Title: The Bullitt Lecture in American History presents Jonathan Alter

Speaker 1:

The following podcast was recorded live at Town Hall Seattle on March 23rd, 2009. It was presented by the Washington Center for the Book at the Seattle Public Library. Podcasts and library programs are made possible through the support of the Seattle Public Library Foundation. For more information on these podcasts, please visit our website www.spl.org. The Seattle Public Library's annual A. Scott Bullitt Lecture in American History is made possible by a generous gift from the late Priscilla Bullitt Collins in memory of her father, A. Scott Bullitt. The 2009 series featured Jonathan Alter, who is well known for his widely acclaimed Newsweek column that examines politics, media, and social and global issues. A contributing correspondent to NBC News, he has appeared on Today, The Nightly News, Meet the Press, MSNBC, and CNBC. Jonathan Alter is the author of the national bestseller, The Defining Moment: FDR's Hundred Days and the Triumph of Hope.

In his first interview after winning the 2008 presidential election, Barack Obama told 60 Minutes that the defining moment would have a great influence over how he governed the country. Mr. Alter was joined on stage for a conversation with Eric Liu, Seattle author, educator, activist, member of the Seattle Public Library Board of Trustees, and host of Seattle Voices on the Seattle Channel.

Eric Liu:

On the very last page of the text, Jon, you described Franklin Roosevelt as a, quote, "vessel president," somebody who carried, embodied a lot of different hopes and characteristics, not only of his time, but of our country, and maybe by implication, someone who didn't have a whole lot of ideas, principles, or frameworks of his own. And I just want to start with that notion of a vessel president and whether, A, what you meant by that, and B, whether you think that quality is good in a president?

Jonathan Alter:

I think great leaders are vessels. And first of all, I would dispute that Franklin Roosevelt didn't have any principles, he did have principles, but as he wrote to somebody who considered him to be too much of a trimmer, which he was, he was often back and forth on different issues, for instance, on prohibition, before he came to office, he wasn't a wet for alcohol, he wasn't a dry, he was a damp, leave it up to the

states. And he was for the League of Nations before he was against the League of Nations. So on particular policies, he could be all over the place, but as he wrote to somebody who complained about this, he said, "Don't you recognize there's a difference between ends and means?" And he was very clear about his ends, a more progressive society, a new kind of social contract, a new idea of what we owed each other as a people.

And the means were all kind of negotiable. And I think Obama's quite like that as well. And that does... if you have that essentially pragmatic view and you are large as a public persona, you become a mansion of many rooms, to use the sort of more biblical description, and people fill up those rooms with their hopes. And so I think in that sense, great leaders, and this would apply to Lincoln, who people saw all kinds of things in, Roosevelt, they are vessels that people fill. And that's as it should be, because if you are not large enough to be a vessel, I think you're going to be more of a shooting star, you're going to... to mix metaphors, you're going to burn out a lot faster if you just stand for one really clear idea and nothing else can be entertained, and you're appealing to a very narrow constituency of people. So we should want our presidents to be vessels. You don't want them to be totally empty vessels, you want them to be partially filled, but still with a lot of room for other people-

Eric Liu:

Damp vessels.

Jonathan Alter:

Yeah, damp vessels. That's good. That's good.

Eric Liu:

It seems that that is a... that kind of assessment is much easier to make of someone in hindsight, not even distant history, but recent history, than it is to make of someone who is in power at the moment. And as you were doing the deep historical research you were doing for this book and going through what people were saying about FDR at the time, was there much appreciation at the time for the virtues of being that kind of vessel, or was he just being branded all the time for being... it's kind of an anachronistic to say, but in his time, a flip-flopper?

Jonathan Alter:

Well, the flip-flopper thing was a much bigger problem before he became president, and he was described, as George W. Bush was, as a lightweight. And I have a lot in my book about how underestimated he was before he came to office. But in 1933, we're in such a period of crisis, and there are many parallels to today, although things were much worse, instead of 8 or 9% unemployment, 25%, and it didn't include women in some places, in Toledo, Ohio, for instance, it was 80%. I'm not sure what it was in Seattle, but I think it was higher than 25% here. The stock market, instead of being down 30% or so, is down 90%. The banks were 4/5 closed before Roosevelt took office and closed the rest, we

were in a barter economy for a week there. And so things were really grim and people were kind of beyond the Roosevelt as a flip-flopper idea by that point, by his first hundred days. And I think they did pretty quickly see him as a major figure one way or another.

