

THE SCANDAL IS THAT JONATHAN ALTER DOESN'T SEE THE SCANDAL

[Sorry for my unannounced absence. I'm on a road trip visiting Mr. EW's family. Thanks to Jim White and bmaz for guarding the likker cabinet! I know they'll keep it safe!]

I once got in trouble for mocking people who thought that blowjobs were a scandal worth legal investigation, but torture was not. Given that Jonathan Alter is the so-called liberal who, weeks after 9/11, affirmatively embraced torture, I'm not surprised he still falls in the former group. On Thursday, he wrote a Bloomberg piece sycophantically wondering how Obama managed to have such a scandal-free Administration. This, of the President whose Administration continues to invent all sorts of legal gimmicks to protect his predecessor's torture. And this, of the guy who is looking high and low for new ways to bail out the banksters from the consequences of their crimes.

This Administration has smothered what was left of rule of law. And yet Alter can't find a scandal?

Part of the problem stems from Alter's terms. he equates scandal with some kind of honesty.

President Barack Obama goes into the 2012 with a weak economy that may doom his reelection. But he has one asset that hasn't received much attention: He's honest.

Obama certainly lies: about his commitment to the public option, his opposition to telecom immunity, and even his belief that no one is above the law. But what Obama does more is spin—spending months claiming that the deficit

is the biggest threat to our country, claiming that a bank settlement is necessary to get the housing market back on track. That kind of spin requires real analysis to catch. Which, I guess, Alter isn't up to.

And part of Alter's problem is his adoption of Brendan Nyhan's definition of scandal: the reference to something as a scandal by a WaPo reporter on that rag's front page.

Nyhan says that political scientists generally see *The Washington Post* as a solid indicator of elite opinion – so for his study, a problem officially curdles into a scandal once the S-word is used in a reporter's own voice in a story that runs on the front page of the *Post*.

Given that one of the WaPo editorial page's most striking ideological commitments is to torture, it seems nearly impossible that torture—and the refusal to prosecute it—would ever be a scandal by Nyhan's (and therefore Alter's) terms. And Dana Milbank's bankster epiphany notwithstanding, WaPo reporters are, almost by definition, isolated from the effects of the banksters' crimes by class and distance.

The WaPo is designed not to see the scandals at the heart of the Obama Administration, not least so people like Jonathan Alter can pretend they don't exist.

And part of Alter's blindness to the scandal of Obama finishing off the rule of law in this country lies in his banal understanding of how spin can immunize from scandal. Apparently, tone matters. Substance does not.

For starters, the tone is always set at the top. Obama puts a premium on personal integrity, and with a few exceptions (Tim Geithner's tax problems in 2009) his administration tends to fire first and ask questions later.

TurboTax matters, the conflict of interest that leads men to try to hide their past horrible decisions (TurboTax Timmeh) or serve their employer (Bill Daley) does not.

And curiously, Alter finds fault with Obama's selection of people like Daley (instead of, presumably, people like Jamie Dimon?), and not with the way Obama permitted people like TurboTax Timmeh to undercut Elizabeth Warren's efforts.

But the White House's intense focus on scandal prevention has had mixed results. The almost proctological vetting process has ended up wounding Obama as much as prospective nominees. He gets cleaner but often less imaginative officials. The kind of swashbuckling figures from the private sector who might have, say, come up with a far more ambitious job-creation plan often don't bother to apply for government service these days.

The problem seems to be that Alter can't see the scandal of Obama's betrayal on the rule of law because he remains committed to elites, like him, playing the fixer, no matter what that does to this country's integrity (or, more basically, their ability to actually fix anything).

The scandal at the heart of the Obama Administration is that people like Alter—and most within the Administration—don't see that they are deploying the tools of the federal government to institutionalize looting and other abuses.

Just as interesting as Alter's failure to see this scandal, though, is his interpretation of how it will affect the 2012 election. In his mind, the economy might doom Obama, but his purported freedom from scandal will mitigate that.

These kinds of stories [Solyndra] are unlikely to derail Obama in 2012. If he

loses, it will be because of the economy
– period.

There are people occupying squares all around this country to protest, largely, bankster corruption. The bankster corruption Obama has enabled. The corruption that caused the lousy economy.

And yet, because Alter doesn't get that Obama's coddling of the banksters exacerbated the lousy economy, he doesn't see that that scandal—Obama catering to his donors the banksters while the biological people of this country suffered as a result—might be the only thing that gives the parade of nutcases auditioning to run against Obama an opening against him.