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INTEGRITY IN LEADERSHIP

Honorable Griffin Bell

I am going to speak today on the subject of integrity in leadership.

There has never been a shortage of would-be leaders for political office or for any other office, for that matter. One of the problems is that many would-be leaders are not suitable as leaders for various reasons, including lack of integrity. Some are the kinds of leaders who simply follow polls and are reminiscent of the person in the French Revolution who jumped into the head of the line of march of a mob and pronounced that he was their leader.

We need leaders, but we need leaders of integrity. Character is important; character does make a difference. In the Old Testament, Isaiah was asked by the Lord, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" Isaiah replied, "Here I am, Lord, send me." But there is more to being a leader in our time than this simple Bible verse.

We may know a leader when we see one, but there is no job description for picking leaders. There are, however, certain attributes to look for as qualifications for leadership of integrity.

Sandburg's *LIFE OF LINCOLN*, in a chapter entitled, "A Tree Is Best Measured When It Is Down," contains many of the tributes to Lincoln following his assassination. One tribute was by the great Russian poet, Tolstoy, who was asked by a group of Russian tribesmen to tell them about Lincoln. Tolstoy replied:

Lincoln was a great man. He was greater than Alexander the Great and greater than George Washington. He was great because all of his words and deeds rested on four attributes of character: truth and justice, humanity and pity.

Honorable Griffin Bell served as a United States Circuit Judge for the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals from 1961 to 1976. He also served as the United States Attorney General from 1977 to 1979. He is currently in private practice with the firm of King & Spalding in Atlanta, Georgia.

This is a good point of beginning for leadership qualification. I would add to these four important characteristics—truth, justice, humanity and pity—a fifth, which we can call a sense of shame. One is left to wonder in our present society whether a sense of shame still exists or whether, by some genetic flaw, it has been eliminated from the sense of Americans. Perhaps the idea that truth is no longer an absolute but is a relative term depending on the circumstances has eroded the sense of shame or possibly it is the result of the modern concept of situational ethics, with ethics depending on a particular setting. At the least, our concept of moral outrage seems to have been dulled by a lowering of expectations from our leaders.

Another characteristic of a leader is to accept responsibility when something goes wrong. It is easy to take the credit when things go right. An example was given to us by General Eisenhower on the occasion of the Normandy Invasion in World War II. There was a good chance that the invasion would fail. The Germans were a problem and the weather was a problem. General Eisenhower was prepared for failure, should it come, and he did not want to dodge the responsibility. He scrawled a press release on a pad of paper before the invasion to be released in case the invasion should fail. It said:

Our landings . . . have failed . . . and I have withdrawn the troops. . . . My decision to attack at this time and place was based upon the best information available. The troops, the air and the Navy did all that bravery and devotion to duty could do. If any blame or fault attaches to the attempt, it is mine alone.

Be careful of a leader who always finds someone else to blame.

Another test of leadership is to look for signs that a person is not a credit seeker. Years ago, Mr. Robert Woodruff at The Coca-Cola Company gave me a bronze plaque, which I keep on my desk, and which makes a simple statement: "There is no limit to what a man can do or where he can go if he doesn't mind who gets the credit."

In the surrender of Lee's army of Northern Virginia to General Grant at Appomattox, we have two splendid examples of leadership: [O]ne was given to us by General Lee, and the other by General Grant. General Grant's army had surrounded what was left of General Lee's army of Northern Virginia. In a humane gesture, Grant sent a message to Lee that Lee's forces were in a hopeless position and that Lee might consider surrendering rather than continuing the bloodshed. Lee responded that he had no idea of surrendering, but wondered what the terms of surrender would

be. Grant sent a message back that his men would need to disarm and agree not to continue fighting in the future. In return, Lee's men would be paroled and left alone. This latter provision saved Lee and others from being prosecuted later.

