

Notes on the Decision of the US Government not to declare war on Thailand after the Thai Declaration of War on the US and Britain on 25 January 1942

1. Following the US Declaration of War on Japan on 8 December 1914 and the outbreak of war between Japan and the US following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor the previous day, Japan moved swiftly into Thailand in order to attack the British in Malaya, Singapore and Burma. After initial resistance, Thailand saw little choice but to agree to the passage of Japanese forces through their territory in order to preserve a modicum of independence and accordingly signed an alliance with Japan on 21 December 1941 **after the Japanese invasion of Thailand on 8 December 1941.**

2. In Washington, there was consternation at the Thai Legation where the Minister in charge, **Mom Rajawongse Seni Pramot (Pramot)**¹, made his opposition to his Government's actions clear beyond any doubt. I refer in particular to his views as presented or reported in the following documents in the Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS) series:

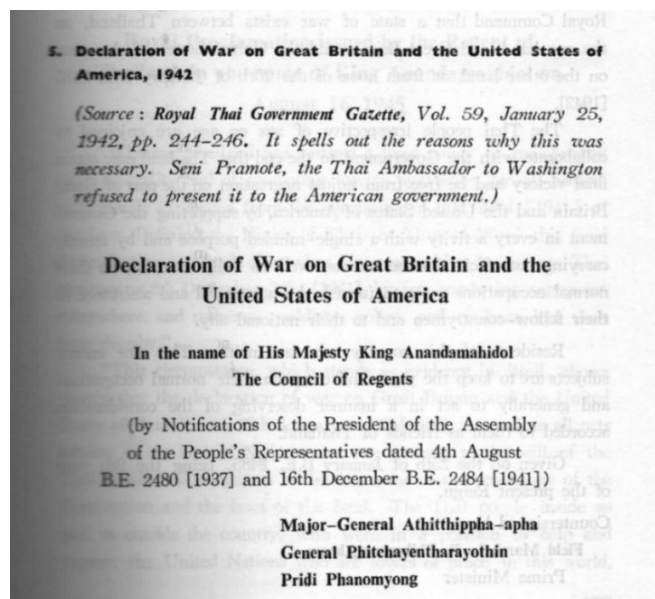
https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1941v05/pg_387

https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1941v05/pg_388

https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1941v05/pg_389

https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1941v05/pg_390

3. On 25 January 1942, Thailand declared war on both the US and Britain. A Royal Command issued that day read:



¹ Mom Rajawongse is a royal title bestowed on the great-grandchildren of Thai monarchs. Seni was a great-grandson of Rama II.

Whereas Great Britain and the United States of America have committed successive acts of aggression against Thailand, in certain cases by sending troops to invade Thai territory and, in particular, by sending aeroplanes clandestinely to bomb the homes of the people who carry on their normal livelihood and cruelly to machinegun unarmed civilian population contrary to civilised practice, without acting openly in accordance with international usage, which may be deemed to be in violation of international law and humanity, so that Thailand can no longer look on with forbearance,

Now therefore, by virtue of the provisions of Section 54 of the Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand, it is hereby declared by Royal Command that a state of war exists between Thailand, on the one hand, and Great Britain and the United States of America, on the other hand, as from noon of the 25th of January B.E. 2485 [1942].

The Thai people irrespective of sex or age are enjoined to collaborate with the Government to the end that Thailand may attain final victory and be free from unjust aggression on the part of Great Britain and the United States of America, by supporting the Government in every activity with a single-minded purpose and by strictly carrying out official instructions as well as fully carrying on their normal occupations so as to furnish the utmost aid and assistance to their fellow-countrymen and to their national ally.

Residents of this country who are neither Thai nor enemy subjects are to keep the peace and carry on their normal occupations and generally to act in a manner deserving of the consideration accorded to them as friends of Thailand.

Given on the 25th of January B.E. 2485, being the 9th year of the present Reign.

Countersigned by
Field Marshal P. Phibunsongkhram
Prime Minister

[Source: "Thai Politics 1932-1957" edited by Professor Thak Chaloemtiarana pp 457-458]

4. Although the Royal Command was supposedly "countersigned" by the Prime Minister Plaek Phibunsongkram ("Phibun"), Secretary to the Cabinet at the time Thawi Bunyakaet has given an authoritative account in "Thai Politics 1932-1957" pp 325 + of how it was Phibun's practice to sign such Royal Proclamations in advance before sending them to the Regency Council for their signature. On this occasion Pridi Phanomyong (Pridi) was out of Bangkok on duty, and was not able to sign the Proclamation in time, but it was even so released as though he had signed.

