

Reston Reports

The U.S. Search For a Rainbow

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Washington

Deep down underneath all the surface arguments about what we are doing in Indochina, something in the American spirit keeps the Nation from facing the facts in that tragic peninsula.

The truth is too unsettling to our romantic view of ourselves and our history. To set a date certain for withdrawing

all the way would not, in my view, threaten our honor, or our security, or the strategic

balance in the world — though this is clearly in dispute — but it would threaten our illusions, our slogans and our myths.

We are still clinging to the dreams of our youth. Everything must have a happy ending. We are bigger and better. Money talks. The machine is power and magic — an irresistible god, partner to the "Bitch Goddess Success." All this is in our fables and every minute in our advertising, and all this has been challenged in Vietnam.

Anybody who ever raised a child or planted a garden knows that life does not support these assumptions, but they are dying hard. G. K. Chesterton rejected Stephen Decatur's slogan "My Country, Right or Wrong" because he thought it was like saying "my mother, drunk or sober," but Decatur's dogma still has a large following.

will ever be satisfied until it gets rid of a potential Communist base in Cuba.

In many ways, the administration is now following in Indochina the techniques of American commerce. It has mounted a vast advertising campaign to persuade the American people that what it is doing is right, moderate, and effective, and in fairness, the men at the top no doubt believe that they are right, and that advertising pays, particularly if you limit objective reporting of the results.

Well, advertising does pay: it has confused a large part of the electorate over Indochina for a very long time and in the short run and in political terms, it may very well serve the President's interests, if not the nation's.

No doubt he can hold the line through 1972 in Indochina and even keep a reasonably secure base in South Vietnam with American air power after that if he sticks. But that, he says, is not his policy. His policy is to get out and bet on the South Vietnamese to hold the fort.

And if he is wrong in this bet, who will explain the sacrifices of the men who died between now and then?

Still, the point of all this is not that he is perpetuating American illusions to serve his personal political interests — thought it could have that result — but that he actually believes in the happy ending, that his purpose is virtuous, and that his ends justify his means.

President Nixon is counting on it. He is not facing the facts of geography. He is not dispelling but perpetuating the nation's illusions, and he can undoubtedly do so for a while.

But China will never be satisfied until it gets rid of a non-Communist military base close to its borders any more than the United States

Well, illusions have their purposes. Eugene O'Neill wrote a whole cycle of plays to prove that they were indispensable.

But Mr. Lincoln had a better idea: his clear and simple goal was to preserve the Union. "Military glory," he said, "is the attractive rainbow that rises in showers of blood."