

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

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It is always a pleasure to read one of historian-journalist Eric Alterman's books. He represents the best of both worlds—solidly-researched history presented in a compelling, fair-minded, and elegant style. It also helps that I generally agree with his political slant. Of course, it does give one pause to see reformed liar-felon John Dean's blurb appearing above the title of the paperback edition of *When Presidents Lie*, but, I guess, who better than a Nixon administration apparatchik to evaluate presidential liars?

Many historians have written about one or another president's lies or deceptions. After all, what president has never deceived the public? But few scholars have devoted so much attention to the consequences of those lies. Alterman's four cases—Roosevelt and Yalta, Kennedy and the Cuban Missile Crisis, Johnson and the Gulf of Tonkin, and Reagan and Iran-Contra—are all infamous cases of presidential deceptions. The problems for me are the difference between deception and lying, as well as how much of what befell the United States in the years after the original lie can be attributed to that transgression.

Alterman uses both terms, "Lie" and "Deception," in his title and subtitle respectively. Each year, when I teach my Vietnam War course, I air the government-made film, *Why Vietnam* narrated by Lyndon Johnson. In attempting to sell his war in 1965, Johnson presented the history of American involvement through the Gulf of Tonkin incident and the months after and explained why he had decided to escalate. My main purpose, aside from introducing vintage Johnson along with useful newsreel footage, is to discuss the propriety of such government propaganda films when the nation is legally at peace and also to evaluate the difference between deception and outright lying. Deception might include the sequence where we see a G.I. training ARVN troops who are described in favorable terms or when the Geneva Accords appear to have sanctioned the permanent division of Vietnam at the 17th parallel. Johnson clearly lies when he suggests that then Prime Minister Diem's fixed 1955 election in South Vietnam was a free election or that the Gulf of Tonkin attack was unprovoked. Invariably, most of my students, without prodding from me, find the deception that I describe more palatable than outright lying. Used to leaders who spin and never quite include all the relevant information in their speeches and press conferences, they reluctantly accept such deception as part of the political game. Alterman, in the end an optimist, hopes for better things from our presidents.

Beginning with Roosevelt at Yalta, and maintaining a distinction between outright lying and not telling the complete and usually far more complicated and politically dangerous truth, Alterman

explores the record of a number of major presidents. Roosevelt did not report to Congress about the Asian agreement, in which Moscow promised to enter the war two to three months after the end of the war with Europe, because he did not want to tip his hand to the Japanese. That makes sense to the present day. As for failing to inform the United States about the three seats granted to the Soviet Union in the United Nations General Assembly, that was a minor matter.

The most important deception for Alterman was FDR's failure to level with the American public about the true nature of the Polish and East European settlements. He contends that by suggesting that a free and independent future was in the cards for the region, he propelled the nation on course for soon concluding that the Russians, and not the United States, had broken the Yalta pledges, made Yalta a dirty word forever in U.S. politics, and was in good measure, responsible for starting the Cold War. These conclusions are overdrawn.

Although Roosevelt knew that he did not get all that he wanted at Yalta, he hoped that the Russians would be happy with independent pro-Soviet governments in Eastern Europe, and perhaps kept happy with the reconstruction loan about which Washington and Moscow had been talking for several years. In the last letter that he wrote on the subject just before he died in April 1945, he was still expressing confidence that things could be worked out with the Soviets, despite the problems that had arisen in February and March. In other words, misguided or not, he still believed that the deal he had made with Stalin would guarantee freedoms to the peoples of Eastern Europe. He may still have thought that Uncle Joe was gettable. Thus, how could Alterman expect him to tell Congress in early February that despite what the Yalta agreements said, he and Churchill had really ceded much of Eastern Europe to Stalin?

But suppose I am wrong and in his heart of hearts Roosevelt knew that whatever the Yalta agreement said, the Soviets would soon dominate the countries the Red Army had liberated from the fascists? What could he say in 1945 to a nation that had been told repeatedly in official and unofficial propaganda that we could get along with Ivan, who, after all, according to Hollywood productions *North Star* and *Song of Russia*, went to church, voted in free elections, loved classical music, and looked like Walter Brennan? Moreover, why start up with the Russians now by denouncing their expansionist program, when there was a chance, through the United Nations, that the only two major powers left in the world could get along and keep the peace? Finally, as Americans were told repeatedly in speeches and on ubiquitous posters, they were fighting to make the world safe for democracy with even the Chinese Nationalists, let alone the Russians, hailed as one of the four freedom-loving allies left standing after the Nazi and Japanese onslaught.

