

LIFE BOOK REVIEW

Where Have Last Year's Cannons Gone?

THE WAR BUSINESS
by GEORGE THAYER
(Simon & Schuster) \$6.95

While public attention is focused on the possibility of a new round in the nuclear arms race, the United States and the Soviet Union are engaged in selling off last year's models of conventional weapons to countries that are ready to move up to something a little more deadly. These countries in turn are selling off their older models (and a few newer ones) to some of the most recently arrived members of the family of nations. And there is so much miscellaneous military equipment around that one private firm runs a flourishing business just keeping track of spare parts. Mr. Thayer, who described American extremists in his recent *Farther Shores of Politics*, now describes the operations of this \$5 billion a year industry in unrelenting and sometimes unnecessary detail and achieves what amounts to a handbook of the international arms trade.

The great bulk of U.S. arms sales is made to our NATO allies, primarily to Canada, Britain and West Germany, who have not yet met the equipment goals called for by their own commitments to NATO. Mr. Thayer is a little too ready to accept the German complaint that we've been twisting their arms in order to push up our sales figures. But he also calculates that 25%-30% of our sales go to underdeveloped countries. It is at least an open question whether we should be taking their money for guns when their people need schools and

hospitals and fertilizers. There is a ready argument that if we don't supply them someone else will, and the prime candidate is the Soviet Union, whose record for stirring up trouble through arms sales is fully documented here. The British and the French are not far behind, and even the neutral Swiss and Swedes are active.

But it isn't altogether clear what the United States gains, on balance, from many of these transactions. The relatively few balance-of-payments dollars we earn in sales to the underdeveloped world may be more than offset by the trouble we cause for our-

selves. Arms that are sold to be used for purely defensive purposes, even against an Iron Curtain threat, have a way of ending up in whatever local grudge fight their new owners may find to test them. Clearly, an agreement not to pass on second-hand arms ought to be fairly high on the agenda for Soviet-American arms talks.

There is a kind of old-fashioned air about Mr. Thayer's description of the captains of the arms industry, whether he is recounting the genteel antecedents of Sam Cummings, the acknowledged leader of the industry, who "spent his first years in the care of governesses," or the eccentricities of the typical "munitions manipulator," or "MM," who "talks in the vernacular of the British officers' mess." He can't quite decide whether private arms dealers "operate in an atmosphere of honesty and mutual trust" or "are brutally competitive."

But there is nothing old-fashioned about his description of the machinery of the United States military establishment, geared up to promote the sale of arms across the globe. That machinery is so enormous that its own momentum tends to keep it running even when its masters would prefer to stop it, or to turn it aside. From the E Ring of the Pentagon, where the Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for International Logistics Negotiations (*i.e.*, arms sales) has his office (having until recently shared a reception room, Mr. Thayer notes wryly, with the Defense Department's arms control office) the network runs through the competent and energetic staff in the Pentagon's back rooms, down to the military departments, and out to the Military Assistance Advisory Groups, military missions and military attachés in U.S. embassies in Asia, Africa and Latin

America. It extends into the private sector, with links to the major arms producers. In many ways it parallels the structure that produces such powerful pressures for new weapons in our own arsenal. Small wonder that the arms controllers in the State Department, U.S. ambassadors abroad, and even senior congressmen and senators are frustrated in their attempts to get a handle on the system.

Gun-runners, according to Mr. Thayer, will reject a plane with cargo doors opening outward, as unsuitable for paratroops. His cargo-filled book opens the doors wide to drop some non-nuclear bombs on a trade that might benefit from the explosion.

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by Adam Yarmolinsky