One hundred fifty years ago, on January 1, 1863, President Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation with shaking hands after three years of a bloody civil war. His decision to approve the proclamation was not a popular one, but it marked Lincoln as a great leader who changed his country for the better.

What’s in a leader? Would it be intelligence? Charisma? Popularity? Popularity, on one hand, is a very influential quality. My peers at school voted for their student representatives and most of the representatives were chosen by how much they were liked. But popularity can do much more than elect a member of student council. Presidents are elected, laws are passed, and societies are changed through popularity, but it does not always work for the greater good.

In truth, while popularity may seem like a very attractive quality, while in positions of leadership, we need to remember that it is not the most important quality at hand. Winston Churchill captured this in a single sentence while giving a piece of advice to the Duke of Marlborough when he said- “Never confuse leadership with popularity.”

Abraham Lincoln, a president who is now revered as a one of the best presidents of the United States, was, in his time, a very unpopular president. While the most recent C-SPAN Presidential Leadership survey puts Lincoln at number one of all presidents, an issue of the *New York Herald* that was released December 19, 1860, said that only 1 million of the original 4.7 million people who had voted for him in the 1860 presidential election still supported him two months later. The Emancipation Proclamation, the proclamation that freed slaves in the South, was not popular at the time. It angered those against the freeing of slaves and it angered abolitionists because of the proclamation's inability to free slaves in the Union as a whole. Yet, he put aside trying to appeal to the masses as his persistence and determination as a leader to do what was right trumped the fact that he was an unpopular leader. He chose to align his goals with the values of equality and freedom- making him an admirable leader.

This advice - “never confuse leadership with popularity” – applies equally well to leaders of the past, such as Lincoln, as it does to the leaders of today. For teens, such as myself, it can be hard to put aside popularity. Especially now, popularity can reflect the exact opposite of what is expected of a good leader even when those who are popular are considered the leaders of our grade. The 21st Century is now a century of innovation. Technology is developing rapidly. The Internet and cell phones are taking over. We now get almost all of our information through the Internet and other media sources. We live in a virtual world that blends electronics and life. It has become much harder, amid the facts and fiction on the news, to tell who is truly leading, and who is vying for popularity. Popularity is everywhere around us- celebrities, actors, singers, politicians. Social media judges people on the number of likes a post gets, or how many followers and Facebook friends a person has- ultimately, by their popularity- and in order to be heard through the multiple media sources, people are driven to gain popularity. Now therefore, in the 21st century, more than ever we need leaders who can envision the future, stay true to their ethics, and know to lead for- not just the majority- but for everyone- instead of pursuing popularity.

So- what’s in a leader? I say there are three traits a person needs in order to be a true leader. To be a true leader, one must not look at today, tomorrow, or next week, but at the years and decades to come. To be a true leader, one must listen to the voices of all the people. To be a true leader, one must keep in mind the principles that he or she strives to live by- such as equality, justice, and freedom. To be a true leader, one must emulate our great president, Abraham Lincoln, who, despite his unpopularity and the rejection of the Emancipation Proclamation, both persevered and changed our nation for the better. Winston Churchill once said “Never confuse leadership with popularity”. And I can’t agree with him more.