

Pasting up political cutouts

PRESERVE AND PROTECT. By Allen Drury. Doubleday, 394 pp. \$6.95.

By Robert Cromie

When *McCall's* magazine paid \$50,000 for Allen Drury's new novel, sight unseen, then refused to use it (permitting the author to retain the loot, as I understand it), the buyer's explanation was that (a) actual circumstances had made the story implausible and (b) the book was too long to run uncut and impossible to cut.

Drury promptly charged that *McCall's* was refusing to let his story be heard, but failed to explain why they couldn't have accomplished the same thing by simply not buying it. He also seemingly failed to realize that the publicity attendant upon tossing \$50,000 out the window must have created a tremendous audience eager to read *Preserve and Protect* and decide for themselves what the fuss was all about.

As one of that audience it is a disappointment to report that for this novel, at least, Drury has lost the hop on his fast ball. He simply isn't the workman and storyteller he was in *Advise and Consent* or *A Shade of Difference* or *Capable of Honor*. The characters, many of whom have inhabited all four books, have lost dimension and taken on a cutout appearance, with a few notable exceptions such as the highly appealing William Abbott, Speaker of the House, who becomes President in the first few pages of the story after Air Force One crashes and kills President Harley Hudson, who has just been renominated after a convention so stormy and ugly that it recalls the Republican convention that named Goldwater.

It is quickly learned that among those in the well-knowning throng killed by the wreckage of Air Force One was "someone" with a gun; and that two members of the ground crew "were in some sort of Communist operation with headquarters in Annapolis," and that *Robert Cromie is book editor of the Chicago Tribune.*

among crew members aboard was an Army mess boy who had "a blank-faced little wife he married in Albania."

The remainder of the novel, following the crash, has a double aim: to describe the renewed fight between supporters of Orrin Knox, the Vice-Presidential nominee, and Governor Ted Jason of California, a misguided liberal millionaire, for the vacated Presidential spot. Jason, it should be added, has accepted the support of three organizations so disparate as to make his action unbelievable. One, to the far left, is headed by a psychotic United States senator. The other is directed by a racist black leader to whom violence is the answer to everything.

It is only fair to say that Drury had the materials for an engrossing novel. From his viewpoint, I'm sure, the frequent interpolation of protests against the rising tide of violence in the country—protests which surely are justifiable and should be made—and attacks on the "liberal" press and "liberal" columnists, belong in the story. From the viewpoint of this reader, at least, they were so labored and intrusive that they did little more than slow down the action.

Certainly Drury is entitled to express his obviously sincere beliefs. But the message would have come across more clearly and forcefully if he had understated it in *Preserve and Protect* and then gone on to write a second non-fiction work, or a long essay, warning of his conviction that there is an international plot to overthrow the United States, a plot in which he feels many of its citizens are involved directly and others unwittingly; and that time grows short.

Drury is angry with a variety of persons, including the Pope, whom he describes as a slick old politician who had recently cozed into Peter's throne and had immediately begun to dabble in everything under the sun as Alexander Borgia ever did, had been first crack out of the box on the day after Harley's funeral with a

speech to a mammoth peace demonstration in St. Peter's Square . . . his exhortations, of course, had been addressed to the United States, apparently the only power on earth that was ever guilty of anything.

Again, speaking of a conspiracy in which the Russian agricultural attaché in Washington has a hand, Drury adds:

There was always something faintly laughable to most Americans about that sort of deep, dark conspiracy: their education, their press, their churches and their literature had conditioned them to laugh at it, and they did. It did not occur to them to reason why they had been conditioned to laugh: they just did, automatically, spontaneously, obediently. It simplified matters greatly . . .

And a final example, supposedly the thoughts of Bob Leffingwell, who would like to become Secretary of State:

... How horribly far down the road to destruction has intolerant idealism taken mankind: especially in the hands of those for whom idealism has been only a tool with which to manipulate the naive for the purposes of Communist imperialism, harshest and most oppressive of them all.

That's a small excerpt from a page or so of his similar musings.

There are minor irritations, too. For instance, it is difficult to believe that the President's widow would attend a luncheon less than ten days after the tragedy. It is even more difficult to imagine a television commentator named Frankly Unctuous.

Portions of the book, it must be said, move quickly and well, and occasionally there is some of the excitement which the earlier Drury novels offered to a far greater degree. But if a smooth-running story may be compared to a smooth-running motor, then *Preserve and Protect* needs its points adjusted.