One journalist said at the end of the first hundred days that he accomplished three magnificent things, hope, action, and self-respect. And those are big vessel ideas, although he went on to become a very controversial and much criticized president. Generally, the reporters liked him and their publishers hated FDR, and he did not have smooth sailing in Congress with a lot of other Democrats. So one of the things I try to do is kind of demarbleized him, take him down off of Mount Rushmore, although he never was on it, and try to give a sense of what it did feel like to be there at the time, and how not everything went his way. So when people... like this week, you have a bunch of people saying, "Oh, Paul Krugman and others are writing, 'Oh, Obama, he's got the wrong idea on the bank rescue plan. Maybe he does, but that somehow, that is definitive and that that will wreck his presidency.' "

Well, when you're in a time of crisis, if it doesn't work, they can try something else. And that's what happened with Roosevelt. Some of his ideas were bad ideas, they failed. And then when those ideas failed, he just come back with another idea. And that's what a pragmatic, supple, flexible president does.

Eric Liu:

Roosevelt operated in a time where the crisis was at a much greater scale than today's, as you were just describing the stats for, but the media environment and the pace of the political culture was, relative today, far more forgiving, or at least far more manageable for someone in the Oval Office. And I'm wondering whether you feel like it is possible today for this president to experiment as persistently and boldly and to fail as often as FDR did in trying to reckon with his crisis?

Jonathan Alter:

I mostly do. First of all, there was a tremendous amount of noise in those days as well, it's just that it was in print. I think New York City had 11 daily newspapers in 1933. Seattle probably had a half dozen daily newspapers at that time. So you had a cacophony then as well, it just wasn't in your face, the way blow hards on cable are in your face.

Eric Liu:

You're one of those non-blow hards on cable, right?

Jonathan Alter:

I'm guilty as charged. So there was an intense media atmosphere then as well, and there was tremendous criticism. I have a chapter on Roosevelt's Tree Army, as it was called, the Civilian Conservation Corps, planted more than a billion trees, very big in Washington state, as well as many others. And pretty much, if you go out and take a hike, you're probably hiking on a CCC trail. Well,

when that bill was introduced in the first hundred days, when Roosevelt was at the peak of his popularity, the American labor movement was totally against it because the CCC corps members were only paid a dollar a day, and the head of the American Federation of Labor called it a combination of Stalinism and Hitlerism. Pretty rough language, even by-

Eric Liu:

But other than that-

Jonathan Alter:

... even by Rush Limbaugh standards, it's pretty rough. So this idea that somehow people just started punching each other now, this stuff goes back to the election of 1800. By 1802, when Jefferson was facing midterms, they were talking about whether he was having an affair with his slave, which turned out to be true. So this isn't new. What's changed, as you mentioned, is the amount of time that you have to react. And that's what the electronic media, and of course, the internet, really shrinks, is a president's reaction time, is less time to think and react, particularly on foreign policy. And also, the scrutiny to his appointees has really changed. I was in the White House last week, and a White House aid held up a resume of somebody for an important government job. It was actually to run TARP.

And this person was being disqualified for a trivial, trivial kind of problem, but they knew that the Senate Finance Committee would... which now has a big staff, to audit everything would cause a... And one person was disqualified because of a nanny problem in 1997, '98, where taxes weren't properly paid on a nanny. You have 80% of tax returns that are audited, they're going to find some kind of problem. 80% of this audience, that's the statistic, there will be something... If you take three accountants and give them the same tax return, they'll find three different problems. But this is holding... because of the media environment, this is holding up key appointments. So that's something that Roosevelt did not have to face. But on the other hand, Obama doesn't have to face people urging him to become a dictator as Roosevelt, a lot of people like Walter Lippman, who was a big pundit in the days when columnists actually had some real influence-

Eric Liu:

His nearest Jonathan Alter. Yeah.

Jonathan Alter:

Yeah. But in those days, they actually really held sway in the culture. And he went to him before the inauguration and said, "Franklin, you may have to assume dictatorial powers." And I found a document at the Roosevelt Library that showed that he was tempted to assume those dictatorial powers-

Eric Liu:

It was a draft speech that-

Jonathan Alter:

A draft speech that he didn't give, where he took all these World War I veterans and he was addressing the American Legion and pressed them into service at his command, the way Mussolini was very popular in the United States at the time did with the blackshirts in Italy. And Studebaker had a car called The Dictator that sold pretty well in 1933.

Eric Liu:

That's true.

Jonathan Alter:

And so all I'm saying is that capitalism and democracy were on the line when Franklin Roosevelt became president in ways that they're not today. So while Obama has it harder in certain respects, maybe with the media, he has it easier in other respects in that people aren't about to give up on capitalism and democracy. When Roosevelt first became president, he was visited by a journalist who said, "Mr. President, if you succeed, you'll be our greatest president. If you fail, you'll be our worst president." And he said, "No, if I fail, I'll be our last president." And there were some indications that that was maybe a tad mellow dramatic, but had a grain of truth. Now, failure did not mean not ending the depression, because it didn't end for years, failure, in his mind, meant a failure to make progress against the depression. So it's important to distinguish between, in our current situation, making progress against the recession and actually restoring us to prosperity in a matter of months. And one of the things Obama's trying to do right now is lower people's expectations about how quickly we're going to get out of this.

