The spring 2007 Cline Symposium is entitled, “Spinning Democracy: The Ethics of Deception in Government”. It will focus on deception by public officials and politicians, where deception is understood broadly to include not only explicit lying but also cases where true statements or statements which disclose only some of the truth are made with the intention of misleading or deceiving the public or other branches of the government.

Is deception by politicians or public officials ever justifiable? For example, does it matter if a president lies to the public for a good reason or with good intentions? Does who is being deceived matter? Is a Senator lying to another Senator to get his vote on a piece of legislation somehow different from a Senator lying to his constituents to get re-elected? Is deception during an election campaign more or less acceptable than deception by an elected official?

Public officials may make deceptive statements for various reasons. They may want to conceal corrupt, illegal, or immoral actions or practices in which they or their colleagues have engaged. They may make deceptive statements for what they truly believe to be just and ethical reasons. The symposium will be less concerned with deception involving illegal or immoral acts and, instead, will focus on deception by public officials and politicians, however well meaning or however intentionally invidious, that involves potential corruption of our commitment to and trust in democratic governance. Indeed by frustrating the ability of citizens to make informed electoral decisions or to hold their elected officials accountable it may be the case that deception in election and in government ultimately could contribute to the corruption or demise of democracy itself.

On the other hand, many political theorists, ethicists, public officials and ordinary citizens see deception of the public by its government to be at times both necessary and morally defensible. It is widely believed now that deception is fully justified where national security is concerned. Others have argued more generally that sometimes it is morally defensible for politicians or elected officials to engage in deception in order to achieve a valuable goal, to prevent a disastrous outcome, or simply to carry out an official duty.
Recent surveys indicate that many ordinary citizens have come to believe that public deception is widespread. For example, polls now show that a substantial majority of people in the U.S. believe that we were deceived by the Bush administration concerning the reasons for and the goals of invading Iraq. Trust in government is at low ebb. It is also clear that political advisors and politicians regard "spin" as a normal practice, going so far as to disguise political commercials as items of news. In this context, it is urgent to understand the ethical, moral and political stakes involved, and to consider whether it is possible to salvage some degree of respect for truth and truthfulness in government and some degree of respect and trust in government by its citizens.

Reaching such an understanding and considering such possibilities will require asking and pondering many important questions. Here are but a few examples:

1. Under what circumstances (if any) is it permissible for public officials to deceive other public officials, the public, foreign governments?
2. Is deliberate non-disclosure the same as deliberately lying?
3. Under what type of ethical framework can we decide upon the defensibility or otherwise of a given example of deception?
4. To what extent do the ethics of deception depend upon the purpose, the outcome and/or the consequences of the deception?
5. If some cases of deception are indeed defensible, is it possible to combat the forms of corruption that these justifiable deceptions may promote. In other words, how do we avoid having rare, uniquely justifiable deception, for instance in dire national security situations from becoming rationales for deception for political expediency?
6. Can government be trusted to police itself? Is our Constitution up to the task?

These issues might also be considered in the context of specific scenarios or situations. Here are two examples.

1. Citizens have a right to expect the government to establish and maintain a high level of national security. Any credible information that the government can glean about anti-American terror groups will ensure the safety of our nation as a whole. We don't have any responsibility to protect the rights of those who seek to destroy us, nor should the public have an expectation to classified information which would compromise the ability of our government to protect us. Therefore was the government justified when it lied about the amount and levels of torture being used on captives at Abu Ghraib? If so, should it also be allowed to deny such lies and try to cover them up in the name of national security?

2. Another interesting hypothetical scenario is one in which the U.S., using just developed technology that is not available in any other country, detects a meteor plummeting for earth that is capable of extinguishing all life on earth. The U.S. has deployed a missile to destroy or divert the meteor but it is unsure whether the mission
will be successful. It is assumed that if this information becomes public there will be complete pandemonium and potentially harmful panic in this country and throughout the world. Would it be justified for the U.S. to withhold this information from other governments and/or from U.S. citizens? Would the U.S. be justified in disclosing the existence of the meteor but also announce that there is no reason to be concerned because a missile is on its way that is certain to destroy the meteor?

While the Cline Symposium cannot hope to even approach a full resolution or understanding of these thorny issues; it certainly will be a worthwhile and beneficial endeavor for academics, citizens and students to come together to discuss and debate the ethical concerns that arise when politicians or a government decide to practice deception.