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On Instructions Of My Government

By Pierre Salinger.

408 pp. New York:

Doubleday & Co. \$6.95.

By FLETCHER KNEBEL

Pierre Salinger—who, as press secretary to President Kennedy played an inside observer's role in the 1962 Cuban missile crisis—has written a tense, inside-outside novel about a similar confrontation of great powers over an installation of missile launching pads in the symbolic year 1976.

This time, America's foe is Communist China, which tries to sneak ICBM's into a small South American nation aboard two whaling ships. This time, the Soviet Union emerges as our wary ally. This time, the pawn is fictional Santa Clara, an impoverished copper country that appears to lie near or within Peru or Chile.

Fletcher Knebel's books include "Vanished," and "Night of Camp David."

"... a downhill country. Its rivers, ditches and revolutions all ran from the mountains to the sea." The world, of course, goes to the brink. Whether it plunges over or pulls up short in the twilight of holocaust should remain a question sealed in the covenant between reviewer and writer. If you like novels whose characters play out noble or repugnant public roles—without such common joys and tribulations as copulation, impacted wisdom teeth, children, parents, dead ignition switches or those spells of brooding over the infinite immensity of the universe and its specks of human energy—you'll salivate over this one.

The prose races, taut and lean, honed on journalism and critical dilemmas in high places. Suspense beckons as the clock strikes midnight and the plot deftly rounds sharp corners. Almost all systems go. Salinger's one leaky system involves a clutch of self-exiled Mafia godfathers, who become enmeshed in the conspiracy

gears and who can be extricated only by last-second slayings.

Salinger is at his best when he takes us inside his outside novel. We may never see one of the heroes in bed with his wife's sister or fumbling for tranquilizers; we do see him hunched over the hot line to Moscow, clattering to crucial meetings in helicopters, grimly attentive to the electronic maps in the White House situation room, reacting to still more bad news on the security telephone-scramblers. The good, rich air of authenticity is unpolluted. Fleets sail on precise orders. Diplomats double-talk. Official statements thunder. Press secretaries lie by omission. Jumbo jets hurtle presidential candidates through the heavens. Politicians connive, cables and wires carry top secret traffic, and Latin guerrillas stalk stony mountain trails.

Salinger also has a worthy message: our policy in Latin America abets rather than thwarts Communist take-overs, because we spend our tax money to arm local oppressors instead of striving to ameliorate mass poverty in a climate of social justice. As examples of his thesis, we have Cuba and Guatemala. In Cuba, we supported a cynical, plundering Batista—and got a Communist Castro. As for Guatemala, the late Allen

Dulles boasted that his C.I.A. stage-managed a successful revolution there in 1954, unhorsing a leftist president and installing one amenable to the United States; later our puppet canceled the land reforms of his toppled predecessor and 1.5 million acres of newly distributed land were taken back from the peasants. Now gunmen of the right and left are murdering one another in Latin America's most terrifying political slaughter. Some success, C.I.A. ✓

Salinger's novel has two counts against it. First, it seems largely a replay of the 1962 crisis, thus muting the element of surprise. Second is a matter of timing. Salinger gives us a death-lock encounter with Communist China at the very time we're experiencing a thaw. The book, of course, was written months before Mao Tse-tung mailed out his ping pong invitations. For that, perhaps, his friends can murmur only, "Unlucky Pierre."

A footnote on conflict of interest. Since I also commit political novels, my views on a rival should be weighed with caution, not to say suspicion. Blame it on the editors. If they ask General Motors to assess the new product line of Chrysler, should G.M. decline? Not if they offer G.M. \$125. Times are tough all over. □

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