Eric Liu:

One of the things that's notable about the quote you cited a moment ago about what FDR did in his first hundred days, providing hope, action, and self-respect. Two of those three, and possibly, even action, are really not about results per se, they were about a psychological state of being, hope and self-respect. And this idea that the... and I think what's striking about your book, The Defining Moment, is that a good portion of it is not actually about the hundred days, it is about the period that leads up to the hundred days, both in FDR's own evolution and education, and in that crisis period, in interregnum between Hoover and FDR. And apart from the statistics you were just citing, it is staggering the sense of existential crisis, I guess, then that really things were, as you just said, on the line. And I'm wondering if you think about our current situation here, yes, it's true that at this moment, capitalism democracy don't seem to be that close to the brink of extinction, but in some ways, particularly with the people that have short attention span, it feels like it is, it feels that way.

And the fact that it feels that way becomes itself somewhat self-fulfilling. And do you feel like it's possible for this president right now to create the same scale of hope and self-respect through action that FDR did in his time, or do you feel like, even though the stakes are different right now, the cycle of

not just news, but of psychology is so quick that it's impossible for a president to really compound and accumulate that kind of hope?

Jonathan Alter:

Well, I don't have a definitive answer. I tried to write a Newsweek cover story about a month ago on this topic of confidence and using the theater of the presidency to restore people's hope and confidence. And it's part of what makes this story that's unfolding right now so fascinating is we don't know the answer to your question. I'm going to write my next book on that question. But I'm cautiously optimistic that he can do so because I think that he really has picked up on a lot of FDR's lessons, which is that you get tremendous credit for trying, that all the American people really expect is that you're going to get up and work the problem, dent the problem, come at the problem from different directions every day. And if they feel like you're working for them rather than working for the Washington establishment or special interests, they're going to give you a lot of credit. And I think they're going to give you more time than some people right now-

Eric Liu:

Herbert Hoover worked the problem pretty hard, at least toward the end there. He was trying in different ways and his approach may have been too timid, but he was not totally sitting on his hands. And part of what was interesting about the story you tell in that period between the election and the then March inauguration was the ways that, depending on your perspective, were either savvy, or cynical, or both, that FDR let things sort of fester and let crisis continue to simmer, if not boil, no matter what Hoover was trying. And what was your take on whether FDR's actions then were, more savvy or more cynical?

Jonathan Alter:

I think it was a combination of savvy and cynical, because Hoover was being cynical at the same time, Hoover did try some things, he was an activist president in a certain way. But I think the best adjective to describe him that was used at the time was clammy, there was just something really unbelievably uninspiring about him. I was mentioning earlier today that the sculptor, Gutzon Borglum, who did Mount Rushmore, said that if you put a rose in Herbert Hoover's hand, it would wilt. And Roosevelt was a master of the radio, and he transformed that medium speaking on the radio the way Bing Crosby transformed singing on the radio, he understood that a microphone could change everything. Because before that, remember, everybody talked like this, politicians all talk like this, John Carey still talks like this. And as if the microphone hasn't been invented.

And Roosevelt and Bing Crosby understood that you could have this other relationship... well, Hoover didn't get that at all. And even though he organized the American radio industry and as Secretary of Commerce, before he became president, and they called him the great, he was a brilliant man, much, much smarter than Franklin Roosevelt, he was the ultimate snooze on the radio. So he just didn't have any ability to rally the country. And even though Roosevelt was manipulating him during the transition and they ended up screaming at each other on the night before the inauguration, which is a fairly

dramatic moment in my story, which today, the HBO bought the rights to a book and to make a sequel to a movie they did called Warm Springs a few years ago, and today, I was talking to one of the people involved in this purchase... you've got to get that scene in where Hoover and Roosevelt are screaming at each other because they really did... they had been very close friends during World War I.

And Jimmy Roosevelt, FDR's son, said that the meeting was so tense on the day before the inauguration that he felt like going up and punching the president in the nose because they each mistrusted each other by then, and Hoover thought that Roosevelt was being unbelievably irresponsible and not joining him in joint action against the banking crisis, as the financial system was literally melting down. What was happening was what we now fear might happen, but it actually was happening, there was just a complete meltdown of the system. And Roosevelt felt like Hoover was trying to lure him into a trap. And indeed, Hoover was. He confided to a friend that if Roosevelt joined him in talking about the old time religion, gold standard, balanced budget, all these things, that he would, quote, "repudiate" 90% of the so called New Deal. And he would have basically made it impossible for him to make a sharp break from the past if he had joined with Hoover too much during this period.

