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Initiative, courage, integrity: these are but a few of the values that we as Americans hold in high regard. However, the value that is most essential to being an American is also perhaps the most overlooked: accountability: the ability to recognize that we make mistakes, and the humility to take responsibility for those mistakes. This allows us to learn and to grow, making us true Americans. Accountability is a characteristic that has instilled itself in our nation's history beginning in 1788, when the delegates to the Constitutional Convention embedded the principle in the Constitution; it was embodied in the 1960s by one of the nation's most charismatic leaders; and is today a characteristic that all Americans can pursue if they so desire.

Of all the values found within the Constitution, accountability is perhaps the most prevalent. Having gained independence from a despotic government just a few years prior to the penning of the document, the founding fathers understood that it was of the utmost importance to make sure that the new government would be one that was accountable to the nation's citizens, and designed the Constitution to ensure this accountability. To this end the Constitution explicitly laid down a series of rules, which stated what the government could and could not do. By creating a system of checks and balances the document further held each branch of government accountable for its actions, as all actions could be subject to review. Finally, Article III Section IV provides the government with the power to impeach those members who commit "high crimes and misdemeanors." By allowing for government officials to be removed from office, the constitution all but guarantees that elected officials will be held accountable for their actions. By engraining accountability into the Constitution, the founding fathers ensured that accountability would be an extremely important value for all Americans, drastically altering the nation's history.

Although it is an extremely important value, accountability is one of the hardest to pursue. It is easy to take credit for our successes but it becomes more difficult when we are asked to account for our failures. As President John Kennedy stated, "Victory has one hundred fathers, and defeat is an orphan." However, it was also President Kennedy who defied this statement and took full responsibility for the disastrous attempt to overthrow Fidel Castro in the Bay of Pigs invasion of 1961. Although he easily could have transferred blame to his advisors or even the Eisenhower administration, which had concocted the plan, Kennedy refused. Instead, he acknowledged that the final decision had been his, and, as such, he was to be held accountable for the failure. Publicly admitting he had been wrong, Kennedy took full responsibility for his decision and never attempted to shift blame to anyone else. Although admitting he had been wrong about the invasion was an embarrassment at the time, Kennedy's courage and willingness to account for his actions has made him one of the most remarkable Americans of the twentieth century.

The characteristic of accountability is one which I have already been faced with in my life. I have by no means led a perfect life; mistakes have been made. However, I have always taken full responsibility for my actions and faced whatever consequences came along with this responsibility. As I continue in my life, it is inevitable that I will make other mistakes. And yet the important part will not be what mistakes I make, but what I learn from them. In order to learn from my mistakes I must first acknowledge that they exist and that I alone am responsible for them. By accepting responsibility for my actions and learning the valuable lessons they have to offer, I will be able to grow as an individual and will be better able to pursue the many of the other values that are essential to being an American.

As Americans, the most essential value we have is that of accountability. It is this value that has allowed the nation to grow and transform over the past few centuries. If we fail to acknowledge that we have made mistakes and take responsibility for them, we never will be able to grow and move forward as a nation. Over the centuries, America has matured and grown to an astonishing degree. It is the ability to acknowledge and account for our mistakes that has allowed this transformation to occur, and it is therefore the characteristic of accountability that is the most essential element to being an American.