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Merchants of death

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Soc.4.01.2 The War Business

THE WAR BUSINESS: THE INTERNATIONAL TRADE IN ARMAMENTS, by George Thayer (Simon and Schuster, $6.95).

The War Business" is a frightening book. Sometimes dull and occasionally repetitious, it is, nevertheless, terrifying; for what George Thayer provides is a comprehensive analysis of the international arms trade, both private and governmental, and the facts he has uncovered do not make for easy sleeping.

Something like one-third of the book is concerned with the private sector and particularly with one man, Samuel Cummings, a truly formidable arms merchant who dominates the international arms scene. Almost too meticulously, Thayer examines the scope and activities of the independent arms traders, focusing largely on Cummings' Interarms, and provides documentation to show how it all works: the danger and excitement, the methods (legal and illegal) and the repercussions, the successes and the failures.

THE QUALITY of Mr. Thayer's research is impressive; for example, he shows how the rifle used to shoot President Kennedy found its way from Europe into the assassin's hands and how men such as Cummings have almost complete control over the sale of foreign arms, especially sporting weapons, in this country. But the average reader will find far more interesting the section entitled "Bureaucracy Armed" — after all, the private sector accounts for "only" $30,000,000 worth of arms business a year.

Governmental arms trading, on the other hand, is big business. Between 1945 and the present time, for instance, the United States gave away or sold arms worth $80 billion; currently its arms trade — there is little giving away these days — runs at the $2-billion level. Western European nations account for another $1 billion a year; the communist nations another $500,000,000. In all, Mr. Thayer estimates that nowadays the war business is worth $5 billion annually, and he predicts that the trade will have doubled by the early '70s.

Trade, of course, is healthy in and of itself — or so we are told. But the trouble is, Mr. Thayer points out, that arms are power, and the search for and acquisition of power has, all too often, resulted in war. There is, in fact, a direct correlation between the growth of the weapons trade and the incidence of war. To take but one example, albeit Mr. Thayer's favorite, the weapons supplied by the United States to both India and Pakistan directly contributed to the outbreak of hostilities between those two nations in 1965.

UNFORTUNATELY, the India-Pakistan war is not an isolated example of U.S. bungling; rather, it is symptomatic of America's arms trading as a whole, and it is no excuse to say that other nations make just as many gross errors. Even more regrettable, however, is the fact that U.S. arms trading is as deceitful as it is stupid. For example, the CIA (who else?) actively participates in secret arms dealing. In 1954 it helped overthrow the legitimate government in Guatemala by supplying arms to the rebel forces; from 1949 to 1961 it supplied arms to Chinese Nationalist forces operating clandestinely in Burma; in 1958 it supplied arms to anti-Sukarno forces in Indonesia; and so on.

But deceit is not confined to the CIA and other such agencies that make no bones about operating secretly. "Congress," Mr. Thayer says, "is increasingly frustrated over its inability to influence the course of arms sales," and one of the chief reasons is that Congress is unable to find out just what is going on. Reports are phrased ambiguously to give false impressions; that hoary old rationale, "the national interest," is invoked time and again to protect the Pentagon from having to divulge details that it wishes not to make public; investigators are met with obfuscation and blank looks wherever they turn. And yet there is plenty to be made public, as the current newspaper accounts of Defense Department boondoggles make clear.

But perhaps there is a reason for government arms selling? Ostensibly, there is. According to Mr. Thayer, the government justifies its arms trading because it (1) promotes the collective security of the West, (2) furthers the idea of co-operation on weapons production among America's allies, and (3) helps offset the costs U.S. troops incur abroad.

However, Mr. Thayer proceeds to show how hollow are the claims. Because of U.S. arms trading, allies have been set at each other's throats (India and Pakistan) or partially alienated from the United States (West Germany); all the arms-producing nations have felt that they should retain the right to arm themselves or at least to shop for a bargain (the idea of co-operative military production was seen, with some justification, as a sales pitch for the big American arms companies); offsetting military costs has been made the excuse for foisting too many weapons or the wrong weapons onto countries (Saudi Arabia) merely to redress the balance of payments deficit and despite the claim that arms are sold only to those countries that "need" them.

AND SO IT GOES. Mistakes, miscalculations, waste, and war—these are the fruits of arms trading. And if the United States seems to come in for more than its fair share of lumps, it should be remembered that America is both the most powerful country in the world and the biggest arms trader. And it is therefore up to the United States to make the first move to bring to an end this folly.

How it might do so is the subject of Mr. Thayer's final chapter. But it is clear that he does not hold out much hope of success. The interests involved—the infamous "military-industrial complex"—are so well entrenched, so little subject to control, the profits to be made so enormous, the demand for weapons—especially among those nations least able to afford such expensive playthings—so great, the efforts of those opposed to the arms trade so puny, that the odds on sanity's winning are slight indeed.

If we were dealing with candy bars, no one would mind. But what is being shipped around the world is increasingly sophisticated and volatile armament. And arms cause wars. And wars tend to be harder to stop than to start. Now there's a sobering thought. One can only hope that some of the 200-odd people who, according to Mr. Thayer, control the arms trade in this country will read his book.

George Thayer, author of "The War Business."

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