But among the reviews I got, and some were critical, that there wasn't truth in advertising, that a lot of the book is not about that first hundred days, but a lot of the scholars in particular liked that Hoover-Roosevelt part of the book the most because there was a lot of new stuff about their relationship that I was able to dig up.

Eric Liu:

The aspect of the book having that much about what preceded the hundred days underscores another dimension of what you're talking about when you describe more generally the elements of presidential leadership, which is the extent to which FDR was not just affected, but transformed by adversity. Warm Springs, you talk about, that his own personal defining moment well preceded the hundred days, it was his battle with polio and the years of kind of remaking of his self, public and private. Could he have steered the country through those hundred days the way he did had he not gone through the kind of personal adversity that shaped him through his bout with polio?

Jonathan Alter:

We can't answer that for sure, but I don't think he would have been elected president if it hadn't been for the polio. People assumed that it wasn't known or that was somehow hidden. The American people knew that he had polio, they didn't know the extent of his polio, they didn't know that he used a wheelchair every day, but at a subtextual level, they knew that he had been paralyzed and could now, they thought wrongly, walk again. And so if they were feeling paralyzed and they figured if he can stand up, maybe he can help us stand up too. And that was a very powerful unspoken connection that he had. I do think that it helped his resilience in the face of the adversity of the Depression and World War II that he had survived polio, but I'm not sure that he couldn't have also been an effective president without it, but he would have lacked that kind of X factor that he had because of that kind of suffering. And it changed him greatly.

And I argue, I have a chapter called Warm Springs Dress Rehearsal where I argue that what he did at Warm Springs, Georgia, in lifting the spirits and hopes of others who suffered from polio, without actually curing them, was very similar to what happened when he got to Washington, where he lifted everybody's hopes and restored their faith, even though we didn't get out of the Depression until World War II.

Eric Liu:

What you described a moment ago as the unspoken resonance between his personal narrative and the country's narrative, is there evidence, looking back now at the history, that he ever made it explicit and did speak it or that others in his circle thought that this is something that they... or did it just so plainly speak for itself that no one really wanted to call it out explicitly?

Jonathan Alter:

He did talk about it a little bit privately that if you are lying there in bed and aren't sure whether you can even wiggle your toe and aren't sure whether you're going to die or not, that nothing else is really going to phase you very much. But it obviously wasn't discussed much in public. And people say, "Well, nowadays, he couldn't possibly be elected if he had that condition." And my response to that is he'd just go on Oprah and he'd be fine. He'd explain how polio had deepened him and everybody would go, "Yeah." And he was charming enough that he could pull it off. But in those days, people were much more stoic and circumspect about those kinds of things. And also, you have to remember, that it was such stigma to be a cripple, as they called it, and they actually had places in Seattle and other cities, home for the ruptured and lame, and these awful names that they'd have for these places that they would stick people who had disabilities.

And so it was an astonishing thing that he was elected even though people did know about this, and a lot of people... there were a lot of rumors that it had gone to his brain. At lunch today at the Seattle Library, I sat next to a wonderful woman who had been a secretary to Eleanor Roosevelt in the 50s, and she said, "Even in the 50s, people were saying, 'Did polio affect your husband's brain?' " And she said, "Eleanor would say, 'Yes, it did. It made him more compassionate, more empathetic, and a much better president.' " But there were all kinds of rumors, and yet he was elected notwithstanding that. And I think Obama hasn't had great suffering in his life in the same way, but he did, in a lot of ways, have to raise himself, as you can see from reading Dreams From My Father. And as we say in New York, "Becoming the first Black president, that ain't chopped liver," that's something to overcome.

Eric Liu:

Shows more than a little toughness. Yeah.

Jonathan Alter:

Yeah. And actually, I was interviewing the Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, a great guy, last week, and asking him about what Obama was like on the basketball court. And Duncan played professional basketball in Australia, and he said, "What people don't understand is this guy's a killer. He's a really seriously competitive, tough guy." And so I'm not really worried about his wilting, but he could get swamped by all the problems because there were so many, and in a certain way, they're much more complex than what Franklin Roosevelt faced.

Eric Liu:

Let's turn back to the hundred days, because that is the programmatic heart of what ended up being understood as the New Deal, apart from the psychology of it, the hope and the self-respect and that feeling of action, what were the biggest substantive building blocks of the hundred days that actually made a difference, that actually moved the dial toward progress?

