

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

Response by Eric Alterman, Brooklyn College, City University of New York

First let me say how honored and grateful I am not only that H-Diplo would chose *When Presidents Lie* for its symposium but also that five such distinguished and accomplished diplomatic historians—historians whose work, without exception, helped guide me through my own research--agreed to take the time and offer such learned and thoughtful critiques. The entire process has been a little scary and intimidating—given my limited experience in the world of diplomatic history--but gratifying nevertheless. My profound thanks to H-Diplo and to all five historians for all the effort necessary to produce the above.

In the interests of time, space and good manners, I will resist the urge to remake my arguments. If the scholars who read the entire work found aspects of it unconvincing, that's my problem, and the book's. As the product of eleven years of on-and-off labor, much of it spent under the direction of Stanford's history department, I have no excuses to make. I will however take more moments of the reader's time to clarify for the record what I believe to be misunderstandings of what I sought to argue that may have arisen due to imprecision in the language I chose or, potentially, an honest misreading of what I actually did manage to argue.

I tried, specifically, to make it clear that I do not believe, as Melvin Small writes, "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." I do not even take the position that the Cold War should have been avoided. I do argue that the actual circumstances of the particular Cold War that we experienced grew out of America's deceptions about the Yalta agreement and the Soviet Union's inability to understand the transformation that was taking place under Truman's leadership. This argument is, I believe, unique to my book and given how many people have examined the same material and come to different conclusions, it does not surprise me that almost all of the scholars who've read it find it controversial. But I try to make clear, as I wrote in the book, "there were many good reasons for the existence of the Cold War—including the incompatibility of American and Soviet social and economic systems, Stalin's paranoia and the murderous policies it spawned, Russia's historically expansionist tendencies coupled with those same tendencies in the brutal Soviet form of Marxism-Leninism, America's new global definition of its national security needs, and both sides' missionary ideologies." (p.43).¹ A few sentences later I add: "Some form

¹ All references are to the paperback edition, *When Presidents Lie: A History of Official Deception and Its Consequences* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005)

of struggle—whether physical, political, cultural, or psychological—was called for to defend what democracy remained in Europe and to prevent totalitarianism from gaining the upper hand. One can convincingly make the case that had the Cold War not been catalyzed by American dishonesty and forgetfulness about Yalta, it would almost certainly have happened anyway. That is a counterfactual argument that extends well beyond the scope of this study. For purposes of the discussion, the Cold War took place when it did and the way it did at least partially in response to America's refusal to keep its word given at Yalta." (pp.43-44)

Nor do I believe, as Small writes, "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..." Finland, if I am not mistaken, is just about the wealthiest nation in the world, per capita, as well as one of its most progressive, both socially and in terms of income distribution, health care, education, etc. The United States, France, and England have not even "developed like Finland." It is the closest thing the real world has to a social democratic paradise. It would be crazy of me to argue that the Finnish model was somehow reproducible in say, Romania, and I don't believe there's any evidence I do. Whether some of these countries had the opportunity to develop foreign policies like Finland, I don't know and I don't think I argue. But personally, I don't find the counterfactual claim to be all that controversial.

Tom Nichols writes "...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." This is only partially correct. Equally important in my decision to exclude these cases was the fact that with both Watergate and the Lewinsky affair, presidential lies preoccupied public discourse as well as the scholarly literature that followed—albeit abbreviated in the Clinton case. I wanted to choose cases in which an examination of the lies as central to the outcome of events would provide the opportunity for original analysis and argument. What's more, as a historian, I thought it too early to do Clinton, just as I barely touch on the consequences of the lies of George W. Bush.

Professor Nichols may also be correct when he writes, "Some of Alterman's sources on these points are dated." Indeed, I would be surprised if they weren't. The manuscript was turned into the publisher in 2003 for publication in September 2004. As for Nichols surprise at what he terms my "non-treatment of the Korean War," the answer is simple: The chapter is focused on events I considered to be direct outgrowths of Yalta and the deception that accompanied it. I don't believe that Korea falls into that category, except in the limited fashion in which I discuss it.

Nichols also writes, "'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? ... Why would Alterman think anyone should have been foolish enough, politically or diplomatically, to try to resurrect the false spirit of a bad deal?" I may be wrong, but I don't think every observation in a 447-page work of diplomatic history needs to qualify as "surprising." The statement above was meant to be informational and contextual. I don't think I even hint anywhere that anyone ought to be surprised by it, nor that it would have been a good

idea for anyone to “resurrect” it. (Though naturally I disagree with Nichols about the reasons why this turned out to be case.)

