President Gerald Ford and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger faced a troubling dilemma in May 1975. The new Khmer Rouge government of Cambodia had just captured an American merchant vessel, the *Mayaguez*, in international waters, and fears ran high as to the fate of the ship’s crew in the hands of the unpredictable Khmer Rouge leadership. Ford and Kissinger wanted to recapture the *Mayaguez* by force, but the only American military bases close enough to launch an attack were in neighboring Thailand, and that country’s fragile, two-year-old civilian government had refused the Americans permission to mount the operation from Thai territory. Without the use of the Thai bases, the United States had little hope of rescuing the detained seamen. But all was not yet lost for Ford and Kissinger. The Thai military, though it had been forced to relinquish its control of the government two years earlier, still jealously guarded its prerogatives against the civilian leadership, which it was, in any case, about to overthrow. Ford and Kissinger, therefore, simply ignored the elected government and got permission from the army to launch the attack. Then, even as the American ambassador in Bangkok informed the civilian prime minister that the United States would respect Thai sovereignty, American forces working out of Thailand proceeded with the rescue—losing more lives in the process than they saved. The elected Thai government’s protests proved futile.¹

More than just a panicked response to a momentary crisis, this U.S. decision to defy the elected government of Thailand and rely on the army was the legacy of twenty-five years of intimate American relations with a corrupt, undemocratic, and often brutal Thai military. The United States, over that period, provided arms, money, and political
support to a succession of military regimes in Thailand, and, in return, those governments backed American diplomacy and collaborated in a variety of military operations. In the 1950s and 1960s, Thai paramilitary police supported CIA covert activities in Burma and Laos. In the Korean War, Thai soldiers fought alongside the American army. During the Vietnam War, almost fifty thousand U.S. servicemen pursued most of the air war against North Vietnam from a string of air and naval bases in Thailand. The American military presence in the country in the 1960s was so extensive that political scientist Benedict Anderson has called the period the “American Era” of Thai history. After the Vietnam War, although the United States withdrew its troops, the American and Thai militaries remained close. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the United States provided arms and training to the Thai military, and Thai and American troops participated annually in joint exercises on Thai soil. In important ways, the United States has retained its special relationship with the Thai military.

To understand why this special relationship has endured—why the Thais sent troops to Indochina, why the United States provided billions of dollars of arms to a corrupt and inefficient Thai military, why Thai leaders allowed tens of thousands of foreign troops on their soil, why successive American administrations supported repressive military regimes—we must turn to the time when it all began, the period from 1947 to 1958. Bounded by two important political events, the return to power of the army through a coup in November 1947 and the assumption of complete control of government by the military in October 1958, the twelve years from 1947 to 1958 formed a watershed in Thai history. The period both brought the establishment of a form of military government that would survive intact until 1973 and witnessed a transformation in Thailand’s foreign policy. In the late 1940s and 1950s, the Thai government slowly acquired the closed and repressive qualities it would retain throughout the 1960s and early 1970s. At the same time, the country abandoned the flexibility it had previously maintained in its foreign relations and forged an alliance with the United States that would last for decades. By the end of the period, in late 1958, a military dictatorship ruled the country, and the basis for all future cooperation with the United States had been laid. With that, modern Thailand was born.

This book seeks to show that the two processes at work in Thai politics and foreign affairs from 1947 to 1958—the extension of the military’s control of government and the movement toward closer relations with the United States—were intimately related. While the military
would have interfered in politics whether Thailand maintained an alliance with the United States or not, America’s actions strengthened the existing tendency toward repressive military government. At first unintentionally, later intentionally, U.S. policy in the late 1940s and 1950s encouraged military leaders to tighten their control over the government and suppress dissidents. Likewise, although Thailand and the United States probably would have maintained close relations no matter what the military’s political role, only a military government would have aligned itself so firmly with the United States and participated in the myriad covert operations the Americans sponsored. The Thai-American alliance of the 1950s was built on the rock of repressive Thai military government, and the military’s success in establishing its authoritarian regime resulted, in part, from that same alliance.

