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TV: Inside a Celluloid Washington, Cliches Intact

By JOHN J. O'CONNOR

What can you say about a four-hour movie that should have lived, if at all, for about 90 minutes? Well, to begin with, you can say that the film was made for television as a "first-time-on-any-screen" motion picture event. It wasn't the first movie to

be shown in two parts in prime time on separate evenings. It wasn't even the first motion picture made specifically for television. But it probably was the first custom-made specimen to cost about \$2-million.

Presented Monday and yesterday by the National Broad-

casting Company, "Vanished" featured a large cast of "names" — would-be names, former names and one or two real names. An adaptation of Fletcher Knebel's 1968 novel, the plot brought any viewer willing to suspend every last shred of disbelief inside official Washington. There, ensconced in a clever montage of on-location and reasonable-facsimile shots, heavy matters clanked about the office of the President (Richard Widmark).

The body of a Chinese sailor is washed up, mysteriously, on an American shore. The President's closest adviser and friend (Arthur Hill) disappears, mysteriously, while playing golf at Burning Tree. The adviser, whose wife (Eleanor Parker) has a drinking problem, turns out to have been meeting, mysteriously, with another gentleman every Wednesday evening for more than a year. An election is coming up and an opposition Senator (Robert Young), every inch the slithering Kentucky Colonel, starts dropping hints, not so mysteriously, about a "lavender and lace" scandal.

Crisis. Hippies, who evidently will demonstrate about anything, make a nuisance of themselves shouting outside the White House. TV newsman Chet Huntley is at his most casually ominous in keeping the public informed, even maintaining his composure as a guest seers gazes into the news camera and confides: "I see no sexuality. I see red, the color of blood."

Well, as Betty White puts

it partly, coining a phrase, speculation is rife. And at the center of the rife-ness stands the President's handsome bachelor Press Secretary (James Farentino), juggling a curiously ideological romance with his pretty secretary and an understandable demand for information from the Washington press corps. It's always something like "Joe Alsop's office calling," and always the call is ignored. Get thee behind me, credibility gap.

What with the ensuing disappearance of some top scientists, the implications of Soviet and Red Chinese involvement, the refusal of the President to comment on anything, the crisis thickens and, oddly enough, the plot thins. Though, perhaps, it wouldn't seem too odd to the student of TV soap opera. Each two-hour part of "Vanished" was dotted with six separate commercial slots, and that leaves room for a good deal of padding leading up to and away from the sponsor messages.

So the entrances and exits, the hellos and good-bys are interminable. So the scene "bridges" carry local-color touches that collapse into the ludicrous—announcement to end one scene with the President: "The Pakistanis are in the Cabinet Room, Mr. President." Pretty secretary returning to fold of boss, picks up phone suggestively, and purrs: "Tom Wicker on 2." Camera discovers an intelligence chief on phone, and he observes: "You don't have to tell me how hard it is to get trained personnel." Presumably, he isn't talking to Tom Wicker on 2.

And in the end? President Widmark, who for the most part has been looking solemn and asking everyone to keep the faith, calls a press conference and, in a dazzling burst of Good Think, unravels all the mysteries. It's really not worth going in to, except possibly to note that his close adviser was taking Chinese lessons on those Wednesday evenings.

It could have been worse. He could have been watching some silly motion picture event on television.