



MORE PERFECT

McChrystal Group

Conversations *on* Character

NATIONAL & COMMUNITY DISCUSSION GUIDE

INTRODUCTION

[More Perfect](#), an alliance of 37 of the nation's Presidential Centers and more than 100 partners working together to advance five Democracy Goals for American renewal, and General Stanley McChrystal, who has written a book to inspire living with purpose and integrity and challenging us to examine not just our deeds but who we become through them, have joined together to launch a series of public events designed to foster reflection on personal, organizational, and national character.

Our ambition is to foster “Conversations on Character” across the nation – among Americans in homes, houses of worship, schools, nonprofits, businesses, government and other places where people gather. The inquiry is to understand our values and beliefs and how they are reflected in our conduct and the decisions we make in life.

Below is a guide with questions and content that may be valuable as conversations emerge. It invites conversation to explore dimensions of our **personal character; character in our roles as citizens in communities, workplaces and other public settings; and the character of America as a nation**. We hope that individuals and leaders of institutions will reflect on their values and ideals and how their behavior and conduct reflect them. In turn, as the nation moves toward the 250th anniversary of its birth in 2026, we can all consider how character informs our journey toward a “more perfect union.”

WE THE PEOPLE

On July 4, 2026, America will celebrate the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence that gave birth to our nation. The Declaration honors self-evident rights to “life, liberty and the pursuit of Happiness” (with “Happiness” being a cooperative enterprise we help one another achieve). The Declaration ends by swelling the chorus of union: “We mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor.” The Declaration breathed life into the U.S. Constitution, whose preamble created a powerful north star for a nation – one built on continuous improvement (“a more perfect union”) and our means of progress being each other (“We the people of the United States”). In a democracy, “citizen” is the highest office and history teaches us that transformational change first comes from the ground up.

The oldest written constitution in use today, the U.S. Constitution, boldly vested power in the people. With it came the assumption that citizens would cultivate civic virtue and character that would honor our system and preserve our union over time. Republican John W. Gardner, who served in Democratic President Lyndon B. Johnson’s Cabinet, summed up the proposition well: “Liberty and duty, freedom and responsibility. That’s the deal.”

On September 17, 1787 Benjamin Franklin reinforced the important role of citizens when he signed the Constitution and then departed the Constitutional Convention. An American outside the Convention, Elizabeth Willing Powell, asked Dr. Franklin what kind of government the delegates had created. Dr. Franklin responded, “a Republic, if you can keep it.”

Americans are at a critical juncture with worrisome trends showing a lack of trust in each other and institutions, increased polarization and hate-fueled violence, and decline in participation in community institutions that traditionally have knitted us together. Many Americans wonder if our democracy is working for them, and a large majority of Americans want to make a difference as we approach this important anniversary and are looking for ways to contribute to and improve our union.

“Character is the product of
deeply held convictions and the
discipline to consistently act on them.”

GENERAL STANLEY McCHRYSTAL



Personal Character

1. What is “character”?

Character has been defined as “the moral qualities distinctive to an individual.” We like to frame it as beliefs reflected in behavior – where conviction meets discipline. How do you define character? What is a simple definition you can remember and repeatedly apply to your life?

2. What are your beliefs? Values? Ideals? Where did you acquire these beliefs? Who were the examples in your life that you thought demonstrated good character?
3. Parents often teach their children the “Golden Rule” – “do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” Does this rule help us shape our character? How have you applied it in your life? Have you applied it to those with whom you disagree or have had some conflict?
4. What life choices have you made or are you making? How do those choices reflect or not reflect your beliefs or character? Are there circumstances where you believed one thing, but acted another way? How do you feel when you have had those experiences?

“I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.”

DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

Explore More: [Step Away from the Carousel](#)

5. We encourage you to read the book, [On Character: Choices That Define a Life](#), by General Stanley McChrystal, and to write in a journal your own short chapters on your life and how the choices you have made and are making reflect or don't reflect your character.
6. Columnist and author David Brooks has distinguished between "resume virtues" – accomplishments you would feature on your biography, and "eulogy virtues" – a person's character and relationships for which you would like to be remembered. Imagine someone is giving your eulogy. What would you like someone to say about you? What qualities would you like to be highlighted?



