

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

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Eric Alterman's book is a unique excursion into the history of a subject so obvious that it is a wonder no one else has written about it so explicitly. Alterman takes us inside the Oval Office and shows us moments that range from amusing to frightening, and sometimes both. (I never knew, for example, that Al Haig once vowed, regarding Cuba, to "turn that [expletive] island into a parking lot" if given permission, and I laughed only for a moment before I realized that the Secretary of State was suggesting starting World War III.) (p. 263)

As a work of history, *When Presidents Lie* is comprehensively sourced, particularly the sections on the actions of the presidents themselves, and it presents a trove of interesting material. It is not hard to believe Alterman when he says that it was a project he nurtured for many years, but I will leave it to professional presidential historians to render their judgment of Alterman's historiography.

As a work of political analysis, however, *When Presidents Lie* has significant problems. The documentation of important instances of presidential mendacity is extensive, but Alterman's interpretations of their eventual impact range from questionable to fantastic. In part, this is because the book reads as though it were written deductively, with the central premise—that bad things happen when presidents lie—decided at the outset and evidence then marshaled to support it, with the result that on occasion significant leaps of faith must be taken to sustain the argument.

But before discussing the study's analytical shortcomings, it is important to emphasize what's right about *When Presidents Lie*. First, Alterman has reminded us that a scholarly historical investigation into an important issue need not be sterile or painfully written. Alterman lays his cards on the table at the beginning of the study with a flatly normative statement about presidential deception, a welcome change from turgid, pseudo-scientific studies that too often seek the pretense of an elusive objectivity rather than simply engaging the reader in a reasoned political discussion. Alterman's tone, throughout, rarely falls into partisan haranguing and never into arid theorizing.

Another strength of the study is that it is structured with attention to intellectual rigor, as it tries to establish a generalizable proposition (that presidential lying invariably makes bad situations worse) by giving us a systematic examination across several cases. I hope that Alterman will not take offense at the suggestion that *When Presidents Lie* could as easily be considered a work of

political science as history, as Alterman fleshes out four reasonably comparable case studies. This is in keeping with his stated intention at the outset not to lapse into moralism—a promise he does not always keep—and instead to base his argument purely on questions of utility.

Finally, there is the richness of the book itself. There is much to admire in a work of scholarship that not only seeks to set the record of the Cuban missile crisis straight, but manages to take an entertaining detour that debunks the account of the crisis in a recent popular movie along the way. Some of Alterman's asides and digressions wander a bit--did we really need, for example, one more frustrated retelling of the saga of Alger Hiss?—but in the main, they add a level of detail and cultural texture that makes the book an education in much more than just the history of presidential misdeeds.

Alterman's four cases were chosen because he sees large (and negative) foreign policy implications associated with each instance of presidential lying. FDR's misrepresentation of Yalta fueled—caused even—the Cold War; JFK's lies about the Turkey-for-Cuba missile trade intensified the Cold War and goaded American policymakers to greater risks later; LBJ's lies about Tonkin Gulf dragged the nation into Vietnam; and Ronald Reagan's lies about Central America caused misery in the region and a created class of mandarins at home who to this day feel that lying is their prerogative.

There are flaws in the analysis of all four of these, some more serious than others, but first it is worth considering the two most famous lying presidents Alterman specifically excludes from his study: Richard Nixon and Bill Clinton. In short, Alterman excludes the former from consideration as a case study more in neurosis than presidential misdirection, and the latter because he only lied about a private matter. But Alterman's explanation does not convince, since each case had significant foreign policy repercussions: the destruction of the Nixon presidency during Watergate encouraged both the Soviets and the North Vietnamese to test the United States at crucial moments, and it could be argued that Watergate played a significant role in the eventual fall of Saigon. In Clinton's case, the president's call for strong action against Saddam Hussein in 1998—a point to which we will return later—was lost amid the clamor of impeachment. (There is also a double standard here where Clinton is concerned; Alterman will criticize later presidents for eroding public trust in the presidency, but he is notably incurious about the spectacle of the Nation's chief law enforcement officer lying under oath.) Their absence from the study is significant and noticeable. Still, it makes sense to head off a certain amount of overly emotional partisan bickering and historical score settling on both sides by removing two of our most controversial presidents from the analysis. (If only Alterman had resisted those same impulses in his final chapter regarding George W. Bush.)

In all of Alterman's cases, he establishes the central fact that presidents and their men were telling lies. But did their lies lead to the outcomes Alterman claims for them? This is the central claim of the book and the test his cases must pass. Here, I will concentrate primarily on Alterman's discussion of Yalta and the Cuban missile crisis.

