

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

Roundtable Editor: Thomas Maddux

Reviewers: Carolyn Eisenberg, Lloyd Gardner, Tom Nichols, Melvin Small, Randall Woods

Commentary by Carolyn Eisenberg, Hofstra University

When Colin Powell testified before the United Nations in February 2003, offering his supposed “proof” that Saddam Hussein retained “weapons of mass destruction,” few in the media challenged his presentation. The previous month, the President had made a series of familiar charges against the Iraqi government, indicating that his Secretary of State would soon provide the evidence, which would establish their veracity. Apart from some ambiguous photos and tapes, the Secretary’s speech was conspicuously long on assertions and lacking in supportive data. But there was a crashing silence, not only from journalists but also the legions of academic specialists around the country, who study American foreign policy. Was the Secretary of State lying to the international community? Here in the United States, this obvious question was barely raised.

In the aftermath of the U.S. invasion of Iraq, the Powell speech emerged as one of the most spectacular example of trickery in modern history. For those, who are now shocked at the degree of executive mendacity so characteristic of the Bush Administration, Eric Alterman’s important book, *When President’s Lie* is a vital source. It provides a rich historical account of Presidential deceptions and as important, a consideration of how uncurious the experts can be, when faced with dubious claims.

Alterman is a trained diplomatic historian with a doctorate from Stanford, who has made his career as a distinguished journalist rather than an academic. This has enabled him to range broadly in his subject matter and perhaps paradoxically to pursue old- fashioned issues. Without pressure to embrace fashionable intellectual trends, in this book and his earlier work, Alterman keeps his eye on fundamentals: how democratic is U.S. foreign policy? By what mechanisms do Presidents shape public opinion? What are the consequences of policies, which are based on manipulation and falsehoods?

The result is a fascinating study of four Presidential lies: Franklin Roosevelt’s misrepresentation of the Yalta agreement, John Kennedy’s dishonest description of how he resolved the Cuban missile crisis, Lyndon Johnson’s falsification of events in the Gulf of Tonkin and Ronald Reagan’s fabrications about the Iran- Contra affair.

All are well known cases and two—FDR on Yalta, Lyndon Johnson on the Gulf of Tonkin—have been frequently cited as examples of deception. It might therefore seem as though Alterman is simply reprising old material. However, the freshness in each of these accounts

derives from his effort to show the destructive ramifications of these particular distortions. The “pragmatic problem with official lies,” he points out, are “their amoeba-like penchant for self-replication. The more a leader lies to his people, the more he *must* lie to his people.” In each of the four case studies, Presidential lies produce long-term dysfunctions if not for the originator, than for the larger society. The simple reason for this is “that the problem or issue that gives rise to the lie refuses to go away, even while the lie complicates the president’s ability to address it.”

Perhaps the most tendentious argument centers on Yalta. Sixty-one years later, the jury is still out on Roosevelt’s public handling of this Conference. Alterman sides with those historians, who believe the President willfully obfuscated his agreements with Stalin, concealing his acceptance of Soviet domination of Eastern Europe and the extensive territorial concessions in East Asia. The author is less critical of the substance of FDR’s diplomacy, which was dictated by the realities of the Second World War, than by his failure to level with the American people. Having waged a war against the Axis, under the banner of democratic ideals, Roosevelt did not want to upset the public with negative news about the post-war settlement. Of course the President hoped that once Germany and Japan were defeated, he could mitigate the harshness of Stalin’s agenda. However, the President died before any of this mitigation took place, and one result was the rapid emergence of the Cold War.

For Alterman the lies, which surrounded Yalta were an important contributor to the Cold War. Beginning with Truman’s ascendancy, the United States government began to withdraw from the terms of that agreement, even as Stalin adhered firmly to its provisions, To the American public, the Russians were the “deal-breakers,” an impression the new President chose to foster. That false perception of Soviet perfidy “intersected with an outbreak of mass paranoia in American politics, which soon crippled the government’s own ability to deal with the realities of Soviet power and the construction of a peaceful postwar world.” This was a great tragedy, which might have been avoided had Roosevelt used his immense popularity to “disabuse Americans of some of their more romantic views about the world.”

