
Roundtable Editor: Thomas Maddux

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**Commentary by Randall Woods, University of Arkansas**

Eric Alterman, a former student of Barton Bernstein and now a widely read liberal columnist, has written a detailed, provocative history of four great presidential “lies”—FDR’s attempt to sell the Yalta accords as a triumph for democracy and the new diplomacy, JFK’s effort to conceal from the American public and Congress that he did not trade Russian missiles in Cuba for American Jupiter missiles in Turkey, LBJ’s fiction that a second North Vietnamese torpedo boat attack took place on the night of August 4, 1964, and Ronald Reagan’s cover-up of the Iran-Contra affair. Alterman begins with a fascinating history and ethical analysis of lying and deception by public officials. He argues that in all cases there were profound unintended consequences and in the four cases cited, disastrous consequences. The end result of all of this executive deception has been growing public apathy and even acceptance. Witness the deliberate gullibility of Congress, media, and public in accepting the Bush administration’s WMD justification for the second Iraqi war.

The presidents concerned are not the only culprits, indeed, not the primary offenders in Alterman’s tale of deceit, although some were guiltier than others. Of the four, he finds Roosevelt the most culpable because he was in such command of the ship of state. His refusal to admit that the United States had tacitly granted Eastern Europe to the Soviets as their sphere of interest opened the door for McCarthyites and their heirs to portray the Democratic party and liberals in general as liars, weaklings, and communist appeasers. The Kennedy administration, loyal to the man to the president and his brother, maintained the myth of JFK’s toughness well into the 1980s, indirectly playing into the hands of conservative anti-communists and discrediting peaceful co-existence and diplomatic compromise, paths that were in reality those taken by JFK. As far as Johnson and the Gulf of Tonkin are concerned, Alterman presents the standard indictment. LBJ, a simple frontiersman when it came to foreign policy, allowed himself to be stampeded by the best and the brightest into using an attack that never happened to persuade Congress and the American people to give him permission to Americanize the war in Vietnam. Reagan comes across as movie lot naif, weaving anti-communist cocoons into which he inserted himself. Thus were his unscrupulous underlings - ideologues and opportunists- free to construct an illegal foreign policy which aided blood-thirsty rightists in Central America and indirectly funded terrorism in Iran.

There are heroes decrying naked emperors—members of the Senate, a courageous journalist or two—but they are few and far between. Caught up in the euphoria of victory over the Axis and wishful thinking about Josef Stalin and subsequently in the blind anti-communism that gripped the nation for the next forty years, the vast majority of legislators and journalists acquiesced in acts of presidential deception.
In general, I agree with Alterman, but I think the cases are not as clear cut nor as singular as he would lead readers to believe. Jefferson misrepresented himself; Polk used a fabricated incident to justify war against Mexico; Wilson misled the American people concerning the reasons behind his decision to go to war with the Central Powers, and FDR used another deception—the Greer incident—to justify the last good war. Compared to Churchill, Stalin, Chiang Kai Shek, and other rulers, both democratic and autocratic, throughout history, three of the four presidents Alterman deals with, the first three, were pikers. And there was context. Roosevelt was desperately trying to hold the Grand Alliance together, to hold domestic anti-communism in check. Despite the Katyn massacre, the Warsaw uprising and other Soviet misdeeds, FDR hoped the Soviet Union could be persuaded to act the role of a conventional nation state and join a concert of powers that would lead the world into a period of peaceful coexistence. But the cold war happened, and the anti-communism it spawned proved to be a force than dominated American culture and politics for the next forty-five years. JFK had shown restraint in the aftermath of the Bay of Pigs. He did so likewise during the Cuban missile crisis, but given the virulence of anti-communism and anti-Castroism, he had to play the tough guy. As Alterman demonstrates, the Kremlin clearly understood this. The second Gulf of Tonkin incident and whether or not it actually happened (a recent *New York Times* article has revealed that mid-level officials at the NSA mistranslated NVA intercepts and then falsified documents to cover their mistakes) is important only in the way Bill Fulbright and the anti-war movement were able to make use of it. The Gulf of Tonkin incident, first or second, was, like Pleiku, just a streetcar, to use McGeorge Bundy’s famous analogy; another one would come along shortly. Johnson reluctantly agreed to the escalation of the war because public opinion polls continued to show overwhelming public support for a policy of resistance to Sino-Soviet expansion in Asia, and his advisors convinced him that South Vietnam rather than Laos or Thailand was the best place to make a stand. Moreover, if he did not make a stand, anti-communism would overwhelm the Great Society, including the Second Reconstruction, and America might then have to deal with a civil war at home as well as in Southeast Asia.

The Iran-Contra affair is, I think, a special case. Ronald Reagan, as Alterman ably points out, made Americans feel good about themselves, especially those who comprised the rising conservative majority. He gave the country Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Granada instead of Vietnam. He made anti-communism a virtue again after denouement in Southeast Asia. And he also made it affordable. Because of geography and power disparity, there was no chance that the struggles in Central America would become another Vietnam. Americans applauded while he waged rhetorical war against the Evil Empire while simultaneously negotiating the beginning of the end of the cold war. Most important, he made deception of the media and Congress seem respectable. The “liberal main-stream media” and the Democratic party were cast as enemies of the republic whose ignorance and machinations justified executive lying and even law-breaking. Once again Oliver North is gracing the nightly news.