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DEVELOPMENT
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AMERICAN AID AND POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT

by Daniel S. Lev

I want to make it clear from the outset that these brief comments are not meant to be a full discussion of the various theories of political development, nor an attempt to lay down a new theory. My main purpose is to stimulate discussion of a few points which I think crucial in any consideration of the relationship between AID, or any other agency of the government, and political development abroad. What I think is crucial may of course be challenged as not at all crucial, nonsense, or naive foolishness. If so, and if the case can be proved, then a few steps will have been taken among us to clarify our views of what political development is and what American policy towards it can or ought to be.

Because these rough notes are hardly complete, I hope that you will have read the articles by Huntington and Packenham. The learned contributions by Huntington are especially useful in gaining perspective on political development and in reviewing what other observers have thought about the matter. I will not try to cover the same material.

The recent rash of writings on political development is not entirely new; the Greek philosophers were interested in the question, and most centuries since then have produced a few thinkers about it. What may be new about recent contributions is their foundation in increasingly sophisticated social scientific techniques -- which lends to some of them a tone of confidence which I do not share -- and, in some but not all cases, a concern to translate analyses of political change into policy proposals.

It is of course exactly in this that our own seminar is interested. But I want to approach the matter differently. I shall say a few things about political development, with warnings about the great complexity of the matter, even as some observers conceive it, which is infinitely less complex than it may actually be. But for the most part I want to raise the question whether the United States should attempt to involve itself directly with political development. There are issues here which have been passed over much too lightly.

Some aspects of political development

"Political development" is merely a term, a great abstraction, whose content varies according to the analyst. There is no precise description of it. We are more or less free to give it what meaning we will. Like its near synonym, "political modernization," it is therefore subject to a great deal of value-ridden discussion. There is a common tendency to define

"development" or "modernization" in terms of our own experience and our own notions of what ought to be. Indeed, the very notion of development implies a strong element of "progress", a concept peculiar to Judeo-Christian civilization and quite alien to many cultures, including those of Southeast Asia. It might be helpful to use the more neutral term "political change", but the point is not worth pressing.

Thus, much recent discussion of political development assumes that the end result of the development will be something like America, or at least Europe. We do this at times unconsciously, but the resultant notions of change are the least useful and often the most frustrating ones. Concepts of development which explicitly take for granted the ultimate emergence of democracy or something equally vague will therefore not be bothered with here. But I want to suggest that many models of development do have an implicit bias towards one's own system.

There are processes or social change which are apparent, however, and which can be regarded with some neutrality as belonging to a pattern common to all societies, if certain kinds of change are occurring at all. A few of these are mentioned below, in no order of priority, with some comment.

One major element in the process of political change during this century in Asia, one that occurred earlier in Europe, is the expansion of the policy to accommodate an increasing number of participants. More people are brought directly into contact with governing institutions for a growing number of purposes. The process of expansion may be one in which some popular control of the government is gradually developed, or more usually one in which the governing elite extends the range of its control over the populace.

The political participation by a growing number of people may be seen partly in the light of what has been called social mobilization. That is, an existing social and political structure becomes more amenable to change when large numbers of people, for various reasons, are mobilized in ways that transcend traditional lines of division and modes of organization. For example, it has been argued that the success of the Chinese Communist Party was secured by the effect of the Japanese invasion, which angered, terrified, and starved men into supporting the most effective anti-Japanese force. Similarly, revolutionary situations in some parts of Southeast Asia have had the effect of mobilizing men to action, thus creating new kinds of interaction and making possible greater change in their social and political circumstances than before.

Much emphasis has been put on expanding participation as an element in development. Often it has been regarded optimistically as an indication of incipient democratization, or at least of rapid change -- all change being conceived as good. It need not be the former at all, of course, unless one defines democracy solely in terms of greater participation. But more important, insofar as the initial course of development is concerned, Samuel Huntington has pointed out that increased participation may indeed obstruct the process of development seen from a different point of view.

