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The used peace salesman won't know what to do with the peace

Whenever I saw that satirical poster of Richard Nixon asking that question, my subconscious would answer, "No, I wouldn't buy a used car from him."

And it occurred to me then that the used car salesmen of the world should have filed a libel suit against the guy who dreamed up that poster.

Maybe some of us wouldn't have bought a used car from the man who makes P. T. Barnum look like a choir boy. But we've all been sold a used peace.

You can remember when peace was a brand new, just-off-the-assembly-line product, ready to be bought with no questions asked.

We were already bought then. Man, were we ready.

"... I say the time has come for the American people to turn to new leadership... and I pledge to you tonight that the first priority foreign policy objective of our next administration will bring an honorable end to the war in Vietnam."

That's what GOP presidential nominee Richard Nixon told us Aug. 8, 1968.

If he had ended the war right after the election—and he had a clear mandate to do so—all of us would have bought that new, unused unscarred peace. No installments. Payment in full.

Instead, our leader shucked and jived for four years, bringing home American troops while simultaneously bombing innocent Vietnamese women and children into oblivion.

Last October, four years later, that peace, now dented and battered, was sold to the electorate. We bought it even as badly mangled as it was then. A few days later we discovered it was a consumer fraud.

The peace accord Henry Kissinger and Le Duc Tho finally did get around to initialing in Paris in January differed little in substance from the conditions spelled out in October.

That's not surprising. The goal of a used peace salesman is to convince you that the broken-down rattle trap he has just sold you is as serviceable as the smoothly purring model you should have purchased four years ago.

But peace is peace. And an American public is too weary to finally celebrate.

No exhilarated gratitude — just quiet relief.

President Nixon's problem now is to understand what peace means for this country. His own tiny morbidity, "peace with honor" (freely translated: "Do it my way or I'll knock your block off"), began to creep into his speeches when the moral justification for prosecuting this ugly war slowly diminished. All peace is honorable. As Cicero once observed: "I prefer the most unfair peace to the most righteous war."

To President Nixon, however, peace only means the absence of hostility between groups. It's more than that. Peace is the presence of progress for the people.

A nation must do more than simply not fight. It must provide for its poor. And build bountiful tomorrows for all its citizens.

Nothing in Mr. Nixon's remarks on January 23, on what could have been an evening of historic luminescence, remotely indicates where this nation goes now.

Does the winding down of the war mean the winding up of quality education, more jobs and clean housing in America—for all Americans?

How much of the Defense Department's billions of dollars budgeted for Vietnam will President Nixon be able to shift from guns to butter?

I would suspect very little. In none of his utterances in the past four years has he offered the American people any clue whatsoever that he planned or even wanted the transition from a wartime to a peacetime economy.

We may stop building bombers but we don't seem to begin constructing cities. Not if we permit this administration to kill off Model Cities, low and middle income housing construction, HEW programs, anti-poverty and manpower training programs.

I would never have bought a used car from Richard Nixon. But I am buying a used peace from him because there is no alternative. What troubles me deeply now is that I don't think the President of the United States knows what to do with peace now that he has sold it to us.