

# 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-



tionships among Communist leaders . . . minus the retoucher's distortions."

But Pipes puts it mildly. The unretouched picture is raw indeed.

These documents establish Lenin's direct connection with—in fact, his eager stewardship of—the terror that directly followed the Russian Revolution. Instead of a stern idealist shedding blood for the future of humanity, the author of these letters and memoranda comes off as a vindictive, bloody-minded zealot who took grisly glee in bribing, manipulating, and intimidating his erstwhile comrades. Unwelcome advice was scorned—"We always manage to get shit for experts." And dissent was diagnosed as insanity long before Stalin's forced institutionalization of dissidents became an international scandal.

Toward his perceived enemies, Lenin was simply brutal. Ordering the confiscation of the property of the Orthodox Church, he ordered all priests who resisted shot—"the more the better." With regard to the kulaks, or propertied peasants, his instructions were clear: "Hang (hang without fail, so the people see) no fewer than one hundred."

*The Unknown Lenin* does not pretend to be definitive. Pipes is careful to say that he has not "seen all or even the bulk of previously unpublished Lenin documents." Perhaps future selections will mitigate the harshness of this initial glimpse. But it seems unlikely. The opening of this archive has summoned Lenin's ghost and left it to unsettle a new generation of historians.

—*Jessica Sebeok*

### **THE OPENING OF THE AMERICAN MIND:**

#### ***Canons, Culture, and History.***

By Lawrence W. Levine. Beacon. 240 pp. \$20

One of America's most accomplished historians, Levine has made a distinguished career out of championing subjects—the world of William Jennings Bryan, the culture and consciousness of black slaves, the vitality of popular culture—long ignored or disdained by traditional historians. In his new book, Levine provides a spirited apologia for that career, and a celebratory defense of the modern university—accompanied by a fierce polemic against those, ranging from Allan Bloom to C. Vann Woodward, who (it seems) would like nothing better than to consign such subjects to the outermost darkness.

The results are, to say the least, uneven. As a brief for the opening of historical and literary studies to nontraditional topics and perspectives, based upon an appreciation of the fluidity and dynamism of American society, the book is convincing. Though much of what is offered here is a more-than-twice-told tale, it is good to be reminded of how unendurably narrow and stupefying most "higher education" has been throughout American history—and how long it took for American authors, even such now-canonical writers as Herman Melville and Walt Whitman, to be taken seriously within the Anglophile precincts of the academy. Measured against such a cramped standard, and considering the limited range of human types permitted to attend college in those days, today's universities look very attractive indeed.

In addition, Levine correctly points out that many of the contemporary critics of higher education have themselves been guilty of sloppy research and excessive rhetoric. He is right that the accusation of "political correctness" is used far too promiscuously and that talented students have always found—and will always find—ways to work around the peeves and prejudices of their teachers. Moreover, it is surely a salutary thing to have the experience of those who are not members of "hegemonic elites" represented in the historical record of a nation as diverse as this one.

But Levine repeatedly goes overboard in fulminating against critics and traditionalists. In the end, he damages his own credibility by disparaging such people as mere case studies of what Richard Hofstadter once called "the paranoid style," rather than acknowledging the elements in their critique that are accurate. For example, he dismisses as perfervid fantasy the notion that the historical professoriate is dominated by the radical Left. He argues that the fragmenting of the subject of history into countless multiculturalist pieces is something that had to happen, because historical writing always "reflects reality"—in this case, "the *Zeitgeist*" of a changing America. But if these assertions are true, then why has the growing political and social conservatism of the American people, consistently reflected in electoral results and polling data for nearly three decades, been so unreflected in the academy, where the opinion trends have