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Do we write off government lies as national politics?

HANOVER, N.H. — Some of the students about to graduate from under the tall elms of this New England village were asking a well-known social scientist about truth in government. Why, they wanted to know, did their government lie?

The question troubles an alumnus. First, it reminds him of the passage of time. It is not a question he might have asked in the year that he graduated — whether in the '30s, the '40s, the '50s or before. We did not think of our government as a liar. But the question troubles him also because he cannot say that his successors, sitting here with fresh and open faces, are wrong to ask the question.

Take the last few months in the news. The commander of our Air Force in Vietnam is dismissed because, the government says, he is ill. It turns out later that he was violating orders — and had been for months — by indiscriminately bombing prohibited targets, mostly civilian.

A few more examples. We are — according to our government — conducting a campaign of "protective reaction" in Vietnam. We all know the phrase means "bombing."

"Vietnamization," according to our government, "is working." As Wisconsin's Sen. Willam Proxmire has pointed

out, what this means is that American bombing is working.

Our government says we never dropped any bombs on the village of Phuc Loc in North Vietnam. But Anthony Lewis, a reporter for The New York Times, has visited Phuc Loc. He says it would be extremely difficult to fake the bomb craters he saw or the screaming women he saw who told him of the attack and of the deaths of their children.

Get away from Vietnam for a final example. The President tells us that every budget dollar contains 42 cents for "human welfare." Those who examine the fine print discover that under "human welfare" the President has included the Social Security trust fund which is not supposed to be part of the budget, as well as the Veterans Administration and Selective Service.

Have those of us who are not members of the graduating class grown so tired that we are willing to accept untruths and put it down as "just politics"?

Hannah Arendt, the social scientist and author of a basic work on totalitarianism, is the chief spokesman for the older generation at this seminar. She admits that "truth has never been one of the political virtues," but she thinks the government does not usually lie deliberately. "The liar believes," she says, "in the truthfulness of his lie."