In examining this interdependence of military and American interests in Thailand, I have abandoned the conventional model of Thai-American relations. Published studies by Raymond Sean Randolph and Donald Nuechterlein and numerous dissertations by both Thais and Americans all focus on the importance of the Cold War to the Thai-American alliance. Such works portray the Thai-U.S. relationship as a partnership of ideological soulmates: the Thais feared the Communists; the Americans did too. By necessity, therefore, the two worked together. All aspects of the relationship, according to this model, focused on national security concerns. “Beginning in the 1950s and continuing through the present, then,” Randolph concludes, “themes of security and of American commitment have dominated Thai-American relations.” While this interpretation might appeal to Americans and Thai scholars trained in the United States, however, the Cold War paradigm explains little from the perspective of Thais of the time. It neither answers why Thai foreign policy took the direction it did nor accounts for inputs into Thai policymaking other than security concerns. Throughout the period, traditional, nonideological policy aims, not doctrinal anticommunism, informed Thai policy. Even regarding U.S. policy, the Cold War model distorts American aims and attitudes. It at once oversimplifies the reasons for American support for military governments in the country and obscures Thailand’s role in America’s disputes with its European allies. Significantly, none of the published studies and only two of the dissertations on Thai-U.S. relations in the period use Thai or American archival sources. And one of those two dissertations, by Arlene Becker Neher, concentrates on economic relations in the 1940s. The other, by Apichart Chinwanno, though ultimately upholding the conventional model, shows signs, especially in his
chapter on the initiation of American military assistance to Thailand, of analyzing Thai policy in terms other than of anticommunism.

Most seriously, the Cold War model fails to explain the role of the military and military-controlled governments in the alliance. In focusing on national security issues, the proponents of the Cold War model assume that political considerations mattered little to Thai foreign policymaking. The need to find a defense against the Communists drove the military government of the late 1940s and 1950s to seek out the alliance with the United States, and, presumably, the foreign threat would have forced a democratic administration, had civilians stayed in power after 1947, to do the same. Domestic politics and the form of government, from this viewpoint, had little impact on Thailand’s stance toward the United States. Likewise, the United States, recognizing the importance of national security concerns to Thai leaders, took limited interest in trying to shape Thai political developments. According to the Cold War model, American support for military governments in the country arose not out of a desire to manipulate Thai foreign policy, but from the belief that the country needed strong leadership to defend itself from Communists. In any case, the United States could do little, the Americans supposedly believed, to influence the course of internal events. Intensification of military rule and the movement toward closer relations with the United States proceeded independently.

Rather than considering Thailand’s alliance with the United States as separate from internal politics and driven by the novel and imported ideology of anticommunism, as the Cold War model assumes, we should view the country’s domestic politics and foreign policy, as the Thais themselves did, as closely connected. Small, weak, and underdeveloped, Thailand in the late 1940s and 1950s was susceptible to outside pressure at several key points. Various outside powers—including the United States—recognized this vulnerability and endlessly pushed the Thai government to set domestic policy in line with their own interests. The competing pressures from the United States and other powers regarding treatment of dissidents and ethnic minorities, in particular, made government conduct toward these internal groups foreign-policy issues. Such pressures had a profound impact on the repressiveness of the military regime. At the same time, the structure of the Thai military governments of the period induced Thais themselves to draw foreign powers into the Thai political arena. Factious, lacking a broad political base, and enjoying uncertain legitimacy, the military rulers of the period badly needed support from wherever they could get it. Because of the relative lack of anti-Western sentiments in Thailand, they sought
such political support from outside powers. When working in unison, the military leadership looked to foreign help to strengthen the military institutionally; individually, military leaders sought outside aid for their personal political interests. Thus at once confronting the inevitability of foreign intervention in internal affairs while also seeking it, Thais of the late 1940s and 1950s treated domestic politics and foreign policy not as separate, but as highly interdependent. Political developments, Thai leaders understood, often had consequences for the country’s foreign relations. And foreign-policy decisions almost always affected domestic politics.

Significantly, although the various international-relations-oriented studies of the Thai-American alliance neglect this crucial point, students of Thai domestic politics offer support for an approach emphasizing the importance of internal political events. Thak Chaloemitrana, the leading scholar of Thai politics of the late 1940s and 1950s, has commented that “Thailand’s involvement with the United States after the Second World War could be viewed as one prompted by domestic political concerns of the Thai leaders.” Similarly, J. L. S. Girling, author of one of the best recent surveys of Thai politics, *Thailand: Society and Politics*, describes the U.S.-Thai relationship as an outgrowth of Thailand’s patronage political system. Because of their focus on Thai domestic politics, neither scholar elaborates on these brief observations, but I take Thak’s and Girling’s comments as an analytical base for my own study of the U.S.-Thai alliance.

