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Executive Suite (M-G-M) is loaded with enough big names to tear the marquee off the average movie house. William Holden, June Allyson, Barbara Stanwyck, Fredric March, Walter Pidgeon, Shelley Winters, Paul Douglas, Louis Calhern, Dean Jagger and Nina Foch—all appear in this adaptation of Cameron Hawley's bestselling novel about big businessmen locked in a grim struggle for power. And when all the stars together set up a fiercely competitive twinkle for attention, the moviegoer is apt to feel somewhat like a switchboard operator with ten calls blinking at once.

But even though the stars do not always stay in their courses, Author Hawley's story is kept surprisingly well in line by Scenarist Ernest Lehman and Producer John Houseman. The movie follows the novel's basic notions: that Babbitt is not really so dead as Sinclair Lewis buried him; that commerce can be a vital and fascinating form of human activity; that businessmen are not villains and boobs (as they were in the "progressive" literature of the '20s and '30s) or necessarily resigned commuters (as they usually are in the works of J. P. Marquand), but diverse human beings who fight diverse, exciting battles, some of them dirty and some of them noble.

The story begins with the death of Avery Bullard, a big Pennsylvania furniture manufacturer, and turns on the problem of who will get his job. Five vice-presidents circle each other like pinstriped tigers on the broadloom of the executive suite. Comptroller Fredric March quickly moves to the inside track. An office politician of the know-the-other-fellow's-weakness variety, he buys the vote of Board Member Louis Calhern with the promise of a stock gift, lines up Paul Douglas (Sales) by showing how much he knows about something he shouldn't (Shelley Winters). And to sew everything up tight, March sweet-talks a proxy out of Barbara Stanwyck, who loved the dead man, although he was always too busy with the furniture to pay much attention to her.

Meanwhile, the opposition, although

dead-set against March, can't get together on a candidate. Walter Pidgeon, the senior in point of service, doesn't feel up to the job, thinks William Holden (Design and Development) should have it. But Dean Jagger (Production), who dislikes Holden, won't stand still for such a deal, and Holden himself, arm-tugged by his wife (June Allyson), is not sure that he wants any part of it.

The tension is brilliantly built by all hands. The script maintains the mood with a cold, mechanical finesse: each new scene thrusts out the one before with a brisk push-pull, click-click. Yet curiously, only one actor really seems to get his blood up in the contest. Holden, Douglas and Calhern are fine in their characterizations of U.S. businessmen. But as the "night-school C.P.A." who tries to charm, scheme, jostle and bluff his way to power, Fredric March is magnificent.

Actor March's performance is so convincing, in fact, that by contrast the upbeat ending seems a little silly. At the big board meeting, Holden hits the sawdust trail for bigger and better production, full employment, community service, and some sort of universal good. Exciting as the scene is, it leaves the spectator wondering whether business really needs such frenzied philosophic justification. The trouble with some of the boys in this executive suite may be that they secretly agree with Sinclair Lewis. They still feel vaguely ashamed of making money, and perhaps they try to salve their consciences by giving God a seat on the board of directors.