



Lesson Plan: Whistleblowers

OVERVIEW

In this lesson, students will study the cases of two whistleblowers and judge whether the actions of whistleblowers help or hurt society. Students will then explain how they would have acted if they had been in the whistleblowers' situations.

The clips used in this lesson are from the film **The Most Dangerous Man in America: Daniel Ellsberg and the Pentagon Papers**, a documentary about a Vietnam War strategist who leaked 7,000 pages of top secret government documents to *The New York Times* after he discovered that the role of the United States in the war was based on decades of lies. For more information on the Pentagon Papers and a timeline of events, see POV's [Background](#) page for this film and the [Related Resources](#) section of this lesson.

POV documentaries can be recorded off-the-air and used for educational purposes for up to one year from their initial broadcast. In addition, POV offers a free lending library of DVDs and VHS tapes that you can borrow anytime during the school year. Get started by joining our [Community Network](#).

OBJECTIVES

By the end of this lesson, students will:

- Define the term "whistleblower."
- Describe the situations faced by two whistleblowers, including Daniel Ellsberg, who leaked the Pentagon Papers during the Vietnam War.
- Explain what they would have done if they had been in the situations of the two whistleblowers studied in the lesson.
- Evaluate whether the actions of whistleblowers help or hurt society.

GRADE LEVELS

6-12

SUBJECT AREAS

World History, U.S. History, Civics, Journalism, Current Events

MATERIALS

- Internet access and equipment to conduct research and show the class online resources

- Handout: Whistleblowers (PDF file)
- Vietnam War map [http://cla.calpoly.edu/~lcall/204/8-10/vietnam_map.jpg]

ESTIMATED TIME NEEDED

One to two 50-minute class periods

FILM CLIPS

Clip 1: “Gulf of Tonkin Incident” (length 2:53)

The clip begins at 2:24 with an aerial shot of the Pentagon and ends at 5:17 when Ellsberg says, “. . . including me.”

Clip 2: “What Ellsberg Learned From the Pentagon Papers” (length 1:46)

The clip begins at 30:41 with the narration “In August of 1969 . . .” and ends at 32:27, when Ellsberg says, “. . . with no end in sight.”

Clip 3: “Willing to Risk Prosecution” (length 2:44)

The clip begins at 40:51 with the narration “Keeping silent in public . . .” It ends at 43:35, when Ellsberg says, “. . . and headed home.”

ACTIVITY

1. Tell the class that a “whistleblower” is someone who uncovers and publicly raises concerns about misconduct or wrongdoings from within an organization.
2. Explain that you are going to show the class a series of brief video clips that tell the story of a whistleblower named Daniel Ellsberg, who leaked top secret government documents to the press during the Vietnam War in order to show how U.S. presidents had misled the American public about their intentions for the war.
3. Distribute the Whistleblowers handout. Then, ask the students to note details about Ellsberg’s story in the first three rows of the second column of the handout as they watch the clips. Explain that Daniel Ellsberg specialized in crisis decision-making and the command control of nuclear weapons. He worked for the RAND Corporation, which provided strategic information and analysis to key U.S. military decision-makers, such as Robert McNamara, who was then secretary of defense. Show the class the Vietnam War map and let students know that it depicts Southeast Asia during the Vietnam War in the 1960s and early 1970s. Point out the location of the Gulf of Tonkin and show Clip 1.
4. Next, explain that three years after the Gulf of Tonkin incident, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara asked the RAND Corporation to put together a full history of U.S. decision-making on Vietnam from the early 1940s through March 1968. Thirty-six men, including Daniel Ellsberg, worked on the project. Then, show Clips 2 and 3.

5. After watching Clip 3, review the content provided in the fourth and fifth rows of the second column of the handout. Do students think that Ellsberg did the right thing by leaking top secret government documents to the public? Why or why not?

6. Have students form pairs. Ask each pair to refer to POV's Whistleblower Timeline and choose a "present-day" whistleblower to study (2000-present). Partners should then work together to complete the third column of the handout with information about this person. Pairs should refer to the timeline and research additional reference materials as needed. Ask students then to complete the handout's Analysis and Application questions individually.

ASSESSMENT SUGGESTIONS

Students can be assessed on:

- Contributions to the work done with their partners.
- The quality of information and analysis they provide on the handout.

