Members of the Cornell community gathered on Monday, April 22nd 2013 in Lewis Auditorium, Goldwin Smith Hall to hear Eric Alterman, Distinguished Professor of English and Journalism at Brooklyn College and the CUNY Graduate School of Journalism and columnist for The Nation give a talk entitled “The Search for a Liberal Foreign Policy.” The talk was given as part of the Einaudi Center's Foreign Policy Distinguished Speaker Series.

After an introduction from Einaudi Center Director Fredrik Logevall, Alterman shared some personal notes about his time at Cornell and extolled the quality of education he received here. During his Ithaca years Alterman fed his journalistic ambitions as a columnist for the Cornell Daily Sun and had the opportunity to write his honors thesis with renowned Cornell historian Walter LaFeber. Alterman was unable to decide between academia and journalism, and these two interests would form the axis of his career as a scholar and journalist who looks to “people driven history” to provide paradigms to explain contemporary foreign policy.

Alterman contends that there has not been a strong tradition of liberal foreign policy after Franklin Delano Roosevelt because liberals make foreign policy in anticipation of public reaction and to head off any strong conservative critique rather than focusing on finding a solution to the issue itself. This causes foreign policy problems to “metastasize” because no one is paying attention to the root of the problem, but public perception of how we’ve reacted to it. Debate on foreign policy is driven by anticipating attacks that will be leveled on a proposed policy rather than how suitable it is for solving the problem at hand. By focusing on three well known examples from the Cold War Alterman showed how his model applied to liberal foreign policy in a number of historical contexts.

The first example Alterman discussed was the origins of the Cold War after the Yalta conference. Truman didn’t know what FDR had agreed to at Yalta, and the U. S. State Department had lost their copy of the agreement. At a meeting before the arrival of Soviet
Minister of Foreign Affairs Molotov, Truman sided with civilian leadership led by Averell Harriman who urged him to “get tough on communists.” The U.S. broke the Yalta agreements by inviting Argentina, a former axis combatant, to join the newly formed U.N. Shortly thereafter, Senator Joseph McCarthy gave his famous “Enemies from Within” speech in Wheeling, West Virginia that questioned the loyalty of the State Department under Secretary Dean Acheson and which culminated in communist witch-hunts throughout the 1950s. After the Soviets successfully tested an atomic bomb, China became communist, and the American public witnessed the spectacle of the Alger Hiss trial, “Yalta became a metaphor for why Democrats couldn’t be trusted with Foreign Policy,” Alterman said.

Next, Alterman discussed the Kennedy administration’s response to the Cuban Missile Crisis. Even though Kennedy had sought a diplomatic settlement with the Soviets, he needed to appear tough and unyielding in the public eye and willing to use the military as a policy tool. “Even before the Bay of Pigs, there had been a drumbeat for war against the Cubans,” Alterman said. Behind closed doors Kennedy had been against escalating the crisis, but he took public credit for his brinksmanship by claiming “Adelai wanted a Munich,” instead of admitting that he had wanted the same diplomatic solution as Secretary of State Stephenson.

The third historical example Alterman discussed was President Johnson’s decision to go to war in Vietnam. In a conversation with Johnson, Senate Armed Services Committee Chair Richard Russell warned that the war would be, “The biggest damned mess on earth, and we will be in quicksand up to our ears.” Johnson, however, worried that he would be impeached if he didn’t go to war. Even though there was minimal political risk behind pursuing a settlement as Eisenhower had in Laos, Johnson ultimately decided to go to war because of his fear of being seen as weak and “soft on communism.”

Alterman concluded that how liberals address foreign policy is conditioned by what they think the political right will have to say about their response. Alterman demonstrated through his three examples how this tendency has roots in Cold War period and what described as “the inability of our political culture to deal with complex issues.” To Alterman, the foreign policy of the Obama Administration is essentially a continuation of the Bush administration’s policies, and recent nominees for defense and foreign policy posts have been made with the goal of garnering conservative support. He argued that this offers continuing evidence that his Cold War paradigm was equally applicable to the current liberal administration.

The Foreign Policy Distinguished Speaker Series features prominent leaders in international affairs who can address topical issues from a variety of perspectives. The Speaker Series is part of the Foreign Policy Initiative at Cornell University led by the Einaudi Center to maximize the intellectual impact of Cornell's outstanding resources in this area.