or its government leaders. But let's not get bogged down on analyzing historical misadventures.

For the past 83 years Thailand has struggled valiantly to find the best form and type of democracy that will suit the needs and aspirations of this country and its people. They are still working at it. The classic democracy form of government, as defined by the ancient Greeks and Romans, i.e. rule by an unfettered majority, did not and does not work. I can elaborate more on that in Q&A if you would like.

What has worked, to one degree or another, is "Constitutional Democracy". This is where a constitution reigns as the supreme law of the land and the rights of the minority are protected. The classic example is the US – which is actually a republic, not a democracy.

Some of the key elements of a constitutional democracy are: a comprehensive constitution, an open legal framework, stable political systems, adherence to the rule of law, freedom of expression, limits on the powers of what governments and their leaders can and cannot do, checks and balances on the actions of the basic branches of government - the executive, the legislature, and the judiciary – to prevent abuses by any of them and the people who run them, an informed and responsible electorate - both those in power and those in the opposition - to keep each other honest, and elections by the whole population of responsible and accountable representatives. Former Thai Prime Minister Anand Panyarachun defined it in his "7 Pillars of Sustainable Democracy": "elections, political tolerance, the rule of law, freedom of expression, accountability and transparency, decentralization and civil society". Political activism is a necessary component as well.

The 18 previous Thai constitutions have failed to achieve their desired results. Hence the concerted efforts of current minds to formulate that elusive perfect solution to be embodied in the upcoming next constitution. As to why they have not worked in the past, basically the then existing Thai constitutional system of checks and balances failed, repeatedly, as the popularly elected majority in power abused and misused their powers for personal gain.

There are two rival theories of constitutional democracy - one founded in England (by John Locke), with which we are familiar, and the other founded in France (by Jean Jacques Rousseau), the country where in the 1920s and 1930s Thailand's Plaek Phibunsongkhram and Pridi Banomyong were schooled. These men were the leaders of Thailand's revolution in 1932 which transformed the then existing absolute monarchy into a constitutional monarchy. The two approaches, the British and the French, to constitutional government conflict in their definitions of governing. The then Thai leaders adopted the French style of constitutional democracy.

Let's get back to my main strategy – supporting activities to strengthen the Thai – US relationship. Most, if not all, of the civilians in the current Thai cabinet are US educated. As are some of the military ministers. They understand where America is coming from, and support the principles which built that nation. They understand the cultural differences yet maintain their Thainess and Thai values.

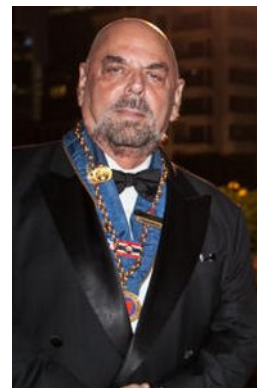
The US Mission in Thailand is perhaps the 2nd largest in the world. There are over 70 US government agencies represented here, many with regional as well as Thai responsibilities. As I recall, there are probably 4,000 ± US and Thai staff based here, including their families. Many of these agencies and people work quietly behind the scenes to help Thailand achieve its greatness in this world of nations. For instance, extensive and broad training and cooperation of the Thai police and justice officials on catching bad guys is ongoing and all encompassing. American government health and agencies, like AFRAMS and the CDC work with Thai researchers and medical personnel – as in helping Thailand to develop a vaccine to prevent malaria and dengue fevers and deal with other tropical medicine needs.

A number of these agencies are working to help Thailand with its environmental challenges, such as: working to stop the poaching of wildlife, the destruction of forest reserves and stopping the criminal trafficking of wild flora and fauna. Next to smuggling of drugs, guns and people, such illicit activity is the next largest money generator on this planet for organised crime.

Just recently Thailand opened up U-tapao air base and Sattahip military port for the US and Thailand to provide humanitarian relief and assistance to the earthquake victims in Nepal, helping to save countless lives.

The Peace Corps continues to receive support from both countries. As does the work of the Asia Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation and the Kenan Institute, among others.

The Thai-US Creative Partnership promoting innovative ideas and creative technology research and practices across a wide range of disciplines is flourishing.



Lyman: Don't be derailed by the occasional outbursts

Thousands of Thai students are helped here with their educational needs and advice on educational opportunities in American educational institutions. The Fulbright and American Field Service Scholarship programs continue.

America returns to Thailand hundreds of Thai antiques in need of their homeland. Cultural exchanges continue unabated. The US provides financial support for the restoration of Thai religious and ethnic heritage sites. It just supported the Thai teams for the 2015 Special Olympics.

And yes, despite the speculations to the contrary, multilateral security cooperation and Cobra Gold is still up and running.

American private sector businesses have long represented a substantial portion of the foreign investment in Thailand. And more are coming to and being welcomed here. Concurrently, Thai businesses are now investing in the US. No relationship tensions here that I am aware of.

On the Thai side, consistent with its reform program, over the past year the government has shepherd through a raft of needed legislation addressing many issues of national significance. To date, about 110 new laws and amendments to existing laws have been adopted since June of last year - 83 published in the Government Gazette and 27 awaiting publication. They deal with the economy, agriculture, human trafficking and exploitation, corruption, energy and the environment, communications, budgeting and taxation, education, domestic and wildlife animals welfare, fishing, migrants, immigration, transportation, water management, regional cooperation – AEC and Asean for example - plus addressing other problems plaguing Thai society. The next and very crucial step, of course, is to monitor the implementation and enforcement of these and pre-existing laws.

Many more laws in the pipeline are in various stages of development. Some have risen to the top because of both local civil society and international pressures – there is an old saying which holds true for many communities, that "It's the squeaky wheel which gets the grease". And Thais do hear and respond to threats to their international image and reputation. The US does not react to such threats.

I am running out of time so I will wrap up my remarks. Having lived in Thailand professionally for the past 48 years, plus a few more starting in 1949, some 66 years ago when my parents moved to what my father called "Old Siam", I have witnessed numerous ups and downs in the US – Thai love affair. Yes, over the years there have been squabbles, bruised egos and some caustic differences, but the fundamental underlying mutual respect and trust between these two nations has never waned or been seriously threatened or been placed in jeopardy of no return.

Look at the fundamentals. While they differ on some of the details, both countries want what they perceive is best for Thailand and its people.

The US, by its unappreciated and overbearing condemnations, is not acting out of spite or with malice. Some of its actions are dictated by US domestic law. American foreign policy is obsessed with the concept of elections, though, in my view, not so much with what happens after the elections. The US long standing guiding principle is that "what's good for America is good for Thailand and good for the rest of the world too". A little arrogant and naive, probably, to some extent impractical, and while perhaps not sensitive enough to non-American cultural values and differences, the hearts of the vocal American officials, like those of well-meaning Thai officials counterparts, are in the right place.

Let's calm frayed nerves, assuage quick tempers, ask the players to keep their mouths tightly zipped shut and get on with the stated objective of supporting Thailand in its quest for the sorely needed reforms to its systems, its infrastructure, its political societies, and in overcoming the barriers to attaining those goals, through a Thai originated solution. That will be a win-win scenario.

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David Lyman, chairman and chief values officer at Tilleke & Gibbins, gave this talk on Thai-US relations at the Foreign Correspondents Club last Wednesday. The views expressed are his own and do not necessarily represent the views of his firm.

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