Lee made the decision to surrender. His staff had suggested that he not surrender but try to escape to the mountains with as much of the army as possible or, as one suggested, simply disband the Army and let them become guerillas. Lee rejected both suggestions, stating that such a move would only cause further damage to the country as a whole. He said his only course was "to surrender myself to General Grant and take the consequences of my acts." This was integrity in leadership.

Lee acted in the best interests of the South and the Nation. Grant acted on his own in such a way as to make it possible for Lee to surrender in an honorable way and with as little humiliation as possible. Some of his generals wanted to destroy Lee's army. Grant overruled them. His conduct exemplified integrity in leadership.

Grant may have taken a cue from President Lincoln, who, two weeks earlier had said to Grant that all he wanted was to get the men of the Confederate Army back to their homes, at work on their farms or in their shops.

Churchill, an authority on the American Civil War from Gettysburg forward, said that Grant's conduct toward Lee was Grant's finest hour in his entire career.

Modesty is also a leadership virtue. We can learn a lot from the life of President Truman. He was a man of strength, intelligence, compassion and courage, but always conducted himself in a modest manner. Who can forget that, upon arriving in Independence after leaving office, he was asked by a reporter what was the first thing he had done that day, and he replied, "I put the suitcases in the attic." He had the courage to drop the Atomic bomb on Japan and later to create the Marshall Plan, which saved Europe while at the same time restoring the countries of our enemies Germany and Japan. He integrated the military and discharged our most popular General when General MacArthur contested civilian authority. And he created the CIA out of what had been the OSS during World War II.

Truman's sense of integrity and the strength of his character was such that people trusted him and, as Secretary of State Schultz once said, "trust is the coin of the realm." It is difficult, indeed, to have a foreign pol-

icy unless the person in charge is a leader of integrity—one who inspires trust.

A leader of integrity is a person of honor, and honor is the *sine qua non* of integrity in leadership. Is he an honorable man? Is she an honorable woman?

Perhaps our leaders could take a note on modesty and integrity from President Bush, who told his speech writers to avoid the use of “I,” by substituting “we,” to use only self-deprecating humor and not humor at someone else’s expense, and not to dwell on his war experiences, which, as you know, were heroic.

When President Carter selected Judge William Webster to be head of the FBI, he made one of the wisest selections of his presidency. Judge Webster, a Republican, had been United States Attorney in St. Louis and then a federal district judge. He had served as an officer in the Navy in World War II and in the Korean War. At the time he was selected to head the FBI, he was a United States Court of Appeals Judge. There had never been a blemish on his character, but there was no proof that he could lead, although he had the attributes of a leader on paper. I had known him well for several years and I believed that he could lead an organization such as the FBI. After interviewing him, President Carter selected him to head the FBI.

The test for a federal district judge being investigated by the FBI is to ask 125 people about the person. I ordered the FBI to ask 500 people about Judge Webster. He had been investigated before, but not in this depth. We did not find a single derogatory thing in his record. He served very well indeed to restore the morale and vigor of the FBI in the post-Watergate period. The same can be said of his service as head of the CIA under President Reagan. He was and is the kind of person of honor and integrity who would have been able to lead in any endeavor for which he had been selected.

Unfortunately, we cannot investigate our elected officials before they are elected. We investigate appointed office holders, but not elected office holders. We live with instant news, the sound bite, and the spinners, and it is more and more difficult for the voters to know whether a would-be leader is a person of integrity. We do not always know what is behind the face and the voice.

We need a simple test. The honor code at the military academies suits me as a test. It is the same test that is used in the honor system in

many schools in this country: "I will not lie, cheat nor steal, nor tolerate anyone who does."

We at least can measure candidates by this standard, and either not elect them or turn them out of office if they fall short. There has never been a time in our history when leaders of integrity were more needed. The world is very different now. We are living with world-wide instant news where struggles and problems are never out of mind. We must know when to act and when to have the self-discipline not to act, how to win with honor but to have the courage to withdraw if appropriate. This calls for leaders on all levels of government who are trustworthy, believable and honorable—another way of saying leaders of integrity.

