Why is there so little leadership today?

In a scene from “The Patriot,” Lord Cornwallis says to the movie’s hero Benjamin Martin, played by actor Mel Gibson, “there must be gentlemen in command to lead and, ... when necessary, restrain their men.” He was arguing that British officers “must not be accorded inappropriate levels of hostile attention” by the American militia during military confrontations.

What at first blush seems like a reasonable argument is immediately annihilated by Colonel Martin, who uses logic to link the officers with the conduct of their soldiers and turn it against them. “As long as your soldiers attack civilians, I will order the shooting of your officers at the outset of every engagement,” he tells Cornwallis.

In Cornwallis’ view of war only certain men, presumably the more civilized among us, must be in command. Only gentlemen must have positions of leadership as officers. Furthermore these gentlemen-officers must be accorded (by both sides in his view) a status that puts them above the fray, above the “utter chaos that would follow from leaderless armies having at each other.”

The implications inherent in this view of leadership are intriguing: who were these gentlemen-officers and how were they chosen to be in command?

The answer in the case of the eighteenth century British of course is that the officers were most often chosen from the ruling elites of British society, sons of landowners and men of title, men of favor upon whom the king might bestow even more land and title for a job well done.

And although these officers in most instances were privileged from birth, that alone obviously did not make them gentlemen. What made them gentlemen was their education. They were educated to be gentlemen. They were educated to be leaders. And they were, like we all are, the products of their education.

This brings me back to the question posed in the title above. Why is there such a dearth of leadership in our country today?

If we are indeed products of our education, then the regrettable answer seems fairly obvious: we simply do not educate our citizens to be leaders any more, and we haven’t done so for quite some time.

Before I continue, let me qualify this answer. A very small percentage of our young people are indeed being educated to be leaders. But most of our citizens, dependent on our public education system, are not. In fact, just the opposite occurs: they are educated to be followers, cogs in the wheel.

This should, however, surprise no one. After all, our public education system is based on the so-called Prussian education system. The Prussians, after being defeated by Napoleon, had come up with a “new” system of education. In a nutshell, the Prussian education system was designed to keep the ruling elites in power, while encouraging the masses to be loyal to the government. This was accomplished through two primary mechanisms. First, they made schooling mandatory; all children were required to attend school. Second, they simplified the education; they left out some things that had up to that point been regarded as essential to a proper education and instead emphasized careers and service to the state.

Several of the United States began to adopt this Prussian education system in the mid-1800s and by the early-1900s it had taken root nationally. It continues to dominate our national education landscape.

It should be noted that the ruling elites in Prussia, comprising perhaps 0.5% of the population, continued to educate their own children by the “old” system of education, through tutoring and/or in exclusive private schools. In other words, their own children continued to receive a proper, classical liberal arts education. In this way, they intended to guarantee that their children would continue to be the ruling elites of Prussia.

This concept of a classical liberal arts education deserves some analysis.
At its root is the so-called “Trivium,” i.e. comprising grammar, logic and rhetoric.

The word Trivium comes from the Latin meaning “three roads.” It is the study of the three disciplines of grammar (knowledge), logic (reason) and rhetoric (persuasion) that forms the basis upon which the proper development of the human intellect proceeds. All three disciplines are necessary to proper intellectual development, and the three disciplines alone, if mastered, are sufficient to that purpose. Properly taught, they allow a person to be self-reliant.

This notion of self-reliance is integral to a classical liberal arts education. The word “liberal” in this context is closer to its Latin root meaning “free.” A true liberal arts education is the type of education appropriate to free men living in a free society. Properly taught, the classical liberal arts education imparts to students the foundation needed to become citizens capable of self-government.

But the Prussian elites who fashioned the education system were not interested in educating a nation of citizens capable of self-government. They were interested in creating an obedient citizenry who supported the state and would give them a better chance to win any future wars.

Sadly, it is a fact in America today that only a handful of schools teach the Trivium properly, if at all. And you can get a pretty good idea of which schools do so by finding out where leading politicians and other ruling elites send their own children. Elite expensive east-coast boarding schools like Philips Andover, St. Paul’s and Milton Academy come to mind.

But most schools, including virtually all public schools, do not teach the Trivium. And the national Common Core initiative that controls public education takes us even further away from it.

There is however some good news. More and more schools are opening that are dedicated to providing a proper classical liberal arts education. Schools like Hillsdale Academy (MI), Regents School-Austin (TX) and Bridgedale Academy (IL) remain committed to the development of grammar, logic and rhetoric. These schools seek to educate citizens capable of self-government.

And now back to “The Patriot.” In the eyes of Cornwallis, Colonel Martin was merely a “rube” farmer of inferior breeding. He underestimated Martin, who in fact was more than adequately educated when it came to his knowledge (grammar), his reasoning abilities (logic) and his powers of persuasion (rhetoric). He proved to be more than a match for Cornwallis.