The minute Roosevelt backed away from the rosy gloss he placed on the Yalta pledges, the Republicans would have gone into attack mode, talking about the sellout at Yalta in February 1945 not in the middle of 1946 and for years thereafter. Churchill had no qualms about making his percentage deal in 1944, which would have been politically palatable to many of his worldly constituents, who, compared to their American cousins, had a more cynical view of international politics. Of course, Roosevelt had to deceive the public, or at least not reveal what he knew between the lines about the Yalta pledges, because he had failed to educate them over the previous six years about the way international relations has to be played. But who could have pulled that off, given the nature of Americans' relation to and understanding of international

politics over their long history *of* all too often confusing politically-motivated rhetoric for the reality, as, for example, when they went to war in 1846 and 1898.

Alterman's most provocative argument in the Yalta chapter, and indeed the most provocative argument in his book, is that the Cold War might have been avoided had the true nature *of* Yalta been known and that only when the United States, and not the Soviet Union had not broken the agreements, was Moscow compelled to react defensively. He accepts the recent conclusions *of* Soviet scholars who describe a cautious and weak Stalin, who was not interested in expanding his empire until pressed *by* Washington. This suggests that absent U.S. hostility to the Soviet Union, several *of* the Eastern European countries that had experienced relatively free elections through 1947, would have developed like Finland and that the Captive Nations would never have become such a volatile issue in U.S. politics. Here, ironically, Alterman, like Republicans in the forties and fifties, may be placing too much emphasis on Roosevelt's Yalta arrangements as the major reason for the Cold War or, at least, the *loss* of Eastern Europe.

In his public explanations *of* the settlement *of* the Cuban Missile Crisis, JFK, like FDR, was guilty more *of* deception than outright lying. According to Alterman, when he failed to tell Americans that there was a secret quid pro quo for Khrushchev's removal *of* the missiles from Cuba, he misled them, made the Russian leader appear to be the loser in the diplomatic exchange, which contributed to his firing in 1964, and allegedly emboldened his and LBJ's best and brightest to employ comparable coercive diplomacy in Vietnam.

Again, the problem was the U.S. political system. Kennedy's presidency was failing in the summer *of* 1962 as the Republicans prepared to make gains in the by-election. Senator Kenneth Keating (R-NY) began the assault against the Democrats' weak response to the Soviet missile buildup in Cuba, which followed the previous year's disasters at the Bay of Pigs and at the Berlin Wall. The president and his party needed a victory over communism. The Republicans would have won the political day had JFK explained that he had promised to remove U.S. missiles in Turkey in exchange for the missiles in Cuba. Few American politicians of any stripe would have admitted that it was a fair exchange, even had they known that the Turkish missiles were to be removed anyway. Quite simply, most Americans were convinced that the Russians had no right to implant missiles in their hemisphere. Kennedy could have shown a good deal more courage than profile in coming clean, but he would have been bashed by Republicans and even by some Democrats running for reelection. The problem, as with Roosevelt, was the public's lack of sophistication and the ease with which mindless nationalism and chauvinism could be evoked to JFK's detriment. I realize that this sounds elitist but we have seen it time again, including the election of 2004 when a plurality of people who voted for Bush were certain that Saddam was tied to Al Qaeda and that the military had indeed discovered WMDs.

During a press conference dealing with Laos months earlier, JFK tried to answer a question by explaining the intricacies of the problem--the three-sided contest between Phoumi Nosavan, Souvanna Phouma, and Souphanouvong. He started to fumble over their unfamiliar names and realized that there was little chance that even the journalists would understand what he was talking about.

The more dangerous lie for me, to which Alterman alludes, was the description of the crisis by Kennedy and, especially, McNamara as relating to a military threat when they privately considered it to be primarily an international political threat. They told the nation that the implantation of the missiles in Cuba seriously endangered U.S. national security because it placed the Soviet nuclear arm only 90 miles away from Florida. Then, after using this sensational rationale, they came close to blowing up the world before the other fellow blinked. Kennedy brought the nation to the edge not knowing that some warheads had already been operationalized and that, apparently, Soviet commanders in Cuba had the authority to use them if attacked.

Paradoxically, JFK's deception, which won him a celebrated victory over the Russians, might have enabled him to refrain from escalating in Vietnam after 1964. Had he lived, it would have been easier for him to pull out of Vietnam than it was for LBJ since few Americans could have accused the brave Cold Warrior Democrat who faced down the Kremlin of being soft on communism.