FDR AND YALTA

Readers may wonder just what Franklin Roosevelt “lied” about with regard to the Yalta accords, and they will not find a particularly clear answer in this chapter. Alterman’s narrative seems to adhere pretty much to what many of FDR’s critics charged for some time: that FDR went to Yalta a tired and very sick man, made what he thought was the best deal he could get from Stalin, and ended up selling out Poland and the rest of Eastern Europe to Communist tyranny. But Alterman’s twist on the story is to argue that Roosevelt should have simply leveled with the American people, educating them into the realities of the post-war distribution of power, and thereby forcing them to realize that there was little that could have been done to stop the Soviets from moving westward.

Had FDR not attempted to convince America that Yalta represented a new era of East-West amity, Alterman argues, the Americans would not have reacted with such shock to what they should have recognized as permissible Soviet actions under the accords. Rather than overreacting to some imaginary Soviet betrayal and falling into the muck of anti-communist finger-pointing at home, America could have saved its emotional and political capital for the struggle against the **real** crimes of the Soviet regime. “Had FDR and, later, Harry Truman been willing to entrust their public with the truth about Yalta, U.S. leaders could have chosen to rally the nation and its allies in opposition to the humanitarian horrors of Stalinism without resorting to dishonest claims and demonstrably false accusations.” (p. 89)

Unfortunately, accepting Alterman’s analysis requires, first and foremost, accepting outdated revisionist views of the early Cold War. (It also paradoxically requires the reader to believe that lying about Yalta started the Cold War but that “rallying opposition to the horrors of Stalinism,” whatever that means, would not somehow have led to the same outcome.) “Americans still lack a convincing explanation for the cause of the Cold War,” Alterman writes, but it might be more accurate to say that some Americans lack a convincing explanation because they flatly refuse to accept the realities that have been right in front of them since the early 1990s. While Alterman acknowledges the views of people like John Gaddis, he immediately breezes past the enormous implications of the work of Gaddis and others by resorting to critics who charge that Gaddis’s explanation of the Cold War “resonates with...triumphalism.” (p. 28) Even if Gaddis is guilty of this tiresome charge (and I continue to contend that the word has little real meaning) it does not then follow that arguments made by him and others are not true, but rather only that they are made in a way that irritates revisionists.

But Alterman does not really engage those arguments; rather, he mentions them to dismiss them so that he can return to the revisionist narrative that is crucial to his point. Stalin, in this telling, was a pragmatist. The Soviet Union intended no further conflict, and wanted only to consolidate its gains. American policies, driven by hysterical bouts of anti-Communism that were fueled by FDR’s lies, baffled and threatened the Soviets, who responded predictably.

Does Alterman’s claim bear the weight he places on it? Let us, for the moment, grant him all of the major points of his historical argument: that Yalta was about the best deal that could be done, that FDR knew it, that he lied about it, and that this lie increased American indignation when Stalin helped himself to the pieces of the European pie that FDR and Churchill had cut and laid on his plate. Does that mean that this putative campaign of lies was the proximate cause of the Cold War?

Alterman's account of Soviet-American relations in this period is so elliptical that it is difficult to know where to begin. Did Stalin really desire or expect protracted cooperation with the West? The first serious breaches between the USSR and its allies come not in 1946, but as early as 1943, once the Battle of Stalingrad was won. Soviet intransigence grew as victory approached, including the shameful episode in which the Soviets prevented any Western aid being given to the Warsaw Poles during the uprising against the Nazis in 1944. Alterman not only brushes aside increasingly aggressive Soviet moves after the war, but even presents them as evidence of good behavior: "...the Soviets did not interfere with Churchill's repression of the Greek Communists, nor push their military advantage when confronted in Iran. They stayed out of Finland entirely and even withdrew Bulgarian troops from Thrace and Macedonia"--this last as though Bulgarian troops had any right to stay in liberated Greece in the first place. (p. 56) It is, to say the least, an odd interpretation of the period to cite the Soviet unwillingness to trigger a military confrontation with the rest of the world over Iran as evidence of a willingness to cooperate with the West.

