

business leaders—and more politicians—had such heart.

PAUL HEWITT is the executive director of the National Taxpayers Union Foundation.

Good Presidents, Bad Presidents

by Norman Ornstein

WHAT MAKES A GOOD PRESIDENT good, and a lousy president lousy? Bill Clinton has certainly been thinking about this question as he contemplates a second term. In an interview with *The Washington Post*, he talked about the fact that most great presidents, like Lincoln, Wilson, and FDR, developed their reputations conquering crises like great wars or depressions; only a few, like Teddy Roosevelt, managed to show greatness without that kind of challenge.

As a student of history, Clinton will welcome historian Robert Dallek's new book, which surveys all 41 American presidents to examine the qualities that

made and unmade their reputations. Dallek identifies five characteristics common to successful presidents—vision, pragmatism, consensus, charisma, and trust—and looks at each one in terms of presidents who have had them and presidents who have not. While many of the superstars in presidential history earned their acclaim for their responses to crises, he says, "Some of our most successful presidents were those who converted relatively lesser dangers into political capital. Moreover, they did not allow themselves to be overwhelmed by unanticipated problems, but rather seized upon them as opportunities to lead the nation through a time of troubles." As examples, he cites Jefferson and the Louisiana Purchase, Andrew Jackson's role in democratizing American politics, and JFK's handling of the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Dallek argues that virtually every successful president has not only articulated a larger vision, but coupled it with

pragmatism—an understanding that political accomplishments often require flexible means. "Pragmatists without vision are seen as opportunists," he writes. "Pragmatists with vision are seen as statesmen, or at the very least, good politicians." Yet even successful presidents with vision and pragmatism have made huge mistakes—Wilson with the Treaty of Versailles, FDR with court-packing, Truman with the Korean War.

Dallek also makes the case that successful presidents don't necessarily need huge

mandates to start, but must understand where political consensus is or can be reached, then exploit or create it. Unsuccessful presidents often overstep their mandates. Successful presidents have personalities that either demonstrate charisma or that embody American dreams or currents. He notes that Teddy Roosevelt "made his mark on the White House not simply by turning himself into a celebrity whom millions of Americans admired, but by identifying himself with a progressive and romantic nationalism that promised to bind the country together and make it a force for law and order on the world scene."

Hail to the Chief is solid, well-written popular history. Dallek competently covers the historical waterfront, focusing in greater detail on some of the more celebrated and vilified presidents. His framework is not deeply systematic, but his categories are sensible. The history buff may learn little new about the presidents, but he will profit from Dallek's approach, and perhaps have fun trying to read the book from Bill Clinton's perspective. Are there lessons here from which this president can profit? If he makes it to a second term and never faces the equivalent of a depression or a Civil War, can he find the means to craft a memorable presidency? Can he find enough of a vision, or create enough of an atmosphere of trust, to go down in history alongside his two Roosevelt role models? *Hail to the Chief* may raise these questions without providing any neat answers, but it is worth reading nonetheless.

NORMAN ORNSTEIN is a resident fellow at the American Enterprise Institute.

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

By Robert Dallek
Hyperion, \$22.95

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Julian L. Simon

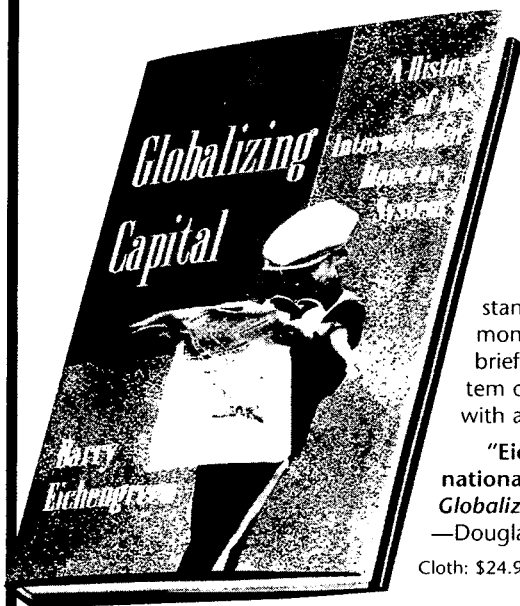
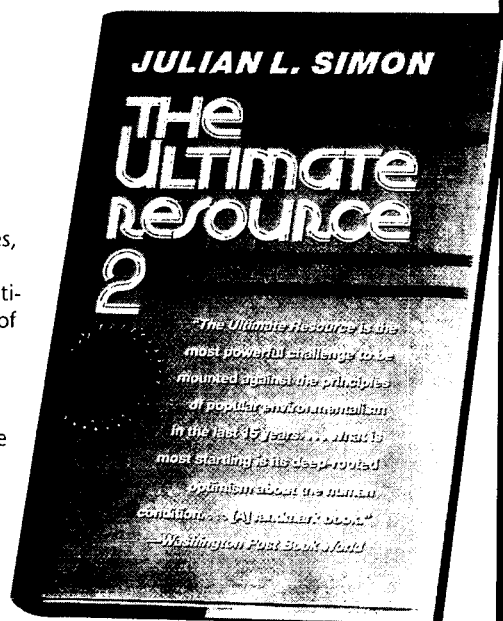
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