Jonathan Alter:

Well, the first was the rescue of the banks. And I think one could legitimately criticize Obama for not having done what he did today earlier. They did have a few months going back to last fall to figure it out, and they may have taken longer than they should. Roosevelt did that first, it was passed without anybody having read the bill, and it was a simple, relatively conservative bill that was actually drafted by the Hoover Treasury Department on how to stabilize the banking sector and rejected nationalization, interestingly. Although in those days, nationalization meant permanent takeover of banks. A lot of new dealers, a lot of liberals were very upset with Roosevelt for not nationalizing the banks, their fallback position was postal banks. Can you imagine if the banking system during the 20th century had been run by the post office? That was the liberal fallback position.

And Roosevelt rejected both of those and said he was going to keep banking in private hands. So that was an important kind of fairly conservative thing that he did early on. The Securities Act of 1933 was very, very important. That was the first time Wall Street had ever been regulated, it wasn't until the following year that they established the SEC. But in his message to Congress in 1933, Roosevelt said, "To the ancient idea of caveat emptor, let the buyer beware, we had a new idea for all time, let the seller beware." If you make misrepresentations, the government will crack down on you. And this was a very important change. And now, unfortunately, we didn't update a lot of that regulation of Wall Street for the last 75 years. So we were dealing with a very, very old structure that FDR had created, but at the time, it was very significant that he began that process.

As I mentioned, the Civilian Conservation Corps, they're about to pass national service in the next week or so, an issue that Eric and I are very interested in. They're going to expand at 250,000, the size of AmeriCorps. Well, interestingly, the CCC, which was the first national service program, Roosevelt said, "I want 250,000 young men working, clearing trails, planting trees by summer. Got to get these people to work." And they actually did it, it was the fastest mobilization in American history. This one will be much slower, it'll be 250,000 over a few years. Then there were some bad ideas in the first hundred days as well. The National Recovery Act, which was really the centerpiece, was a big, messy, bad idea,

later declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court, that just grossly overregulated the economy. And as I hope this isn't redundant for too many people, but my favorite example of how stupid the NRA was, when the NRA met something else that does today was that... and by the way, the NRA had... its insignia was a blue eagle, and underneath it would say, "We do our part." They were the first stickers.

And the stimulus for the Recovery Act, Obama now has a new logo, Recovery.gov, that they just unveiled in the spirit of the National Recovery Act. But it was so overdone, the regulation was so overdone that every single industry had codes and regulations that were written in Washington, and I mean every industry. So the burlesque industry, for instance, had regulations written by Washington bureaucrats telling strip club owners how many times a night they were allowed to tell their strippers to take off their clothes. And it didn't work, it was wrongheaded in many ways. And there were some other bad ideas as well. Roosevelt actually was against deposit insurance, the creation of the FDIC, and had passed over his objections and became a strong bulwark for our financial system. There were 15 major pieces of legislation in the first hundred days and many of them were down payments for later changes in expanding the rights of organized labor, for instance, regulating the marketplace, and establishing jobs programs.

Eric Liu:

The precedent that FDR set with the hundred days becomes this bar or burden for every successive president. The idea that you've got to make your first hundred days count, you've got to make them meaningful, even in relatively good times, that has been the case. Though it wouldn't necessarily help sales of your book, do you feel like presidents going forward really ought to banish explicitly this idea and expectation that they're going to work some kind of magic in their first hundred days?

Jonathan Alter:

Well, they all try to. Kennedy, in his inaugural address, said, "We won't solve these problems in the first hundred days or the first thousand days," which became the title of Arthur Schlesinger's memoir, "or even in our lifetime on this planet," he said. That's how much he was trying to get away from the hundred days.

Eric Liu:

That's lowering expectations.

Jonathan Alter:

And they all try, but it's become a kind of a press gimmick, CNN, MSNBC, Newsweek, we all have our hundred days project, and the Obama White House hates it. And one way I'm able to get some interviews, very tough to schedule interviews, done is I said, "My book's not about the hundred days, it's about the first year." Because they realized that it is an unfair standard. Originally was the amount of time that elapsed between Napoleon's return from exile on the isle of Elba to his final defeat at

Waterloo, and then Roosevelt, in June of 1933, noticed that the special session of Congress that enacted so much of his legislation turned out to be almost exactly a hundred days. So he picked it up and it became a cliche. Obama's already succeeded... I did a piece of Newsweek about how the hundred days of various presidents since Roosevelt had gone, and some were better than others.