Some of Alterman's sources on these points are dated; while he cites an excellent book by Russian authors Vladimir Zubok and Konstantin Pleshakov, much more data has come out since its publication a decade ago. But even here, his choice of evidence is selective: he cites Zubok and Pleshakov as noting that "the Cold War was not [Stalin's] choice or his brain-child." (p. 45) But that citation needs context: Zubok and Pleshakov, in the same book, note that diplomacy was part of Soviet strategy, and that Stalin "believed that skillful manipulation of the rules of the old world would someday allow him to sweep that world completely away--with its capitalist states and bourgeois civilization."¹ It is especially surprising that Alterman, while reporting the comments of Soviet deputy foreign minister Maxim Litvinov at one point, does not then report his most famous comment. When asked by Averell Harriman in 1945 what the West could do to satisfy Stalin, Litvinov replied: "Nothing." A year later, when asked what would happen if the West simply gave in and granted all of Moscow's demands, Litvinov answered that it would simply lead to "the next series of demands."²

But most startling in this chapter is the treatment of the Korean War--or more accurately, its non-treatment. (The Berlin Blockade is curiously absent, as well, among other Stalinist misdeeds.) Stalin's adventurism in Korea in particular is difficult to square with Alterman's image of the prudent statesman. While Alterman cannot be faulted for not mastering the literature on the Soviet side of the Cold War, it is nonetheless problematic that his accounts of important moments read much like the proverbial one-sided chess game.

In fairness, Alterman does not try to whitewash Stalin or his regime; his point is the relatively unremarkable observation that the Kremlin was not full of wild-eyed revolutionaries. But to say that Stalin wasn't crazy isn't the same thing as saying he wasn't aggressive, opportunistic, and on occasion, ideologically blinkered--which goes much farther toward explaining both why the

¹ Vladimir Zubok and Konstantin Pleshakov, *Inside the Kremlin's Cold War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1996), p. 18.

² Quoted in Robert Conquest, *Reflections on a Ravaged Century* (New York: Norton, 2000), p. 154.

Cold War took place and why it took the shape it did than anything to do with FDR's crafty misrepresentations of what happened at Yalta.

This is too large a subject to discuss comprehensively here, but to take one salient example, if Yalta were all that important to Stalin, why was he so willing to abandon it? Stalin told Mao Zedong in early 1950 that he thought previous arrangements concerning Port Arthur were not "equitable," and would be adjusted accordingly in a new Sino-Soviet understanding. Mao then pointed out with alarm to do so would go "against the decisions of the Yalta Conference!?" [sic] "True," Stalin answered. "It does--and to hell with it! Once we have taken up the position that treaties must be changed, we must go all the way. It is true that for us this entails certain inconveniences, and we will have to struggle with the Americans. But we are already reconciled to that."³

Alterman might respond that five years of American bad faith regarding Yalta may have led Stalin to be frustrated enough to abandon the accords as well. The only problem with such an explanation is that Stalin himself made no such claim. Instead, he simply pointed out to Mao that the previous arrangements had been made during the war, based on different expectations of the situation in China at the time. Stalin was soon to allow war in Asia not because FDR had lied to the American people about Yalta, but because the hardening of the Western alliance against him in Europe--something he did not fully comprehend due to his ideological preconceptions--blunted his ambitions there and pushed him to look for another theater to recapture the strategic initiative in a Cold War that was of his own making, whether he intended it or not. Stalin's Soviet biographer, Dmitri Volkogonov, confirms the ideological romanticism described by Gaddis and others, and notes that Stalin's "entire life was war: war with his own people, war with imperialism," and this as much as anything led him to conflict with the West and war in Korea.⁴

"By the early 1950s," Alterman tells us, "Roosevelt's 'Spirit of Yalta' had virtually no defenders of any consequence in the American Establishment." (p. 79) But is this surprising? Again, in trying too hard to draw the narrow connection between supposed presidential lying and disastrous foreign policy consequences, Alterman too quickly leaves behind the international context. By the time the "Spirit of Yalta" had dissipated, the world had seen a communist victory in Beijing, an atomic blast in the Soviet heartland (the fruit of intensive spying against America that predated the Gospel of Yalta), violent purges in Eastern Europe, a civil war in Greece, and Soviet-supported tanks rolling across the Korean peninsula in unbridled aggression. Why would Alterman think anyone should have been foolish enough, politically or diplomatically, to try to resurrect the false spirit of a bad deal?

One nagging issue in all this is whether FDR "lied" to the American people or anyone else. Perhaps I am a child of what Alterman in a later chapter will call the "post-truth" era of politics,

³ "Stalin's Conversations With Chinese Leaders," *Cold War International History Bulletin* 6-7, Winter 1995/1996, p. 8.

⁴ "Stalin and the Korean War," unpublished manuscript, The Dmitrii A. Volkogonov Papers, Library of Congress, Washington DC, box 12, folder 7, p. 3.

but there seems to me to be a world of difference between what we might call “spin” today and an intentional campaign of dedicated falsehoods. Even Alterman admits that by 1946 “the terms of the ultimate deal had become so confused that neither side really understood them, and hence, each felt free to violate them at will as it simultaneously accused the other side of doing.” (p. 56) (Interestingly, the Novikov telegram of 1946 doesn’t raise Yalta specifically, but only notes that Roosevelt’s previous line of cooperation had been abandoned by the bumpkin Truman and the nefarious James Byrnes.) While this might make FDR guilty of signing off on a nebulous and poorly-negotiated agreement, does his attempt to put the best face on it make him a liar?

