

Tiptoeing through a Legal

Thailand's giant-killing attorney battles everyone from a touchy prime minister to negligent sex-change surgeons. His secretaries voted him boss of the year, but his enemies threaten him with PLO vengeance.

Tibor Krausz Bangkok

IN THE LONG AND HONORABLE tradition of David versus Goliath, [David Lyman](#) took on the Thai government and won. At issue was a highly publicized court case that pitted Prime Minister Taksin Shinawatra, a telecommunications billionaire, against two Bangkok correspondents of the Far Western Economic Review (FEER) for “endangering national security” by publishing a brief article last January that suggested friction between the prime minister and the venerated King Bhumibol Adulyadej. Clamping down on dissenting voices, from bellyaching taxi drivers to FEER reporters, the Thai government insisted it was merely guarding against *lese-majeste*. Representing the American and British journalists facing deportation, Lyman called the government’s bluff. On his advice, the Hong Kong-based magazine, which stood by its story, offered a measured apology for “inadvertently offending Thai sensibilities.” The government, faced by an international hue and cry, last March reversed its decision to deport the two reporters. Like his Biblical namesake, David Lyman outsmarted Goliath.

In his 35 years as a top-tier attorney heading Thailand’s largest independent law firm. U.S.-born Lyman, 65, has triumphed over numerous political and financial giants. Flipping through a manila folder on favorite cases during an interview in his file-flooded office with wall-mounted photos of Lyman hobnobbing shows off some recent victories. He’s helped overthrow a public company’s self-dealing managers for his client, a minority shareholder. He’s locked horns with the Royal Thai Navy over the rights of maritime treasure-hunters who had salvaged priceless Chinese antiques off the coast of Thailand. He’s proved the innocence of a court-martialed U.S. army officer accused of pedophilia. “You name it, I’ve done it.” Lyman says of his potpourri of cases, which even takes in sex-change operation malpractice suits. “Law is about ensuring people’s rights, and no one needs rights better than underdogs,” the Jewish lawyer explains.

True to his credo, Lyman is an ardent anti-graft activist, serving on the boards of several international task forces on corruption. “I am tiptoeing through a minefield,” he acknowledges. Occasional death threats are part of his job description, like this note of pasted-up newspaper letters (accompanied by revolver bullets) from – Lyman suspects – a multinational’s crooked Thai manager: “Death to Jewish! – PLO.”

Lyman inherited his finger-in-every-pie legal activism from his father, Albert. A yeoman first class in the U.S. Navy on Okinawa during the American invasions in 1945, Albert Lyman single-handedly drafted constitutions for the southern Ryukyu islands, granting civil liberties to disenfranchised serfs. “He caught hell for it from Washington,” Lyman chuckles. Albert would over time proceed to found Thailand’s American chamber of commerce and stock exchange.

“Packing up stove and sink” in their home in Washington, D.C., David Lyman, then 12, and his mother, Freda Ring Lyman, arrived in Thailand in 1949 to join Albert, who, captivated by the Orient, had decided to replant his practice in Bangkok. In 1951, Albert and Freda, also a lawyer, bought Tilleke & Gibbins, a firm that has served its first client back in 1893. The sole Jewish student. David attended the only English-language school in town. It was run by the Seventh-Day Adventists, members of a Christian offshot that encourages its follows to keep Shabbat and observe Jewish dietary laws.

That was the closest young David (who became a bar mitzvah only at age 47) came to Judaism back then. Some transient Holocaust refugees aside. Bangkok was home to few Jews in the 1950s. Ever the organizer, Freda duly set about creating the Jewish Association of Thailand, which now has four resident rabbis from chabad and numbers some 250 families, mostly Israeli and American gemstone and jewelry dealers, who started arriving in the early 1980s. For her charity work with handicapped children, Freda Lyman was the first foreign woman to receive the Most Noble Order of the Crown of Thailand in 1961. She died in 1986.

Deterred by his father’s dawn-to-dusk rigors, Lyman junior – whose family on both sides had been lawyers for three generations – “did everything I could to shun the legal profession,” he says. In 1958, after graduating in electrical engineering from Duke University in North Carolina, Lyman joined the U.S. Navy, receiving his first commission on a minesweeper. Soon he earned the gold dolphin officer’s insignia in submarines, serving “close to home” in the Pacific Fleet. “I knew submarines inside out, down to the last screw,” he boasts, “but I had too big a mouth for toeing the blindly-follow-orders line.” Although a die-hard navy buff, who even today publishes a maritime newsletter, Lyman was too much of a rebel in uniform.

