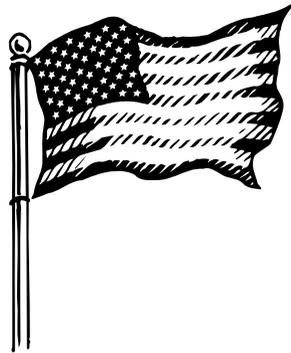


# MENDACITY



**...Is NOT AN AMERICAN VALUE®**

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# MENDACITY

...IS **Not** AN AMERICAN VALUE

A DEMOCRACY IS ONLY AS EFFECTIVE AS ITS CITIZENS, WHICH IS WHY CIVIC EDUCATION IS ESSENTIAL TO PRESERVING OUR DEMOCRACY. ONLY BY ENCOURAGING PEOPLE TO THINK ABOUT WHAT IT MEANS TO BE AN AMERICAN, AND HOW OUR COUNTRY WORKS, WILL OUR COUNTRY CONTINUE TO THRIVE IN THE FUTURE.

ONE WAY TO APPROACH CIVIC EDUCATION IS BY DISCUSSING “AMERICAN VALUES.” THESE ARE EXEMPLARY BEHAVIORS OR CHARACTER TRAITS THAT HAVE ALWAYS BEEN VALUED AS IDEAL FOR AMERICAN GOVERNMENT AND CITIZENSHIP. “AMERICAN VALUES” ARE SEPARATE FROM “HABITS.” HABITS ARE ACTIVITIES THAT AMERICANS MIGHT FALL INTO, BUT ARE NOT “VALUES.” BY DISTINGUISHING BETWEEN THE TWO, VALUES AND HABITS, DISCUSSION GROUP MEMBERS WILL BE ABLE TO THINK ABOUT WHAT THEY APPRECIATE MOST ABOUT OUR DEMOCRATIC SYSTEM AND ENGAGE IN DIALOGUE AND DISCUSSION AS RESPONSIBLE CITIZENS.



## MENDACITY...IS NOT AN AMERICAN VALUE

### DEFINITIONS

Why definitions? Words are extremely powerful, and dictionaries are always very precise about what vocabulary they use in their definitions. Mendacity is a word rarely used today in common practice. Before going through the definitions, ask the group what they think mendacity means. Once they are on the right track, then go through the definitions of “mendacity,” “lie,” and “to lie” and discuss the differences.

The group may end up with the conclusion that the concept of a lie is very complex, and just as difficult to grasp as the concept of the truth. For example, in order for something to be a lie, must there be intent to mislead or deceive behind the statement, or must someone else simply believe the statement to be untrue, regardless of intent?

Mendacity is a habit that many people fall into at some point in their life, whether the lies are small or large. Ultimately a government will always be dependent upon its people. Therefore, it is impossible that a government will not wrestle with its own honesty, just as people do. As citizens it is our duty to decide how far mendacity in government can go.

Is it ever acceptable for a government to be dishonest? Are there times when a government must be secretive or blur the truth? How truthful, in general, do the group members believe the government is or has been throughout history? All of these are very large issues, which will be discussed throughout this guide. After the group discussion on the given definitions, have the group create their own definition for mendacity *as it applies to the government*. (Definitions taken from Merriam-Webster Online (<http://www.m-w.com>) )

#### For mendacity

n. The quality or state of being mendacious. (Mendacious is an adjective defined as “given to or characterized by deception or falsehood or divergence from absolute truth.”)

#### For lie

1. n. an assertion of something known or believed by the speaker to be untrue with intent to deceive
2. n. an untrue or inaccurate statement that may or may not be believed true by the speaker
3. n. something that misleads or deceives
4. a charge of lying

#### For ‘to lie’

1. v. to make an untrue statement with intent to deceive
2. to create a false or misleading impression

## VOICES IN HISTORY

Quotations help to point out values that are important to American society, or in this case, to point out the habits which fall short of our aspirations. The following collection of quotes indicates that the issue of mendacity has long been a part of our country's dialogue on government. Many other quotes can be found by encouraging group members to explore the Internet. Ask the group to discuss the relationship of mendacity and democracy in light of these quotes.