It is far too much to lay the Cold War itself at FDR’s feet. Even the Soviets themselves later admitted how much of the world’s suspicion and enmity that Stalin and his heirs brought upon themselves. To focus on the supposed missteps of an America blundering its way into confrontation with the Soviet Union in hypocritical outrage over Yalta is an approach that simply refuses—like so much other revisionist history—to account for the USSR the West actually had to deal with, and not the one that revisionists think could have been created if Moscow’s every demand were met and every misdeed overlooked.

JFK AND CUBA

As the book moves to Cuba, Alterman’s excursion into counterfactual history becomes so strained that on occasion he risks proving the opposite of the point he wants to make.

The chapter begins with an entertaining retelling of how the Cuba “myth” became so entrenched in the American psyche, a reminder of just how deferential the American media once were to the presidency. But it is hardly a revelation that the media of the 1960s--always willing co-conspirators in protecting John F. Kennedy’s unbecoming secrets--were eager to report the outcome of the crisis as a victory for a swaggering young American president and his tough line against the Commies.

Alterman need not have gone to the trouble to dethrone this orthodoxy. The stature of the Cuban myth has been shrinking for a long time. Most people, and certainly, most students of international relations, now know that there was a secret trade (their Cuban missiles for our Jupiters in Turkey) that was not allowed to look like a trade. Alterman’s argues that the secrecy around the trade--or, more to the point, the lies told by the Kennedy inner circle about it--had several baleful effects: It humiliated Khrushchev and led to his fall, which in turn led to a huge Soviet military buildup. This turned up the heat in the Cold War, especially since gullible Americans, and most American policymakers, took away the lesson that the way to deal with the enemy is to go toe-to-toe with the Kremlin and fight rather than negotiate.

The Russians would not have been compelled to accept a public humiliation--unearned, at that, since they made a better bargain than they could admit--and Khrushchev would likely never have been removed from power. The United States would have had a much more energetic partner in the search for a peaceful modus vivendi in the Cold War, and the Soviets might have been less eager to build up their military machine and nuclear arsenal to guarantee they were never so embarrassed again. (p. 158)

If only the President had swallowed his pride and saved the Premier! But this represents a fundamental misunderstanding of why Khrushchev put Soviet missiles into Cuba, and what happened after he took them out. Alterman's arguments go beyond speculation and are wishful thinking to the point of fantasy.

First, despite the richness of so much of his material, Alterman repeatedly sidesteps important moments needed to establish the context of his case. Cuba was not the first Soviet test of American resolve, nor was it the first moment of Soviet-American military confrontation, even during the Kennedy administration. It was only a year earlier the Americans refused to accept the authority of the East German police to stop Allied vehicles, a move that brought Soviet and U.S. tanks barrel to barrel at Checkpoint Charlie in the third major crisis over Berlin since 1947 and the second since Khrushchev came to power. Cuba did not take place in a vacuum, and it is no surprise that Americans of any political stripe were not of a mind to tolerate the proximity of nuclear missiles controlled by the shoe-banging, haranguing instigator of two potentially deadly European crises and his excitable Cuban client.

Second, it is important to understand the Soviet context of Khrushchev's provocations in both Berlin and Cuba. Khrushchev did indeed seek to shrink the Soviet defense budget, but he intended to do so by trading men for missiles. The Berlin crisis of 1961 undermined this plan. (The crisis itself was part of a struggle among Politburo factions bent on using security issues as leverage against each other, a story too detailed to go into here.) Khrushchev was looking for strategic advantage on the cheap, as he was trying to make the case--in a kind of late conversion to a Soviet version of Massive Retaliation--that nuclear arms could intimidate the Americans far better than large (and expensive) standing armies in Europe. To this end, Khrushchev promulgated a new military doctrine that any future war with the West would immediately go thermonuclear, and thus there was no reason to expend precious rubles on costly things like armies and navies.

This infuriated the military, who were less concerned about whether Cuba was a provocative or dangerous act--the General Staff, we now know, was eager and willing to run crazy risks all its own--but more that Khrushchev was determined to build a "hollow" force, overly reliant on nuclear forces and bereft of the ability to project Soviet power.⁵ Khrushchev, in other words, was in hot water with the Soviet military (and for other reasons, with a good number of the Party apparatus) whether the Cuban scheme succeeded or not.