Our [U.S. Constitution](#) vested power in the people to form a more perfect union and elect their representatives. In a real sense, "citizen" is the highest office in the land. Given that responsibility, please explore what it means to have character in your role as a citizen in a democracy, in your workplace, house of worship, school, or community organization.

1. What elements of character are important when you consider your role as a citizen? Since being a citizen involves interacting with others in communities, states and the nation, how do you best express your character in public settings? How do you treat others with whom you interact? What happens when you are in discussions with people with whom you disagree?

"Character is like a tree and reputation like its shadow. The shadow is what we think of it; the tree is the real thing."

ABRAHAM LINCOLN

2. Some traits that have been associated with character include: Honesty, kindness, empathy, courage, resilience, gratitude, forgiveness, self-regulation, curiosity, and a love of learning. What traits do you value in your role as a citizen? What experiences have you had as a citizen – in schools, communities, faith-based institutions, interacting with public leaders, etc...– that reflect upon your character and the character of those institutions or leaders?
3. What does the absence of character look like? What are the consequences of such absence?
4. Are there other things that contribute to the collective character of a country's citizenry? Learning about our shared history? Helping neighbors and those in need in communities? Voting in elections? Supporting civic organizations?



Thomas Paine, the author of the pamphlet “Common Sense” that ignited support for the American Revolution, said, “reputation is what men and women think of us; character is what God and angels know of us.” Americans elect their leaders and expect them to have good character. Leaders are also found in businesses, nonprofits, faith-based institutions, and other organizations that are making decisions every day.

“We are either a United people, or we are not.
If the former, let us, in all matters of general
concern act as a nation, which have national objects
to promote, and a national character to support.”

GEORGE WASHINGTON

1. What are the values and ideals that make up America's character? Please read and discuss with peers the [Declaration of Independence](#). What values and ideals does it express? Thomas Jefferson, the author of the Declaration, talked about "self-evident truths" and "that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness". He said, "that among these" as an inquiry to future generations. What other truths do you think Americans should respect?
2. Please read the [U.S. Constitution](#) – which outlines the rules for how our society and government operates. What are the rules of the game? What do each of the three branches of government have authority to do? What does the U.S. Constitution assume about the character of leaders and citizens?
3. Please read the [Bill of Rights](#) – the first ten amendments to the U.S. Constitution that articulate our rights as citizens and serve as a check on government power. In expressing your rights – for example, freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, freedom of religion, etc..., what traits of character are particularly important?
4. Identify examples in your own life going to school, working in a business, serving in a nonprofit or faith-based institution, or engaging in community settings where you have seen these values, ideals and rights in practice. Who were the leaders you admired for their character? What was it about them that inspired you?
5. How does the character of the citizenry contribute to America's character? How do you view our country's character?
6. "Constitutional character" refers to the qualities and values a leader exhibits in upholding the principles of the U.S. and State Constitutions and democratic processes. One historian said that having "Constitutional Character" was essential for our system to work – leaders who followed the rules. This includes qualities like respect for basic rights, due process, responsibility, tolerance, and a commitment to truth. It also encompasses traits like civility, individual responsibility, self-discipline, civic-mindedness, open-mindedness, and the willingness to compromise. Do you think our leaders are reflecting Constitutional character? How and how not?
7. What are some ways in which strong or weak Constitutional character in a leader might affect the lives of citizens?
8. Who are leaders across American history who you would hold up as having outstanding character that reflects the values and ideals of our nation?

"Character cannot be developed in ease and quiet. Only through experience and trial and suffering can the soul be strengthened, vision cleared, ambition inspired, and success achieved."

HELLEN KELLER

RELEVANT LINKS

[U.S. Constitution Resources](#) | [Full Text](#)

[Declaration of Independence Resources](#) | [Full Text](#)

[Bill of Rights Resources](#) | [Full Text](#)