

THE SECRET REASONS TO DECLARE SO-CALLED ‘UNWINNABLE’ WARS

Unredacted Transcript of Dr Mark Alter’s Confession to CIA



Dr Mark Alter

President’s Therapist Dr. Mark Alter’s confession to Central Intelligence Agency of his conversation with presidential advisor Karl Rove prior to Dr. Alter’s White House therapy session with George W. Bush; excerpted from *The President’s Therapist* by John Wareham.

“I’M KARL,” HE SAID, EXTENDING A FLACCID PALM. “The First Lady asked me to escort you.” His hand was moist, and the eyes behind his rimless spectacles were polar. I could see why the President nicknamed him Turd Blossum. “I gather you have some big ideas that might have caught the president’s attention, Doctor Alter, so it’s nice to meet you, finally.”

“Thanks—and call me Mark, please. This is an unexpected honor.”

As the limo pulled away, he settled back into the gray velvet, folded his lily white hands across his paunch, and smiled enigmatically. “Seems you have an odd take on the Iraq War.”

“I might be on the side of those who say that we can no more win a war than an earthquake.”

“That’s a popular position right now, of course.” The smile hadn’t left his face. “But the people who say it are mostly theorists who deal only in words, whereas a president deals with reality—and the reality in this case is that the outcome of a war depends upon actions.”

“To be honest, I have a moral problem with your selling of the war. I mean Iraq *never* had weapons of mass destruction—right?”

“Nobody knows for sure.” Still smiling, he lifted a manicured index finger to his pudgy nose and scratched at it. “But it doesn’t matter because in times of war, survival is more important than truth. At worst we told a noble lie.”

“But we weren’t *at* war.”

“Of course we were. It just hadn’t been declared.”

“That’s how you justify our preemptive strike?”

“You really should stop with your questions now. I’ve been grilled by experts,” he said condescendingly, ready to dismiss me. But then his manner softened, and he continued, “But, I will answer this question. That is *exactly* how we justify the war. We had to formalize the situation.”

“And we didn’t care about world opinion? It’s okay for the U.S.A. to become the bully of the free world?”

“World opinion and the hypocrisy of other world leaders doesn’t bother us. We all know that absolute truth is the first casualty in war—a lie is just another way of presenting the truth.”

“The problem is that one lie costs a whole lot more than one truth because it costs the entire truth.”

“The public would rather win the war than agonize over truth,”—he was warming to our debate against his better judgment—“that’s why they elect leaders to tell them noble lies. It’s also why it’s more important for a leader’s proposition to go to war to be more compelling than truthful.”

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but as I see it, Saddam was just a coward who erected a Beware of the Dog sign, but didn’t have the dog. More to the point, we were attacked on 9/11 by fifteen Saudi Arabians and four Egyptians armed with box-cutters and the idea that God was on their side. We can bomb Iraq back into the Stone Age, but how will this protect us from another dozen or so Saudi or Egyptian zealots armed with box-cutters?”

“We’ll be shielded by our boldness. Ah, Doctor Alter, there’s no point in having power unless you use it. If we fudged on the WMD issue, we now have Iraq strategically placed to influence the entire Arab world, so we, uh, the president made a hardnosed real-world decision to shift the entire region toward democracy and freedom.”

“We’re not there for the oil?”

“America has never been an empire. All we want is to help the Iraqis provide a secure supply of oil to the world—all of which is totally in their best interests.”

“But have we been demonstrating power or incompetence?”

“Has everything gone right?” he answered, staring out the window. “No. But the creation of a new system is difficult. We’re the enemies of everyone who would profit by the preservation of their old, corrupt institutions.”

“And as far as I can tell, getting only tepid defense from those who would gain by the new ones. All of which proves, don’t you think, that power corrupts?”

He must have had his answer ready for he turned his full attention on me. “Maybe. But the more interesting question is does powerlessness make anyone pure?” He grinned, pleased with himself, and pressed on. “I don’t think so, Doctor Alter. In the real world, even well-meaning people are corrupted by powerlessness. Those who have no power will do anything to get it. But nobody gives you power, you have to take it”—he smiled boyishly—“and absolute power is kind of neat, really.”