From the perspective of the larger case Alterman wishes to make, the central question is whether JFK should have lied about the secret deal. But all options short of unconditional withdrawal of the missiles carried terrible consequences, ranging from accepting the end of the Monroe Doctrine while staring down the barrel of a Soviet nuclear threat, to watching NATO collapse as a missile trade confirms Europe's worst fears about American unwillingness to endanger North

⁵ Anastas Mikoian claims in his memoirs that Minister of Defense Malinovskii put forward a plan for menacing Berlin in retaliation for American moves in Vietnam and the Caribbean, a proposal that he claims "staggered" him. Anastas Mikoian, *Tak bylo* (Moscow: Vagrius, 1999), p. 619.

America. Even Alterman wisely concedes that the arguments for secrecy were strong: if JFK could get the missiles out and appear to lose nothing in return, why accept less?

But again, as with Yalta, let us grant Alterman's main arguments. Let us assume that Kennedy let the deal go public, and that Khrushchev did not suffer a "humiliation." Would the outcome have been as Alterman posits?

Alterman's notion that a public missile deal would have saved Khrushchev is completely unsupportable. He neglects the degree to which Khrushchev was already in trouble in Moscow. Although Alterman wants to draw a straight line from Cuba to Khrushchev's fall, it is important to remember that Khrushchev survived the Cuban debacle, and it would be two more years before he would be removed on a variety of charges of imprudence and incompetence. To be sure, Cuba was an important part of the bill of goods against him, but it was only one of many. (Radical de-Stalinization was not exactly considered a heroic move by many of his colleagues, and it was one of the first things reversed under the new management.) Khrushchev's ouster was due to a whole slew of failures and blunders, most of them having to do with domestic issues such as the Virgin Lands, the bifurcation of the Party, and many other initiatives that fell under the accusation of "hare-brained scheming." Even the hardening of relations with the West was not directly tied to Cuba; Khrushchev's own colleagues blamed the frostiness of Soviet-American relations not on Cuba, but on his hotheaded reaction to the U-2 shootdown, which in the words of Khrushchev confidant Anastas Mikoian helped to "bury détente" and prolong excessive Soviet defense spending.⁶

The idea that Kennedy could have saved Khrushchev and turned him into some sort of partner for peace in the Cold War by just letting up on the macho heroics merely replaces one ridiculous myth with another. Khrushchev was doomed in any case. And Soviet-American relations actually warmed somewhat after the trip to the brink; it was only after Cuba that the Hot Line was established and a test ban treaty signed--which actually suggests that the resolution of the crisis had the opposite affect Alterman claims. The massive Soviet military buildup was going to take place one way or another, not least because the Soviets did a major review of their own defense posture two years after Khrushchev was gone and concluded that they, like the Americans, needed warfighting options that did not include the immediate destruction of life as we know it. (The nuclear doctrine was not just rhetoric: all Soviet war games in Europe in this period began with simulated nuclear first strikes on Warsaw Pact forces, a Khrushchevian hangover that persisted until changes were made in 1967.) Khrushchev would still have been deposed, the Soviets would have built up their military, and the Cold War would have continued apace, not least because the Soviets intended to prosecute it vigorously.

Alterman also argues that Kennedy's lies about Cuba laid the foundations for the "legacy of skepticism between the governing and governed in America that endures today." (p. 135) One might be tempted to think that Richard Nixon's attempts to shred the Constitution ten years later probably had more to do with that legacy of distrust. But Alterman is so determined to prove the inevitably negative consequences of presidential lying that he is left making these kinds of overblown and ahistorical charges. He even resorts to the claim that Kennedy's lies, enshrined

⁶ Mikoian, p. 605.

in Graham Allison's classic *Essence of Decision*, polluted the education of generations of future political scientist (as if there isn't enough blame for **that** to go around).

Kennedy's lies--or prudent secrecy, depending on one's point of view--reversed a dangerous moment of Soviet adventurism and forced Moscow to realize that competition with the United States would be an expensive proposition that could not be solved with nuclear sabers rattled from Caribbean shores. In the end, Alterman complains that none of the men around Kennedy "who perpetrated these deceptions has ever expressed any public remorse about the role he played in misleading the world about the settlement of the missile crisis." (p. 121) To this I would add: and with good reason. As for whether Kennedy's stance on Cuba emboldened LBJ to go into Vietnam, I can only agree with Theodore Sorenson's answer when Alterman asked him that question: "I doubt it." (p. 376n)

LBJ AND REAGAN

If Alterman's case against JFK is the weakest part of his study, his dissection of Lyndon Johnson's mendacity about Vietnam is easily the strongest--although going after LBJ for political manipulation and mendacity is the historical equivalent of shooting fish in a barrel. Still, Alterman's readers will find the most common ground in this chapter.

