

Should Prominent Americans Behave with Elevated Ethical Standards

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In each generation, a nation looks to its politicians, social icons, or celebrities to lead women and men whose decisions and values can create history, culture, and change. Those symbolic Americans have enormous influence. What they do is heard by the culture, building or breaking public trust in fairness, truth, and equality. In *The Mountaintop*, a very human depiction of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. is provided to the readers on the night before he is murdered. The play takes away his untouchable image and presents an overworked, imperfect, and scared man who nonetheless attempts to act with moral integrity. By depicting him this way, Katori Hall forces one to question the morality of leadership and responsibility. Because they have been given immense power and public attention, America's leaders owe their citizens higher moral integrity. Their choices not only define their legacy but also influence the moral trajectory of society itself.

*The Mountaintop* confronts the conflict between human weakness and moral duty. Returning to his motel room after delivering his "I've Been to the Mountaintop" speech, Dr. King faces his mortality and his unfinished dreams. The maid Camae reminds him of his shortcomings and fears, showing that heroes are human. King, at his lowest point, is honest, fearless, and humane. His ethical courage comes from deontological ethics, that school of philosophy believing that people must act according to moral duty despite circumstances. King comes to understand that as a leader, he must serve others even when he is tired or scared. His own pilgrimage shows that leadership is not about being perfect but about adhering to moral values willingly. This is the best possible argument that public leaders have to live by a higher standard of morality: the more individuals whose lives they touch, the greater their responsibility on a moral level.

Public leaders can shape public morality. Their own actions are the standard according to which society determines what is wrong or right. Dr. King, as peaceful and nonviolent a pastor as he was, spoke to millions with the moral force within him. His vulnerability exposed in *The Mountaintop* does not make him weak, this gives him strength to voice his views. Even in times of doubt, he never compromises on his values. Through him, we see that inner morality begets leadership. Under the utilitarian tradition, where everything is judged based on what can produce the greatest good for the greatest number, King's behavior shows us that personal ethics can lead to good effects on a large scale. Public leadership therefore has a moral obligation to be honest and transparent, since leaders directly influence public trust, justice, and harmony in society through their own actions. When such leaders break these principles through corruption, dishonesty, or oppression harm is not only caused to the personal integrity of the leader but to the institutions of democracy as well. Others would argue, however, that it is expecting too much of public leaders to demand that they hold to a higher level of morality.

Leaders are human beings, not gods; they are as susceptible to temptation, stress, and fear as the rest of humanity. The Mountaintop shows this convincingly: King curses, smokes, and rages at the ongoing struggle for justice. Hall's grounded portrayal makes him all the more human, reminding us that even the greatest heroic leaders are not flawless. To seek moral perfection in public figures is to set us on the path to disillusionment when they, as they certainly will, falter. It is understandable, some argue, that these expectations compel them to hide their weaknesses instead of talking about them openly. From that perspective, maybe it is better to look at public figures simply as ordinary mortals and not moral saints. But even granting the impossibility of perfection, this argument fails to reckon with one plain fact: there is vast moral responsibility at stake in power.

All who take on a public role as a civil rights leader, politician, or pop idol must acknowledge that their power has moral stakes. Their actions can build or destroy. Moral leadership is not the removal of flaws, but the pursuit of integrity, openness, and responsibility in the face of imperfection. This is what King is taught in The Mountaintop: even when he finds out that he will not live to witness the "Promised Land," he continues to move forward. His moral philosophy reflects virtue ethics, in which the focus is placed on the character of the individual and cultivating such virtues as honesty, courage, and compassion. Great leaders are not characterized by perfection but by persistent efforts toward moral excellence. History attests that moral character is superior to human frailty. Dr. King isn't remembered as flawless but as just.

History condemns those who abuse power or act without honor. Corruption or dishonesty overpowers trust in governments and justice institutions and makes people suspicious of the systems built to protect them. It is because of this that the highest ethical standards of public figures are not optional; it's a requirement under which morality and democracy can coexist. Without them, leadership becomes self-serving rather than service. Lastly, The Mountaintop reminds us that greatness is not perfection, but awareness of ethics. Greater moral responsibility belongs to great Americans because they define America's collective conscience by what they do. Within King's frailty, Hall reminds us that leaders are mere mortals who, though vulnerable and afraid, still strive to do good.

Moral leadership requires humility, determination, and courage qualities best entrusted to authority. As long as human beings will seek leaders, those leaders must never forget that the cost they pay for being who and what they are is terribly high. The climb to the mountaintop is not a peak of perfection but a peak of moral bravery, where leaders take the courageous step of integrity even when the entire world stands in opposition.