5. The proclamation was annulled by another Royal Proclamation issued on 16 August 1945 by Pridi, now sole Regent. He acknowledged that the 25 January 1942 Proclamation constituted "an infringement of the provisions of the Constitution and the laws of the land":

6. Peace Declaration. Royal Proclamation issued by the Regent of Thailand in the name of King Anandamahidol on August 16, 1945.

(Source: Royal Thai Government Gazette, Vol. 62, August 16, 1945, pp. 503-506. The proclamation marked the shift of foreign policy from belligerency to reconciliation with the Allies. It stated that the declaration of war was made contrary to the popular wishes of the people and the constitution and thus should be considered null and void. Also, laws passed during the war which encroached upon the interests of England and the United States would be annulled and losses suffered by the two countries would be justly rectified.)

Royal Proclamation issued by the Regent of Thailand in the name of King Anandamahidol on August 16, 1945

“Whereas Thailand has pursued a fixed policy of maintaining strict neutrality and of combating foreign aggression by all means, as is clearly evidenced from the enactment in B.E. 2484 [1941] of the Law ‘Defining the Duties of Thais in Time of War,’ this fixed determination was made clear when Japan moved her forces onto Thai territory on 8th December, 2484 [1941], by acts combating aggression everywhere, and numerous soldiers, police, and civilians lost their lives thereby.”

“This circumstance, which stands as evidence in itself, shows clearly that the declaration of war on Great Britain and the United States of America on 25th January, 2485 [1942], as well as all acts adverse to the United Nations, are acts contrary to the will of the Thai people and constitute an infringement of the provisions of the Constitution and the laws of the land. The Thai people inside as well as outside the country, who were in a position to help and support the United Nations who are lovers of peace in this world,

have taken action by every means to assist the United Nations as most of the United Nations are already aware. This shows once again that the will of the Thai people does not approve of the declaration of war and of acts adverse to the United Nations as already mentioned.”

“Now that Japan has agreed to comply with the declaration of the United States of America, Great Britain, China and the Soviet Union which was made at Potsdam, peace is restored to Thailand as is the wish of the Thai people.”

“The Regent, in the name of His Majesty the King, hereby openly proclaims on behalf of the Thai people that the declaration of war on the United States of America and Great Britain is null and void and not binding on the Thai people as far as the United Nations are concerned. Thailand has resolved that the good friendly relations existing with the United Nations prior to 8th December, B.E. 2484 [1941], shall be restored and Thailand is ready to co-operate fully in every way with the United Nations in the establishment of stability for the world.”

“As for the territories the occupancy of which Japan entrusted to Thailand, namely the States of Kelantan, Trengganu, Kedah, Perlis, Kengtung, and Muang Phan, Thailand has no desires on those territories and is ready to arrange for their delivery as soon as Great Britain is ready to take delivery thereof.”

“As for any other provisions of the law having effects adverse to the United States of America, Great Britain, and the British Empire, their repeal shall be considered hereafter. All damages of any kind resulting from those laws will be legitimately made good.”

“In conclusion, all the Thai people, as well as aliens who are in the Thai Kingdom, are requested to remain in tranquility and not to commit any act which will constitute a disturbance of public order. They should hold steadfastly to the ideals which have been laid down in the resolutions of the United Nations at San Francisco.”

6. Neither the United States nor Britain was disposed to consider the Japanese-Thai Alliance of 21 December 1941 as sufficient cause to declare war on Thailand, however unfriendly the action. Once the US Government had received notification of the declaration of war against the US via Swiss channels, the US took the decision not to reciprocate, but to

treat Thailand as territory occupied by the Japanese. Particularly relevant are the British and US Memoranda at:

https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1941v05/pg_392 (pre 25 January 1942)

https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1941v05/pg_393 (pre 25 January 1942)

https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1942v01/pg_914 (President Roosevelt)

https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1942v01/pg_916 (US State Department)

<https://networkmyanmar.org/ESW/Files/DoS28011942.pdf> (US State Department)

7. The declaration of war on 25 January 1942 by Thailand against the US and Britain created was reported by news agencies internationally. Thus "The Times" (London) of 26 January 1942 cited a Reuter report:

The Times - 26 January 1942



8. The Thai Government felt it important that the Thai declaration of war should be communicated to the US and British Governments. Two channels of communication were used.