But first, it must be noted that even here, Alterman for some reason digresses into a needlessly controversial counterfactual argument, raising the question of what Kennedy would have done had he lived. "Of course we will never know, but the indications are that he would, at least, have avoided many of the fateful political mistakes that Lyndon Johnson made in Vietnam--the mistakes that forced him to pile one lie on top of another in order to cover up his initial deception." (p. 183)

Not only is this irrelevant to the issue at hand, but it is a strange argument to make after Alterman himself has spent an entire previous chapter ensuring that his readers know what mean-spirited and facile liars Jack and Bobby Kennedy were in the first place. On the very next page Alterman tells us that LBJ made some of his mistakes because he was relying "heavily on the advice of the Kennedy brain trust, particularly McNamara." (p. 184) Alterman does not explain why JFK wouldn't have listened to his own brain trust, nor why a man so concerned about his own machismo that he crowed about how he "cut [Khrushchev's] balls off," wouldn't have felt tested yet again by Communist aggression in Vietnam. (p. 92) What any of that has to do with the issue of Johnson's lying, other than as a detour into liberal "what-would-Jack-have-done" nostalgia, is unclear.

Otherwise, Johnson's story plays out as the tragedy it was, and both advocates and opponents of the war in Vietnam might find common ground on the issue of Johnson's dishonesty. "When Lyndon Johnson finally decided that he had no choice but to fight in Vietnam," Alterman writes, "he never found within himself the courage to be forthright with the country about his decision." (p. 183) A poignant and simple description of the tragedy of America's entry into the Vietnam war, and one that explains much of the disaster that followed.

Alterman's chapter on Reagan and the Iran-Contra scandal actually spends relatively less time on Iran-Contra itself than might be expected. It is also the least well-written, not least because Alterman gives in to the temptation to take a few cheap shots about Reagan's eventual diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease. (By now one would hope that the idea of Reagan as a disconnected boob would have been laid to rest; whether one agrees with his policies or not, they were, in the main, very much his.) Alterman's personal antipathy toward many of the figures involved, who mostly are still living and engaged in public life, is barely disguised, and his normally more balanced appraisal of the motives of various public figures fails him (particularly the actions of special prosecutor Lawrence Walsh). In this chapter more than any other, Alterman abandons his promise to eschew moralism, perhaps because the events were within his lifetime and his knowledge of them more personal.

Like his chapter on LBJ, there are aspects of this part of the book with which even the most conservative reader will agree. The United States in Central America sided with the sons of bitches who were **our** sons of bitches, and the bad taste lingers. And Alterman, in fairness, rightly notes the dilemma the administration faced in the cowardly position of Congress, which did not want to support a violent military regime in El Salvador but yet "was unwilling to accept responsibility for a policy that could lead to the fall of the Salvadorean government to the Marxist rebels." (p. 253) Alterman also captures the spirit of the times, noting that "many Americans found themselves feeling helpless and angry in the face of Soviet military adventurism coupled with a veritable explosion of anti-American nationalism throughout the Third World." (p. 274)

But here Alterman presents opposing views out of context as though they are self-evidently wrong. Noting that American officials claimed that Central America was the victim of "indirect armed aggression by Communist powers through Cuba," he complains that reporters "accepted these conclusions without question." (p. 263) But is the charge **true**? Alterman doesn't contest it, but simply excoriates the gullibility of reporters for believing it. Likewise Alterman claims that it was "McCarthyist" for Jeane Kirkpatrick to lash out at House Democrats and claim that some of them would like to see the Marxists win in Central America...but was there any reason for Kirkpatrick to make the charge? Alterman treats us to line after line uttered by the Presidents's men (and women), and few by their opponents, thus depriving readers of the context and flavor of the debate between right and left at the time.

Again, let us stipulate that Alterman is right on a major point: it is not the unarguable right of the President of the United States to run secret wars in foreign nations and then lie to **everyone** about them, including the members of Congress who must constitutionally exercise their duty of oversight and budgetary approval. Iran-Contra led the United States to the verge of a constitutional crisis, averted mostly through the sheer fecklessness of a Congress so intent on hanging Reagan that it bumbled into a dead end of its own making.

But what was the lasting damage, if any, from Iran-Contra? Alterman's main argument seems to be that the primary damage done by Iran-Contra is that everyone involved in it got away with it—thus enshrining the principle that lying in the service of national security is not only necessary, but will be excused if discovered. Few, if any, of the principals involved suffered any

lasting damage. Oliver North walked away a hero, and as Alterman notes, many others in the scandal returned in later years to top jobs in Washington.

