

Lincoln to Thai king: Thanks but no thanks for the elephants

By Kawewit Kaewjinda
The Associated Press

BANGKOK — The elephant is Thailand's national animal, so it's only natural that King Mongkut in 1861 offered to send a pair to the United States as a gift of the friendship between the two countries.

U.S. President Abraham Lincoln, likely bemused and relieved at the distraction from America's then-raging Civil War, politely declined, saying his country uses the steam engine and would have no use for the working animals.

As part of the 200th anniversary celebrating the long-lasting relationship, the U.S. Embassy in Bangkok is showcasing historic gifts the two countries have exchanged on the grounds of Thailand's Grand Palace.

It includes the first-ever official letter sent in 1818 from a Thai diplomat to U.S. President James Monroe. There are documents spanning two centuries as well as some spectacular Thai objects d'art and portraits.

Then there's the elephant story, also documented among the exhibits.

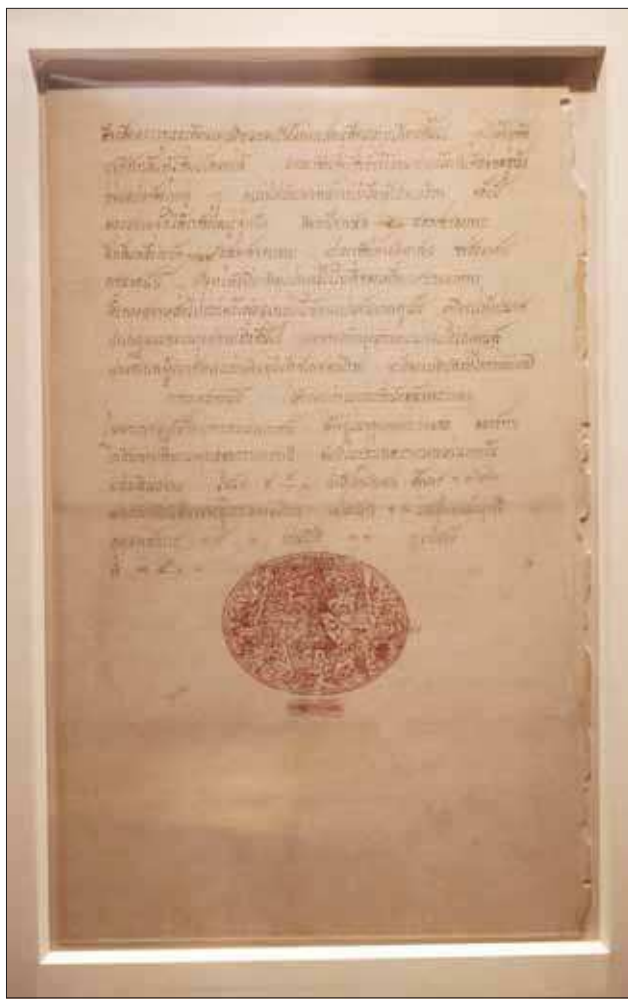
In his 1861 letters, Mongkut offered the elephants after learning they were not native to America. He also sent along three gifts: a sword and scabbard, a photograph of the king with one of his daughters, and an impressive pair of elephant tusks.

He addressed the letters to then-U.S. President James Buchanan "or whomever would become president" with elaborate paragraph-long salutations.

Lincoln was already president by the time the letters arrived a year later. He penned a reply, addressing the king simply as "Great and Good Friend."

The offer of elephants did not neglect practical details. Mongkut stated, "On this account, we desire to procure and send elephants to be let loose to increase and multiply in the continent of America." But Thailand — then called Siam — did not have a large enough vessel to transport them, the letter said.

It continued: "In reference to this opinion of ours if the President of the United States and Congress who conjointly with him rule the country see fit to approve, let



them provide a large vessel loaded with hay and other food suitable for elephants on the voyage, with tanks holding a sufficiency of fresh water, and arranged with stalls so that the elephants can both stand and lie down in the ship — and send it to receive them. We on our part will procure young male and female elephants and forward them one or two pairs at a time."

Mongkut then in his letter directs that the elephants should be kept away from the cold and under the sun, and to also "let them with all haste be turned out to run wild in



HISTORIC GIFTS. A letter (left photo) written by U.S. President Abraham Lincoln in 1862 replying to Thailand's King Mongkut is currently on display at "Great and Good Friends," an exhibit inside the Grand Palace in Bangkok, Thailand. Lincoln, likely bemused and relieved at the distraction from America's then-raging Civil War, politely declined Mongkut's offer to send a pair of elephants as a gift to the United States, saying his country uses the steam engine and would have no use for the working animals. (AP Photo/Sakchai Lalit)

some jungle suitable for them not confining them any length of time."

"If these means can be done we trust that the elephants will propagate their species hereafter in the continent of America," the letter said.

Thai monarchy expert Tongthong Chandransu said the offer of elephants reveals that Mongkut wanted to be part of building the young United States.

"You have to consider that 200 years ago, elephants were an important means of transportation and helped a lot with our work, not to mention warfare, but also the building of homes and cities," Tongthong said.

The ever-practical Lincoln rejected the offer to send wild elephants running through American forests, saying the country "does not reach a latitude so low as to favor the multiplication of the elephant." He said in his 1862 letter that "steam on land, as well as on water, has been our best and most efficient agent of transportation in internal commerce."

The exhibition runs through June 30.

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