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Dwight D. Eisenhower once stated, "The supreme quality for leadership is unquestionably integrity. Without it, no real success is possible." Eisenhower recognized that integrity – the consistency of action with belief – is the most important civic value that American leaders and citizens can develop. Most people agree that it is good to always be honest and to treat others kindly, but if they do not exhibit integrity and actively live these values in which they believe, their belief is useless. Integrity allows other important values, such as hard work, kindness, and perseverance, to be exemplified. Our Founding Fathers lived with integrity as they sacrificed for the values they held dear. As we strive to live with integrity today, our nation will continue in the rich legacy laid by our forbears.

The fifty-six great men who signed the Declaration of Independence serve as prime examples of the integrity embraced by the founding generation. The creators and signers of the Declaration of Independence believed strongly in the principles of liberty and freedom, and they were willing to defend them. It was at great personal risk that during the summer of 1776, these Founding Fathers placed their names to the document that could have easily become their own death sentence. Although each signer was subsequently persecuted for his decision to support independence, each had the integrity to follow his convictions and do what he felt was right. These signers could have avoided much hardship by rejecting the document, but they refused to sacrifice integrity merely for personal convenience. The Declaration of Independence is a symbol of the exceptional integrity of our Founding Fathers.

After the Revolutionary War concluded and the colonies had gained independence, George Washington simply wanted to retire to his beloved Mount Vernon and enjoy the remainder of his life as a private citizen. He had already sacrificed years of his life and suffered terribly as he led the fledgling nation's troops in battle against the world's greatest military force. He deserved to peacefully enjoy the freedom he had fought so hard to obtain. In 1787, however, with the loose confederation of independent states about to dissolve, Washington was called out of his retirement to attend a convention that would – hopefully – save the nation. He easily could have denied this call and let someone else take his place, but he had a deep and abiding love for freedom which he could not deny. Heeding this call that came not only from his countrymen, but from his heart, Washington left his beloved home and peaceful retirement to serve his country. He presided over the Constitutional Convention where his quiet leadership and influence kept this pivotal meeting from dissolving. Subsequently, he was again called from retirement when he was unanimously elected president of the nation he had given so much to create. Washington exemplified integrity as he sacrificed his personal desires in order to preserve the freedom he held so dear. Even when it was difficult, he lived his life in a manner that was consistent with his beliefs.

Integrity is not only a value of the past – it is an essential ingredient in the perpetuation of America as a nation today. We must have the moral courage to live in a manner that is consistent with our beliefs, and not relinquish what we believe when others make it appear unpopular. In my personal life, integrity is of the utmost importance. I strive to always make my actions consistent with my beliefs by reaching out to others with kindness and respect and by standing up for my beliefs. Honesty is a vital aspect of integrity, and I seek to be honest in all my dealings with other people. I try to be an example of integrity to those around me and inspire others to embrace this indispensable civic value.

Integrity has remained essential in America from our nation's founding until today. The Declaration of Independence is a tribute to the integrity of our Founding Fathers who risked their all to preserve freedom. George Washington exemplified integrity throughout his life, sacrificing personal convenience to defend the principles he held dear. Today, we show integrity through standing up for our beliefs and living honest and upright lives. If we as American citizens embrace the timeless value of integrity and strive to make our actions consistent with what we know and believe, our nation will continue to grow until it exceeds even the fondest dreams our Founding Fathers held for it.