This book, therefore, is as much political as diplomatic history. In part, it should be seen as an update of Thak’s study of the politics of the 1940s and 1950s in *Thailand: The Politics of Despotic Paternalism*. My examination of Phibun’s ambiguous attitude toward the coups and accumulation of power by the military in the period should, in particular, contribute to a reevaluation of this important figure’s role in developing the modern Thai political system. At the same time, it is hoped that this book will add to the growing body of studies of American relations with developing countries, best represented by George McT. Kahin’s book on American involvement in Vietnam and Bruce Cumings’ examination of the Korean War, analyzing U.S. policy in terms of the domestic politics of the nations in question. Only through such an approach can the full meaning of the Thai-American alliance be understood.

Fortunately, sources for conducting a wide-ranging study of Thai politics and the alliance with the United States in the late 1940s and 1950s now abound. In the United States, fairly comprehensive records
of the State Department and meetings of the National Security Council are held in the National Archives and the Eisenhower and Truman libraries and appear, in part, in the published *Foreign Relations of the United States* series, the various versions of the Pentagon Papers, and the microfiche collection of documents released under the Freedom of Information Act, the *Declassified Documents Reference System*. Personal papers of two American ambassadors to Thailand, Edwin F. Stanton and William J. Donovan, housed in the University of Bridgeport Library in Connecticut and the Army War College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, respectively, are similarly illuminating.

In Thailand, the National Archives and the Foreign Ministry Library retain important records—many never before researched—of the cabinet, Supreme Command, Foreign Ministry, Defense Ministry, and Interior Ministry. Newspapers held in the National Library, transcripts of parliamentary debates in the National Assembly library, and proceedings of the Juridical Council (Kritsadika) at the Juridical Council’s library are revealing of both Thai domestic politics and foreign policy. The Phibunsongkhram Memorial Library at the Chulachomklao Military Academy in Nakhorn Nayok province also contains helpful, though limited and unorganized, materials, and masters’ theses from Thai universities often provide useful descriptions of important events. In England, British Foreign Office documents at the Public Record Office offer an added perspective on both Thai and American policies and shed light on Britain’s crucial role in the development of Thai-American relations in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

Each of these source materials is deficient in some respects. On the Thai side, a number of Thai-language newspapers from the late 1940s and 1950s have not been preserved, and the records of the various ministries suffer from huge gaps, both chronological and topical, for no apparent good reason. Even where newspapers are available and official records abundant, the Thai sources are often silent on those items of greatest interest because so many important decisions and events were made and occurred in back-room settings involving no note-taking. On the American side, documentation is more extensive, but the reviewer responsible for declassifying the State Department records from the 1955–1959 period released significantly fewer documents than reviewers for the earlier years. For all periods, the American records contain almost no references to the CIA, possibly the most important American agency operating in Thailand in the 1950s.

Luckily, however, materials from one source often compensate for weaknesses in another. Although the official Thai records at times give
no indication of the behind-the-scenes maneuvers critical to the politics of the period, a careful reading of contemporary newspapers can be most revealing. Where such newspapers are missing, U.S. and British embassy reports on press opinions often fill the gaps. Likewise, because important Thai political figures regularly consulted American and British diplomats about domestic events, the State Department and Foreign Office dispatches provide a great deal of information unavailable in the Thai records. And while the American records are mostly silent about CIA activities, the Thai documents are, at times, strangely open about both American and Thai covert operations. Perhaps most helpful in this respect have been the numerous interviews conducted for this study with former Thai diplomats and military leaders and American CIA and State Department officials. When pieced together with the documentary evidence, such interviews supply important insights into both the development of covert operations in Thailand and the personal aspects of the alliance.