That’s how the family tradition caught up with him. During a year-long furlough, he enrolled in Hastings College of the Law in San Francisco. “I loved all the intellectual stimulation of it.” By 1967, after “getting his ears pinned back” at a firm in the U.S., he found himself back in Bangkok, at Tilleke & Gibbins. Curious about his son’s prospects in Thailand, his father took him to a fortune-teller, who told David: “Don’t try going native, riding bicycles to work and wearing sandals. Be the best American you can be, and you’ll make it.”

He has. Under the stern gazes of Albert and Freda Lyman’s bronze busts guarding the entrance to the firm’s five-story head office on a leafy Bangkok side street. Lyman has stewarded his inheritance, since his father’s death in 1984, from a mid-range practice of three dozen people to Thailand’s oldest and largest independent law firm today, employing some 240 (predominantly

Thai) staffers and servicing 12,000 clients from 107 countries. Tilleke & Gibbins now has branches in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City (the first foreign law firm to receive a license from the Vietnamese communist government) and in Phnom Penh, Cambodia.

An impulsive, peppery fellow relishing one-liners and sporting a graying Andy Rooney haircut with matching bushy eyebrows, Lyman is a proud martinet, who drills his cub attorneys in “Lyman’s Laws” (Rule 1: Never, never assume! Rule 2: Clients and bosses don’t like surprises...). Yet this 12-hours-a-day workaholic lords it over his helpers in his affable Dutch uncle fashion, always finding time for jovial banter and heart-to-hearts. Five years ago, the Women Secretaries Association of Thailand voted him Boss of the Year. An old family friend, Father Raymond Brennan, director of an orphanage in Pattaya, once wrote him: “Although you may be a hardass lawyer, you are a sentimental old softie. Just like your father – hard shell on the outside, whipped cream inside.

HE DOES HAVE HIS SOFT SPOTS. Emulating his reformist father, Lyman has indulged in myriad high-profile good works of his own. His six-page minutely typed resume boasts some 70 memberships and directorships from World Peace Through Law to business coalitions on AIDS. A dedicated conservationist, he’s founded the Thailand Business Council for Sustainable Development and acted as secretary general for the Thailand Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.

“As a boy,” Lyman remembers, “I could hike through jungles rich in wildlife and bike around Bangkok with its still clean air and unpolluted waterways.” Wanton destruction has since laid waste to his verdant roaming grounds and decimated their fauna. On his firm’s centennial in 1993, he launched his Second Hundred Years Forest Project, which since then has planted 70,000 saplings (at \$2.50 apiece) around Thailand. “When someone wants to give me a present, I ask him to plant a tree,” he says.

With the disappearance of lush tropical jungles and fertile wetlands, Thailand’s elephants are disappearing too, Lyman laments. A century ago, 100,000 pachyderms roams in Siam; today, a mere 5,000 remain, most of them miserably hauling timber or cadging handouts off tourists on Bangkok’s choked-up streets. Lyman has adopted an old, maltreated work elephant that had gored and crushed four mahouts to death before Lyman rescued him from being out down. The elephant now enjoys a dignified retirement in the Ayutthaya elephant camp, an hour’s drive away from Bangkok.

In his spare moments, Lyman pursues his hobbies. A certified dive master, he scouts around sunken shipwrecks. An avid photographer, he captures postcard-perfect images of Nepal, Tibet or Bali. “A Libra born in the Year of the Rat,” he practices transcendental meditation and studies alternative medicine, hoping to turn the clock back on aging. In the late 1990s, by way of office decoration, he began collecting rare, threadbare hill tribe and minority textiles: Burmese Kachin hip wrappers, Lao Tai Daeng head cloths, Cambodian Khmer wall hangings. By now, he’s assembled

some 1,000 tapestries (for as much as \$5,000 apiece), showcased in his law firm's private textile museum.

It's next door to the Tilleke & Gibbins Museum of Counterfeit Goods, housing Asia's largest collection of bogus trademarked wares, everything from Rolex watches to Viagra pills. Lyman has hoarded some 1,500 types of counterfeit goods, mostly from police raids, which his firm used as evidence in copyright infringement cases. Thai detectives, Interpol investigators, university students, corporate CEOs – they all come here to learn about the skills of professional copycats.

Any unfulfilled dreams for this go-getter? All thumbs, he's given up on learning to play the banjo. Ditto his old longing to pilot airplanes. And a self-confessed ladies' man just divorced from his Thai wife, he's still "looking for my ideal woman." But forget retirement. "My mother was still coming into the office after she'd turned 85. If I'm not senile by then, I hope to do no less," Lyman asserts.

That will give him 20 more years. There are plenty of other Goliaths to wrestle, trees to plant, elephants to save.