*"I am a firm believer in the people. If given truth, they can be depended upon to meet any national crisis. The great point is to bring them the real facts."*  
– Abraham Lincoln

*"A lie gets halfway around the world before the truth has a chance to get its pants on."* – Winston Churchill

*"One may sometimes tell a lie, but the grimace that accompanies it tells the truth."*  
– Nietzsche

*"The naked truth is always better than the best dressed lie."*  
– Ann Landers

*"A lie cannot live."* – Martin Luther King, Jr.

*"Truth is the only safe ground to stand on."*  
– Elizabeth Cady Stanton

*"Repetition does not transform a lie into a truth."*  
– Franklin D. Roosevelt



## **HISTORICAL SOURCES & STUDY QUESTIONS**

How does one decide what an American value might be? The soundest approach is by using core historical documents. Materials ingrained into American culture include the Declaration of Independence, the Federalist Papers, and the Constitution, as well as famous speeches, Supreme Court cases, and other sources documenting events or ideas from American history.

Before moving on to the historical sources and study questions listed here, consider starting a group discussion by asking how the group might identify an American “value.” Have the group make a list of what it considers to be “American habits” that are not values and why. See if these habits or sources they come up with are similar to those listed in these study guides.

### **GEORGE WASHINGTON AND THE CHERRY TREE**

<http://www.apples4theteacher.com/holidays/presidents-day/george-washington/short-stories/the-cherry-tree.html> )

Many people look to religion or other belief systems for anecdotes or rules concerning lying. However, American folklore also addresses dishonesty – nowhere more famously than in the story found in “The Life of George Washington” by M.L. Weems. In this work, Weems provides the classic story about George Washington and the cherry tree. This was only an anecdote to help flesh out Washington’s childhood and demonstrate his honesty, but because of the importance surrounding our first president, it has thrived as a fable for American morality. It is unlikely that the group members will even need the link above to recall the story. Have the group describe the fable, and where they have heard it. Then move on to the following questions.

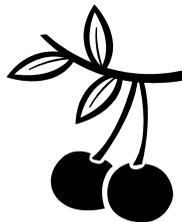
1) Why is it important that George Washington states that he “cannot tell a lie” in the story? Is it simply a way to tell children that they should not be dishonest, or is it also intentionally portraying Washington as an extremely honest person? If the latter, does that mean that American society requires that a president be an honest man? George Washington, after all, has become the symbol for the presidency. Do any group members feel that there are times when a president must be less than completely honest? Or do they see the idea as entirely unacceptable? If not, have them describe situations where they feel a president might have to be less than straight-forward with citizens.

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### HISTORICAL SOURCES AND STUDY QUESTIONS CONTINUED

2) The story finishes with the father praising Washington's honesty: *"My son, that you should be afraid to tell; the truth is more to me than a thousand trees! Yes—though they were blossomed with silver and had leaves of the purest gold!"* This is the final message in this American fable — that honesty is a trait that is valued by Americans. Have the group members try to brainstorm other American fables and stories where the message holds honesty as a virtue, or have them browse the Internet to search for more. With honesty as the key message to so many tales, it becomes clearer that honesty is a central value in America and throughout most of the world for ethics and morality. Ask the group whether the government should be held to the same standards as normal citizens, or should special rules apply? Why or why not?

3) The story by Weems is just that — a story. The incident with the cherry tree reportedly never occurred in the life of George Washington. Ironically, the group is exploring a story about honesty that is untrue. Ask the group about their thoughts on this. Is this fable an example of mendacity? Is it a situation where mendacity is used for a good reason? Does its fictional nature hurt the original purpose of the story? Why or why not?



**THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE** [http://www.archives.gov/national-archives-experience/charters/declaration\\_transcript.html](http://www.archives.gov/national-archives-experience/charters/declaration_transcript.html)

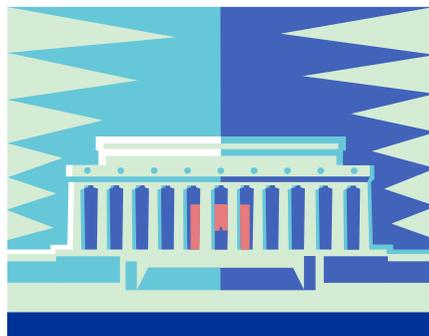
Before addressing some of the core historical documents and how they relate to mendacity, it is important to note that in many ways the American value “accountability” can be paired with the American habit “mendacity.” Is it possible for a government to be accountable if it is dishonest? If the group has already gone over the accountability guide, it can look back on that discussion for insight into this mendacity guide.

## MENDACITY...IS NOT AN AMERICAN VALUE

### HISTORICAL SOURCES AND STUDY QUESTIONS CONTINUED

1) In the beginning of the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson states: “-*That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.*” This brings up an interesting point. According to the Declaration signers, the government must acknowledge that it rules only with the “consent of the governed.” If our society values honesty and frowns upon mendacity, is it possible that a government can be dishonest and still have the consent of those they govern? Or is it necessary instead for citizens to hold a mendacious or dishonest government accountable? How do the group members feel? They are citizens themselves; do they believe that their “consent” is present without disclosure? Why or why not? Do they believe they have the power to hold the government accountable? Why or why not?

2) The Declaration of Independence delivers a lengthy list of grievances to the English sovereign. However, Jefferson does not point out a single act of dishonesty or deceit in this list of grievances. Have the group members discuss this absence. It is possible that the king was exceedingly honest, but more than likely there is a different reason. Perhaps Jefferson did not believe that dishonesty was something that citizens must prohibit in their leaders, or saw it as simply a habit that any government must occasionally embrace. On the other hand, could all of these grievances have dishonesty behind them in some way? By abusing the power that Jefferson feels only the citizens can grant, was the king being inherently dishonest?



## MENDACITY...IS NOT AN AMERICAN VALUE

### HISTORICAL SOURCES AND STUDY QUESTIONS CONTINUED

**THE UNITED STATES CONSTITUTION** <http://www.archives.gov/national-archives-experience/charters/constitution.html>

(for the Constitution click on 'read transcript')

1) When discussing the Constitution in relation to mendacity, group members should have the opportunity to cross-reference to the accountability guide. That guide allows group members to review articles of the Constitution that explicitly describe many of the powers and limitations of the government. When discussing mendacity, have the group members look over and think about these limitations of power. Consider starting a discussion about why the Constitution does not directly address the honesty of the branches of the government. Explore the potential reasons why this is so.

2) Honesty is central to the moral fabric of America and the world, so perhaps the framers of the Constitution felt it was unnecessary to list any rules regarding what they believe it to be. On the other hand, perhaps the framers were just being pragmatic. Lies vary greatly in degree, and it would also be nearly impossible for a law on honesty to be enforced, except in very specific situations (such as perjury). Or perhaps the issue was indirectly addressed through the checks and balances put in place between different branches of government. Could any government live up to the Constitution if it was regularly mendacious? Encourage the group to brainstorm and discuss many perspectives.

3) At some point in the discussion, the group may have noted that, at points, the Constitution is vague or imprecise. If not, you might consider pointing this out. How has this imprecision provided the flexibility to adapt over time? Ask the group members to discuss whether that has been beneficial to the country, or not? Why? For example, the Constitution states what powers the Supreme Court may have, but does not specify every detail of how a trial before the court will go. It gives the president the power to appoint people in his agencies and bureaus, but does not specify what those should be, or how they should behave (other than they are there to enforce and protect the laws and the Constitution). How does the group feel about this, especially as it relates to accountability and dishonesty?

