

Back to Camelot with Dr. Frankenstein

ON INSTRUCTIONS OF MY GOVERNMENT. By Pierre Salinger. Doubleday. 408 pp. \$6.95

By S. K. Oberbeck

What would happen if novelist Allen Drury woke up one morning with his politics in a complete muddle, his writing talent plagued by overweening ambitions, his ego wounded by a business bust, and no political gray train to hop onto for the

moment? Why he'd write a book like this one, a heavy-breathing, neo nationalist about the Chinese getting ICvavs into Latin America, our discovery of the nuclear knife at our jugular and our response. Or, in other words, warmed-over Cuban missile crisis—solved fortunately this time without our president guaranteeing the safety of the country in which the missiles are poised. The time is 1976 and we're nineteen billion in the hole; but

never mind: Allende is our friend. Salinger's fictional president fumes and cusses a la LBJ, connives with the patrician sang-froid of JFK, while press secretary Maxwell Busby uses the Nixonian yellow legal pads. Like some fictional Dr. Frankenstein, Salinger sews up elements from all three administrations, but when his heart's in it, it's the teary nostalgia for Camelot that blubbers quietly in the wings of this slightly silly scenario.

There's a Galbraithian ambassador, Sam Hood, down in sunny, insolvent Santa Clara, urging the election-conscious Prez not to cut funds to *El Jefe* Luchengo, who may seem a dictator but is the only force keeping the country from falling into the hands of Communist renegade Paco Jiminez. Hood's bothered that Luchengo may turn for his gold to a Mafia refugee who plans to turn the Santa Clara coast into a resort and sanctuary for Brotherhood biggies on the lam. That sort of *Yanqui-panky* bridges the Harvard Law grad and Fulbright scholar who "on his first visit to Hyannis Port . . . met the . . .

President-elect John F. Kennedy—and they found more in common than their love of sailing."

This sort of misty-eyed, manfully-swallowed reminder of the halcyon days of the New Frontier drags all through the book, as if Salinger seeks to avoid the stigma of profiteering in personal confidences by over-promoting his love and sense of loss. Yet he expresses plenty of pique in scenes in which the Chief treats his press secretary like a lowly, back-office paper handler. The almost compulsive injections of insider White House tidbits and keyhole exposés, in fact, get in the way of the plot, which is fleshed out with a full panoply of Washington characters. In addition to the complete aviary, we have China's von Braun, the insidious General Gi, and his spying flunky posing as a trade emissary, Mr. Han, who plays sickeningly symbolic tennis with Ambassador Hood (the big game vs. the backcourt plodder). "You Americans try to cover the whole court," says Han. "Then, when you tire, we place our shots very, very carefully."

When he isn't being so dreadfully Druryesque, Salinger gets off a few good lines. Of the Maoist missile threat, he writes that "Americans had been living with crises too long not to believe that this latest would prove still another false alarm." That may be our fatal problem but Salinger doesn't develop the contention deeply enough. I think Drury would have. That's the difference. At one point, the rebels led by Jiminez attack, and Luchengo is hit by a salvo "with the impact of a massive sledge hammer." Which is a bit how Salinger writes, but I doubt it will knock you out of your hammock.

S. K. Oberbeck is an associate editor of Newsweek.