9. The first was a message sent through the Swiss Consul in Bangkok (as Switzerland had for some days prior to the declaration been used as a channel of communication and representation). The FRUS reference reads:

740.0011 Pacific War/1793 : Telegram

The Chargé in Switzerland (Huddle) to the Secretary of State

BERN, February 2, 1942.

[Received February 2—8:10 a. m.]

350. Department's 246, January 28.¹¹ Swiss Foreign Office note January 31 communicates following telegram from Swiss Consul Bangkok.¹²

"Ministry Foreign Affairs notified Consulate by letter 25th January: 'By royal command a declaration of war on Great Britain and the United States of America has been made as from noon of 25th January 2485 B. E.¹³.'" "

HUDDLE

⁹ Hu Shih.

¹⁰ In response on February 7, the Department cited as its position the language of paragraph 3 of its *aide-mémoire* of the same date to the British Embassy, p. 916.

¹¹ Not printed.

¹² Walter Siegenthaler.

¹³ Buddhist Era.

10. This declaration of war is so insubstantial that it might be asked whether the Swiss Consul in fact received, or, if he did, bothered to transmit the full notification sent by the Thai Government. The single sentence is apparently extracted and summarised from the second operative paragraph of the Royal Proclamation ².

11. The second channel of communication was to use Thai diplomatic channels through the Thai Legation in Lisbon. Seni Pramoj does not seem to have had knowledge of the Swiss Consul's notification which reached the State Department in Washington only on 2 February 1942. He had already informed the State Department, on 30 January 1942, and so prior to the State Department's receipt of the Swiss Consul's communication, that he would refuse to present any Thai declaration of war to the US Government, if he were to receive such instructions.

[The Mr Bhakdi referred to in a manuscript note at the top of the Memorandum was Luang (title) Dithakar Bhakdi, Secretary of the Thai Legation in Washington. ³]

² Text in Paragraph 3 of this Note.

³ The Thai Legation consisted only of the Head of Mission, Minister Seni, three diplomatic Secretaries and a Military Attaché.

Handed to Mr. Smith by
Mr. Bhakdi on Jan. 30, 1942.
RLS

1/30/42

Division of
FAR EASTERN AFFAIRS
JAN 30 1942
Department of State

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THE ROYAL THAI LEGATION
WASHINGTON, D. C.

No. 106/2485

MEMORANDUM

The Thai Minister paid a visit yesterday to Mr. Berle of the Department of State. The main object of his visit was to discuss with Mr. Berle the text of a telegram which he proposed to send in reply to a message transmitted by the Thai Minister in Lisbon. (See Memorandum No. 107/2485 dated January 28, 1942).

The latter message in effect contained a demand from the Bangkok Government for the Thai Minister in Washington to give an explanation of the stand publicly taken by him following the Japanese invasion of Thailand.

In his proposed reply, the Thai Minister desired to make it quite clear that he had taken his decision on his own personal responsibility and without any outside pressure. Secondly, the Thai Minister was confident that if the reply, as drafted, could be despatched and should reach Bangkok, the terms of the telegram could not fail to instil hopes in the Thai people and to encourage them to organise opposition to the Japanese.

On his return to the Legation, the Thai Minister received a visit from the Swiss Minister, who said that Bangkok Government had declared war and that he had been instructed by the Swiss Government to take over the interests of Thailand in the United States. Mr. Bruggman had informed the Department of State but understood that no official communication of Thailand's declaration had been received. He asked the Thai Minister whether he could give any information. In reply, the Thai Minister said that, probably in view of his own public declarations, the Bangkok Government had not disclosed this

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news to him. He added that if he should receive instructions to transmit a declaration of war he would disregard them as being a patent absurdity in view of the Japanese occupation of Thailand. Mr. Bruggman asked if he could quote the Thai Minister in his cable to his Government.

