Recently, Congress and the president reached some accommodation on the debt ceiling crisis, a temporary palliative giving leaders an opportunity to develop consensus on how to deal with the real problems that remain. Difficult decisions lie ahead requiring our elected representatives to show honesty, courage and the willingness to compromise for the larger good.

In a previous column I averred that courage is the willingness to listen to all sides but to do what is best for the larger good, even if it comes at some personal sacrifice. This is what is needed now.

Let’s step backward in history to a book credited to John F. Kennedy, titled “Profiles in Courage.” In that book our 35th president discusses the pressures faced by previous political leaders and their willingness to sacrifice their future careers for principles important to them. Kennedy describes three types of pressure: the pressure to be liked, the pressure to be re-elected and the pressure to satisfy constituency and interest groups. In many cases, all three come together, making courage all the more important.

In “Profiles in Courage,” Kennedy talks about eight legislators over the years who gave it up for the larger good.

• Sen. John Quincy Adams of Massachusetts, who voted in 1803 for an embargo to shut off trade with Great Britain, which at the time was pirating American merchant ships. This was counter to his party’s interests and those of his constituents, who benefited from trade with Great Britain.

• Sen. Daniel Webster, who in 1850 supported keeping the Union together at all costs, even if it meant greater rights to slaves.

• Sam Houston, who refused to support the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, which would have allowed the residents of territories from Iowa to the Rockies to decide slavery issues themselves.

All of these courageous leaders suffered politically for their actions, never recovering from going against the wishes of their interest groups. But history has judged them well.

You get the idea. Courage, honesty and doing what is right often come with cost. But the alternative to courageous leadership is what usually dominates discussion — carefully crafted sound bites, which excoriate the other side while promoting the virtues of a given position. And gridlock, which is imperiling this nation’s future.

So, what is needed to ensure that a future “Profiles in Courage” not become the world’s smallest book?

• To our elected representatives: Stop telling us what the American people want and don’t want. In our representative form of government, you were elected to lead. So do it, and accept the consequences.

• And don’t sign pledges. If this becomes a trend, there will be multiple pledges on each issue. Soon, we won’t need elected representatives to lead; we can just tote up the pledges and prepare for gridlock.

• And don’t try to mislead the public by claiming that the budget can be balanced without serious attention to the big four: Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid and Defense. Most Americans will be called upon to make sacrifices — and most will be your constituents. Honesty, please.

• And don’t make revenue enhancement sound easy. Again, most taxpayers will be asked to make sacrifices, not just “fat cats” and large corporations. Honesty, please.

• For the citizenry and the various interest groups: Expect your representatives to listen and provide feedback, but also expect them to have the wisdom and courage to do the right thing whether you like it or not.

This is best said by paraphrasing President Kennedy. “The true democracy … puts its faith in believing that the people will not simply elect those who represent their views ably and faithfully, but also faith that leaders whose devotion to principle leads them to an unpopular course will not be condemned but rewarded for their courage and honor.”

In its many crises, America has always had those that stepped up. True leadership is often a profile in courage. It’s time.