EXTENSIONS AND ADAPTATIONS

- If time permits, have pairs take turns giving class presentations about the whistleblowers they selected from the timeline. Ask the students to consider how the cases of their present-day whistleblowers differ from the case of Daniel Ellsberg. Students may also share what they would have done if they were in the present-day whistleblowers' situations.
- Learn about whistleblower protection laws. Have students research and summarize laws such as the Whistleblower Protection Act of 1989 and the Sarbanes-Oxley Act of 2002. Sites such as WhistleblowerLaws.com [http://whistleblowerlaws.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=60&Itemid=39] and the National Whistleblowers Center [http://www.whistleblowers.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=741&Itemid=161] provide details on whistleblower laws in each state.
- Report on President Obama's record on government transparency. During his campaign, President Obama promised the most open, transparent, and accountable executive branch in history. Ask the class to examine his record by reviewing the data in the document "Secrecy Report Card 2010," [http://www.openthegovernment.org/otg/SecrecyRC_2010.pdf] which evaluates the last three months of the Bush administration and the first nine months of the Obama administration. Have students use data and quotes from the document to create their own news stories and commentary pieces.
- Think about how whistleblowers might effectively share sensitive information in modern times. Ask students to develop strategic plans for how they would leak something like the Pentagon Papers in today's world. For

example, would they post the papers on their own website? Share them anonymously on a site like Wikileaks.com? Work with *The New York Times*, as Ellsberg did during the Vietnam War? After students share their ideas, compare them to Ellsberg's thoughts on this topic by reading the article, "What Would Daniel Ellsberg Do With the Pentagon Papers Today?" [<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/19/business/media/19link.html?r=1>]

- Compare the facts revealed in the Pentagon Papers to presidential rhetoric during the Vietnam War. Students can reference the Pentagon Papers in books or online [<http://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/pentagon/pent1.html>] (scroll to the bottom of the page for a Table of Contents). Presidential speeches to consider include:
 - "Peace Without Conquest" by President Lyndon Johnson (April 7, 1965) [<http://www.lbjlib.utexas.edu/johnson/archives.hom/speeches.hom/650407.asp>]
 - "Speech on Vietnam" by President Lyndon Johnson (September 29, 1967) [<http://millercenter.org/scripps/archive/speeches/detail/4041>]
 - "The Silent Majority" by President Richard Nixon (November 3, 1969) [<http://www.watergate.info/nixon/silent-majority-speech-1969.shtml>]
- Watch and discuss other POV films relating to protest, the Vietnam War and the role of journalists, including **The Camden 28** (<http://www.pbs.org/pov/camden28/>), **William Kunstler: Disturbing the Universe** (<http://www.pbs.org/pov/disturbingtheuniverse/>) and **War Feels Like War** (<http://www.pbs.org/pov/warfeelslikewar/>). A lesson plan is provided for each film.

RESOURCES

Daniel Ellsberg's Website

<http://www.ellsberg.net/>

Ellsberg's site includes an archive of his articles, interviews and lectures since the 1950s. He also keeps a blog where he comments on current events.

National Whistleblowers Center

<http://www.whistleblowers.org>

This advocacy group seeks to help individuals speak out about wrongdoing in the workplace without fear of retaliation. The site includes profiles of whistleblowers and FAQs on laws that protect whistleblowers.

Mount Holyoke College. "*The Pentagon Papers, Gravel Edition.*"

<http://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/pentagon/pent1.html>

This online copy of the Pentagon Papers organizes materials by topics and years addressed; a summary is provided for each section. Scroll to the bottom of the page for links to additional chapters.

University of Southern California. “*Top Secret: The Battle for the Pentagon Papers.*”

<http://www.topsecretplay.org/>

The University of Southern California’s Annenberg Center on Communication Leadership provides background information on key players and events related to the leak of the Pentagon Papers, as well as a timeline, in connection with a play.

Beeson, Ann. “Whistleblowers: An Interview with Daniel Ellsberg and John Dean.” *The Huffington Post*, 14 September 2009.

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/ann-beeson/whistleblowers-an-interview_b_285637.html

This *Huffington Post* article features quotes from Ellsberg and Dean about the impact of their actions as whistleblowers, as well as their views about the similarities between the Vietnam War/Watergate era and modern times.

STANDARDS

These standards are drawn from “Content Knowledge,” a compilation of content standards and benchmarks for K-12 curriculum by McRel (Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning) at <http://www.mcrel.org/standards-benchmarks/>.

Behavioral Studies, Standard 4: Understands conflict, cooperation and interdependence among individuals, groups and institutions.