The Thai Minister proposes to give the following text to Mr. Bruggman for transmission to Berne and eventually to Bangkok :

"THE THAI MINISTER DECLARED THAT HE HAD RECEIVED NO OFFICIAL COMMUNICATION TO THAT EFFECT AND THAT EVEN IF SUCH AN UTTER ABSURDITY SHOULD COME THROUGH HE WOULD NOT ACCEPT IT AS THE EXPRESSION OF THE TRUE WILL OF THE THAI PEOPLE. FURTHER, HE ABSOLUTELY REFUSES TO CONVEY ANY SUCH DECLARATION TO THE GOVERNMENT OF A PEOPLE WHO, FOR OVER A CENTURY, HAS BEEN ON THE BEST TERMS WITH HIS OWN PEOPLE AND TO WHOM HIS NATION ACKNOWLEDGES A DEBT OF GRATITUDE".

The Thai Minister considers that if this text could be transmitted through a neutral channel such as the Swiss Government, it would greatly help to convince the Bangkok Government of the genuine nature of the action spontaneously taken by the Thai Minister.

January 30th, 1942.

12. On 11 February 1942 Seni Pramoj indeed received via the Thai Legation in Lisbon instructions from Bangkok to deliver the Thai declaration of war. These instructions he did not act upon, but the same day sent a copy of them to the State Department:

Feb 11, 1942

Division of
FAR EASTERN AFFAIRS
FEB 13 1942
Department of State

158/2485

LEGAL ADVISER
FEB 13 1942
DEPARTMENT OF STATE

MEMORANDUM

THE ROYAL THAI LEGATION
WASHINGTON, D. C.
FEB 14 1942
DEPARTMENT OF STATE

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The Thai Legation presents its compliments to the Department of State and, as a matter of mere routine, has the honour to transmit the following text of the telegram received to-day from the Thai Minister in Lisbon:

"1285 DECLARATION OF WAR ON GREAT BRITAIN AND U.S.A. MADE AS FROM JANUARY 25TH WORDED SUBSTANTIAL PART BEGIN WHEREAS GREAT BRITAIN AND UNITED STATES AMERICA HAVE COMMITTED SUCCESSIVE ACTS AGGRESSION AGAINST THAILAND, IN CERTAIN CASES BY SENDING TROOPS INVADE THAI TERRITORY AND, IN PARTICULAR, SENDING AEROPLANES CLANDESTINELY TO BOMB HOMES OF PEOPLE WHO CARRY ON NORMAL LIVELIHOOD AND CRUELLY MACHINE-GUN UNARMED CIVILIAN POPULATION, CONTRARY CIVILISED PRACTICE, WITHOUT ACTING OPENLY IN ACCORDANCE INTERNATIONAL USAGE, WHICH MAY (BE) DEEMED TO BE IN VIOLATION INTERNATIONAL LAW AND HUMANITY SO THAT THAILAND CAN NO LONGER LOOK ON WITH FORBEARANCE. NOW THEREFORE BY VIRTUE OF PROVISIONS OF SECTION 54 OF CONSTITUTION OF KINGDOM OF THAILAND, IT IS HEREBY DECLARED BY ROYAL COMMAND THAT A STATE OF WAR EXISTS BETWEEN THAILAND, ON THE ONE HAND, AND GREAT BRITAIN AND UNITED STATES OF AMERICA ON THE OTHER HAND, AS FROM NOON 25TH JANUARY B.E. 2485 END

note
740.0011P.W.
file

YOU ARE REQUESTED BY FOREIGN OFFICE TO NOTIFY AMERICAN GOVERNMENT, ADDING THAT SAME NOTIFICATION WAS MADE 25TH JANUARY TO SWISS GOVERNMENT, IN CHARGE AMERICAN INTERESTS IN THAILAND."

It goes without saying that the above communication will be entirely disregarded by the Thai Legation.

February 11, 1942.