Like a sore tooth, the controversy surrounding Yalta refused to go away. By the late 1940’s, Roosevelt’s false assurances had morphed into something more dangerous –the belief that traitors had sold out American interests at the Crimean Conference. Alger Hiss became the wicked personification of that calamity. For years thereafter, American Presidents were cowed by the new myth of Yalta, the notion that diplomatic dealings with an enemy were a dangerous opening to betrayal and national weakness.

According to Alterman, this anxiety hovered over President John F, Kennedy as he wrestled with the challenge of Soviet missiles in Cuba. In this second case study, the author highlights the now well- established fact that in settling the crisis the President, acting through his brother Robert, gave private assurances to the Soviets that American Jupiters would be coming out of Turkey. This was not how the story was related at the time. As far as anyone knew, it was Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev, who had gazed at the nuclear precipice and “blinked.” In exchange for a simple “non-invasion” pledge by the United States, the Russians were packing up their missiles and sending them home. It was a golden moment for the young President, who had shown nerves of steel at a moment of high crisis.

However, this display of *machismo* was an illusion. In actuality Kennedy, like his Soviet counterpart, would not hazard a nuclear war. Had the Russians failed to accept his private assurances about the Jupiters, the President was already hatching an alternative compromise that could be introduced at the United Nations. Unfortunately, by nurturing the public's exaggerated notions of what military threats might achieve, Kennedy sharply curtailed future options for himself and his successors. Khrushchev had hoped to use the settlement of the crisis as the foundation for mutual curbs on defense spending. But the Kennedys did not want to impair their recently refurbished reputation for "toughness." The result was a massive increase in Soviet conventional and nuclear arms programs, which would ultimately impose a serious burden upon the United States.

From a longer term perspective, "the belief in the beneficent power of strategically deployed military force became the *sine qua non* of the Kennedy-Johnson administration foreign policy team." In Kennedy lore, brilliant leaders had carefully calibrated the use of force, moving slowly up the ladder of escalation and producing a great triumph. It was a model for future endeavors. Of course the most tragic misapplication of this false lesson occurred in Vietnam, where it was believed that "controlled escalation would dissuade Ho Chi Minh," just as it had intimidated Khrushchev.

For deception on a grand scale, the Vietnam War reliably wins the history sweepstakes. In telling this story, Alterman begins with its most famous fabrication- the two "unprovoked attacks" on American ships in the Gulf of Tonkin. That tall tale unraveled years ago, as it became clear that the Johnson Administration was directing offensive actions against the nearby coast of North Vietnam and that the second attack on the *Turner Joy* never occurred. To the author the tissue of lies, which were the foundation of the Gulf of Tonkin resolution, hold special significance. They represent a decision by the Johnson Administration to go to war in secret and without public debate.

That set a pattern for future events, as at each stage Johnson and his associates underplayed American involvement and minimized the grim situation existing on the ground. Also noteworthy was the complicity of the American news media. As Alterman points out, "Contrary to popular memory the media were rarely disapproving of the war, at least until its latest stages." For the most part journalists were content to believe the President and his subordinates. There was no critical scrutiny of Administration claims about events in the Gulf of Tonkin, and for a longtime thereafter, the mainstream press did not communicate how poorly the war was going.

While the author does not explain why things changed, at some point the public woke up to the fact that the United States was in a major war that it was losing. When that realization hit, the damage to the society was profound. Alterman is careful to point out the Vietnam War was inherently futile and morally questionable for many reasons, and that it spawned numerous falsehoods. But the "violation of public trust and the corruption of public leadership that Tonkin inspired continued to haunt US policy for decades." Under any circumstances, a policy, which asks young men "to die for reasons no one can explain," would be problematic in a political democracy. That the Vietnam War was "undertaken under the dark of night-through lies, misinformation and deliberate subterfuge...gave the anger it inspired a far uglier, more vicious tinge."

The United States failure in Vietnam left officials naturally hesitant about any substantial commitment of combat troops for the future. However, it did not obliterate the taste for military intervention nor the determination to reshape the internal affairs of other nations. In Central America, the Reagan Administration pursued a vigorous course, which generated misery across the region and stimulated the slaughter of tens of thousands of Guatemalans, Salvadorians, and Nicaraguans. In following his theme of deception, Alterman does not highlight a single event, as in the previous cases, but describes a succession of lies, which grew more outrageous with each addition.