Civics, Standard 2: Understands the essential characteristics of limited and unlimited governments.

Civics, Standard 13: Understands the character of American political and social conflict and factors that tend to prevent or lower its intensity.

Civics, Standard 14: Understands issues concerning the disparities between ideals and reality in American political and social life.

Geography, Standard 13: Understands the forces of cooperation and conflict that shape the divisions of Earth’s surface.

Language Arts, Standard 1: Uses the general skills and strategies of the writing process.

Language Arts, Standard 7: Uses reading skills and strategies to understand and interpret a variety of informational texts.

Language Arts, Standard 9: Uses viewing skills and strategies to understand and interpret visual media.

U.S. History, Standard 31: Understands economic, social and cultural developments in the contemporary United States.

World History, Standard 44: Understands the search for community, stability and peace in an interdependent world.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Lesson Plan: Ethics in Journalism

OVERVIEW

This lesson plan is designed to accompany the film **The Most Dangerous Man in America: Daniel Ellsberg and the Pentagon Papers**. The intent of this lesson is to familiarize students with the release of the Pentagon Papers and some of the broader issues, questions and considerations it raised.

OBJECTIVES

By the end of the lessons, students will:

- Understand the historical context of the release of the Pentagon Papers
- Analyze the First Amendment and the ethical considerations associated with freedom of speech
- Evaluate the public impact of the release of government documents
- Discuss the future of journalism, as it pertains to freedom of the press

GRADE LEVELS

Post-secondary

SUBJECT AREAS

World History, U.S. History, Civics, Journalism

MATERIALS

- Internet access and equipment to conduct research and show the class online video clips and resources (as detailed in each lesson)

ESTIMATED TIME NEEDED: The curriculum has been divided into three lessons, though it also could be taught in one to two 50-minute classes if taught in the style of a lecture rather than a discussion. For discussion-based classes, the following time is recommended per class:

2 to 3 50-minute class sessions

1 to 2 1.5 hour classes

1 3-hour class (or most of one)

Note: Each student should view the film outside of class prior to Lesson 1.

Lesson 1

Understanding the Events

Knowledge of the events preceding and following the release of the Pentagon Papers is crucial to understanding the magnitude of this information made public. Not only did the release of the Pentagon Papers confirm public suspicions about lies and cover-ups from the then-current Johnson administration and the four previous administrations, but the release led to an unprecedented event in U.S. history: the Watergate scandal.

This lesson is intended to be more factual than subjective. In order for the discussion during Lesson 2 to be productive, students must first have a clear understanding of the events that took place.

ACTIVITY

Discuss with the class the following questions on each given topic.

Vietnam War

1. Which events pertinent to the Vietnam War were kept from the media? (These include the Gulf of Tonkin incident, the bombing of Cambodia and Laos and North Vietnam raids.) What was the public led to believe was happening?
2. When did U.S. involvement in Vietnam begin? Which presidents were involved in the Vietnam War strategy? How were they involved? In what ways did they deceive the public?

Daniel Ellsberg and the Pentagon Papers

1. What were the Pentagon Papers? Who commissioned them? Why? Explain that in June 1967, three years after the Gulf of Tonkin incident, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, disturbed at how poorly the U.S. war effort in Vietnam was going, commissioned a comprehensive study of U.S. decision-making on Vietnam from 1945 to the present. Thirty-six men, including Daniel Ellsberg, worked on the project.
2. Who was Daniel Ellsberg? What was his area of expertise? Who employed him? How did he become privy to knowledge about the Vietnam War? How did he learn about the Pentagon Papers?

3. What was Ellsberg's goal in trying to make the McNamara study (which later became known as the Pentagon Papers) public? To whom did Daniel Ellsberg first try to give the papers? What was the reaction?
4. Why were *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* apprehensive about publishing the papers? Was there a real legal threat to the press, or was the press concerned about the power of the White House and the Nixon administration? Why did the newspapers decide to go ahead and publish, in spite of their concerns?
5. What were some of the major revelations of the Pentagon Papers? Compare the facts revealed in the Pentagon Papers to presidential rhetoric during the Vietnam War. Students can reference the Pentagon Papers in books or [online](#) (scroll to the bottom of the page for the table of contents). Presidential speeches to consider include:
 - [Peace Without Conquest](#) by Lyndon Johnson (April 7, 1965)
 - [Speech on Vietnam](#) by Lyndon Johnson (September 29, 1967)
 - [The Silent Majority](#) by Richard Nixon (November 3, 1969)

Watergate

1. How did the Nixon administration handle the release of the Pentagon Papers? Why did it pursue both legal and extra-legal actions against Daniel Ellsberg? What were those actions and what were the consequences of each?
2. How did Nixon administration actions against Ellsberg ultimately lead to the Watergate scandal? What was uncovered during the trial of Ellsberg and Anthony Russo that was potentially more damaging to President Nixon than the Watergate Hotel break-in, and what made it more damaging?

