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1st Place Essay: The Penthouse of Leadership

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Over a century ago, a U.S. President candidly stated that “No man has a good enough memory to make a successful liar.” In 1968 another President urged America to “begin committing ourselves to the truth... to *find* the truth, to *speak* the truth, and to *live* the truth.” The two leaders who shared these insights had a lot in common. Both ascended from humble beginnings to experience the awe and respect that accompanies the Presidency. Throughout their journeys both men experienced setbacks and disappointments, only to plod on with grim determination until success was achieved. As President, both men not only guided America through the darkness and disunity of war, but also made lasting impacts on society. Objectively, both could be defined as effective leaders. Yet despite these commonalities, history rarely recognizes Abraham Lincoln and Richard Nixon for their similarities.

There was a teacher at my high school whose family owned a dazzling, high-rise hotel on the sun-kissed beaches of Miami. Whenever he visited Florida, Dr. Day had the privilege of lodging in the hotel’s penthouse at no cost. One night while taking the hotel’s elevator, he noticed an urbane, well-dressed couple enter behind him. “What floor?” Dr. Day asked, wondering which button to press. With a subtle smirk the affluent woman replied: “The top floor, please.” Unwilling to be outflanked, Dr. Day rebutted: “You mean the *penthouse*?” Shocked and dismayed, the woman turned and whispered to her husband, “You never told me there was a penthouse!” After the chic couple exited the elevator on the top floor, Dr. Day experienced a renewed sense of amusement and self-gratification as the elevator ascended to what most people regard as the apex of success- the penthouse.

After sharing this story, Dr. Day pointed out the reason for which it was told: Even though most scholars and academic pundits would resolve that they have reached the “top floor” of academia, without an understanding of Latin (his class) they would never reach the penthouse.

Although high school has passed, that story still enters the limelight of my thoughts from time to time. Having ruminated on its theme repeatedly over the years, I have concluded that its principle can be applied to areas outside of academics. When I think about the world we live in today, it becomes apparent that many of our leaders have their own idea of the “top floor”; and it’s filled with things visible only to the public eye. Whether it’s getting to that next rung on the corporate ladder or being the recipient of one more award, many leaders have placed their personal character on hold and instead have chosen to pursue public prestige. This is not to imply that they must choose between one and the other, but the fact of the matter is that too many of our leaders have shelved their personal integrity in exchange for building their public persona as their private one crumbles. In essence, they have traded the penthouse for the “top floor.”

What, then, is the penthouse of leadership? Thinking back to Presidents Lincoln and Nixon, it is apparent that both spent some time on the “top floor”. Both attained numerous political achievements and managed to maintain a high standing in the public eye for quite some time. It was Abraham Lincoln, however, who ended up in the penthouse because his private levels of character, honesty, and integrity matched those which he spoke about in public. Richard Nixon compromised his public standards in an attempt to illegally win an election. In doing so, he found himself in a position much unlike the one he anticipated. It is not Richard Nixon’s public achievements that he will be remembered for; it’s the things he did in private.

The way a person acts when no one else is looking is what defines them. Leaders today are under the impression that the proper amount of achievement and success in the public arena will get them to the top floor. This may be true, but without character and integrity, they will always fall short of reaching the penthouse. Leaders need to stop being like Richard Nixon and that young couple who thought they had it figured out but were embarrassingly surprised when

they found out otherwise. Instead, they should strive to maintain the same high standards in private as those they display in public. If our leaders prioritize their character and integrity above all else; then like Abraham Lincoln, they too can claim residence in the penthouse.