And the only one that was even close to Roosevelt's was Lyndon Johnson's in 1965, where he got the Voting Rights Act, Medicare, and the immigration bill, which was a hugely important change Ted Kennedy was very involved in, that there used to be these quotas that favored European immigrants. And that bill just changed the face of America and several other important pieces of legislation. But other than LBJ, nobody, except Reagan to a lesser extent, was anywhere close to Roosevelt. Obama is already in that company because the stimulus bill was so big that people don't quite understand what was in that bill. It was the biggest energy bill ever, the biggest tax cut in American history, and the biggest education bill ever, and the biggest infrastructure bill since the establishment of the interstate highway system in the 1950s.

So it was really about five major bills. So he hasn't quite gotten to... FDR is 15, but five is more than, in terms of investments, public investments, it's more than Bill Clinton, for instance, was able to accomplish in eight years, or Jimmy Carter in four. So he's already exceeded the accomplishments of the last two Democratic presidents, domestically, and he's only been president for less than a hundred days.

Eric Liu:

Another way in which FDR's hundred days set this standard that folks like you and the media reinforce, and presidents, try as they might, can't resist being held to, there's another way though, which is that, even whether it was LBJ or Obama, their legislative initiatives, their policies that they enact in their first hundred days or first year are really still built on the lattice work that was erected during the New Deal about what government is for, about government's role in social insurance, or in regulation of finance, or in providing basic health, or whatever it may be.

And I'm wondering whether you feel like at the... well, as you studied the history of that period, it wasn't just FDR, he had his famous brain trust of folks, how explicit a theory of action did his brain trust have... even if FDR himself didn't have an elaborated theory, how explicit a theory of action did his brain trust have about what government was for and what it should be doing in sector after sector and how much were they really driving this so that even though FDR himself was happy to experiment and abandon experiments, that his team really had a goal in mind and was pushing toward a certain kind of government intervention and action?

Jonathan Alter:

Well, before I answer that, the first part of your question, as it relates to the stimulus this year, it wasn't very imaginative. And that's really what was wrong with it, is that it wasn't redefining what government is for. And that's where the debate over healthcare reform, and cap and trade, and the other big things

coming down the pike are much more significant long term because they restructure our economy and our approach to these big challenges. And the stimulus didn't do anything, it was in the familiar furrows, even if it was a tremendous amount of money. Just to give you an idea of how big it was in terms of money, 760 billion, maybe 767, I guess it was, I might be getting the number slightly off, Bill Clinton introduced a $16 billion stimulus in 1993 that was rejected.

But in answer to the second part of your question, this was one of the great revelations that I had when I was researching the book, because I thought, "Oh, the New Deal, it was a fully articulated theory of government and they knew what they were going to do and it was all seat-of-the-pants. And Raymond Moley, who was FDR's top eight, said, "To call the New Deal a plan would be like saying that a boy's bedroom full of dirty clothes, broken baseball bats, and discarded chemistry sets had all been put there by an interior decorator." They were improvising. And yes, there were aids like Rexford Tugwell, who voted the most handsome member of the Roosevelt administration because he always made sure that his blue shirt matched his blue eyes and he was a-

Eric Liu:

They would have sent him on Oprah, right?

Jonathan Alter:

Yeah, Dapper... Well, actually they sent him abroad because he became a liberal lightning rod because he was full of these theories. And he'd been to the Soviet Union and he brought back a lot of different theories, and Roosevelt wasn't into that. A reporter came and said, "What's your political philosophy, President Roosevelt? Are you a socialist? Are you capitalist?" He left and he said, "I'm a Christian and I'm a Democrat." And that was as far as he really wanted to go. And by Christian, he didn't mean like the way that Christian write today, calls themselves Christian, and he didn't infuse it into politics, but he was just talking about kind of who he was. So all of these brain trusters, they had their various theories, but I originally thought that was going to be a much bigger part of the book. And another journalist has written a book about all these aids and their fancy ideas.

And I ended up kind of downplaying that, because it was really Roosevelt and his overall sense of direction and his ability to improvise. I remember when my daughter was studying for her AP tests in high school and she had to memorize all these alphabet soup agencies and everything, and I said, "Why are they making you memorize all of this?" FDR himself didn't really care that much about the particulars of any of these agencies with the exception of a couple of big exceptions, the Civilian Conservation Corps he was intensely interested in and focused in detail on, and social security was really his baby later on, although he wavered on that in 1935. But mostly, he just wanted to project a sense of forward momentum and movement. And if he thought an agency wasn't working, he'd either kill it or bring in another agency on top of it.

He wasn't wedded to a lot of the particulars. It's very important for progressives not to let the particulars calcify. So on social security, for instance, which I got very interested in the establishment of that, he

had a bedrock belief in guaranteed return that you should not be subjected to the winds of chance and the hurricanes of disaster, meaning, the stock market, which, around the time of Katrina, I thought was very interesting, thought it was government's job to protect you from that. And he would have been absolutely appalled by Bush's plan to put social security in the stock market, which, even a couple of years later, can you imagine if that had gone through in 2005?

