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The Kennedy Legacy As Thriller

On Instructions of My Government by Pierre Salinger

(Doubleday; \$6.95)

If Ian Fleming had written this novel, his readers might have noted the low level of sex life and the high level of political savvy in it, but have been otherwise unsurprised; another day, another nuclear-warhead melodrama. Since Pierre Salinger wrote it there is reason to read it not as melodrama but as a showing of how White House people think. My guess is that the proper way to read *On Instructions of My Government* is as both; it is an ex-presidential Press Secretary's idea of what a thoughtful novel is, which is melodrama.

As melodrama it keeps looking like life, life as lived and dreamed in our country's highest governmental places. The prime source of the book is not Ian Fleming but the Cuban missile crisis; Salinger moves Robert Kennedy's book about that crisis, *Thirteen Days*, up to 1976, replaces Cuba with a South American republic named Santa Clara, and puts Red China rather than the Soviet Union in the role of secret planter of intercontinental missiles within range of our cities. The model is therefore government crisis-life as lived by the Kennedys, whose tragic attachment to melodrama still haunts us; but the model is of course not merely historic. The possibility of another missile crisis is always present, so Salinger may reasonably fantasize another crisis and run it through again. The only catch is that looking at the crisis as a future possibility, rather than a current or historical fact, gives one time to reflect, to imagine other possibilities or at least other thoughts, conversations and actions than those Salinger gives us - to imagine in other words a more spacious mental world at the White House in crisis-time than the Ian Fleming sort of thing. Salinger's assorted tough political pragmatists - some smart, some stupid - are the kind who may, in the best James Bond tradition, outsmart the Red Chinese, but never understand them or have other than

Fu-Manchu encounters with them. And no matter how hard the reader may try to remind himself that Salinger's characters are fictional, the old Cuban reality, with its cast, moves in.

How does one talk to the enemy? In the Salinger book one moves from grand platitude to small talk - that is, from benign nonsense about the ultimate destinies of nations to talk about tennis - and never approaches the necessary intimacy where one mind impinges on the other, where the general and particular, public and private, meet. There is no significant private life and thought in *On Instructions of My Government*; the novel is efficient, sticks to business, never moves beyond the conditions of melodrama - which is fine except for the nagging, unliterary questions: was it (is it) like that at the White House? did (does) James Bond rule there?

It is wholly appropriate that a White House press agent's vision of our country shows the country's future inexorably molded by an unfortunate news-break (the incumbent liberal President is overheard playing politics with the nuclear shebang, with the result that he loses the election to a Goldwater type). It is also appropriate that the press agent, since he is a Democrat, make his melodrama Democratic in its politics, and have the good guys favor foreign aid to progressive regimes abroad, while the bad guys itch to back fascist generals and drop the Bomb. It is even appropriate that this press agent find villainy in the Press in the form of a conservative TV journalist (what would Spiro say?). Yet behind these conventional assumptions there remains the emptiness of melodrama itself, of minds quick on the draw but glued forever to their chosen righteousness. This is the James Bond heritage, and it emerges constantly even in dialogue that is obviously close to the Cuban business Salinger lived

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characteristic snippet of businesslike, crisis-conversation that could well have appeared, but for necessary changes in detail, in Robert Kennedy's *Thirteen Days*:

"The great danger," the President continued, "is that they might actually believe we would launch a preventive attack."

"There's always that risk," said Trask. "But I wouldn't read too much into their redeployments. I think they're just as much a propaganda response as this first broadcast."

"I don't know that I agree," said Adams. "This is the first time they've had to face joint American-Soviet action. We're pushing them very hard. And we have to measure the

deterrent effect of what we're doing against the possibility that they believe we do intend to attack."

"If they do go off the deep end," said Rand, "we're ready for it."

His words hung in the air ominously.

"No," said the President. "We took the hard line because we had no choice and I wouldn't countermand a single order I've given. But we're not going to push the Chinese into a corner where they think - even wrongly - that the only way out is war. We have to leave them an option, a very clear option, short of that."

The attractions of John and Robert Kennedy to youth and intellect have long been part of the Kennedy mythology, and to the degree that Salinger moves within the Kennedy orbit and has been himself an active, high-level Democrat-politico, we may reasonably give his thoughts, even if planted in a thriller, some nonthriller attention. Yet if we do so now, after our Vietnam bust, we are apt to be struck by the poverty of imaginative political thought to be found behind the Kennedy philosophy of international relations, both as that philosophy was originally revealed in the affairs with Cuba and elsewhere, and as it is now suggested in Salinger's reconstruction.

One may wonder idly how well John Kennedy's reputation would have survived Vietnam and the Sixties if he had continued to uphold the Cold-War assumptions that underlay his Cuban de-

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