

HONORABLE MENTION

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10th Grade

The Courage to Be Heard

In the early fall of 1974, the newly inaugurated United States President Gerald R. Ford faced the defining moral crisis of his presidency. Ford had inherited the nation's highest office through an accident; not a single American had chosen Ford for either president or vice president. Rather, he had inherited both due to the corruption scandals that had so plagued the men elected to these positions. Now he had to decide the fate of his predecessor, Richard Nixon, who faced devastating legal action against him for his actions in the Watergate scandal.

Throughout those early days of the Ford White House, aides constantly bickered about what should be done to aid the former president. The administration was torn apart as one group argued passionately that Ford must give Nixon a presidential pardon for all possible crimes in order to properly heal a divided America, while the other firmly advised him to distance himself from the corruption of the Nixon Administration and exact a just punishment for the former president's actions. In Ford's mind, a presidential pardon was the only way to properly settle the "long national nightmare" of Watergate in the people's minds; a trial would only further draw out the pain the scandal had caused. Yet, the president also knew that a pardon would damage him politically: it would seem that President Ford was unwilling to enforce the law against a person many viewed as a traitor to the country. With congressional midterms looming just around the corner, the pressure on Ford to make the right decision was huge.

Finally, the president came to a decision: a pardon was the only reasonable course of action. His advisors begged him to delay the announcement of his decision, at least past midterms. Firmly, he refused, saying that he would not simply dodge the questions of the American people. Frustrated, one aide argued, "That's easy. Just tell them you haven't decided." Ford looked back and said, "But I have decided." (Woodward) Days later, he informed the public that he would be issuing the pardon.

The president displayed an enormous amount of courage that September 8. The true meaning of courage today is the willingness to speak out; to create a rational opinion and then state it, regardless of the consequences. Today, every person needs this kind of courage. Politicians need it to effectively carry out their duties. Regular people need it in their daily lives to interact with each other successfully. From foreign policy to a bully at school, people need to make their voices heard. What makes this so courageous is the willingness to stand up for what is right, regardless of the social consequences, and upon receiving the John F. Kennedy Profiles in Courage Award in 2001, President Ford spoke to this truth, saying "courage is not something to be gauged in a poll or located in a focus group. No adviser

can spin it. No historian can backdate it. For, in the age-old contest between popularity and principle, only those willing to lose for their convictions are deserving of posterity's approval." (Clymer)

The other attribute of this type of courage is its sheer power. All throughout human history, change has come because individuals protested the status quo. When people speak out, they start a conversation. The writings of the Enlightenment thinkers of the 1700s led to the rebirth of democracy. Only two hundred years later, the women's suffrage movement succeeded because its supporters remained strong in the face of opposition and refused to let the issue fade. The most famous event of the Civil Rights Movement, taught in every elementary school in the United States, occurred when Martin Luther King stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial and said, clearly and proudly, "I have a dream..."

This type of courage is, in the end, the best type of courage to promote freedom in the world. This is the courage to stand up to dictators, to ensure that the ballot box is more respected than the rifle. This is the courage that can make sure all people's rights are protected. Time and again throughout our nation's history, this type of courage has defined us. In the world we live in today, we need this courage more than ever to create solutions to the seemingly endless problems we face. Today, we must make sure that we honor it more than ever, and that we all display it in our lives.

Bibliography

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