Emphasis on the participation explosion, the rise of political consciousness, the emergence of new symbols of nationalism and political action, and other social and psychological processes -- though all are significant parts of political change -- has led to the neglect of another major facet of development. Huntington made what should always have been an obvious point that development must be seen primarily in terms of the growth of reasonably permanent and adaptable institutions. Institutionalization of organizations of governance, administration, control -- rule-making and executing bodies, bureaucracies, and especially parties or organizations of similar function -- assure a semblance of stability over a period of time and permit governments to implement policies which strengthen themselves and give new shape to society and the state. The argument of Huntington with respect to participation was that bringing people too quickly into the political process, with all the attendant disruption, might prevent the emergence of stable yet flexible and adjustable institutions. As a qualification, however, it can be argued that fundamental political change may not occur at all without the pressure brought by the mobilization of certain parts of society.

In this much oversimplified and sketchy discussion one or two other aspects of development should be mentioned. One of great importance to Southeast Asia is the integration of all the peoples of a state into a recognizable whole, a society and polity loyalty to which tends to transcend that to the primordial units of kin, religious, ethnic, racial, or regional group. In part, this must derive from the extension of political and economic institutions out from the center towards the farthest territorial reaches of the state, and from those areas towards the center and towards one another. It also depends on the development of more or less intricate patterns of communication flow, connecting individuals and larger social units with one another throughout the state. This is facilitated, for one obvious example, by the spreading of a single common language. One could go on at great length about the importance of communications to political development, but the basic point is that the majority of the people must come to share a more or less

common set of symbols related to their state and society, and these symbols, even as they change, must be constantly reinforced and handed down from generation to generation.

All this has to do with creating a state in the twentieth century. There is a broader and more complex process that may be at work in most of Southeast Asia that is even more fundamental: this is the growing specialization and diversification of social, political, and especially economic institutions and forms. The special services demanded by an increasingly complex society give rise to new functions which are assumed by new or modified organizations in a never ending evolution. As the organization of society is thus transformed, traditional religious and customary concerns begin to give way to the demands of "rationalization" of the system. Gradually new values evolve, sometimes before and sometimes after the social change has occurred. New social and political symbols arise to legitimate new forms. Men begin to think in new ways about what society has to offer, what they can take from it or contribute to it, and so on.

In having said these few things, I have not explained much about the actual process of change. Some abstract facts have been noted of the development of less complex and fragmented societies into more complex, integrated societies and states. What has been said, however, sounds rather simple, as if all one need do is encourage or not encourage participation, expand communications facilities, improve education, protect reasonably strong institutions, and the like. No one in the seminar would, I am certain, take such a view. The evolution of societies is extremely complicated. No one factor is all important, but all of them combine -- with several score that have not been mentioned here -- in a total process, mixed with a good deal of historical accident, to eventuate in something that remains as unique as the starting point, but different and constantly changing. No one can predict the outcome, nor foretell the character of the state -- in its political style, values, level of sophistication (by any standards one may choose) -- after a time period of ten, twenty, fifty, or more years. It is all quite uncertain, no matter how much we think we know of the factors that go into the transformation.

With different mixtures of the various ingredients of change -- social, cultural, economic, political -- different results appear. Europe produced one type with many variations. Japan underwent a process of radical economic transformation, accompanied by significant social change, while the Japanese elite attempted to hold cultural values and the political system constant; the impact of the American occupation is well known. In some parts of Southeast Asia, change has begun in certain

areas of political and social organization, and among a younger post-independence (or, in Thailand, post-1932) generation new cultural values are evident, but economic change of a recognizable and persistent sort is not yet fully under way in the region. In Thailand the reforms of Mongkut and Chulalongkorn deeply affected the political system, and less so the economic structure of the country, but it is not clear that the resultant coup of 1932, which produced a new military-bureaucratic alliance, had within it obvious seeds of another stage of change. Only with hindsight, some years hence if major changes do occur, will we be able to say with great confidence what the sources of change were.

The United States and foreign political development

So much for political development, which, again, one may learn much more about from reading a few of the items in the bibliography. I want to turn now to the question of whether and to what extent the United States can make a contribution to what we may or may not agree upon as constituting political development.