In addition, I do not agree that I “lay the Cold War itself at FDR’s feet.” My description of FDR’s role strikes me, at least, as considerably more nuanced than that. (And in fact, Truman comes off a lot worse insofar as his role in the ongoing deception is concerned.) Specifically, I conclude about FDR’s role: “Perhaps Stalin and Roosevelt’s working relationship might have resulted in a stable, if competitive, world system divided between the free and unfree. Domestically, FDR’s combination of luck and political skill had proven so effective during the previous twelve years that he might well have succeeded in deflecting the revelations that he deliberately misled the nation about Yalta. But in dying at such a critical moment after the conference, the wily Roosevelt finally outsmarted himself. Failing to prepare either his appointed successor or the nation he led for what followed is among the blackest marks on a great man’s legacy.” (pp.46-47)

Again, I agree with Nichols that “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.” That’s why I make no pretenses to present it as such. But when Nichols writes “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.” I dispute the former but not the latter. And I don’t know if Nichols can present any evidence to support his contention about what “most people” now know, while I present considerable evidence demonstrating that it is not the case, including important and best-selling works of history that appear unaware of it, including, alas, even the books and memoirs of some of the participants. (An Aside: In his *New York Times Book Review* review of WPL, Gary Hart made the unsupported—and to me-shocking-claim that “almost everyone in Washington knew” about the trade immediately after it occurred. I think historians—and reviewers—should refrain from claiming to know what “everybody” or even “most people” know without citing supporting evidence.)

Nichols also writes “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.” I do not see any conflict between these two statements. Indeed, I strongly agree with the latter. Any number of presidential lies and actions have contributed to this legacy, beginning with Eisenhower’s lie about Francis Gary Powers and including Lyndon Johnson’s lies about Vietnam—to which I devote a chapter of the book. Again, what’s the problem?

As to Nichols’ disquisition on the role the deception regarding the deal played in the fall of Nikita Khrushchev, I do think it played a role. I cite my evidence for this view and readers can make up their own minds if I have overstated my case. But I never go so far as Nichols seems to believe I do, in placing virtually all of the blame for Khrushchev’s fall on the fallout from the missile crisis. Naturally, any such historical event has many causes. Again, my argument was focused exclusively on those aspects of that could be tied specifically to the event I was

examining. About as far as I go in the text, as far as I can tell is the statement “This willingness to keep the trade secret, long after Kennedy’s assassination, ‘cost him dearly,’ in the words of Anatoly Dobrynin.” In a 1998 interview with CNN, the former Soviet diplomat lamented, “The whole world was under the impression that Khrushchev lost because he had given in to the pressure of a strong president, that he had taken everything out of Cuba and gotten nothing in return. No one knew anything about the agreement regarding the missiles in Turkey.’ Within two years, Khrushchev found himself out of power in what turned out to be a bloodless coup. While the records of the October 14, 1964, politburo meeting remain secret, a memo for the prosecution that is now available shows a vicious attack on the premier’s perceived failure to have bargained a quid pro quo for his strategic retreat in Cuba.” (p.132)

I further dispute Nichols description of my portrayal of Jack and Bobby Kennedy as “mean-spirited and facile liars.” My view, and one would hope, my portrait in the book, is considerably more complex than that. I continue to admire Bobby Kennedy, though I think this may not have been the most admirable moment in his long and inspiring political journey. And I came away with enormous regard for President Kennedy’s political skills, as well as his visionary leadership in seeing the nation through the crisis while keeping a firm hand on the actions of his more excitable advisers. As I write in the book: “Judged purely on the basis of how well he sheltered his decision-making process in the crisis from his personal political interests, Kennedy’s performance is much better than many critics allege, though hardly as impressive as the many keepers of his flame would claim.” (p.127) I also note “The new evidence also points to a relative vindication for the Kennedys with regard to those revisionist critics who, like I. F. Stone, argued that they were “unwilling to be put in the position of paying any but the most minimal [political] price for peace.” (p.128) (And by the way, this admission was personally costly to me as Stone was both a mentor and a close friend to me during his final decade.)

I also do not understand why Nichols considers it to be a “cheap shot” to raise the issue of Ronald Reagan’s Alzheimer’s disease. Again, I make no conclusive claims and do so, I believe, respectfully. The entire reference reads: “Whether it was all part of a brilliant act, or evidence of the then yet-to-be-diagnosed onset of Alzheimer’s, will likely never be known.” (p.240) But if Nichols can conclusively prove that there is no possibility that the president’s Alzheimer’s affected his decision-making while president, I would like to see the evidence. Certainly many of Reagan’s public utterances—particularly those dealing with his knowledge of the events he personally witnessed and in which he participated regarding Iran-Contra—are consistent with the onset of this unfortunate disease.

