

**THE WAR BUSINESS:
The International
Trade in Armaments**

by **George Thayer**

Simon & Schuster, 417 pp., \$6.95

DURING THE PAST QUARTER CENTURY, in response to Communist threats, we have created an enormous war industry, which now permeates the pores of our society, distorts it in innumerable ways, and often causes us to behave in a fashion that we not only would find abhorrent in other nations but hardly dare admit to ourselves. Nations, like individuals, have psychic defense mechanisms, which suppress recognition of acts or behavior patterns that do too much violence to the cherished self-images created to permit them to function. The official traffic in conventional arms described by George Thayer in *The War Business* is a perfect example of this.

When I was a boy the world was much simpler than it is today, and it was easier to recognize the bad guys. Armaments were invented by perverted individuals and made by malevolent private companies—Krupp, du Pont, Bofors, Oerlikon—and it was clear that they had to be watched. Their motive, too, was simple—money. The merchants of death were well known and despised. Everyone was aware that Sir Basil Zaharoff was one of the world's most influential arms salesmen, that he bought influence in high places and that he would sell munitions to anyone who could afford them. Though Sir Basil's counterparts exist today and make fortunes dealing in arms, they live in dark shadows cast by the arms traffic of the major nations of the world.

We the people, through our governments, be we American, French, Russian, or English, are today's merchants of death. In some areas of the world we have provided vast amounts of arms, frequently to both sides involved in a dispute, in desperate and usually futile attempts to maintain stability and prevent war. The Middle East and the Indian subcontinent are two cases in point. In other regions we have used arms sales or gifts as a way of buying political allegiance. Often, as in Latin America and Africa, this has had the result of introducing unneeded and unmanageably sophisticated weapons systems such as jet fighters, tanks and submarines into relatively tranquil locales, thus creating mini-arms races between nations with little or no basis for conflict. These poverty-stricken countries can ill afford to waste money in this way. Moreover, when armed,



George Thayer—"a thorough job."

nations usually find something to fight about. Just a few weeks ago Honduras and El Salvador were having a shooting war about the outcome of a soccer game.

Although hundreds of the most reputable companies compete for the arms business, there are arms merchants to meet all needs and fit all pocketbooks. Shady one-man operations will sell any revolutionary a few guns or obsolete aircraft, and even arrange for their delivery for a slight additional fee. Then there are the big private firms capable of supplying great quantities of modern armaments which, even if not the latest model, could support a sizable war. Mr. Thayer suspects, though he was never able to prove it, that some of the large arms dealers work intimately with governments, possibly as their agents. Such firms have representatives around the world and may even have sub-depots in foreign countries to speed delivery and avoid control by their home government.

The next step up the scale in both size and respectability is the arms manufacturer, whose most important customer or sponsor is usually his own government but whose overseas sales provide a very important source of income. In most cases these companies are aided and abetted in their foreign sales by their governments either for political reasons or because of the balance of payments income that such sales provide. In some instances it is difficult to tell where the private incentive ends and official action begins. For example, most industrial manufacturers of weapons receive official sanction for their sales. Indeed, the French government actually provides a catalogue of military hardware available in France. The bulk of the weapons suppliers have close ties to their home governments, and several of

them, such as the French company SUBAVIATION, are owned by national governments. In addition, nearly all depend upon their own governments for research and development support.

But the most aggressive and successful weapons peddlers are the world's great powers themselves, with national treasuries to finance their deals and huge amounts of high quality surplus to sell or even give away if the competition gets stiff. *The War Business* describes the vast scale of arms sales, amounting to many billions of dollars per year, by the major powers, among whom our own country is the acknowledged leader. Weapons provided in this way instigate and sustain the conventional-arms races.

Though I do not like the anecdotal style of *The War Business*, the author has done a thorough job of documenting, for the first time, one of the most dangerous yet least appreciated aspects of mankind's walk along the brink. In the United States we are experiencing a national movement in the Congress and among a large segment of the population bent on bringing a runaway military system under more effective control. Its primary focus has been the immediate impact on American society of the nuclear arms race, the Vietnam War, and the effects of too much military spending. This book makes it clear that there is another dimension to the problem which requires urgent attention.

It is not as if the control of conventional arms were an unrecognized problem. Many efforts have been made by the United Nations and other groups to create international machinery to limit the conventional-arms traffic and to substitute other means, both legal and military, to deal with local and regional conflicts, but these initiatives have failed for lack of support by the big powers. Even the existing U.N. arrangements would work much more effectively if the major powers would support them. For example, the United Nations peace-keeping forces have never been adequately financed and their past activities have created a large deficit. Two hundred million dollars per year—less than one quarter of the amount involved in the controversial ABM budget—would allow the U.N. to maintain a truly effective peace-keeping force, but so far no one has wanted it. Understanding must precede action. One hopes that this book will make a contribution to both.

Jerome B. Wiesner

Jerome B. Wiesner, provost of M.I.T., wrote "Where Science and Politics Meet." From 1961-64 Dr. Wiesner was special assistant to the President on science and technology.