DCR - NE Unit
Anal. mst
Rev. mst
Cat.
Dist.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF STATE
FEB 16 1942
MR. BERLE

892.01/12-1142
2-1142
892.01/2-1142
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13. The information in the Memorandum was sent to the State Department in the name of the Thai Legation "as a matter of mere routine", though I am at a loss to

explain how transmitting the text of a telegram of instruction to the State Department could be regarded as a routine. Rather it is a dazzling display of both personal bravery and rather eccentric diplomacy; unless we interpret “routine” as reflecting Seni’s consistent and widely known opposition to Japanese actions in Thailand. The Legation made it clear that the communication sent via the Lisbon “would be entirely disregarded”. By that Seni meant what he had already said in his Memorandum of 30 January 1942⁴ - that “he absolutely refuses to convey any such declaration” to the US Government. In any case, the declaration war – both the Royal Command and an accompanying statement on 25 January 1942 by the Thai Government were public documents, and the US Government would be likely to receive copies of the Royal Command in due course through neutral and international media sources.

14. The operative part of the instructions is taken from the first and second paragraphs of the Royal Proclamation of 25 January 1942⁵. The Thai version of the Royal Proclamation and of an accompanying five-page statement by the Thai Government **may be found at this link**. I might digress slightly by noting that the original Thai Proclamation is in typically Thai segments, while the official contemporary translated version is one continuous stream. My own slightly revised translation (my Thai is passable) would read:

“Whereas Britain and the United States of America have committed acts of aggression against Thailand, notably by sending troops to invade Thai territory; and especially by sending aircraft without warning to bomb the homes of the people carrying on their normal lives; and also cruelly shooting⁶ at the unarmed civilian population contrary to civilized practice, without any open declaration; all of which may be deemed to be in violation of international and humanitarian law, to the extent that that Thailand cannot tolerate this any longer.....”

15. The Lisbon telegram noted that the same communication had been made to the Swiss Government. The Thai authorities may have intended to send an identical text, but, as I have explained in paragraph 10 of this Note, this was either not communicated to the Swiss authorities, or the latter failed to include it in their communication to Berne and thence to the State Department via the US Legation in Berne.

16. The archived version of Seni’s instructions was widely circulated in the State Department at the time. One such reader was Stanley Kuhl Hornbeck, Special Adviser to Secretary of State Cordell Hull. Hornbeck saw the document on 14 February 1942. He may have shown it to Cordell Hull at some point, though Hull himself was recuperating in Florida at the time from an illness. Another reader was Assistant Secretary of State Adolf Augustus Berle on 16 February 1942. Two Legal Advisers have also appended their initials, as well as other officials whom I am not able to identify. Internal submissions to the Secretary of State often normally took the form of

⁴ See text in Paragraph 11.

⁵ See Paragraph 3 of this Note.

⁶ The word “machine-gun” (Thai ปืนกล) does not appear in the original Thai, but its inclusion in the English version might have been influenced by contemporary Press Reports e.g. the Reuter report in Paragraph 7 of this Note of machine-gunning by air on Bangkok on 25 January 1942, the same day as the Royal Command.

a short memorandum. <https://networkmyanmar.org/ESW/Files/DoS28011942.pdf> already mentioned in Paragraph 6 of this Note is an example of the progress of a document up the hierarchy through Political Adviser (Hornbeck), Legal Adviser (Hackworth), Assistant Under-Secretaries of State (Berle and Long) to the Secretary of State (Cordell Hull). These internal memoranda are generally not reproduced in FRUS, only the main document. They are however available in US Government Archives.

17. Seni later made much of his assertion that he had kept the instructions from Bangkok in his office desk drawer. Literally or figuratively, there is no reason to doubt this. However, the Thai declaration of war was received by the US Government via Swiss diplomatic channels and the US decision not to reciprocate the declaration was based on reasons of state, not on Seni's widely known and broadcast opposition to the Japanese.⁷

18. Even so, the late Judith Stowe, a very good friend of mine for we were stationed at the British Embassy in Bangkok in the late 1950s at the same time, interpreted the situation differently:

Judith A Stowe: "Siam becomes Thailand" Hurst 1991

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War and Peace, 1941-1945

communication with Washington long before Thailand declared war on the United States.¹²

In later years, Seni made much of the claim that he declined to deliver Thailand's declaration of war to the Americans and kept the document firmly locked in his desk-drawer.¹³ Strictly speaking, it is not true. When he finally received notification from Bangkok of the state of war between the two countries – a message delayed because of the severance of communications between Washington and Bangkok – Seni conveyed the text to the State Department with the comment that it was simply intended for the record because he himself was ignoring it.¹⁴ That too was the reaction of Roosevelt who recommended Congress to treat Thailand's declaration of war with contempt by ignoring it just like those of Hungary, Bulgaria and Romania. Only if Thai forces engaged in military operations against the United States or its Allies was Thailand to be regarded as an enemy. Rather it was classed as an enemy-occupied state, which entailed freezing Thai financial assets in the United States, whereas Thai citizens residing there were not considered enemy aliens.¹⁵

