

# History

## *HAIL TO THE CHIEF: The Making and Unmaking of American Presidents.*

By Robert Dallek. Hyperion. 207 pp.  
\$22.95

This is a useful book. It is also an unsatisfying one.

It is useful because Dallek, a historian at the University of California at Los Angeles, has devised a sensible set of criteria for why some presidents succeed and others do not.

Similar exercises abound, from political scientist Clinton Rossiter's list of seven "qualities that a man must have or cultivate if he is to be president," to veteran journalist Hedley Donovan's list of 32 "attributes of presidential leadership." Still, there is an admirable compactness in Dallek's combination of his elements into five characteristics: vision, pragmatism, consensus, charisma, and credibility.

Taking the characteristics in turn, Dallek lists the presidents who had each and those who did not. Vision belonged to George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Theodore and Franklin Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, Lyndon Johnson, and Ronald Reagan. At the opposite extreme are those presidents with "no clear idea of where they wished to steer the ship of state": William Howard Taft, Warren Harding, Jimmy Carter, George Bush, and Bill Clinton.

But vision alone does not make for a successful presidency, and Dallek knows this. Indeed, the value of his approach lies in his subtle appreciation of how the five attributes interact to produce a successful, or unsuccessful, administration.

Pragmatism might be considered the antithesis of vision. Yet, as Dallek notes, "political accomplishments often required flexibility of means to reach desirable ends." On the one hand, Jefferson managed to overcome his constitutional scruples and buy Louisiana. Lincoln delayed emancipation because it might have precipitated Kentucky's secession. Wilson, on the other hand, failed the pragmatism test when he refused to compromise with the Senate and thereby lost the League of Nations treaty.

If Dallek's criteria are so sensibly handled, then why is his book so unsatisfying?

Dallek's considerable talent, as demon-

strated in his major books about FDR and LBJ, is for archival research and the layering of many details into a rich tableau. But this slim volume is a series of short takes: Jefferson's deliberations on Louisiana occupy a mere two pages, Lincoln's decision to free the slaves only three. And Dallek is not adept at the essay form. His language lacks elegance, though occasionally he enlivens the book with borrowings from such stylists as Russell Baker and Garry Wills.

Ultimately the reader is left with a collection of assertions rather than a narrative supporting an argument. The problem, apparently, is that *Hail to the Chief* was written as the "prospectus" for a television documentary. In fact, it would make an excellent TV program, with the texture provided by footage of FDR accepting the 1932 Democratic nomination, for example, or Nixon bidding farewell to his staff. As a book, however, it is bare-bones historiography: a thoughtful arrangement of material, perhaps, but still a bit like a professor's notes for an upper-level course on the American presidency.

—Stephen Hess

## *THE UNKNOWN LENIN: From the Secret Archive.*

Edited by Richard Pipes with the assistance of David Brandenberger. Yale Univ. Press. 256 pp. \$27.50

A specter is haunting Soviet historiography. Following the recent opening of the long-sealed Lenin archive in Russia, the secular deity of the Soviet state is losing what little luster he recently possessed. According to Pipes, emeritus professor of Russian history at Harvard University, these documents "cast fresh light on Lenin's motives, attitudes, and expectations, as well as on the personal rela-

