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Salinger Provides Addenda to an Era

Chalmers M. Roberts

PIERRE SALINGER, in the first place, is no Arthur Schlesinger Jr. or Theodore Sorenson. He was on the periphery of the great events of the Kennedy era, for the most part, and not in the storm centers. He doesn't quite come off as a historian and it is still difficult to take him very seriously as a high level diplomatic go-between when thrust into that role by an unconventional President and the unpredictable Russians.

Salinger, in fact, was a roly-poly press secretary who had a lot of fun in the Kennedy days and practically none in the Johnson days, by his own account. His bounce and some of his irreverence show through along with his dedication to JFK.

And so this latest of the Kennedy books is a volume of addenda, of bits and pieces which fit into the historical sweep of Schlesinger and the personal picture of Sorenson. Naturally enough, Salinger is best in describing his side of the press problem in the two administrations, of which more later.

First, some tidbits. Actor, now Republican Senator, George Murphy worked for JFK at the 1960 convention. Newly-arrived Soviet Ambassador Dobrynin told Salinger Khrushchev's messages "will go directly through me," no longer through Georgi Bolshakov, the previous embassy intermediary.

Salinger's long talks with Khrushchev in Russia in 1962, as well as the use the Soviets made of him through others as a direct channel to JFK, are illuminating chiefly to show how undiplomatic diplomacy often was during the Kenne-

Chalmers M. Roberts, a Washington Post Staff Writer, reviews "With Kennedy" by Pierre Salinger (Doubleday, 391 pp., \$5.95).

dy-Khrushchev years. Salinger's account will reinforce the unease of the professional diplomats, but it doesn't prove their point that they alone should be the channel.

SALINGER is most at home in recalling his press role. He concludes that communications have "broken down" in the critical press-government relationship over how to work with each other "in the time of national crisis short of a declared war." The Bay of Pigs, the Cuban missile crisis and the Vietnam war are detailed from Salinger's side of the desk.

The trouble with the Bay of Pigs, however, is not, as Salinger seems to think, that the press printed too much in advance, but that it didn't print enough to force the Government to abort that foolish undertaking. Arthur Sylvester's "right to lie" statement, says Salinger, was "unfortunate" only as to timing, yet he produces no evidence that the press upset any essential Administration move conducted in secrecy.

Salinger rightly says that news management was a spurious issue, but he makes no bones that his chief objective, in working for both JFK and LBJ, was to make the boss look as good as possible.

Salinger's thesis is that "there must be some dialogue on how a democracy operates in the present gray areas of world politics" and he is unhappy that the



Salinger with Kennedy

press won't sit still for a set of rules to cover such muddy affairs as the war in Vietnam. Yet he acknowledges that JFK did indeed try to get a New York Times correspondent recalled from there.

Salinger ends with a plea for a new round-table discussion, but if anything is predictable it is that it won't produce results. As Salinger himself concedes, there is a "fundamental chasm" between the interests of the press and those of the Government, short of formal wartime, and the struggle between President and press is "irreconcilable" in an open society.

Salinger deserves credit for much that he did in the press field: the Kennedy interview by Khrushchev's son-in-law and the effort to swap TV interviews with the Soviet leader, especially, and for his role in making the White House staff more available than it had been in years.

His enthusiasm for JFK is total; that for LBJ comes out close to minimal despite an effort to be polite. He notes that President Johnson refused to see Theodore H. White for the writing of "The Making of the President 1964" because the chief executive felt White had "done a job on me" in 1960.

Maybe it wasn't Camelot to Pierre but, as he says, "none of us will have a better job as long as he lives." The book is thus, in sum, an admiring story of the Kennedy years, told with humor and anecdote, a worthwhile addition to the memorabilia of those short but fascinating thousand days.