4) Do the group members differentiate secrecy from dishonesty? Can there be secrecy without dishonesty? If the government is secretive for reasons of national security or privacy, does that necessarily mean it is being dishonest? The interaction of these concepts can result in a very practical and thought-provoking dialogue concerning the government.

## **CONTEMPORARY EXAMPLES**

Mendacity continues to be a focal point of our national dialogue. Nearly every day issues related to mendacity are reported, debated, and discussed in the media and government.

As a group, go through a stack of newspapers or magazines, or browse the Internet and have group members point out articles that reflect concerns they have about mendacity. Discuss these in the context of the ideas and concepts already pointed out from the definitions and historical sources. Ask group members how their views were shaped by their own experiences with mendacity. Ask them to consider if the article or report is promoting a particular point of view. What is being reported and what is not? Why? What additional information would the group like to have?

The following are some examples of mendacity issues that are often in the news to help begin discussion.

### **SUNSHINE LAWS**

(Article: Jacksonville Business Journal -- <http://www.bizjournals.com/jacksonville/stories/1996/07/01/editorial2.html> CBS News -- <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2000/11/12/politics/main248889.shtml> Missouri Attorney General's Office -- <http://www.ago.mo.gov/sunshinelaw/sunshinelaw.htm> )

Sunshine Laws, or Freedom of Information Acts, are laws designed to ensure that governments make their meetings and records open to citizens. These laws affect everyday issues, as well as large ones. In the first article, published prior to the 2000 election, it states: *“Open records let you find out such things as whether the lake is clean enough for swimming, if there’s been a leak at a nuclear power plant, how many times guns are found at school, how much money a football coach earns at a public university, who owns the empty lot that could become a neighborhood playground.”* The second article indicates how the application of these laws may become hotly contested in situations such as the 2000 presidential election.

1) In Missouri, the law is very clear: *“It is the public policy of this state that meetings, records, votes, actions, and deliberations of public governmental bodies be open to the public discourse unless otherwise provided by law.”* How much transparency does the group believe there should be in the government? Why?

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### CONTEMPORARY EXAMPLES CONTINUED

2) Have group members discuss the benefits of state laws such as these and how they relate to the concepts of “mendacity” and “accountability.” For example, with Sunshine Laws it becomes not only more difficult for a government to mislead its citizens (since all of the records are there) but it also allows citizens to hold government officials accountable for any decisions they have made (since all of the information is in theory readily available).

3) In Sunshine Laws openness is the value, and without the option of privately engaging in public business, officials are not given the option of secrecy. After discussing how Sunshine Laws relate to mendacity and accountability, have the group members browse the Internet or a public library to find out different kinds of information available to them due to Sunshine Laws. Consider having them share some specific examples.

4) Do Sunshine Laws ever operate to the detriment of the public? How and why?

### **POLITICAL SPIN**

In the 2004 Presidential Election, “political spin” was a hotly-debated issue. For example, after debates, commentators would muse on how the candidates’ election managers would “spin” the results. In order to understand political spin, let’s look at two definitions from Merriam-Webster Online. Spin, the verb, is defined as (3b): *“to evolve, express, or fabricate by processes of mind or imagination.”* Spin, the noun, is defined as (4): *“a special point of view, emphasis, or interpretation.”* Therefore, political spin can be defined as media or government figures taking a subject and shaping it to reflect a special point of view or emphasis.

1) Have the group members think back on the definitions for lying. Is the intent of spin to mislead? If so, is it any different than lying? How? Or is it only an emphasis on a particular view over another? When does “spin” go too far?

2) There is such a prevalence of spin in the media and government today that there are fact-checking organizations dedicated to it. For example, have the group members visit the website: <http://www.factcheck.org>. Take a look at the first few articles, and contrast the group’s opinion on the issues discussed with the actual facts given on this website. Ask the group members how they feel about the gap between opinion and facts. Do they consider “spin” to be mendacity? Have them discuss the implications of spin.