But once again Alterman overplays a strong hand: in the aftermath, he writes, the “principle of covert action itself was never seriously questioned. The only issue that concerned the [Tower] committee, therefore, was whether this particular covert action might have gone a bit too far, and who might be held responsible for it.” (p. 289) This represents a sudden shift in emphasis. Is this chapter a polemic against covert action? Or is it about engaging in covert action and then short-circuiting the institutions that are meant to oversee such actions? Is Alterman really arguing that there are no instances in which the government—that is, the executive branch in cooperation and consultation with the legislative branch—might best serve the interests of the Nation by flatly lying in public?

This is not a hypothetical question. One example that comes to mind is covert U.S. aid to Polish dissidents during the Cold War. “Neither confirm nor deny” was not an explanation that would fly, since too often (at least in my short experience in Washington) it is an answer that many journalists take to mean “yes,” and to admit that America was aiding the Poles was to court a crisis with the Soviet Union. So why not feign ignorance at the money and material (like copiers) appearing in Poland, deny the operation publicly, and let history judge whether the American people, and the world, needed to know about it at the time, or whether it was sufficient only that their elected representatives knew the truth and controlled the purse strings?

One interesting story that Alterman tells along the way in this chapter is how new institutions on the American right rose up to supplant those of the previous establishment. My only complaint is that the account is one-sided; Alterman makes it seem as though some sort of right-wing cabal emerged fueled only by spite and anger, and not by the very real failures of American liberalism, particularly in foreign affairs, in the previous decade or so. But Alterman succinctly captures the seismic movement that shifted the intellectual center of gravity from the left to the right in the 1980s, and it is important part not only of Reagan’s story but of American foreign policy since his presidency.

BUSH AND THE POST-TRUTH PRESIDENCY

Alterman’s concluding chapter abandons his promise to avoid moralizing, and in contrast to the rest of the book, it is a relatively undisciplined affair in which the author reveals the bitterness about American foreign policy that led him, one assumes, to finally write the book after so many years.

“[B]y the time of the Iran-Contra scandal, “Alterman complains, “...lying to the public had become an entirely mundane matter, one that could easily be justified on behalf of a larger cause.” (p. 295) But when, one wonders, was this idyllic time for which Alterman seems to be so nostalgic, when foreign policy was conducted with complete transparency, no covert action, and full compliance with the Constitution? When Mr. Jefferson shelled the Barbary Pirates? When TR demanded “Perdicaris alive or Raisuli dead,” an incident whose true details were kept secret for decades? Without doubt, the Cold War and the creation of the national security state raised

secrecy to totemistic heights, but was there ever an age in which the often unpalatable business of diplomacy and the use of force was conducted to Alterman's standards?

Alterman makes the disturbing charge--disturbing because there is at least some truth in it--that the American people don't want to know all the sordid realities of foreign affairs. But for some reason, he links this sensible observation with a defense of Jimmy Carter that shows a true tone-deafness to American politics, at least where Carter is concerned. He contrasts continuing admiration (well, at least in some quarters) for Henry Kissinger with Carter's longstanding unpopularity, and suggests that Carter's lack of "cachet" might reflect "an unspoken bias that too much truth telling is not considered an entirely admirable quality in a politician by many Americans." (p. 295) Well, maybe. Or, on the other hand, it might reflect the fact that Carter was an abysmal president who left America's economy and foreign policy in a shambles when he was finally booted from office, and who continues to be a meddling gadfly who doesn't seem to realize he is no longer president. (It was, after all, a member of the Clinton cabinet and not some member of the conservative establishment who referred to Carter as a "treasonous prick" for interfering in Clinton's negotiations with the North Koreans.)⁷ This kind of sweeping statement, in which Alterman expresses the wince-inducing self-pity found too often among some on the left, undermines the more direct and generally more balanced analysis found in earlier chapters.

Alterman then predictably goes after George W. Bush for lying about whether there were weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, attempting in some 10 pages to make a case about a period in world history whose final chapters have not been written. Historians both of war and the presidency will continue to write entire books on the toppling of Saddam as the materials become available--just as Alterman has done with the four cases he studies, none of which are closer than two decades in hindsight. This abbreviated attempt to shoehorn the Iraq war into the larger narrative about presidential lying, after several deeply-sourced chapters, reads like a slapdash attempt to capitalize on current controversies. There is no point in engaging Alterman on the issue of whether Bush "lied;" Al Gore flatly claimed that Saddam had secret stockpiles of chemical and biological weapons just months before the invasion, and even Bill Clinton has defended Bush's belief that there were WMD in Iraq. If Alterman thinks it was a bald lie to assert that Saddam still had WMD, he can take it up with the former president and his veep, but it is not a debate to be rehashed here.

WHY DO THEY DO IT?