NO EXIT FROM VIETNAM

by Sir Robert Thompson

McKay, 208 pp., \$4.50

WHO WE ARE:

An Atlantic Chronicle of the
United States and Vietnam

edited by Robert Manning and
Michael Janeway

Atlantic-Little, Brown, 391 pp., \$7.95

AMERICANS ARE GETTING TIRED of thinking about Vietnam, and this is a dangerous sign. "Those who cannot remember the past," wrote Santayana, "are condemned to repeat it." If that is true, then the current spate of books on Vietnam may be serving scant purpose. This is not to say, of course, that every book must teach a lesson and that such lessons must then be followed if the writing is not to have been in vain. Rather, the point is that there are so many crucial lessons to be learned from America's experience in Vietnam that a failure properly to identify and profit from them would amount to a crime more horrendous than our involvement in the war itself.

Sir Robert Thompson, widely considered the world's leading authority on counter-insurgency warfare, presents us in *No Exit from Vietnam* with his views of the causes and nature of the war and the strategies adopted by both sides in the pursuit of their varying definitions of victory. Although he discusses primarily the years since 1965, Sir Robert draws amply on his own experience from 1961-1965 as head of the British Advisory Mission to South Vietnam, as well as on his subsequent trips to Saigon as consultant for the U.S. Government. Before Thompson's involvement with Vietnam, he was widely respected as the architect of Britain's victory over the Malayan Communist guerrillas in the 1950s. One of this book's most interesting contributions, in fact, is his authoritative references to the similarities and differences between the Malay and Vietnamese insurgencies; both, he feels, were not at heart "wars to evict the imperialists but wars to decide the colonial succession."

In terms of what he would have us learn—not only lessons of military tactics, but of understanding of character weaknesses as well—Sir Robert is eminently reasonable. His chapter on "The Failure of American Strategy" points to some of our faults as they have been manifested in Vietnam: impatience, impulsiveness, aggressiveness, overly emotional reactions, and reliance on wealth. To these might be added over-reliance on technology and

lack of understanding of what Vietnam and the Vietnamese are all about. ("Saigon was inundated with teams of American political and social scientists and every form of expert, researching and analyzing from preconceived Western ideas every facet of Vietnamese life and motivation. They succeeded in scratching every itch and frequently where it didn't itch at all.")

The most serious error, as Sir Robert points out, has been the failure to realize that the Vietnamese revolution is not essentially a military matter, but a political and social one. What would be needed, in short, is not counter-insurgency but counter-revolution. "The American forces," he notes, "fought a separate war which ignored its political and other aspects, and were not on a collision course with the Vietcong and North Vietnamese, who therefore had a free run in the real war. It was just as if the Americans, having been frustrated in the chess game, thought that they could win by going off and playing poker instead."

If Sir Robert really feels that the United States has been playing poker rather than chess, his conclusions—a rhapsody of "light at the end of the tunnel" (if we only improve and then persist)—come as a jolting surprise. "Failures . . . can be retrieved and harmony restored," he writes in the preface; but this optimistic judgment does not take into account the unpopularity of the Thieu régime in Saigon (though Thompson believes the régime is popular) and the cynicism of too many South Vietnamese toward the

entire war effort—in short, the fact that the anti-Communist side has already forfeited its generous opportunities in Vietnam. Sir Robert believes that "now, more than at any time in the past decade, it is vital for the United States to keep its pledge and stand by South Vietnam. There is no exit. . . . A complete if not altogether a happy victory could still be won."

Had Sir Robert's approach been followed earlier, along with that of others whose advice was also ignored, it is just possible that events in Vietnam might have been different. But this was not the case, and his is wistful optimism. For those of us who have been involved in one way or another with Vietnam, failure has been no easy thing to acknowledge. Not to acknowledge it, however, is to fly in the face of current realities, not the least of which is the disillusion in America itself.

It is for understanding American attitudes that *Who We Are* has value. A collection of diverse (though all relatively dovish) articles that have appeared in the pages of the *Atlantic Monthly* since late 1966, *Who We Are* is not the integrated, in-depth history of "wartime America" that one hopes will be written one day after the dust has settled. Beginning relatively late in the Vietnam chronology, the compilation now seems a series of disjointed and dated reflections.

This is not to say that certain of the articles are not well worth rereading. Frances FitzGerald's "Tragedy of Saigon" (1966) and "The Struggle and the War" (1967) provide stimulating social

Your Literary I.Q.

Conducted by David M. Glixon

TRAVELING MEN

All of the characters below found a certain amount of travel necessary during their careers. Kathleen Petersen of Schenectady, N. Y., asks you to match each name with a destination, and tell why the trip was necessary. The ticket office is on page 62.

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|--------------------|-----------------|--------------------------------|
| 1. Aeneas () | a. Avalon | A. to arrange an ambush |
| 2. Aragorn () | b. Avernus | B. to conquer invaders |
| 3. Arthur () | c. Colchis | C. to consult his dead father |
| 4. Beowulf () | d. Eden | D. to fetch a coat of wool |
| 5. The Cid () | e. Gondor | E. to fight a monster |
| 6. Ganelon () | f. Green Chapel | F. to find his missing father |
| 7. Gawain () | g. Heorot | G. to heal his wounds |
| 8. Jason () | h. Lanka | H. to receive a blow |
| 9. Rama () | i. Saragossa | I. to reclaim a throne |
| 10. Satan () | j. Sparta | J. to rescue his wife |
| 11. Siegfried () | k. Valencia | K. to seduce a man and a woman |
| 12. Telemachus () | l. Worms | L. to win a princess |