In considering United States involvement in foreign political development, we ought to hold a few points constantly in mind. Perhaps the first is the need always to be aware of our interests, values, and political world-view. Only by continually testing these conceptions against other perceptions of reality can we begin, I think, to arrive at some reasonable understanding both of our responsibilities and, more importantly, our capabilities.

For example, a point touched on above, a major difficulty in discussing "political development" is the inexorable tendency to see one's own political system -- especially if one is an American, European, or a Communist or other confirmed ideologue -- as the absolute best. Even though we may be capable intellectually of dismissing so naive a notion, yet our entire pattern of thought, the complex of symbols and predilections which inform our judgements, incline us to assess all behavior in terms of our own. "Political awareness", "economic growth", "flexibility", "openness to change", and so on are no less reflections of our own views of what is politically or socially desirable than the more obscure term "democracy".

But let us assume for a while that a quite neutral view of the matter is possible, as in fact to some extent it is. That is, certain kinds of economic and social development are actually under way whose eventual consequences can be assessed in terms of patterns of growth and change. The question is whether the United States should undertake a program directed at guiding such change, and, if so, how and with what consequences.

Several scholars firmly believe that the United States has an important role to play in political development and, indeed, prescribe guidelines for such a role. Both Huntington and Packenham do so, though the latter seems to take the whole enterprise more seriously and with fewer reservations. I have basic disagreements with some of these views, for they seem to me to be based on oversimplified premises about Southeast Asian (to limit ourselves to that part of the world) amenability and American capability. One can raise various kinds of objections: for example, one ought to consider the moral issue of whether one state should undertake the kind of intervention necessary* -- with or without the prerequisite expertise, which Packenham at least seems to believe we possess more than less of. And one could also question whether American interests are really served by the kinds of activity proposed. But for the moment there is no need to discuss these problems; we can stick to the essential questions of capability, content, and consequence.

In no particular order, I want to offer a few arguments against a program of direct American involvement in Southeast Asian political development, of the kind, for example, proposed by Packenham.

I. Knowledge and action. For all that is known in general about political development, we know very little in particular about any one of the countries within which such change may occur in Southeast Asia. Each state is unique. There are of course common patterns of change, but each state enjoys, for better or worse, its own cultural (and other) modes of behavior. And though over a period of a century or so these might tend to level out in favor of the common patterns. in shorter time periods the differences are very important indeed. Yet it is in these shorter periods of time that we must operate, and I do not think we will soon know enough to operate with finesse and discrimination. I will not argue that cultural types and values are unchangeable or that they are more important than structural matters, but unfamiliarity with them makes it most difficult, if not impossible, to devise programs of institutional and cultural change. It is all very well to say that we must encourage certain types of groups with the right kind of achievement orientation, for example, but it is quite another thing to determine precisely the nature of such bends in another culture and to treat them in a way that does not threaten the dominant cultural proclivities. In short, we do not understand Southeast Asia so completely that our foreign assistance (or other) agencies will be able to mount a precise and persistent program of controlled social and political change.

* Packenham is aware of the objections to his arguments and lists a few of them, but he does not answer them satisfactorily to my way of thinking.

II. Program persistence. Without a persistent program, one that is planned and executed over a considerable length of time, one is doomed to worse than failure, for dabbling in social institutions is likely to cause more turmoil than can easily be handled. At least that is a possibility, for which the United States must assume some kind of responsibility. But even were a persistent program possible, and all the necessary knowledge available, surely no other state would permit this kind of intervention in its most intimate national life. Men will not willingly permit their cultural habits, social institutions, and political security to be challenged for any reason at all. Recent problems in the American south are indicative of this. (And one might add how difficult it is to mount a program of political development in parts of our own country, though the matter is infinitely less complex here because we know more about ourselves than we do about Southeast Asians.)