While Alterman correctly accuses Roosevelt and Kennedy primarily of deception, Johnson and Reagan were outright liars. In Johnson's case, his lying involved informing the nation and most of Congress that the attacks in the Gulf of Tonkin were unprovoked. He compounded his lie by not revealing in the days after the August 4 incident that it was highly likely that the second attack had not occurred. In the most general sense, he had not leveled with the American people about how bad things were going, with most military and civilian advisors advocating escalation when politically possible to save South Vietnam from imminent defeat. In fact, a Gulf of Tonkin statement had been drawn up several months earlier to buttress any future measures he had taken as the commander in chief to protect U.S. forces in Vietnam. To borrow from McGeorge Bundy and his analogy about a Pleiku coming along like a streetcar, the Gulf of Tonkin incident was not needed for Johnson to issue a Gulf of Tonkin type of statement. He would have found another incident to employ to present to Congress his call for a formal vote of support for the boys in Vietnam. If that was the case, then the lying surrounding the events off the coast of North Vietnam in August, 1964 becomes less significant. On the other hand, Alterman does suggest that Johnson's reaction to and explanation of the incident helped convince Hanoi that it was futile to try to fashion a compromise political solution for the South before too many North Vietnamese and U.S. troops entered the fray. If Alterman is correct, then he contributes significantly to the debate surrounding Frederik Logevall's arguments concerning the opportunities Johnson missed to end the war during the long 1964.

As in 1962, the election cycle is central to understanding Johnson's response to the crisis, only this time it was the presidential election when, like most Democrats, Johnson feared appearing too weak to defend the nation against communist aggression. The Tonkin Gulf incident was a godsend (although I do not agree with Alterman that it may have even been deliberately provoked by Johnson) since it permitted him to demonstrate how tough he could be, while showing more restraint than his shooting-from-the-lip opponent, Barry Goldwater, would have shown in a similar situation. Again, the election plays a role here with some skeptical Democrats not pushing too hard for information on the incident for fear of hurting Johnson and helping Goldwater, whom many thought would be a reckless president, capable of starting a nuclear war. Certainly that was J. William Fulbright's prime motivation in not investigating publicly what happened in the Gulf of Tonkin. The way he allowed himself to be taken in by Johnson, as

Alterman points out, led the Arkansas senator to soon become the single most important antiwar spokesperson in the Senate.

What would have happened had Johnson told the truth about the incident and refrained from sending the punitive bombing mission to North Vietnam? Would nationalists and anti-communists among Democratic and independent voters been so outraged by Johnson's apparent conciliatory or wimpish behavior to vote for premature Reaganite Goldwater, and thus begin the Reagan revolution in 1964 and not in 1980?

I'll refrain from discussing Alterman's fourth juicy example, Reagan and Iran-Contra, in part because he does not offer much of a case about how the lies told by the administration came home to haunt the United States. After all, Reagan administration figures Donald Rumsfeld, Elliot Abrams, John Negroponte, and others have worked in the current administration and, each year, Reagan comes closer and closer in presidential polls to cracking the great president category. Maybe it was because he really didn't lie or deceive. In the immortal words of the felonious, cable-television talking head Ollie North, he didn't always know what he knew. One wonders if some day soon the same argument will be used in defense of the lies and deceptions of George W. Bush.

I was disappointed after reading Alterman's exciting, thoughtful, and very well-researched study that his conclusion, and especially remedies, was so brief. He points out that one reason presidents lie is because the short-term negatives are negligible. Politics, unfortunately, is about the short term, in most cases the next presidential or congressional election. Despite some handwringing from Democrats and a few Republicans, how many in the Bush administration or in Congress really care about the deficit they are leaving to their grandchildren? Or until the Greens reach a critical mass, how many presidents and legislators are prepared to do something serious, something that will be costly and call for individual sacrifice, about global warming that is creating environmental crises if not for their children then for their grandchildren? Or, in the foreign-policy realm, who is willing to risk the electoral wrath of most Cuban-Americans and conservatives by ending America's absurd non-recognition policy toward Castro in the absence of strong support for that policy among the rest of the citizenry?

The answer to the problem, for Alterman, rests with a more responsible media, a more sophisticated and educated public, more responsible opposition leaders and, above all, more responsible presidents who will take the time and risk to explain the nuances of international relations and that compromise is often the surest way to peace and security over the long haul. No, it is easier, for example, for LBJ's aides to publicly beat up on allegedly effeminate compromisers like the too cerebral Adlai Stevenson whom the president once accused of having to sit down when he had to pee. Alexander de Tocqueville famously worried about how the American system would work when the United States became a serious player in the international system. A century later when the United States had become a serious player, Walter Lippmann worried again about the problems of operating a foreign policy in a democracy.

And now Eric Alterman is worried about many of the same problems and offers important lessons about how lying, deceiving, and pandering cause more problems for the nation in the long run than telling the truth would have been in the short run--as long as one is willing to

accept the personal political consequences of telling the truth. Perhaps a six-year term might make it easier for a president to be more responsible, but he or she would still have to worry about Congressional elections every two years. Alas, the best we may be able to do is to fall back on Winston Churchill's famous aphorism, "Democracy is the worst form of government, except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time." But-that was in 1947. The stakes are higher today, the margin for error is slimmer and the world is far more complicated. Thank goodness we now have access to so much more information on cable and the internet to help educate the public about Aruba and Natalee Holloway.

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