

American Caesars – Lives of the US Presidents – from Franklin D Roosevelt
to George W Bush by Nigel Hamilton.
Bodley Head 2010.

In the dim and distant past while studying Ancient Greek and Roman History for 'A' level, I hugely enjoyed reading Suetonius' The Twelve Caesars, not just for the incredible insight it gave into the illustrious and infamous men under scrutiny, but also for the salacious details, which were immensely appealing to a teenager in the 1970s!

Using the template provided by the Roman historian, Nigel Hamilton, eminent biographer of Presidents Kennedy and Clinton, has produced a collection of chapters concerning the last 12 American heads of state, covering possibly the most interesting period in modern history.

Each vignette follows the same pattern: the name, dates, and number of the respective presidency are given on the title page, together with a photographic representation of both sides of their presidential medal. Under the name, aping Suetonius, Hamilton adds a qualifying phrase, i.e., Later deified, Respected, Mocked, but later respected, or Later reviled. Each chapter is divided into three parts: The Road to the White House, The Presidency, and Private Life.

Hamilton is a fine historian, and an excellent writer, and his précis of the twelve presidencies is succinct, informative and highly entertaining. With some of his subjects, like FDR, JFK and Harry Truman, he has the benefit of the decades that have passed since their terms in office to look at their life and careers in a measured and open way, with others, such as Clinton and George W, the perspective of time is not an option. Nevertheless, Nigel Hamilton maintains his high standards throughout, and each chapter is full of intriguing views and not a little scandal.

Some, like Lyndon Johnson, emerge as pretty repellent human beings, others, like Kennedy, as victims of circumstance, yet still others, like Roosevelt and Truman, are revealed as truly great leaders, not just in the context of the United States but of the world as a whole.

American Caesars is a highly enjoyable read, and will enthral students of American politics, fans of biography, and those who like a touch of scandal, in equal measure.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh