

NEW PERSPECTIVES *in foreign policy*

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Interview with Jon B. Alterman

January 16, 2015

The editorial board of *New Perspectives in Foreign Policy* sat down with Dr. Jon B. Alterman to discuss his experience as a Middle East expert and his career in academia, government, and the think tank world.

Alterman is a senior vice president, holds the Zbigniew Brzezinski Chair in Global Security and Geostrategy, and is director of the Middle East Program at CSIS. Prior to joining CSIS in 2002, he served as a member of the Policy Planning Staff at the U.S. Department of State and as a special assistant to the assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs. He is a member of the Chief of Naval Operations Executive Panel and served as an expert adviser to the Iraq Study Group (also known as the Baker-Hamilton Commission). In addition to his policy work, he teaches Middle Eastern studies at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies. Before entering government, he was a scholar at the U.S. Institute of Peace and at the Washington Institute for Near East

Policy. He received his Ph.D. in history from Harvard University.

NFPF For over a decade now, from September 11 to the present, the Middle East has been a central focus of U.S. policy, arguably its central focus. The past few years have been especially turbulent. What has it been like to be a Middle East expert during this period?

Alterman It's been a little strange, and more than a little exhausting.

My wife told me on January 28, 2011, when Egypt was reaching a fever pitch, "This is the week you've been preparing for your entire career." And quite frankly, that week hasn't ended. A week doesn't go by that I'm not totally confounded, surprised, or seeing something that tests things I thought were true, or that brings things together that I thought were totally unrelated. The Middle East is on a wild ride right now. It's going to go on for a while. What happens will determine the



trajectory for quite some time to come. And there is nobody who can tell you with any certainty how these different trends are going to play out.

It's a little strange being in demand, because for a long time I wasn't. Many of the problems in the Middle East were thought to have been solved in the 1990s. No one thinks that any more.

One of the most interesting experiences I had was about a week before President Obama went to Cairo to give his speech to the Muslim world in June 2009. The National Security Council (NSC) brought about 8 or 10 people into the White House to talk about what the president should say in Cairo. I have no idea how much of the speech was written at that point, I have no idea what decisions had already been made, but they went around the table and gave everyone an opportunity to pitch ideas for what the president should say. A few months prior, I had written one of my newsletters for the Middle East Program on what the president should say, were he to make such a speech. I had brought copies with me, and I slid one to a senior member of the White House staff sitting next to me. He started reading it and underlining parts of it. That was a little bit surreal. The president didn't say what I thought he should, but I had a chance to make a pitch. Who knows where those ideas went after they had been underlined? Even so, it was a tremendous opportunity to take the things that I have learned and come to care about and transmit them to people who are making decisions.

NFPF When you moved to the Policy Planning Staff at the Department of State, was there ever a time when there was a major policy question on which you found yourself in disagreement with the consensus—

Alterman —Like, say, on the invasion of Iraq.

NFPF For example. What is it like to be in that kind of position, and how did you think about acting in that context?

Alterman I had a fellowship at the State Department from October 2001 to October 2002. I started off in the Near Eastern Affairs Bureau and moved to the Policy Planning Staff in February. And clearly one of the things that was being considered across the U.S. government was whether we should invade Iraq.



It's important to remember that no one in the U.S. government knew anything about Iraq. We had not had an embassy there for years, there was only a tiny scholarly community that worked on Iraq, and there were very few books you could read. Iraq was kind of a black box for people in the U.S. government. For people who had done academic study in the Middle East, Iraq was a weird authoritarian footnote.

That being said, I did not have a good feeling about where this was going to go, and the basis of my bad feeling was the certainty that seemed to be coming from senior levels of the government about how well it would all turn out. The State Department, as an institution, was very concerned that if it was overtly critical, then the State Department would be cut out of the planning and the discussions without being able to affect the outcome. Many felt that, as an institution, the best option was to remain quiet so that when there was really a need to intervene, you would at least be inside the room.

I recall a time in August 2002 when a senior official called in some Middle East experts one by one, and said, "Tell me what you think about Iraq." I said, "I have two principal concerns. One is that nobody can imagine any future scenario for Iraq that is worse than the status quo." And he said, "I'm not sure anything's worse than Saddam." I told him I was less sure. And then he said, "What's your second concern?" I said, "Running someone else's country is really hard, and all the former British colonial administrators that can tell you how to do it are dead." And he responded, "But we're not going to be in Iraq for a long time. Everybody's being brought in on a 90-day personal service contract. There will not be any long-term U.S. occupation." And I said, "Well, that's what I have." That's when I began to look much more vigorously for employment when my fellowship was over, and, happily, I came to CSIS.

To give you another example of the challenges on the Iraq front, one of the memos I tried to write was, "What does the United States do in the first week after Saddam falls?" It's a hard question. We didn't know very much about the country. But we also didn't know under what circumstances he would fall. Have you had an exchange of chemical weapons? Do you have 500 American troops on the ground, or 50,000 American troops on the ground? Has part of the country been contaminated with radiation? You have two pages to write

the memo, but to my mind, to do it responsibly, you had to spend a page and a half talking about the dramatically different circumstances under which Saddam could fall. But that was not a welcome conversation. The decision was, I think, made relatively early, that we were going to do this and make the best of it.

And there was an important piece of the context running through all of this, which was that the September 11 attacks systematically discredited Middle East experts. There was a broad consensus in the Bush administration after the attacks along the lines of “You [Middle East experts] were supposed to be paying attention to the Middle East. You didn’t predict this, and the continental United States was attacked for the first time since the War of 1812. And therefore, the people who had the boldness of vision to win the Cold War are going to be the ones who have the boldness of vision to come in and avenge this, and make the Middle East right.” Ultimately that didn’t feel right to me. And that is when it became clear to me that the next portion of my career would be outside of government rather than in.

NFPF: Can you talk a little about the progression your career has taken and what roadblocks came up that you didn’t anticipate? How did you deal with them, and what did that teach you?

Alterman: There are some people who have had glorious and direct ascents to the heights of power. I haven’t ascended to the heights of power and it certainly hasn’t been direct.

I worked in the Senate for two years right after college and decided that, from my perspective, the world was divided into two kinds of people: process people and substance people. There are people that are really good at running processes, and they are very good “people” people, and they are sort of indifferent as to what they are working on. I remember meeting some very talented lawyers when I was working in the Senate, and they fit this bill well. And then there are people who accrue knowledge and hopefully, out of knowledge, they come up with wisdom. Those are the substance people. And I said, “You know, I really want to be a substance guy—that’s who I want to be.” And so I decided to get a Ph.D.



By the time I was graduating from my Ph.D. program in 1997, there were four modern Middle East history jobs in the United States and five people graduating from my Harvard class with Ph.D.s in modern Middle East history—so that was not looking too promising. I got a one-year job at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, which is a place that gave me opportunities but also is a place that has an institutional position to support Israel and Israeli policies. My academic training made me wary of institutional positions to support anything, and I said, “Well that’s OK for now, but I don’t think it’s a permanent place for me to be.” I met a lot of people and did a lot of networking. And then in one week I got five phone calls saying, “The U.S. Institute of Peace is hiring a Middle East guy, you should apply.” It turned out to be a great place to be, partly because I had a great boss, and partly because that is where I was able to transform from being an Egypt nerd who knew something about Arab media to become a more general Middle East expert.

It strikes me that there were at least three points in my career where I said, “I don’t know that this Middle East thing will work at all.” I had some funding issues in grad school, and the job market for Middle East things was enduringly miserable. Throughout the early part of my career, people in government and business had decided they were over the Middle East. As I think back to the friends with whom I studied Arabic in Cairo, many of whom have gone on to prominent careers in government, business, journalism, and academia, there were a lot of us in the mid-1990s who were not sure we could make any of this work. Then the world changed, and as the world changed, we suddenly found opportunities.

NFPF: What distinguishes a career in the think tank world from other career tracks in foreign policy? What skills do you need to be effective in the think tank world?

Alterman: A think tank is a different environment: one with incredible freedom, but also with incredible risk, where what you do in a year can totally shape, for positive or negative, what happens in your career. The think tank world is, in some ways, a world without a lot of net. Figuring out what you want your brand to be is a much more profound issue in the think tank world than it is in a government setting. Certainly, it matters in a government setting, but I think in a think tank setting, in many ways, you are nothing but the brand that you create.



I think the most effective things I have done have mostly had to do with framing things in ways that give people an architecture to work from. For example, I did a book on China, the United States, and the Middle East called *The Vital Triangle*. And in many ways, coming up with the title is 50 percent of the job. Because once you see this as a triangle, once you understand that no two sides can gang up on a third side, that's the way you think about it. It's the most basic ideas that have impact. You have to prove them, you have to do the research, and you have to do the legwork to make a case. But if you don't have a frame that allows somebody to take your information and apply it to new information that comes to them—I don't think you've done your job.

A problem in policymaking over the last decade —and it is a bigger and bigger problem—is that people are overwhelmed by data points: the number of things that are put out online, the number of things that are Tweeted, the number of columns, the number of online journals. That puts the premium on people who can give you a framework, give you an architecture, give you an understanding, because there's no way to have lasting wins on the data points. The lasting wins are on the architecture and the framework. In doing so, you're helping people understand what data points should engage their interest and what they all mean.

Part of being able to construct a framework is innate—some people are good at this, and some are not. The absolute smartest people I've been in seminars with, the political scientists Samuel Huntington and Lucian Pye, were masters at taking the most complex things and making them understandable. That moment of intellectual clarity they help you achieve is incredibly exciting. There's a tier below that where people take complex things and explain them, but they're still very complex. That's less satisfying. To me, no one wants an expert whose answer starts off with, "Well, this is all really complex," and then does a huge data dump. Instead, the job of an expert in my world is to use knowledge and experience to pare down the data so that it's understandable, digestible, accurate, and explanatory. You have to see the value and the beauty in the simplicity. You have to have watched other people do it. And you have to resist the impulse to look for three more data points.

In my experience, the part of writing that people too rarely do is to spend an hour with a blank sheet of paper in front of them just sketching out where the argument is going. What are you trying to prove? What fits into the



argument? What are the different elements you need to think through? There is no question that spending that first hour saves you time in the overall writing of the paper. The things I write quickly are uniformly better than the things I write slowly, because when I write quickly it's because I know where it's going. When the writing is painful, you have to pull back, and that alarm bell has to go off in your head. You have to make yourself stop and say, "OK, where is this all going?"

NFPF: How do you translate those effective habits into having an impact?

Alterman: I still think back to a summer evening when I was about 10, and I went to the antique carousel on Martha's Vineyard, and it had a ring dispenser. The ring dispenser is a long arm off to the side of the carousel that automatically dispenses three-inch metal rings that you hook your index finger into and grab as you ride by. Most rings are a dull iron, but one is a bright and shiny brass. If you get that one, you get a free ride. It seemed simple enough. I started riding and grabbing a ring as I went by. And then I saw what other people were doing. They were leaning as far ahead as they could and kept grabbing rings as they leaned back until the dispenser was so far behind them they couldn't grab any more.

I don't think you can be successful in the think tank world if you grab one ring every time it goes around. The challenge is figuring out how many rings can you grab, how many can you keep in your hand at once, and how to quickly tell the dull iron from the shiny brass. It's harder than it seems.

It's not just intellectual, though. It's also personal. If you want to have an impact, you need to find a person who is receptive to precisely what you want to say.

You also have to be prepared to have an impact. If I had walked into that White House meeting and I hadn't already written something about what the president should say when he goes to Cairo, then it would have been a different game. But I had it prepared, and I brought it with me, and I was able to just slide it over and watch the senior official start underlining it. It's not just chance. You have to be ready for the chances you have, and you never know when the chances are going to be. That's the great fun of this job. It's also part of what makes it exhausting.



Overall, we are looking for ways to help people at decisive moments understand something so they make better decisions. When we have conferences that bring in people from academia and elsewhere, you can see clearly that most academics write for other academics. Timing doesn't drive most of them. They're not focused on finding the decisive moment to put forward the decisive idea or framework that people then take away and so makes a difference.

I recently ran into somebody in government who told me about an article I wrote several years ago about the way the Mubarak government used religion instrumentally. For the life of me, I couldn't remember what that article was or when I had written it. Still, there was somebody who read that piece and at the moment he did it answered a question that had been bothering him. I rarely know exactly when that happens, but I hear enough to know that sometimes it does. It's exciting: there is something deeply interactive about what I do, and there is something really productive about that. You are able to make the world at least marginally a better place, and you are able to apply your skills and your knowledge to help people make better decisions in a world that has a whole bunch of people making some pretty miserable decisions. If you're lucky, it can be a big deal.

This interview was conducted on January 16th, 2015, and edited for publication. The NFPF Board would like to extend their thanks to Dr. Alterman for his time, insight, and candor.