From these various sources, a picture of Thai-American relations from 1947 to 1958 emerges in which American fortunes in Thailand, far from being independent of the country’s domestic politics, were bound directly to the strength and repressiveness of the military government. Initially, the Americans responded negatively to the military’s overthrow of the elected government in November 1947, but, as the military consolidated its rule over the next three years, relations between the United States and Thailand improved. The formation of the de facto alliance in 1950 coincided exactly with the diminution of civilian control over the foreign policymaking process. Then, as the military tightened its grip over the country in the early 1950s, eliminating its rivals and repressing dissidents, relations grew even closer. The United States in these years expanded its aid to the military, intensified its operations in the country, and strengthened its commitment to fight for the government’s survival. When, from 1955 to 1958, the government instituted democratic reforms, freeing dissidents and allowing political parties to form and compete in elections, relations with the United States deteriorated. Disputes between the two countries emerged, and both Thais and Americans reevaluated the prospects for continuing the relationship. Only the imposition of an absolutist military dictatorship in 1958 restored the alliance.

Although, superficially, this correspondence of American policy successes and military accumulation of power appears merely coincidental, more was at work here than happenstance. The problem, simply put, was that American policy aims and Thai democracy were in-
compatible. The Americans sought a massive increase in Thai military power, insisted on the repression of criticism of the United States, and enhanced the military’s ability to conduct covert operations without outside interference. In a country where a military tending toward authoritarianism already intervened in politics and construction of a public consensus on foreign policy was nearly impossible, such policies could not help but conflict with the forces for democracy. Likewise, American policies would have enjoyed little chance for success had civilians been allowed to criticize government foreign policy and oversee covert activities and the military expansion.

Therein lies the tragedy of the Thai-American relationship of the late 1940s and 1950s. When, in 1958, the Americans finally embraced outright military dictatorship in Thailand, they had not lost faith in democracy. They still believed that civilian participation in government strengthened Thailand. By then, however, their own policy concerns simply mattered more to them.

THE SETTING

Thailand is a Texas-sized country with a tropical monsoon climate set in the middle of mainland Southeast Asia. It shares borders with Cambodia to the east, Laos to the north, Burma to the west, and Malaysia to the south. Neither China nor Vietnam is contiguous, but parts of both lie within one hundred kilometers of Thai territory. Much of Thailand’s border, except where the Mekong River forms the boundary with Laos, is poorly demarcated.

Measured by population and economic development, Thailand ranked in the top half of Southeast Asian nations of the late 1940s and 1950s. In 1947, it had a population of more than seventeen million, a gross national product of about $700 million, and a per capita income of approximately $42. Eighty to 90 percent of the population in the period farmed. Although tenancy was on the rise, more than 80 percent of all farmers cultivated their own land. The country’s main exports, in descending order, were rice, rubber, teak, and tin. Bangkok, the capital, formed the only major urban area.

Land forms and drainage divide Thailand into four geographically and linguistically distinct regions. The central region, including Bangkok, is the richest, most densely populated, and most developed. The fertile soil of the Chao Phraya River valley has made it the rice bowl of Thailand, and its hub, Bangkok, handles most of the country’s
international commerce. The most populous region, the northeast, is the poorest. Underdeveloped and relatively dry, it depends on rice cultivation, but, unlike the central region, usually supports only one crop per year. The south, a narrow peninsular region, has an economy and climate more like Malaysia’s than those of the rest of Thailand. Rubber remains its major agricultural product, with tin-mining contributing income in the 1940s and 1950s. The north, a mountainous region, is the most thinly populated. Its inhabitants are concentrated in the rice-growing alluvial valleys. Each of these four regions has its own dialect. The central dialect is the official language.

Ethnically, Thailand is the most homogeneous nation of Southeast Asia but contains significant minorities. Small numbers of non-Thai, primarily migratory “hill tribes,” live in the mountains of the north. These tribes mix little with the ethnic Thais of the lowlands. In the four southernmost provinces, Muslim Malay speakers form the majority, and Khmer (Cambodian) speakers predominate in some northeastern border provinces. A few Indians and Europeans live in Bangkok and larger towns. Most important, some 10 to 15 percent of the population is of Chinese ancestry. Although Chinese have occupied a prominent place in Thai society for centuries, most arrived from the late nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries, and many remained unassimilated in the late 1940s and 1950s. Chinese of the time controlled almost all the country’s domestically owned industry, commerce, and banking. Despite the prominence of some minorities, however, ethnic differences never troubled Thailand as much as they did its neighbors. More than 80 percent of the population in the period could be classified as Thai, and, because the Chinese quickly adopted their hosts’ religion, more than 90 percent practiced Thais’ syncretistic form of Theravada Buddhism.