

Link-man in the White House

Sunday Times
Apr 2

WITH KENNEDY/by Pierre Salinger/Cape 36s

By Alastair Buchan

THE FLOOD of Kennedyana rolls on: Schlesinger's pretentious but readable pseudo-history, Sorensen's unpretentious and unreadable companion volume, and Manchester's grim narrative of the assassination, are only the tip of the iceberg. The combination of promise, power, glamour and tragedy has seemed to publishers on both sides of the Atlantic as unbeatable as books about the Royal Family once were—a category of literature to which Beachcomber (I think) once gave an appropriate generic title, "I was Hitler's Aunt."

So one approaches this latest volume, by President Kennedy's Press Secretary, with a wary suspicion that it is more of this servants' hall stuff. And much of it is. The reader who has just about had his fill of Kennedy's breakfast habits, Mrs Kennedy's rearrangement of the White House, or the idiosyncrasies of little Caroline, should stand aside, or at least be prepared to skip large sections of the book.

But for the selective reader there are interesting chapters. Mr Salinger, a Californian who became part of the Kennedy estate through an association with Bobby on a labour investigation, is clearly a nice and an honest man. He does not report on subjects in which he

was not directly concerned, and his angle of vision on the high politics of the reign is an interesting and a professional one, namely as the link between the President and the vast, hungry corps of correspondents in Washington. On subjects other than the Kennedy family, which he treats with an unhappy mixture of deference and sentimentality, familiar to readers of nanny books about Royalty, he writes clearly and amusingly.

And two sections in particular are important. One is his description of being used as an intermediary in the developing relationship between Kennedy and Khrushchev that succeeded the latter's attempt to stampede the West over Berlin in the winter of 1961-62. His account of his visit to Moscow at the insistence of the now forgotten Adzhubei, and of a long interview with Khrushchev, is excellent reporting. The other is, of course, the Cuban missile crisis in which he had the nightmare task of trying to prevent the Administration's fears and plans from becoming public knowledge too soon.

Though it is a light-hearted book I put it down with rather a heavy heart, because of what it shows about the gap between American responsibility and American professionalism in handling it. Salinger, like Schlesinger, simply cannot understand why the machinery of American diplomacy should have become both dislocated and irritated by the fact that the White House was carrying on negotiations with the Kremlin independent of the great departments of state—and without telling them. That a score of allied capitals might be deeply concerned hardly seems to have occurred to him. In the Cuban case he does admit the grave weakness of having no legal framework to control information in a crisis: he briefly examines the British system, which he incorrectly describes and misconstrues, and argues that with the American Press nothing like it is possible.

One day the United States will have to have a professional system of government or else relinquish much of the vast burden of responsibility that has been thrust upon it.

Treasure

Pieces of Eight by Kip Wagner as told to L. B. Taylor, Jr. (Longmans 36s). A Spanish armada, laden with bullion and jewellery, was wrecked off Florida 250 years ago: in the forties Mr Wagner discovered various coins strewn along the beach and formed the Real Eight Corporation to locate and salvage as much as possible: so far the team has recovered some \$3 million in coin, gold and silver bars, Chinese porcelain and a superb gold necklace. Fast moving, exciting and with some exceptional colour pictures.

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