The kind of approach suggested by Huntington -- i.e. that the United States support those modernizing political organizations which are not Communist and which are most likely to become effective institutions -- is, I think, the wisest one, for it does not pretend to be a full scale program, only a general policy. But even here there is not much that the United States can do, both because there are some groups which we cannot support, and also because so much care must be taken to avoid tainting such organizations with the stigma of foreign connections. Thus if Packenham's approach is impossibly idealistic, Huntington's, though I agree with some of its general lines and modesty, is peripheral.

III. American interests, values, and program capabilities. In this area lies the main objection to any program directed specifically at "political development", aiming towards the evolution of particular kinds of institutions, values, and orientations.

It is necessary to clarify not only what the United States can contribute to foreign political development but also what our purposes are in seeking to make such a contribution. For there may be instances in which our goals contradict our capabilities, whatever they may be. In this case, and it may be a frequent one, we are compelled to make a choice, and perhaps to explore more deeply our conception of America's role in the world. This is a very puzzling question, and a frustrating one, but unavoidable.

We are all aware that what we desire of other states stems from many different motivations. Among the more important ones behind our concern for political development in the third world are: 1) a moral or humanitarian concern, which impels

us to seek betterment for other people simply because we dislike suffering; 2) national interest: that is, we now commonly assume that American security depends not only upon influencing the foreign policies of other states, but also upon determining the very character of their national social, economic, and political, not to mention cultural, life.

There is a strong ideological component in our present view of American national interests. We interpret our interests, for example, partly in terms of halting Communist expansion wherever it may occur and in whatever form. There is also a tendency to read a threat into all kinds of phenomena that seem to display characteristics common also to Communist movements. Revolutionary activity anywhere disturbs us because it represents radicalism, "leftism", and may in fact offer a foothold to bona fide Communists. Until not long ago, American leaders used to be greatly disturbed by the term "socialism" because of its associations. We have moved away from this psychology slightly, but it remains with us. I say this not to argue with it, but merely to point out that it is part of our present political temperament and affects our ability to contribute to the process of political development.

Because we are concerned with AID activities of the United States government, we ought to be quite clear that our interest in political development is in fact a political interest. There is no doubt an altruistic element in American assistance, but it is not primary. To the extent, however, that our concern with political development is motivated by self-interest, our abilities are distinctly limited, our freedom of action restricted, and our chances of success quite possibly nonexistent. On the one hand, as has been mentioned, we tend to see political development in terms of our own values, and therefore our imagination is limited. But one may perhaps get over that. On the other and more important hand, there are certain courses of action which we cannot follow, because existing interpretations of national interest will not permit them. The most obvious case is one in which a Communist party might offer the best opportunity in a country to achieve political stability, lay the foundations for further organizational development, undertake a determined program of basic economic growth, and begin to break the hold of non-modernizing traditions. It is unlikely that Washington would undertake, for the sake of another state's political development, to facilitate a Communist take-over, even in the face of the most devastating political and social turmoil.

This seems like an obvious point, but it is highly significant in understanding what we cannot do in the matter of political

development. The unstated assumption behind such programmatic considerations as Packenham's is that the rest of the world -- to put it in extreme terms -- is something of a laboratory in which the United States, with its great wealth, power and expertise, can manipulate almost at will. Packenham does of course admit limitations, but the fundamental assumption remains. Yet the fact is that we are restricted not only by what other states will permit us to do, assuming that they know, but also by what our own views of American interests will permit us to do. These are limitations that must always remain, and they are so serious as to preclude any reasonable and consistent program of political development.

In the terminology of science, our laboratory is ill-equipped, the data are inadequate, there are too many variables and inconstants in the research subject, and the director of the experiment is hopelessly biased. And, to shift metaphors, even if the world were our own erector set, there are edifices that we cannot build because we are automatically denied certain parts which we fear to handle.

If anything, I am appealing here for a sense of proportion in assessing our capabilities with respect to Southeast Asia political change. To a certain extent, no doubt, we can bring influence to bear, by encouraging here and punishing there, but we should not be deceived by a notion of omnipotent science into believing that we can control the human environment of other nations. Our own lack of success so far in America in integrating Negroes fully into the polity -- and other problems -- should make us skeptical of social engineering projects. How much more difficult to determine the course of change of an entire foreign society.

