‘Caesars’ sizes up power of the presidency

By Glenn C. Altschuler  |  September 8, 2010

‘It won’t be long until I can sit back and study the picture and tell ’em what is to be done in each department,’’ Harry Truman wrote to his wife soon after he became president. “When things come to that stage, there’ll be no more to running this job than there was to running Jackson County [Missouri] and not any more worry.’’

He was wrong, of course. Dead wrong, as he discovered while deciding whether to drop atomic bombs on Japan, break the Soviet blockade of Berlin, endorse the Marshall Plan, send American troops to Korea, fire General Douglas MacArthur, fight Senator Joseph McCarthy, and seize America’s steel mills.

If anything, the job has become even tougher since Truman left office, as the United States exercised its responsibilities — and flexed its muscles — first as a superpower, then as the superpower. In “American Caesars,’’ Nigel Hamilton, the biographer of Field Marshall Bernard Montgomery, John F. Kennedy, and Bill Clinton, evaluates how effectively US presidents have used their power since the onset of World War II. His model is “The Twelve Caesars’’ by Suetonius, a portrait gallery of Rome’s rulers during its greatest century and a half, from 49 B.C. to A.D. 96, a volume, he writes in the preface, remarkable for its “frank, often salacious accounts.’’

Hamilton acknowledges that he uses the terms Caesar, imperial, and empire “somewhat loosely.’’ Alas, that’s an understatement. Hamilton equates presidents and emperors. He doesn’t define — or assess — “the imperial presidency’’ in the United States. He doesn’t ask the $64,000 question: Did the power of the executive branch grow until Richard Nixon resigned — and then contract until George W. Bush (and Dick Cheney) asserted the “unitary executive theory of the presidency’’? And his evaluations of the last 12 tenants of the White House, which range from the conventional to the sensational, and, all too often, accentuate the sexual, don’t provide much guidance about governance.

Hamilton believes that Franklin Roosevelt, Truman, Dwight Eisenhower, and John Kennedy were “great Caesars.’’ With the exception of Kennedy, he may well be right. But in small and large ways his treatment of these presidents does not engender confidence in his judgment. Hamilton barely notices FDR’s inconsistencies — and deviousness — in conducting foreign policy. He gives Truman (who for some reason he describes as a “Cincinnatus’’) a free pass for building a Cold War military-industrial complex. And he devotes one sentence to Eisenhower’s authorization of CIA-sponsored coups in Iran and Guatemala, calling them a “conservative break on younger imperialistic hotheads.’’

Kennedy’s death, Hamilton argues, marked the end of the exercise of power tempered by
wisdom. To prove his point, he goes over the top. Nixon, he writes, “committed genocide in Southeast Asia and provoked virtual civil war at home.’’ The Camp David agreement brokered by the “charismatic’’ Jimmy Carter, who “posed as a democrat, a common man, while often acting as a control freak,” was an “unmitigated disaster.’’ Ronald Reagan’s presidency was shaped by a “failure ever to think through the consequences of his policies.’’ And the “impetuous, impulsive, shallow, and insecure’’ George W. Bush, along with his “mentally unbalanced’’ vice president, turned America into “a failed state,’’ in which “Orwell’s nightmare of ‘Nineteen Eighty-Four’ had come true.’’

Chosen to lead the United States at the height of its power during what Henry Luce called the “American Century,’’ our last 12 presidents, Hamilton reminds us, “surely deserve to be seen . . . unflinchingly and yet uncharitably.’’ And, one might add, they also deserve to be portrayed accurately and judiciously. For only then will we be able to understand the international implications of “the imperial presidency.’’

Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University.