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In May of 1997, several hundred veterans gathered in Arlington National Cemetery to honor the men who gave their life during the Southeast Asian conflicts. From the 1950s to the 1970s, CIA-trained Hmong guerrilla forces played a major role in the war against communism, which Americans know as the Vietnam War. For years the American government denied any dealing in Laos; they denied that the CIA had local operatives disrupting the Ho Chi Minh Trail, which ran through Laos; and they denied that Air America, the “commercial” airline which flew into Laos carried any military supplies. The American government’s deception, in this case, caused harm not only to American citizens but to the Hmong as well. It wasn’t until after the Fall of Saigon in 1975 that Nixon acknowledged any involvement in Laos, however, the opportunity to examine the government’s deception failed as the American public wanted nothing more to do with Southeast Asia. Although many politicians argue, and our electoral system supports, that the average citizen does not have enough information to fully grasp particular situations, this reasoning does not permit the people in power to lie, and it should be required that issues concerning the public be openly discussed.

Sissela Bok defines a noble lie as “based on the benefits they may confer and the long-range harm they can avoid.” Bok argues that people in power lie as to protect the people from circumstances “too uncomfortable, too painful,” which can be described as a paternalistic relationship between those who govern and those who don’t. The concept of a paternalistic relationship is not new for the American government. One only has to look at Native American history or Filipino history, where the government played the role of ‘great father’ or ‘big brother’, respectively. These relationships allowed the U.S. government to expand its borders and fulfill its Manifest Destiny, in which millions of Native Americans were beat, raped, converted, and/or killed for their own good; and in addition, allowed the U.S. government to control the Philippines economically, politically, and in some ways physically, allowing only certain hand-picked members of the Filipino elite to receive education in America. Noble lies, as defined by Bok, suggest that they are told to avoid harm, which implies that those who utter noble lies will eventually acknowledge the lies and offer the truths. Over the years, the Native American

and Filipino communities have requested that the American government recognize its painful history, only to be met with words such as “ungrateful,” “the greater good,” and “better off.” Noble lies, which cause harm then and now, have no benefits whatsoever, whether exposed or not.

When the Framers of the Constitution developed the Electoral College, which is the system that elects the U.S. president, they did not trust the average citizen. The Electoral College allows one vote for each of the U.S. Representatives and Senators of a particular state. The number of Representatives depends on the population of the state whereas each state is allowed two Senators. For instance, Montana has three electoral votes; Montana has one U.S. Representative and two U.S. Senators. The voting population votes for electoral candidates who go to Washington, DC, to vote for the President. The presidential candidate with the majority of electoral votes wins the presidency. In other words, this country does not have a direct election for the presidency. After the 2000 election, when the candidate with the most votes lost the Electoral College vote, thousands of Americans called on the government to examine the efficiency of the Electoral College. Bok writes, “...officials view the public’s concern for ethics as understandable but hardly realistic...[these concerns are] without any understanding of practical exigencies.” People in power distrust and discount those without power, those without education, and those without experience; in turn those without power, education, and experience distrust those noble liars. It is evident with the Electoral College that there is already in place a systematic cycle of deceit.

History has proven, whether it is Manifest Destiny, the control of the Philippines, or the reasons regarding the invasion of Iraq, that the American government deceives and distorts the American public. We have in place a system which holds that distrust is “necessary merely at *one* stage in the education of the public.” The noble liars’ defense is to protect the American people from the realities of pain, suffering, and war. Bok argues that issues concerning the public should be openly discussed and free of distortion; and where “duplicity is to be allowed in exceptional cases,” there ought to be open discussions regarding the conditions for these cases. In the case of the Hmong veterans, there has yet to be any open discussions. It seems that without grassroots organization,

some unrest and protest from the American public, the government is more than willing to keep quiet about its lies, noble or not.