## MENDACITY...IS NOT AN AMERICAN VALUE

### CONTEMPORARY EXAMPLES CONTINUED

3) A good discussion starter might be to ask the group if spin misleads the public. If so, what are the consequences of a body of citizens that are misinformed about their own government or country? Can they make decisions as responsible citizens? Does “spin” cause citizens to grow apathetic toward the political process? Why or why not? What suggestion does the group have for improving public discourse and limiting the prevalence of “spin?”



#### **CLINTON AND BUSH**

Perhaps one of the easiest ways to offend someone is to call them a liar, to accuse them of mendacity. Two presidents since Nixon, both in office for two terms, have earned their fair share of accusations of mendacity. Bill Clinton was accused of perjury before a grand jury in the Monica Lewinsky scandal. George W. Bush and his administration have been accused of misleading the public about weapons of mass destruction in Iraq and their motives for going to war there. There is a wealth of information on both issues available on the Internet. Have the group members explore news websites – such as network websites, or *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*.

Any of these will have articles on these issues in their archives, and there are two important questions to focus on when discussing them with the group: 1) What values do these accusations in each context reveal? Mendacity is at the heart of both of these issues; focus the discussion on how mendacity was related to each issue. 2) What concerns were raised with respect to how this dishonesty affected the country as a whole?

Both of these issues can be highly partisan, and thus if discussed it is important to discuss them both. As citizens, we do not always have the opportunity to have a mediated environment for exploring partisan issues. By focusing the group on the underlying values identified and concerns raised, you can, as a group leader, help maintain a *dialogue* and avoid partisan debate.

## **SECONDARY SOURCES**

Below are links to websites of organizations that deal with mendacity.

Programs for addressing hate and how to engage in beneficial dialogue are available through The Communications Center at

<http://www.buildingdialogue.com> .

Open the Government.org

<http://www.openthegovernment.org>

The Mendacity Index (Washington Monthly Opinion):

<http://www.washingtonmonthly.com/features/2003/0309.mendacity-experts.html>

Harry Frankfurt's Book (On Bullsh\*t):

<http://www.pupress.princeton.edu/titles/7929.html>

Harper's Magazine Online Mendacity Page:

<http://www.harpers.org/Mendacity.html>

You might want to use this guide with the guide "Accountability ... is an American Value." The following are some resources that address accountability.

Factcheck.org

<http://www.factcheck.org>

The Government Accountability Office

<http://www.gao.gov>

GAP – Government Accountability Project

<http://www.whistleblower.org>

Government Accountability – George Mason University

<http://www.mercatus.org/governmentaccountability/>

OMB Watch –

<http://www.ombwatch.org>

## **MENDACITY...IS NOT AN AMERICAN VALUE**

### **SECONDARY SOURCES CONTINUED**

In order to fully understand issues surrounding government accountability and mendacity, it is also important that the group members understand the system of checks and balances in the United States government. Below are some links to various guides that can help explain how the system works. Also, now would be a good time to review our Internet research guide in our Other Resources page on the website.

Wikipedia

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Checks\\_and\\_balances](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Checks_and_balances)

Boston Globe Editorial:

[http://www.boston.com/news/globe/editorial\\_opinion/oped/articles/2005/05/04/checks\\_and\\_balances/](http://www.boston.com/news/globe/editorial_opinion/oped/articles/2005/05/04/checks_and_balances/)

USconstitution.net

[http://www.usconstitution.net/consttop\\_cnb.html](http://www.usconstitution.net/consttop_cnb.html)

Factmonster.com

<http://www.factmonster.com/ipka/A0777009.html>

Cyber Learning

<http://www.cyberlearning-world.com/lessons/oct6usg.htm>



[WWW.AMERICANVALUESARE.COM](http://WWW.AMERICANVALUESARE.COM)

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[WWW.BUILDINGDIALOGUE.COM](http://WWW.BUILDINGDIALOGUE.COM)