ASSIGNMENTS

Read excerpts from *Secrets: A Memoir of Vietnam and the Pentagon Papers* by Daniel Ellsberg.

Suggested chapters: 1; 20; 23-28; 30-31

Read "In Defense of Secrecy" by Noah Feldman.

http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/15/magazine/15wwln_lede-t.html

Read the first volume of *The Pentagon Papers, Gravel Edition*.

<http://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/pentagon/pent1.html>

Read articles on Daniel Ellsberg's website.

<http://www.ellsberg.net/>

Read "Seeking New Ways to Nurture the Capacity to Report" by Charles Lewis.

<http://www.nieman.harvard.edu/reports/article/100060/Seeking-New-Ways-to-Nurture-the-Capacity-to-Report.aspx>

This last article can serve as a starting point for discussion during the following lesson. Charles Lewis notes the lack of investigative journalism during the time leading up to the Iraq War. He asks a difficult and ultimately unanswerable question: "Could such a controversial war of choice have been prevented if the public had been better informed about the specious official statements . . . and governmental decision-making processes?"

Lesson 2

Ethical Considerations

After students have a grasp of the events, a more subjective dialogue can begin. Ideally, this should be a discussion that forces students to articulate why freedom of speech exists and why, or if, it is a right that ultimately benefits the public and the government.

To start, review the First Amendment:

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

ACTIVITY

According to the First Amendment, the people and the press are guaranteed the right to free speech, including the right to "petition the Government." The founding fathers provided these rights, but are there situations in which government secrecy is necessary and better for the public?

Explore Daniel Ellsberg's reasoning for revealing the Pentagon Papers. By releasing the Pentagon Papers, did Ellsberg put the nation, or the world, at risk? Why or why not?

The *New York Times Magazine* article by Noah Feldman suggests that some level of secrecy is necessary in government. To what extent should the government be allowed to have such secrecy? Discuss where and how the line between national security concerns and the public's right to know should be drawn.

IF TIME PERMITS

Report on President Barack Obama's record on government transparency. The current administration has stated that they are committed to creating an unprecedented level of openness in Government. Ask the class to read President Obama's [Memorandum on Transparency and Open Government](#) as well as the [Executive Order on Ethics](#). You can find links to both documents on the [White House Blog: Ethics](#), as well as an overview of the administration's progress to date. Then, ask the class to review the data in the document "[Secrecy Report Card 2010](#)," (PDF) which evaluates the last three months of the Bush administration and the first nine months of the Obama administration. How does the report card compare to the two documents President Obama signed?

ASSIGNMENTS

Have students refer to POV's Whistleblower Timeline and choose a present-day whistleblower to study (2000 to the present). Alternately, each can select a whistleblower of his or her choice. Students should prepare 3 to 5 minute presentations for the following class.

Presentation information should include information about who the person is (profession), what type of information he or she leaked, how he or she went about leaking it, who published the information, how the information helped or hurt the public and what, if any, consequences the whistleblower faced.

Read "[Purveyors of Truth About the Powers That Be](#)" (PDF) by Charles Lewis. On the 100-year anniversary of the Society of Professional Journalists, Lewis discusses high points in journalism history (such as the release of the Pentagon Papers and coverage of Watergate), as well as the fact that there must be committed investigative journalists, now and in the future, in order for true democracy to be maintained.

EXTENSIONS AND ADAPTATIONS

- Read the first four chapters of *State of War: The Secret History of the CIA and the Bush Administration* by James Risen and the *New York Times* article about his subpoena, "[U.S. Subpoenas Times Reporter Over Book on CIA](#)."

Lesson 3

Present and Future

The first half of the class will be used to hear presentations. This should give the class an overall sense of other whistleblowers and the kind of in-depth journalism practiced around their stories. It should also give students a sense of the ultimate impact these

stories have had on the American public, or in some cases a global audience, for better or worse.