But on the particulars, on what their retirement age is, what's the payroll... all the things that a lot of Democrats... now, their feet are set in concrete, you can't touch social security, that wouldn't have been Roosevelt's view. Fine, mess with it a little bit, change the details, that's not important. What's important is the principle behind it. And I think a lot of progressives have been kind of frozen in amber on some of what they see as the means of liberalism and haven't kept focused enough on the ends.

Eric Liu:

Do you see President Obama as being sufficiently improvisatory in approach and temperament to shake some of that calcification up?

Jonathan Alter:

I think so. It's still early to know. Roosevelt was famously described when he went over to Oliver Wendell Holmes's house shortly after he was sworn in, a few days later to drink some bootleg champagne on Oliver Wendell Holmes's 92nd birthday. And when he left, Holmes said, "Second class intellect, first class temperament." And that became a classic description of Franklin Roosevelt. There's some historians who think he was talking about Teddy Roosevelt, but I kind of puzzled through that and found out I think it really was Franklin. And Obama has a first class intellect. He's smarter in an IQ way than FDR. And we don't quite know yet whether he has a first class temperament, we know he has a good temperament. That's one of the reasons he beat John McCain, is because when the economy was collapsing last fall and people took a look at these guys, and McCain was bouncing from pillar to post and threatening to boycott the debate, and you weren't sure where, and Obama was very calm, like they used to say that deodorant commercial, "Cool, calm, collected, ice blue secret."

He seemed like he had that cool temperament that people wanted when they went into the polling place. We don't yet know whether he has that effervescent, ebullient temperament, that's why I watched that Leno appearance very closely the other night, to lift people's spirits. Churchill compared meeting Roosevelt to opening your first bottle of champagne. It just made you feel better when you heard him on the radio, when he had that wonderful laugh. And Obama's a kind of a cooler character than Roosevelt was that way. So we don't really quite know yet temperamentally how he'll do in lifting people's spirits. But I think we do know that he has a kind of a critical detachment that is very useful for him, almost a buffer zone between him and the problems that keeps him from getting too high or too low.

So all of his aides I've spoken with, they all remark on this, and this goes back some years because I've known Obama for about seven or eight years since he was a state senator, actually longer than that,

nine years, I guess, and everybody has always said the same thing. So that's a different kind of temperament than Roosevelt had, but I think a very useful one in the presidency when you're getting hit by a-

Eric Liu:

Particularly for someone who does have a first class intellect, because the temptation for someone, say, Jimmy Carter, or even Bill Clinton, having a first class intellect led them to want to manage and solve and get into the details of every little thing. And Obama's capacity for detachment may not be the same as FDR's bubbly personality, but it may provide that buffer. Before we-

Jonathan Alter:

It's not detachment from the details because he's a policy wonk, it's detachment from getting too emotionally connected. I think of it as being almost writerly detachment. The guy's a good writer, and as I'm sure many of you have read his books, and having that space for what he's writing about, even when it's his own life, critical distance. Now, sometimes, detachment can leave you flat-footed and slow to respond, and we've seen a little bit of that from Obama too, where he's not quite as quick in this 24/7 news, but that's partly because he's not really going to get too caught up in the day-to-day, he's keeping his eye in a longer game.

Eric Liu:

I want to pose a question to you about your own writerly detachment. You've alluded a couple of times, you're working now on a book about Obama's first year. And having done this book, The Defining Moment, how do you shift gears mentally, temperamentally, between commenting on the flare up of the moment, literally, whatever may be on Newsweek's website, or on NBC News, or on MSNBC right now, to assessing Obama with a little bit of more historical perspective, and then even farther back, zooming back, placing Obama in this much longer epochal historical frame. How do you manage just as a writer and observer to shift those gears?

Jonathan Alter:

How do you manage to zoom in on my big problem right now?

Eric Liu:

This is your Oprah moment right here.

Jonathan Alter:

It's a real challenge. It's much easier to write about dead people, to tell you the truth, because I knew that I could always go back to the Roosevelt Library, and the documents I needed would still be there, and the oral histories would still be there, and in this case, I feel like I'm in a raging river and I'm trying

to grab a twig as it floats by, or a piece of plastic, to get ahold of. And I don't have that depth perception that I feel I need, and I'm trying to acquire it on the fly about events that haven't fully unfolded yet. So it's actually... to tell you the truth, it's the biggest professional challenge I've ever had. I've been at Newsweek for 26 years now, and not the cable blowhard part of it, but the book part of it, to try to get that sense of historical context that can take it out of the quotidian into something-

Eric Liu:

Do you feel that because you have this book project on the plate right now that you are taking note of the current moment much more attentively than you would have before? Or do you have the same process you would have before of just observing and taking notes on the day's events, whether or not you were going to end up putting that stuff in a column?