In El Salvador, Congress had barred the administration from using combat troops. The response was for CIA “advisors” to do so anyway, while concealing the evidence. Required to certify progress on “human rights” as a precondition of U.S. aid to the regime, the Reagan officials fudged the data. As “death squads” roamed the countryside, with the collusion of the government, the Administration insisted that democracy was advancing. Since Congress was incurious and the media paid little attention, this was a surprisingly easy feat. When an occasional journalist happened upon an atrocity, as was the case for *New York Times* reporter Raymond Bonner, who discovered a massacre at El Mozote, the response was to launch a phony investigation, which whitewashed the event. In a chilling aftermath, Bonner’s employer rewarded his efforts by assigning him to the New York Metro section of the paper.

Emboldened by the free ride in El Salvador, the Reagan team “set up a shadow, secret, government apparatus designed to carry out its own foreign and military policy and shielded from the inconvenient constitutional barriers of law, debate and sometimes even reason.” The particular focus of this skullduggery was the Sandinista-ruled government of Nicaragua, whose overthrow was a favored project of the President. The normally lethargic Reagan was desperately anxious to aid their armed opposition, the thuggish Contras whom he regarded as heroic “freedom-fighters.” Since the project was prohibited by the Boland Amendment, passed by Congress in 1982, the CIA waged a clandestine war of its own, which included the mining of Nicaraguan harbors and production of a “murder manual” that advised rebels on how to “neutralize” government officials.

More far reaching in its implications was the effort by Reagan appointees in the National Security Council to create a private network of people to provide the Contras with military advice and equipment. Since Congress would not appropriate the funds, they raised the money by tapping foreign governments and private businessmen. While illicit CIA operations were nothing new, this unofficial apparatus opened the possibility of an entire foreign policy, free of public scrutiny. The enterprise might have flourished for years, were it not for Administration’s absurd decision to sell arms to the government of Iran in exchange for hostages. Since funds from that sale were diverted to the Contras, the exposure of the Iran initiative brought to the fore the secret Central America policy.

Alterman tells the Central America story in riveting detail, reminding us that this was not a mere “bump in the road” on the way to Cold War victory. The “Iran-Contra scandal” was in actuality a profound assault on democratic governance within the United States. Although the disclosures (notably the sale of weapons to Iran) caused acute embarrassment and temporarily damaged

Reagan's political standing, the penalties for the perpetrators were minimal. Those "who had done the lying were not personally discredited, merely inconvenienced." Once again, the news media failed to convey the gravity of the crimes, while managing to imply that it was the Special Prosecutor Lawrence Walsh, who was the zealot.

By the time of Iran-Contra, Americans attitude towards lying had undergone a transformation. Through the Nixon Administration, it was assumed that on important matters of state, government officials should tell the truth. When they were caught in acts of deception, this was regarded as an abuse of power. In the Reagan era, Americans no longer expected their leaders to be forthright. When Oliver North defied Congress and proudly acknowledged his secret support for the Contras, fan mail flowed into Capital Hill. When Ronald Reagan died, he was a revered national leader.

Alterman contends that because "the nation never faced up to the consequences of what it meant to be led by dishonest officials," it remained vulnerable to future charlatans. This set the stage for the "post-truth Presidency" of George W. Bush for whom lying in broad daylight has become an art form. So brazen is our current leader that although millions of people around the world saw UN weapons inspectors practically poking through Saddam Hussein's closets, Bush claimed on national television, "We gave him a chance to let the weapons inspectors in and he wouldn't let them in."

The author has wisely limited his commentary on Bush Jr. to a few pages, since the latter's duplicity has already created a cottage industry of chroniclers. The value of this book is that it offers an historical context and forces us to grapple with the magnitude of the problem. It is hardly news that Presidents lie, but one cannot put down this volume without being stunned by the extent to which the American people has been deliberately misled. It may be quaint to worry about this, but with so much disinformation how can public accountability be sustained?