Finally, on the issue of George W. Bush’s lies, one can offer up any number of examples without ever mentioning the disputed issue of WMD, something I acknowledge in the text. Nichols makes it appear as my accusation against Bush rests on this dispute. Many more examples of this have surfaced since the book has been published—as has considerable evidence that Bush and certainly Cheney did indeed know they were lying about WMD, among other things. One could go on ad nauseum on this topic and I will resist the urge. Suffice to say that Al Gore and Bill Clinton at one time believed that Hussein may have had such weapons is not an argument that five years later, following many more inspections, etc, Bush and Cheney did not have access to information that disproved this. And remember, as I cite in the text, Bush continued to lie after the evidence was in. Following the invasion and the revelation that no such weapons

existed Bush claimed, "Did Saddam Hussein have a weapons program? And the answer is: absolutely. And we gave him a chance to allow the inspectors in, and he wouldn't let them in." Even a sympathetic reporter like CNN's Howard Kurtz was forced to admit that this assertion had "no relation to reality," as the inspectors had been in Iraq for months before the invasion, making what they insisted was considerable progress in mapping out the weapons Hussein did or did not have.... No less incredibly, Bush made the same blatantly false assertion months later, at a January 2004 press conference Speaking of Hussein and the inspectors, who were in Iraq at the time Bush announced his decision to go to war, the president's exact words were, "It was his choice to make, and he did not let us in." After witnessing President Bush's tolerant treatment with respect to this uncontestable untruth Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld made a similarly indefensible claim two months later. Responding to CNN's Wolf Blitzer's question about whether, in retrospect, it had been a "mistake to go to war at that time instead of giving the UN more time to continue their own inspections," the defense secretary replied, "Well, the UN inspectors were not in there. The UN inspectors were out." (pp.303-304) Dick Cheney has even twice insisted that he "never" claimed that the apocryphal meeting between September 11 hijacker Mohamed Atta and an Iraqi intelligence official, Ahmed Khalil Ibrahim Samir al-Ani, which was said to have occurred in Prague in April 2001 was "pretty well confirmed" even though he can be seen on videotape using these exact words in an extremely high-profile appearance with Tim Russert on NBC's "Meet the Press." (Cheney had already been informed by Czech President Vaclav Havel that no such meeting took place even before making the original false claim.) The brazenness of these lies constantly remind one of Michael Kinsley's pre-Iraq observation, "Bush II administration lies are often so laughably obvious that you wonder why they bother. Until you realize: They haven't bothered. If telling the truth was less bother, they'd try that, too." (p.296)

I beg also to differ with Randall Woods' characterization that, "Of the four, [I find] Roosevelt the most culpable because he was in such command of the ship of state." I don't know what led Mr. Woods to conclude this, but whatever it was, my writing was decidedly unclear. I don't believe I take a position on this question anywhere in the book, and I suppose, it would be imprudent to do so here. Let me just add that at the end of my research and writing, my admiration for FDR remains, despite everything, profound and unmatched by my opinions of any 20th century president.

Finally, I was particularly pleased to read the kind words of some of the reviewers about my research, though I owe much of the final product to the demanding standards of my thesis adviser Barton J. Bernstein, and my committee members Gordon Chang and David Holloway. (The thesis in question, by the way, examined only Yalta and the missile crisis. The other sections were added afterward.) I would also like to acknowledge the role played, if only psychologically, by my undergraduate adviser, Walter LaFeber, whose scholarly commitment and personal example originally inspired my continuing interest in history, both diplomatic and otherwise twenty-eight years ago during my freshman year as a history major at Cornell.

And absolutely finally, I'd like to point out one unnoticed item in the book that may be of use to my fellow historians. I do think I am the first person to discover a document that demonstrates that Truman did, in fact, know the details of the Far Eastern Accord long after he denied any such knowledge. Truman said, in response to a query from the media, that he learned of the Far

East deal in July of 1945 while reviewing the agreement's text in preparation for the Potsdam Conference. But in researching the book, I discovered in June, 1945, he requested and received a secret memo from George Elsey that described all of the agreements reached at Yalta, explicitly detailing the secret Far East accord. The footnote in question reads: "The memo appears to have been prepared by Elsey with Captain James K. Vardaman Jr., before being shown to the president. See James K. Vardaman Jr., "Memorandum for the President," June 12, 1945, Papers of George Elsey, box 3, "Historical Reports and Research Notes, Yalta Conference Briefings" file, HSTL." Most historians have long suspected this—and of course, I may have missed something—but I had never seen this small fact nailed down before writing the book.

Again, my gratitude to all concerned, particularly the H-Diplo editor, Thomas Maddux.

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.