[Note 14 reads: "Note of Feb. 11, 1942, in 892.01/2-1142 RG59"]

19. I would point out that Seni did not use the words "for the record" which might indeed imply formal, though reluctant transmission of the declaration. The text he

⁷ Britain reportedly received a declaration of war by the Thai Minister in London Phra Manuvedya Vimolnard and responded by declaring war against Thailand on 6 February 1942. Seni in Washington was still to receive his instructions.

conveyed was of his instructions which included reference to the declaration of war. This is not the same. He did not act on his instructions. He did not transmit the declaration “for the record”.

20. In his **February 2018 article “Top Secret: The Infamous Thai Declaration”**, Bob Bergin, a retired US Foreign Service Officer, noted:

“In a June 1979 letter, Pridi Banomyong, the wartime leader of the Free Thai Movement, then in exile in France, addressed this issue. ‘[During 1978] I was asked by many Thai students whether it was true, as written by some so-called history professors, that Field Marshal Phibul’s government sent the Declaration of War on the USA to the Thai Minister in Washington, but the Minister did not deliver it as instructed... that the Minister kept the document of the declaration of war in his pocket and did not present it to the U.S. government. I told the students that I really did not know. However, I made some observations for them to consider.’

“The Thai government had followed diplomatic practice and international law by notifying the Swiss consul in Bangkok, who represented U.S. interests in Thailand at that time. The notification was forwarded to Washington via the American chargé d’affaires in Berne, Switzerland, who received it as a note from the Swiss Foreign Office on January 31, quoted as follows: ‘[Thailand’s] Ministry Foreign Affairs notified [Swiss Bangkok] Consulate by letter 25th January: By royal command a declaration of war on Great Britain and the United States of America has been as from noon 25th January 2485 BE [Buddhist Era calendar year corresponding with 1942].’ The U.S. State Department received the note on February 2, 1942.

“With that done, the Thai government had no reason to send an ‘extra’ declaration of war to its ambassador in America. And there was something else Pridi noted. In mid-December 1941, Ambassador Seni started a series of radio broadcasts to the Thai people in which he regularly stated that he would have nothing to do with the Thai government. ‘So why should [the Thai government] send [him] a telegraphic declaration of war ... when it knew well enough that [Seni] had renounced his allegiance to it?’

21. The answer to Pridi’s arguments is quite simply that the Thai Government did indeed send dual instructions to ensure that the Thai declaration of war was received, at a time when communications were difficult, uncertain and delayed.

22. I think it possible that Seni, who had little diplomatic experience and was only 35 years of age, felt that he had been exiled to Washington at the behest of Pridi in order to remove a potential rival to political power in Bangkok. There was no love lost between the two. Pridi himself, who had been Minister of Finance, found himself relegated by Phibun to the Regency Council, while Foreign Minister Direk Jayanama was sent by Phibun as Ambassador to Japan.

23. It should be noted that the Thai Memorandum of 11 February 1942 had been confusingly catalogued in US Government Archives for many years and could not be located. E. Bruce Reynolds reported this in Footnote 31 on Page 20 of his seminal work "Thailand's Secret War", Cambridge University Press 2005. I am especially grateful to David A Langbart at US National Archives, College Park, for recovering this document missing for so long.

24. It is my intention to expand this note by examining what happened in London where the Thai Minister Phra Manuvedya Vimolnard indeed presented a declaration of war, though he later sought and was granted permission to stay in the UK. There may be some delay as a result of a cyber-attack in 2023 on British Library archives whose operations have been seriously disrupted as a result **though I have identified the likely file**⁸ which runs from 9 December 1941 to 21 February 1942 only.



Derek Tonkin

British Ambassador to Bangkok 1986-1990

19 January 2026

⁸ Astonishingly, the British Library regret that they currently offer no facilities to photocopy documents and transmit them to customers by email, even where these documents can be identified. But I make photocopies if I visit the British Library in person with my own camera device.