Indirect assistance in political change

To recapitulate a bit, dabbling in political and social institutions is an attractive possibility mainly for social scientists who dream, as all of us do, of magnificent social laboratories. But, for one thing, U.S. government officials are not disinterested social scientists. There are distinct interests to be defended; and although Mr. Packenham has some justifiable bones to pick with short term interests, they do after all exist, and I hope that Washington continues to concern itself with them -- though I agree with Huntington's strictures about the character of American responses. Secondly, the U.S. government is in no position to carry on a consistent policy of institution building in other countries where it does not have consistent authority and power, such as that once held by colonial governments in Southeast Asia and elsewhere. Nor at a time when social mobilization has already begun in most of

Southeast Asia, and nationalist urges have taken deep root, would such a possibility be desirable or feasible.

There are no doubt possibilities here and there for the United States government along the lines suggested by Professor Huntington. Some of his rules of thumb for institution building are clear, wise, sympathetic, and again, peripheral. Institutions rather than men should be supported, when that is possible and if it can be done without tainting them with the blemish of foreign support. There may on occasion be a superb opportunity to deny a traditionally oriented dictator support in the hope that a fledgling organization may benefit -- so long as the organization is not Communist or opposed to American interests in other ways. Or perhaps the U.S. can give economic breaks to groups interested in programs that might contribute to a developing middle class. But we ought not to get our hopes up that such opportunities will appear in any kind of persistent way, nor that we will always be able to take advantage of them in spite of more immediate American interests -- or the exigencies of American domestic politics.

It has been suggested that to mount a consistent program of the sort suggested by Packenham, or perhaps even that proposed by Huntington, may be out of the question not only because of the limitations of our own interests and predilections, but also because foreign political leaders tend over time to object to foreign interventions of any kind. I might mention here, as an example, that in Thailand American programs of institution building -- e.g., strengthening local government institutions -- appear not to be successful both because political systems tend to reject foreign conceptions and foreign threats to their integrity and also because Thai officials do not fully appreciate foreign advisors. I do not speak as an expert on Thailand. But anthropologists, among them men with wide experience in Thailand, including the Northeast -- and one of whom has only recently returned from the country -- have told me quite emphatically that their Thai informants have expressed discontent precisely on these grounds, though they very much favor straight technical aid.

What, then, is the role of aid in political development? The conclusion I come to, and one I did not anticipate when I agreed to write these notes, is that by and large AID has the right idea insofar as the main focus of assistance is concerned. That is, if Packenham's characterization of AID penchants for economic criteria is correct, for whatever reasons, those criteria seem to be most in accord with our capabilities and the most likely to have far reaching consequences for political and social change.

The consequences of certain kinds of economic aid do at least have the advantage of being basic, predictably basic in a way that dealing with other social institutions is not. To take some obvious examples, one may consider development of social capital -- i.e., roads, communication networks, necessary education facilities, basic agricultural improvements such as dams and irrigation systems, and so on. If we agree that the process of nation building depends significantly upon opening up of communications channels between center and region, village and city, elite and non-elite, then it seems clear that roads and basic transport facilities are enormously important. I realize that arguments against an oversimplification of the impact of investment in transport, and I do not mean to imply that the United States government ought to rush about building roads everywhere space is available.* But when it appears that conditions make the economic and perhaps social impact of a road worth the while, it ought to be built instead of putting the same funds into less certain possibilities.

I want to emphasize at this point that I do believe all economic aid must be planned with an eye towards its social and political consequences. Programs of economic assistance should be programs. Roads should be built where they have the greatest economic and social influence and only when they are definitely needed. Investment in education is fine, though perhaps much overrated, but only when the need for it is obvious and pressing, and where it suits other needs of the economy. (For example, technical education is worse than absurd when there is no immediate demand for the technically educated.) And a good deal more could be said about levels of aid, visibility of foreigners, and so on, but this is not the place. My point is that while economic assistance is both suitable to American purposes and fundamental, it will be so only if thoroughly planned and effectively executed.

* See International Development Digest, Vol. IV/2, July 1966.