“I understand that the essence of leadership is the enjoyment of power and the responsibility that comes with it.



Unfortunately, the mere love of power is the disease of narcissists. I think you might be confusing power with wisdom and greatness. You seem to believe that because you have power, you also have wisdom. But wealth and power stem mostly from luck. Greatness, however, is the result of goodness, daring, and discipline. Therefore, the only power worth aspiring to is power over oneself. Leaders who possess this power know that the love of liberty is the love and concern for others, and that the only advantage of power is the capacity it ensures to create a better world for everyone.”

He adjusted his spectacles. “Well, that *is* idealistic. In the real world, how do we create such paragons?”

“By exposing them to good ideas. That’s what alters the power balance. It’s also why the best ideas are resisted. They come with heavy burdens. The gods of power frown on the frivolous, punish those merely looking for good times, and ultimately give satisfaction only to those who study and reflect.”

I sensed his smirk. “We should take care not to make the intellect our god,” he said. “It has powerful muscles, but no personality.”

Personality! Precisely what got W elected. But of course his apparent affability sprang from serious underlying maladjustment.

“Knowledge builds authentic confidence, which is infinitely more crucial to leadership than personality. Better to know the lessons of the past and understand when *not* to use all your power. A leader is more effective when he has power in reserve.”

“In my book, power never takes a backward step.” The limo slowed, then reaccelerated as we entered a subterranean tunnel. Rove seemed not to notice, and continued to press his point. “Power is about passion, not intellect. It’s the capacity to command respect”—I could not see his eyes but his white teeth flashed a *schadenfreudean* smile—“by holding someone else’s fear in your hand and showing it to them!”

So there, the bully had gleefully admitted the cruelty in his modus operandi even though he failed to realize the extent of the cowardice that inspired it.

“Well, it seems to me you might be both right and wrong. Fear does rob the mind of the power to reason and act. And, yes, people do defer to a man with a gun, but the respect is for the gun, not the man. Remove the gun and respect gives way to contempt—and then reprisal.”

He paused. “What do you *want*, Doctor Alter?” The question from the



shadows caught me by surprise. I didn't answer before he continued, "Look, everything has a price," he said, "and at this level, whatever you want I can almost certainly get."

"What do I want? Well, nothing you have or can get. I mean, you can't resurrect my wife or son. Separate evils took each of them to early graves. I was sorely tempted to give up on life, but then I made a choice. I decided, as naïve as it might sound, merely to be a force for good."

"I'm listening, Doctor Alter, and I'm almost persuaded."

"Almost persuaded?"

"Unfortunately, a lifetime in politics has taught me that idealism such as yours is merely a cloak to hide an underlying drive for power. And that, surely, is why you've gravitated to leadership consulting—which, as a psychologist, I imagine you clearly understand."

"Well, you're right, of course. My role is to influence those in power. So the more influence I have, the greater my power. Where we might differ is that I use my power for one reason only."

"And what might that be?"

"Well, not to sound priggish, but in my zeitgeist, the only legitimate use for power is to exercise it for the good of all humankind."

"Again, a very noble sentiment, Doctor Alter. Let us hope that you are never tested in having to weigh your own best interests against the good of all humankind."

The vehicle had come to a halt, and peering out, I recognized the gunmetal elevator door. Again, I was in the bowels of the White House.

I stepped out of the limo, but Turd Blossom stayed stuck to his seat. "You'll be in good hands," he said. The words were harmless enough, but something in his tone triggered alarms in my brain and stomach.

I was about to take my bag from the limo driver when the elevator doors slid open and the vice-president strode out, two gray-suited security officers in tow. They all eyed me coldly, then the vice-president pointed at the bag. "Anything coming up into the White House must be inspected." He grabbed the bag—almost greedily, I thought—and clenched it firmly. Then, noting that I was observing him closely, he half smiled. "These are dangerous times," he said. "One cannot be too careful."

The vice-president and his two body guards ushered me into the elevator. I anticipated a surge beneath my feet as the elevator would propel us up into the White House. Instead we sunk, and that earlier apprehension of imminent danger now welled within me. •