Jonathan Alter:

Well, it's just a totally compelling story on so many levels to see history unfolding, to be cursed... live as we all are in interesting times. And so I think I probably would react to it the same way, but I wouldn't be pressing as hard as I am to interview the key players and spend time with the key players, which I have to do for the book. But Phil Graham, who bought Newsweek in 1962 and was publisher of the Washington Post, and his widow, Katharine Graham, who I had the great honor and pleasure to work for for nearly 20 years, Phil Graham said that journalism is the first rough draft of history. And what I'm trying to do is write a book that's maybe at least a second draft, but no matter what I do, it's not going to have that detachment that you can get only from the passage of time. But these are all... I'm not sure how interesting all this... seeing how the sausage gets made is these are kind of craft problems that I have.

But I think the larger question is how do all of us get our arms around this? And that includes the president. How does he get his arms around the complexity of the challenges right now and the way they're all connected to each other? That's the thing, something like healthcare is very connected to the economy. If you want a thriving economy, you have to have a certain number of people who are willing to quit their jobs and start new businesses. And of course your innovative culture here is probably the nation's best example of that. If you're worried about what might happen if you get sick, or you have a preexisting condition, or you're not going to be able to... are you going to be as likely to start that business out of your home, that small business that is responsible for more than 70% of all the jobs in the United States?

And so when critics right now are saying, "Well, we don't have time to worry about healthcare, we've got to fix the economy." It's connected. Fix the economy along what lines? If we don't do it along green lines, then what are we doing? Just trying to restore some economy that doesn't really make sense in the 21st century? So energy becomes very relevant. And I think where Obama's great asset, even if he may fall short of FDR in a whole series of areas, is that he does have some of his teacher in chief qualities where he can explain these things as he did in that speech to Congress in ways that people can understand and then they can leave... and Bill Clinton had some of these qualities as well, they can

leave feeling that they were educated. If you can't explain, then you can't move a nation. They won't go someplace that they don't understand.

Eric Liu:

But the final question that we've got time for here, it kind of sits right on that little balance point between history, even a first draft of history and what we can glimpse around the corner here. And the question is, early as it may be in President Obama's administration, do you feel like the "defining moment," quote, unquote, has already happened perhaps? And if not, what do you think it might be?

Jonathan Alter:

Obama used that phrase, the defining moment, repeatedly in the latter part of the campaign, he used it in Grant Park on election night that we're in a new defining moment. And I don't think he was talking about... when he raised his right hand or when a particular bill was passed, he was talking about this period, call it six months, a year, however one wants to define it, when we are at some sort of a juncture and when we are, once again, as we were in 1933, arguing about the social contract, what do we owe each other as a people? What does government owe us? What do we owe the government? What are our mutual responsibilities, and how will that be played out in our politics and in our public life more broadly? Because a lot of it goes beyond politics.

I was struck in the speech to Congress the other week by a line where Obama said, "When you drop out of high school, you don't just quit on yourself, you're quitting on your country." And thinking, "Wow, if that went up in schools across the country and it became to use," something that you've written so eloquently on, "to use patriotism in a new way, then you're not just changing our politics, you're changing our culture." And if you can use a moment in time, a particular period in our national life to redefine not just the normal early burly of Washington or which bills get passed, but how we define ourselves as a people, then you've really made history, and you've really used an inflection point in our national life to its proper ends.

Eric Liu:

One of the things that I think is so powerful about reading Jon Alter's book, The Defining Moment, is that though it is the story of a president and of the people very close to the president, in the end, it really is, as you're just saying, Jon, a story about how a culture shifts. And cultures don't shift just because a president says shift, cultures shift because people everywhere, around the country, start to embody something and start to hold some values and start to use those values to guide the way they make everyday choices. And one of the things that's powerful about this book is that it makes us ask ourselves right now, "How should our choices be changed in this defining moment?"

Jonathan Alter:

See, that's the thing that when Obama said, "We are the ones we've been waiting for," some of my friends, other pundits leapt on him, "What does that mean? That's just empty... those are just empty words." I always liked that phrase, I thought there was some meaning to that, that ultimately, it really isn't about him. And this brings us full circle to your first question about the president being a vessel, it's ultimately about all of us and what we're capable of, and whether all of us can use a new defining moment to change the country.

Eric Liu:

Well, Jon Alter, thank you for inspiring us, awakening us, and giving us a vessel of history to understand our moment.

Speaker 1:

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