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In my opinion, one of the most prevalent issues in America right now is division. Fueled by the pandemic, racial tensions, and other recent events, polarized opinions on these important issues are essentially tearing our country apart.

Social media has only made this division worse by allowing people to report biased or fake headlines and also allowing people to attack certain viewpoints without having factual, educated, or civilized conversations about them. Even in my high school, I have seen people lose friendships over differing political views because they are unwilling to understand each other's feelings. I have witnessed this on a micro level when a USA theme was proposed by my Rally Committee in our leadership class for a football game because it was on the 20th anniversary of 9/11. The class was split between people who felt this showed patriotism and support for first responder police and firemen and people who felt this could be viewed as racist and unsupportive of the Black Lives Matter movement. It quickly turned into a heated argument, and some people boycotted the game because of the theme.

I believe that the best solution to this division, both on a macro and micro level is to develop leaders who can understand and embrace differing viewpoints and come up with ways to unite and strengthen our country. We've seen plenty of leaders who have fueled the division in order to gain support from certain organizations or political parties; this is an example of what we need to steer away from. Instances like the one I mentioned earlier, where ideas or beliefs

clash, can go one of two ways. They can fuel division and turn into an argument in which both sides are forcefully presented trying to persuade the other side. Or, alternatively, they can be an opportunity to reflect and consider and find common ground. These instances have the opportunity to develop the kind of leadership that we need to unite our country; they can open a conversation in which both sides can be heard and understood equally, and the participants can work together to find the best solution or compromise for the pressing issue. I believe that we are the generation of change, and by continuing to expose ourselves to different pressing issues or difficult conversations, no matter what the topic, we will better prepare ourselves to help steer the world in a better, more united and productive direction.

Throughout the last four years, I have personally learned how to both actively engage in these difficult discussions or situations, and how to sit back and listen to all sides of any story. Every single conversation makes me a more educated and inclusive person, and after every single one I feel more prepared for the next. In order to be the leaders of the future, it is necessary to walk into situations with an open mind and a willingness to hear all points of view before forming any concrete opinion. Furthermore, the openness to changing your point of view after being presented with alternate information is crucial.

I am so hopeful for this future. As I said, I believe that our generation is one of change. We are brilliant, compassionate, reasonable, and understanding. I also believe in looking into the past to help find tried and true solutions for new issues or conflicts. When contemplating who or what instances we could look at to gather optimism and inspiration on how to better unify our country, my brain jumps directly to President Abraham Lincoln. It was leaders like President Lincoln that possessed the qualities and acquired the skill set necessary to do the seemingly

impossible: unify our country during one of its most divisive times. There are endless examples that we can look to for advice: President Roosevelt unifying the country after The Great Depression, George Bush's response to 9/11 following one of the most controversial presidential elections, or even Mahatma Gandhi leading a civil rights movement that united India's people. Looking back on the darkest times in our history, and examining how we were able to bounce back from them is our biggest source of hope.

I hope that learning from President Lincoln and other great leaders of the past will empower us as leaders of the future to develop solutions and ideas to unify our country and engage in difficult conversations that we so often avoid. I hope that we will be able to learn from our history, use that knowledge to better the future, and work to remedy racial injustice and other similar issues in every way possible. I also hope that as students, we truly recognize the division in our world, and take an active role in solving it whether that's in terms of politics and our smaller communities or making sure our voices are heard, despite any obstacles standing in our path.