

H-Diplo *Roundtables*

Eric Alterman, *When Presidents Lie: A History of Official Deception and Its Consequences* (New York: Viking, 2005).

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Eric Alterman understands that we often can't see the history for the monographs. *When Presidents Lie* takes up the theme of presidential misrepresentation and traces it from FDR's treatment of what happened at Yalta through to what he calls the "Post-Truth Presidency" of George W. Bush. Did American presidents get into the habit of lying because of mistrust of the public? It would seem so. Yet in each instance, the consequences of the original lie only increased the mistrust the public had for the presidency. And with public mistrust came the need for still more lies or exaggerations to satisfy an increasingly skeptical audience.

If we center all our attention on the White House, however, what role does that leave for Congress? From the time of World War II, and Roosevelt's delicate maneuvers before Pearl Harbor, it could be argued that Congress desired no role—so long as things went well, whatever the president did or did not do. And that raises the question that Nicholas Katzenbach tried to answer as the Vietnam War turned sour. Asked what authority the president had to send half a million troops to Southeast Asia, he answered that in the modern age, the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution was a functional equivalent of a declaration of war as required by the Constitution.

Before turning to the specifics of Alterman's argument, it might be worthwhile to spend a few moments with the use of speeches and resolutions as presidential "tools" for managing the nation's foreign policy. What Katzenbach was really saying was that war was too serious a matter to be left to the Constitution and Congressional debate in the atomic age. That point was established at the outset of the Cold War. When Harry S. Truman went before Congress in 1947 to ask for military aid to Greece and Turkey, he exaggerated the nature of the challenge (as he had been told to do) in order to bring about an open-ended resolution that would allow him to carry out a general program to project American power into the Mediterranean area. Several senators well understood the dilemma as they debated his speech and request in secret executive session. If they did not respond to the request, the exaggerations could become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Presidential foreign policymaking from that time to the present has followed that pattern: The White House takes an initiative, and then challenges Congress to deny him. And Congress, whether under Democrats or Republicans makes no difference, responds out of fear of encouraging the enemy of the day. The perfect recent example came in the last "Great" debate before March, 2003. It occurred in September 2002, when President Bush challenged Congress to give him the authority to wage peace. He told the press at that time that he did not believe senators and representatives would want to face voters in the coming elections having denied him the power to force Saddam Hussein to come clean and rid the world of his WMD.

All sorts of euphemisms have been developed as adjunct aids to this powerful tool to increase presidential power. One thinks of Korea and “police action,” the “Eisenhower Doctrine,” “The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution,” and all that has happened since the first Gulf War. In this last instance, however, the politics of terror at home has supplemented and, to a certain extent, exceeded the impact on specific foreign policy decisions. The connections were always there but now the interleaving is tighter than ever. The ability to alter the national mood by simply changing the color code on supposed terror alerts provided the president with a great advantage in dealing with Congress or the media.

But it was FDR who committed the original sin—with the best of intentions—when he returned home from the Yalta Conference to tell Congress that the agreements made there constituted an end to all the old political expedients that had proved so futile and had produced the wars of the first half of the twentieth century. His object was to avoid an early debate over what he hoped were temporary arrangements in Eastern Europe, and necessary steps to secure Russian entrance into the Pacific War and support the shaky Chinese government. Roosevelt’s aides knew that he had taken a great gamble, and when it all came apart with the onset of the Cold War, Harry S. Truman was left with no option but to say that the Soviets had broken all the agreements reached at the Crimea Conference and then at Potsdam. In this way the original sin was passed down from president to president. It did not matter that, especially in the case of the Yalta Far Eastern agreements, the Russians were on solid ground as they moved to secure their position. When they were published by Moscow the argument shifted to treason or—as Democrats began to concede—Roosevelt’s supposed fading health, with Truman all the while intensifying the rhetoric of Soviet perfidy to shield his administration from the fallout.

Alterman argues that the decision to fight in Korea stemmed, at least in part, out of a concern that Republican charges of a sell-out at Yalta left him no alternative. It was a symbolic war, he continues, fought as Acheson said, against the “second team, whereas the real enemy is the Soviet Union.” And when the time came, the temptation to go above the 38th Parallel was irresistible for the same reason. “Liberation” had replaced “Containment” (already a dirty word) before John Foster Dulles wrote it into the 1952 Republican platform, ironically, even as it courted disaster in a ground war with Communist China. Korea then begat Vietnam, etc.

One could argue, alternatively, that the symbolism of the Korean War had more to do with the Chinese Revolution and the Russian atomic bomb, than with the need to continue the Great Yalta Debate. It is certainly true that the Eisenhower Administration made it a high order of business to accelerate the publication of the “Yalta Papers” in the increasingly lagging *Foreign Relations* series. And there were a corresponding flurry of Congressional resolutions regarding the captive nations to suggest the Republicans were determined to undo the Roosevelt “treason.” While the publication of the Yalta volume helped historians, it did little to make the Republican case for a “sell-out,” but that hardly mattered. The Yalta Papers, moreover, left out important details of FDR’s post conference visit to the Middle East to attempt personal diplomacy with Ib’n Saud, and his efforts to broker a solution of the already burning Palestine/Israel issue. In today’s world, those omissions loom more important than the Far Eastern agreements in terms of presidential diplomacy.

How far did the shadow of Yalta extend? Alterman seems to suggest that Kennedy's misrepresentation of the trade-off that occurred during the Cuban Missile Crisis could also have its origins in the persistent Democratic fear of seeming weak. Roosevelt, he writes, portrayed his "settlement" as Wilsonian idealism, while Kennedy dressed his "partial compromise in the cloth of unmitigated victory." FDR's death left his critics free to damn him, while JFK's assassination left Johnson with the burden of tending to the eternal flame he saw through Oval Office windows. "Both presidents imprisoned their successors and their nation's political culture in a self-reinforcing psychological labyrinth of dangerous delusion."

LBJ's use of the Tonkin Gulf Resolution was originally intended to drive Barry Goldwater's campaign completely off the political spectrum by crowding him to the very end. There is little reason to believe that Johnson expected to send half a million soldiers to Vietnam, but the logic of the original commitment, and his own use of the Resolution to challenge later critics played out in tragic fashion. The United States found itself fighting a war that dragged on for eleven years.

The underlying theme of *When President's Lie* would seem to be the dominance of domestic politics in foreign policy. It is an effectively argued case. But when one gets to the Reagan Administration and the Iran-Contra scandal, the dominance of politics is replaced with another powerful force that crosses over politics-as-usual and that we are only beginning to understand. Closely connected to the debates during the Reagan years are the Washington "think-tanks" and their products both in theoretical output and officials that rise to power in key government positions. Whatever one concludes about the reasons presidents lie since the end of the Cold War, the Yalta curse no longer would seem very relevant.

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