So why do presidents lie? Alterman's study ends with this blunt question, and his answer begins on a philosophical note. Well, actually, it begins on a bizarre note, as Alterman considers the tired charge that the current government has fallen into the hands of the disciples of Leo Strauss. Fortunately, he finds that argument unconvincing (which leads to the question of why he raised it at all), and instead lays blame on "political convenience." Here, he makes a sophisticated and persuasive historical argument that Americans, convinced of their country's special place in the world, are not swayed by realist considerations and indeed even find them immoral. And so presidents--who must live in the world as it is--are caught in a dilemma: "American presidents

⁷ Quoted in Chris Suellentrop, "He would have gotten away with it if it weren't for those meddling voters," *Slate*, May 17, 2002.

have no choice but to practice the diplomacy of great power politics, but American citizens have rarely if ever been asked to understand the world in those terms.” (p. 307)

The pressure to lie is thus generated by the need to act like Bismarck while pretending to be George Washington. It is easier to say that peace and cooperation have been achieved (rather than to explain that Stalin had to be given what he wanted), that American masculine swagger carried the day against the Communist threat (rather than to admit that a deal had to be made with Khrushchev), that our ships had been attacked in Asia and that we “seek no wider war,” (rather than to defend the idea that Vietnam was a strategic counterthrust against communism), and that Central American rebels were freedom fighters of the same pedigree as Paul Revere (rather than simply identify them as our preferred agents in a war against a Soviet client state).

This is seductive and incisive reasoning. But it is also too cynical and one-sided. It downplays the fact that American presidents and the men and women who serve them can truly believe the things they say (in Reagan’s case, Alterman accepts this, but mostly, it seems, to establish Reagan’s general diminished capacity). Likewise, his demand that presidents “tell the truth” reflects a petulant insistence that foreign policy actions have only one motivation at a time and that those motivations be only the purest of national or political motives. His advice to future presidents at the end of the book is strikingly simplistic, especially in an age of complicated diplomacy: “Protect genuine secrets by refusing to answer certain questions, certainly. Put the best face on your own actions and those of the politicians you support, of course. Create a zone of privacy for yourself and your family that is declared off limits to all public inquiry. But do not, under any circumstances, lie.” (p. 314)

But what can this mean? Isn’t “putting the best face on your own actions” exactly the kind of thing that Alterman would decry as “lying?” Bill Clinton and a number of prominent Democrats were banging the gong of Saddam Hussein’s WMD threat for years, with Clinton even warning that Saddam might use them against advancing U.S. troops if war were launched in 2003. Were they lying? (And if so, just how did they escape mention in the final chapter of the book?) With the exception of the Cuban missiles and the extraordinary lengths to which the Reagan administration went to cover operations in Central America, much of what Alterman writes about in *When Presidents Lie* could just as easily be construed as spin or manipulation as lying. Alterman’s prescription of “never lie” is the utopian dictum of a direct democracy, but it is far less useful advice to a representative republic—especially one engaged, as Alterman’s presidents were, in a life-and-death struggle with existential threats to that republic.

Still, Alterman weaves a thread that runs through *When Presidents Lie* that even I found disturbing. Whatever his other conclusions, Alterman shows that presidents often lie—or, more charitably, spin facts to their own advantage—**even when they don’t have to**. And here it is easy to agree that they shouldn’t. Men as different as FDR, JFK, LBJ and Reagan all dissemble at various times, when telling the truth would have served them just as well and perhaps even better. Why not just admit that there was no firm agreement on Poland and that the United States and the Soviet Union do not see eye to eye? Why use the Tonkin Gulf attacks as a pretext when so much better evidence of communist aggression in the region was available? Why claim that the Contras were modern day Minutemen when most Americans—who are not nearly as stupid as Alterman depicts them—would have fully understood that sometimes the choice in a foreign war

is the lesser of two evils? (These were, by the way, the same Americans who in an earlier age accepted the necessity of allying with a monster like Stalin to defeat an even greater evil in Hitler.) Only the Cuban situation, pace Alterman, truly mandated a lie for objective political purposes.

In the end, despite the fact that we all know that presidents manipulate the truth, and even outright lie, Eric Alterman has shown us exactly how they do it in a book that is hard to put down and which presents arguments even the strongest proponents of presidential power cannot ignore. Alterman's insistence that presidents always cop to the cherry trees they've felled may not be the best advice in the real world of international politics, and it is, to say the least, arguable whether the consequences of presidential dissembling are as dire as Alterman claims they are. *When Presidents Lie* may not be appropriate for undergraduates or general readers who lack the background to fill in the significant amount of historical context that Alterman too often leaves aside, but for historians, political scientists--and perhaps most importantly, policy specialists--it is a book well worth reading.

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