A Leadership Deficit
By Mark Jamison and Araceli Castañeda

This moment in history is a good opportunity to learn about leadership. We see the U.S. debt ceiling deadline looming large and our federal government losing its AAA credit rating, even if a debt deal is reached. We also see the people who are in a position to do something faltering: Three perspectives seem to prevail.

First, there are the political actors who see today’s predicament as a phase in a long-running competition for public approval and political power. They play to the media and the voting public, demonize rivals, and exalt themselves, seeking advantage for the next election.

Second, there are those who view this moment as resulting from recent elections that authorized them to reign in government spending; they feel a need to meet their supporters’ expectations and stand firm against the bad guys.

Finally, there are those who perceive the situation as a train wreck; they attempt to distance themselves from the fray, from the adolescents, and frame the state of affairs as someone else’s fault.

These three views shape much of the activity in Washington, D.C., at least as it is portrayed in the media. This media view is to be expected. After all, powerful drama with good guys, bad guys, and looming disasters stimulates newspapers sales, newscast viewership, and Internet page views.

However, these perspectives seem to miss the uncomfortable feeling that is settling in for this country: Most of us in the U.S. have never lived in a country that was not the world’s leading economy, not the world’s leading financial center, and not a world leader in good government. Now we do.

Public debt as a percent of our income (GNP) now stands at 73%. That is double what it was at the start of the current recession. Thumbing its nose at historical patterns, our sputtering economy is now into its fourth year of the doldrums, despite multiple attempts at fiscal and monetary stimulus. Wall Street is now a four-letter word in much of the public discourse, not the respected center of international finance that it became after the Great Depression. U.S. government officials are being lectured about financial responsibility by officials from countries that we considered developing economies just a few years ago. Now the media mentions the U.S. in the same breath as it does Europe’s most anemic economies.

Our natural response to this predicament is to view it as someone else’s fault: We blame Democrats, Republicans, greedy businesses, bureaucrats, Bush, etc. We don’t see ourselves in the problem. We are there.

We are there in part because we are looking for solutions in the wrong places: We are looking for a traditional type of leader, one who would provide direction, solve problems, and fix the bad guys. This approach, however, does not work because this is new territory, and there are no easy answers. Making matters worse, we are divided in what we want. Some voters want to live in the world’s strongest economy, financial center, etc. again. Others are more comfortable with a United States that does not stand out on the world stage. Some voters don’t bother themselves with such concerns, preferring to focus on culture wars, nanny state, wealth envy, or social and environmental justice. As a result, many of us
become upset if someone tries to lead us on a particular course, as President Obama has discovered. Maybe the leadership deficit is in us.

We are also in the midst of this dilemma because we do not like what someone practicing leadership has to offer. Leadership in moments like this should stir, steer, inspire, and disappoint. Stirring keeps our problems, conflicts, and contradictions before us so that we see them clearly and debate them with our friends and colleagues. Steering moves us away from past loyalties and supposed truths that in fact hold us back, and moves us onto new paths of our own making. Inspiration is needed to keep us in the game: It gives us hope that we can overcome the current situation. It also carries us through the disappointment of coming to the realization that some of our “truths” may be false, and some of our aspirations may be fantasies.