The arguments in this book are far-reaching and bold, and there are many controversial claims. One question is whether the author has focused on the most important lies. In the case of the Cuban missile crisis, Alterman emphasizes Kennedy's secret assurances on the Jupiters. But what makes this a more fundamental lie, than for example, not telling the American people about Operation Mongoose? Were the hidden schemes to murder Castro or to destabilize the Cuban economy by violent acts of sabotage the derivative phenomenon or the stimulus for the other distortions?

There is also reason to wonder whether the Yalta Conference rightly belongs on this list? Apart from the surprise effect of reviving an old right-wing bugaboo in progressive garb, how persuasive is the case? Franklin Roosevelt said many untrue things about the proceedings at Yalta, but the one that Alterman finds most consequential was his upbeat rendering of the arrangements for Poland and Eastern Europe. In terms of action, he recognizes that "the President never really had any choice in the matter, the Red Army's occupation of these countries would ultimately determine the shape of their political futures." Roosevelt's poor decision was to sugarcoat the situation, to pretend that democracy was being protected when there were no mechanisms for doing so?

However in early 1945, it was not so clear how the vague arrangements provided at Yalta would translate on the ground, And Roosevelt thought he had a mechanism for gaining Soviet cooperation, once the war was over. The achievement at Yalta, which Alterman underestimates were the agreements on post-war Germany. Roosevelt saw these a key. If the Allies could work together in supervising the defeated enemy, many smaller disputes would be resolved. Soviet security concerns would be substantially assuaged and there would be less incentive for repression in Eastern Europe. He may have been unrealistic in expecting this, but as he departed the Crimea the optimism was genuine.

Alterman correctly maintains that the United States did go back on many aspects of Yalta, once the fighting in Europe had ceased. This certainly aggravated great power relations. But for the Soviets, the relevant provocation was being locked out of western Germany not being hectored about elections in Poland. If the American people were deceived in those early post-war years, it was not Roosevelt's fibs that were determinative, but Truman's failure to explain that the integration of west Germany into the Marshall Plan would leave the eastern zone and the remainder of Eastern Europe under complete Soviet control. That choice was in American hands and it was a genuine sell-out.

According to Alterman, the explanation for Roosevelt's lies was his reluctance to challenge the public's naïve and simplified view of international life. Two world wars later, Americans had still not grasped the exigencies of great power politics. This contention is integral to the author's broader historical analysis. Why, he asks, "do American Presidents feel compelled to deceive Congress, the media and their country about their most significant decisions?" They do so for reasons of "political convenience" which are rooted in "a fundamental contradiction at the heart of the practice of American democracy." Presidents 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 these terms." Therefore, "when deals must be struck and compromises made on behalf of large purposes, presidents prefer deception over education." All of this harks back to the origins of the country, when Americans liked to think of themselves "as a city on a hill."

Alterman's last minute reversion to U.S. "exceptionalism" as the reason for all this fakery is at odds with most of his engaging narrative. For with the exception of Yalta, what emerges quite clearly is that Presidents lie because they are pursuing policies that the public would never tolerate if they knew about them. This has nothing to do with sophisticated diplomacy or the need to compromise with other great powers. It derives from the post-World War II effort to dominate foreign countries and the criminal behavior that often resulted. If Kennedy had told the truth, would Americans have approved the assassination efforts against Castro, or the bombing of Cuban sugar refineries? If Johnson had not invented acts of North Vietnamese aggression, would Americans have approved attacks on their cities? If Reagan had not concealed U.S. support for the Contras, would their murderous ways have been accepted? And if George W. Bush had not successfully charged Saddam Hussein with possession of "weapons of mass destruction," would Americans have signed on to an invasion of his country? I think the answer to all these questions is a resounding "no." This is not because the public has failed to "mature," but because most Americans still believe in democracy and think that other nations have the right to determine their own destiny without foreign coercion.

Eric Alterman began this book long before the planes struck the World Trade Center and it became evident that Pinocchio was President. Although one might disagree with some of its conclusions, *Why Presidents Lie* is an invaluable study that all Americans and (particularly journalists) should read. Maybe the next time a President cooks up a case for invading a country, harder questions will be asked.

Copyright ©2006 by H-Diplo, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For other uses contact the H-Diplo editorial staff at h-diplo@h-net.msu.edu.
