

Presidential Poker

VANISHED. By Fletcher Knebel. 407 pp. New York: Doubleday, \$5.95.

By DAVID DEMPSEY

A FORMER Washington, D. C. newspaper correspondent with the Cowles Publications, Fletcher Knebel has made a name for himself as a novelist of Presidents. Gore Vidal, as we know, is indisputably the playwright of Presidents, although his latest novel ("Washington, D. C.") is about Senators; whereas Allen Drury, who cut his fictional teeth on Congress, now heads up the novelists' bureau at the United Nations. Each of these men, in his own way, can be counted on to give readers of popular fiction an apocalyptic glimpse into the political future, to confirm the public's largely cynical attitude toward politicians, and to expose the processes of democratic government as being both potentially conspiratorial and entertaining, although fictional accounts are not always as entertaining as the real article. (What novelist, for example, could invent Senator Dirksen?)

In its modern form, the novel of political intrigue dates to Upton Sinclair's "Lanny Budd" series, in which actual crises and living persons are scram-

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bled with imaginary characters to achieve the *détentes* that elude our statesmen. Sinclair belonged to the "millennial" school of politics. Knebel, who has used the genre as a warning siren, is known as a "conspiratorial" novelist—and novelist is not too complimentary a term for someone who, for all his far-fetched plotting and counterplotting, his prophetic dabbling with the future, always operates within the limits of the possible.

In "Seven Days in May" (written with Charles B. Bailey), a fascist-like conspiracy within the Army almost topples the Government. "Night at Camp David" explores the problem of a President's breakdown and the vulnerability of our democratic institutions in the subsequent struggle for power. Now, however, Knebel emerges as a full blown "millennialist." "Vanished" is a trumpet blast of good news that should reassure everyone who fears for the future of man. Interestingly enough, this too is achieved through a conspiracy.

"Vanished" is by all odds the best thing that Knebel has written—the blurb adjectives apply here quite easily. The style is clean and literate; the characters solidly conceived and convincingly drawn. Basically a suspense novel, it overcomes a rather shaky premise—the bizarre disappearance of three men who play important roles in science and government—to put the reader on a manhunt, and in the thick of a mystery, that is heightened right up to the moment of discovery.

There is no violence, no sex to speak of, no pornography, no gods from the machine, no hare-brained adventures—in short, no 007's to jerk us into disbelief. Knebel operates, as I have suggested, strictly within the ground rules of the possible; his expertise in government, military intelligence and political know-how is lively and wide-ranging; and his story—in the light of what we have learned from the Bay of Pigs to the fiasco of the C.I.A.—



Fletcher Knebel.

plausible enough to be convincing.

This is one of the dubious benefits of the age of espionage and distrust to which the author addresses himself. The market for his kind of novel of intrigue is expanding, not because it provides "escape," but because, on the contrary, it conveys some threats to our national life that are all too real. To describe the plot is unfair, but it can be revealed, in the words of the publisher, that "three prominent men along the eastern seaboard, a lawyer, a physicist, a mathematician, all acquaintances who had conferred frequently, disappear from their homes within ten days. All fly by staggered routes to South Atlantic seaports."

Why they vanished, where they turn up, and how the mystery is related to President Paul Roudebush's political survival, as well as the ultimate survival of mankind, is the game the author plays with his readers. No one is going to name the game literature, but it is craftsmanship of the highest order. In the end, Project Alpha—the code name of the mystery—succeeds, a millennial enterprise on the President's part which is pure idealism, conspiratorially arrived at; otherwise, one realizes, there would be no novel. But one also suspects that, without a "conspiracy of the good," there will be no millennium.