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An enticing tale of Washington

VANISHED, by Fletcher Knebel (Doubleday, \$5.95).

By Van Gordon Sauter

A GLANCE at the book shelves would indicate there has developed in recent years a genre of books about contemporary American politics. A glance inside the books would reveal that most of them are painfully mediocre.

But ever since Upton Sinclair's "Lanny Budd" series, authors have been drawing upon the game of politics — and some of its more curious players—to titillate our curiosity about the dilemmas and qualities of those in the seats of power.

FLETCHER KNEBEL has perhaps been the most durable of the writers in this field. For one thing, he is a skilled craftsman. As a Washington correspondent for many years, he knows the subject and can draw from it the ingredients of a good yarn.

His six books (three of them in conjunction with Charles Bailey) have all borne a distinct relationship to what we all read in the newspapers. But he carries us forward by one vital step—into the Oval Room of the White House, into the director's office at the CIA, into the private corporate dining rooms of the lawyers and lobbyists who wield vast secret power.

IN "VANISHED," Mr. Knebel has far outdistanced both Allen Drury and Gore Vidal. The novel ties in a presidential election; a power struggle between the chief executive and the CIA, a super-secret effort to control nuclear power, and the always fascinating stories of those who must deal with the great problems of state.

At times, Mr. Knebel's prose is infuriatingly amateurish. He writes, with an apparent lack



Fletcher Knebel

of embarrassment, such dreadful lines as: "It was one of those fresh, bright days of June that seem as newly scrubbed as a schoolgirl in early morning." Such drivel is redeemed only by the validity of his characters and the true ring of dialogue. And his precise plot easily supports the air of suspense resulting from the disappearance of a key presidential adviser during a period of considerable national unrest.

"Vanished" is hardly good literature. But the "Lanny Budd" business wasn't that memorable either. What Mr. Knebel offers is a story as enticing as the gossip at the National Press Club. After reading him, even today's dispatches from Washington seem bland by comparison.

Van Gordon Sauter is the co-author, with Burleigh Hines, of a forthcoming book about the 1967 Detroit rioting.

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