The remainder of class time should be used to discuss the future of journalism as it pertains to freedom of the press and petitioning the government:

ACTIVITY

Ask the class the following questions:

1. Has government transparency increased or decreased since the time when the Pentagon Papers were released?
2. Are journalists and publishers today more or less likely to risk potential jail time or financial ruin for doing the right thing? Are there less severe consequences that journalists and publishers might face? (These might include ruined professional relationships with politicians and corporations, less financial support and so on.)
3. In the information age, it often seems as though we are inundated with scandals and rumors involving politicians. At the same time, less in-depth journalism is being conducted. Discuss the reasons for this. (For example, publications do not provide adequate time and funding for true investigation and research.)

EXTENSIONS AND ADAPTATIONS

- Discuss the chapters of James Risen's book. Discuss how the Bush and Obama administrations have viewed and handled leaks. What measures are being taken to prevent future leaks? Do these measures violate the First Amendment?
- In light of its timeliness and relevance, WikiLeaks and Julian Assange himself could be discussed beyond student presentations. Students should be prepared to articulate their stances on Julian Assange's actions (if they feel strongly one way or the other). Refer students to the following sources to help them gain a deeper understanding and perspective: "The Pentagon Papers and WikiLeaks 'Afghan War Diary'" on the *POV* website; "Dealing With Assange and the WikiLeaks Secrets" by Bill Keller

RESOURCES

Online:

Beeson, Ann. **"Whistleblowers: An Interview with Daniel Ellsberg and John Dean."**

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/ann-beeson/whistleblowers-an-intervi_b_285637.html

Daniel Ellsberg website

<http://www.ellsberg.net/>

Executive Order on Ethics

http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Ethics-Commitments-By-Executive-Branch-Personnel/

Memorandum on Transparency and Open Government – The White House

http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/TransparencyandOpenGovernment/

Mount Holyoke College. *"The Pentagon Papers, Gravel Edition."*

<http://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/pentagon/pent1.html>

The National Security Archive

<http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/>

National Whistleblowers Center

<http://www.whistleblowers.org/>

Personal Democracy Forum

<http://personaldemocracy.com/>

POV. "The Pentagon Papers and Wikileaks 'Afghan War Diary.'"

<http://www.pbs.org/pov/mostdangerousman/legacy.php>

Presidential speeches, including [*Peace Without Conquest*](#) by Lyndon Johnson (April 7, 1965); [*Speech on Vietnam*](#) by Lyndon Johnson (September 29, 1967); and [*The Silent Majority*](#) by Richard Nixon (November 3, 1969)

Secrecy Report Card 2010 (PDF file)

<http://www.openthegovernment.org/node/3013>

Feldman, Noah. "In Defense of Secrecy." *The New York Times Magazine*, February 10, 2009. http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/15/magazine/15wwln_lede-t.html

Keller, Bill. "Dealing With Assange and the WikiLeaks Secrets." *The New York Times*, January 26, 2011.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/30/magazine/30Wikileaks-t.html?pagewanted=all>

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<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/29/us/29justice.html>

University of Southern California. "Top Secret: The Battle for the Pentagon Papers."

<http://www.topsecretplay.org/>

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Ellsberg, Daniel. *Secrets: A Memoir of Vietnam and the Pentagon Papers*. New York: Viking, 2002.

Ellsberg, Daniel. *Papers on the War*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1972.

Lewis, Charles. *Purveyors of Truth About The Powers That Be*. Society of Professional Journalists centennial anniversary book essay, 2009.

Risen, James. *State of War: The Secret History of the CIA and the Bush Administration*. New York: Free Press, 2006.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Charles Lewis is a tenured professor and the founding executive editor of the [Investigative Reporting Workshop](#) at the American University School of Communication in Washington, D.C. He is the founder of the award-winning [Center for Public Integrity](#) including its [International Consortium of Investigative Journalists](#) as well as other nonprofit organizations. A former producer for ABC News and CBS News *60 Minutes*, Lewis is the principal co-author of five Center books, including national bestseller *The Buying of the President 2004*. He was awarded a MacArthur Fellowship in 1998.

Jennifer Collins is a graduate student in the Film and Media program at American University in Washington, D.C. As a student in the School of Communication, she is able to pursue her interests in both documentary-style storytelling and in-depth journalism. Through her education and work experience she has been involved in a number of projects, serving in roles ranging from filmmaker and photographer, to researcher and writer.