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Beyond Belief

Little white balls that explode when they touch water are being found on California's beaches, and both Army and Navy swear they know nothing about them.

Maybe they are telling the truth; maybe they aren't. The time is past when we took it for granted that our government was honest with us. Now we know it is just as likely to tell us a lie if a lie is more convenient.

In a ludicrous way, then, these little white balls are symbols of the credibility gap.

The credibility gap — the growing suspicion that Uncle Sam is Fibber McGee in disguise — is attributed to the devious character of President Johnson and the Vietnam War. But it goes back much further than that.

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FOR MOST OF US it goes back at least to Gary Powers and the U-2 incident. And ironically it wasn't a falsehood that first disillusioned us but an inept admission of the truth.

When the Russians revealed that our high-flying "weather" planes were in reality spy ships that systematically violated their air space on espionage missions, there was, you'll recall, several hours of high confusion in Washington.

The State Department issued a denial, a denial that immediately fell apart when the Russians exhibited their evidence. Then, with the egg on our face still fresh, President Eisenhower blurted out the truth.

Somehow it wasn't the false denial that shocked Americans. It was Ike's honest confession.

We were vaguely aware that our government had an intelligence service. (The good guys have an intelligence service; the bad guys have a spy network.) But it shocked us to hear the details from dear

old Ike, our apostle of apple pie honesty. In a wildly irrational way we felt he shouldn't be involved in such unsavory matters.

The credibility gap had begun.

President Kennedy's most dramatic contribution to it was the Bay of Pigs mess. It is difficult now to remember what a surprise that was. For weeks the Cuban radio blared that the U.S. was plotting an invasion. Our officials off-handedly dismissed the charge as something too silly for serious answer, and most Americans scoffed at such a clumsy Big Lie.

But as it turned out, Castro was telling the truth and our own government was lying to us. The credibility gap widened.

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MORE RECENTLY, we've learned of sub rosa arms sales to a dozen trigger-happy countries. We've learned that a CIA agent posed as a scholarly author to plant propaganda in a national magazine. We've learned of secret CIA subsidies to everything from students to newspapermen.

As for McNamara's mistaken predictions about the Vietnam war, it doesn't really matter whether they are simply wrong guesses or calculated deceptions; we no longer believe him anyway just as we don't believe the Army and Navy when they disown those little white balls.

In many ways this growing skepticism is a healthy thing. The world is a complicated place, and we need to be more sophisticated in our approach to it. Most other peoples long ago acknowledged that deception has its place in the affairs of nations. Americans are the only ones left who still play cross-my-heart.

With considerable misgivings, then, let's revise our credo. "My country, right or wrong," is no longer enough. We must also pledge, "My country, true or false."