

This Country's Star Salesman



Tom Braden

THERE WAS always something a little too honest about Senator George Aiken's advice on Vietnam. "Declare a victory and get out," he said.

We could all repeat George Aiken's line. We could smile knowingly at his wisdom. But we couldn't make a policy of it, any more than a man can admit when he goes out to buy a new car that he intends to hoodwink himself into thinking that the extras won't cost much. What a man needs when he wants to hoodwink himself is a star salesman. The same is true of a country.

That's why this country is fortunate. Richard Nixon is a star salesman. By the time he is through with his sales pitch, we are going to lose the war in Vietnam, but we are going to think that we won it. Most important, we are not going to care.

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IN THE SENSE in which Lyndon Johnson and Dean Rusk once talked of our war aims, we have already lost the war. Ronald Reagan to the contrary, President Nguyen Van Thieu's reelection is not really very much like the unopposed first election of George Washington. "I don't see why so many people in our country are so charged up by this one-man election," Governor Reagan told the press in Saigon. "If Americans want to criticize the one-man ballot, we should start with a whole list of nations, such as the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia and North Vietnam." It is a measure of our defeat that nobody laughed.

True that Henry Kissinger did his level best to persuade Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker to persuade Thieu to permit somebody to run against him. True that the President was annoyed at Bunker's failure. But it was only a detail in the sales pitch. The fact is that in the name of saving democracy and drawing the line

against Communism, we have set up a tin-horn dictatorship as repressive as any in history. So much for our war aims.

The important thing is that nobody cares about war aims. The salesman has mesmerized everyone with his pitch about going to China and Moscow. If he can persuade either or both to intervene on behalf of our prisoners, we shall be happy to believe that the inauguration of Thieu achieves our war aims, and that now, at last, we can leave.

Nor will it matter very much if we eventually lose the ground as well as the aim. Nobody in official Washington thinks that President Nixon can persuade Peking and Moscow to call off an offensive by Hanoi. But before he leaves on his trip, the President will announce a further troop withdrawal. By the time of the next offensive season, there will be no American ground troops in battle. If Thieu should fall, and the Saigon government should welcome the Communists, what politician will demand that our ground troops go back in?

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YOU HAVE to hand it to the star salesman. He inherited a nation heartily sick of the war. What it wanted was a fig leaf — some excuse, any excuse — to pretend that it was all right to get out and to forget it. First, Mr. Nixon bought time by invading a couple of countries. Then he bought more time by announcing his visits to Peking and Moscow. On October 31, the inauguration of Thieu will provide the fig leaf.

So the sale has been made. The deal is about to be closed. The country is ready to take George Aiken's advice and the chances seem at least fair that by election time, the star salesman will be able to talk about a victory on Vietnam, just as though it were a fact of history.