The military has been developing managers for the past two decades, not leaders...there are no Marshall and Pattons waiting in the wings to lead us into time of need like there were at the beginning of World War II.

This was the thrust of a comment made by a U.S. Navy captain during a recent “60 Minutes” television interview. My initial reaction was to disagree, but after all, I thought about it, the more I began to see merit in the observation. In the end I found myself in total agreement with the good captain and would like to take this opportunity to describe how I arrived at that point.

From the outset, let me state that I am not an advocate for one of those pendulum swings where it is suddenly bad to be a “good manager.” My concern is not with the emphasis being placed on management in the military, but rather with the attitude that promotes management as the solution to our problem...“we just need better management!...” “If we could apply some of the latest management techniques...” “if he could only learn to manage his resources better...” etc. The military needs good managers, but not to the continuing extent, and they must be in all positions of responsibility, commanders as well as staff positions. But we also need, in fact, must have, leaders if we are to retain our position as a strong military force.

As the National Guard moves through the 1980s and into the 1990s, a period many have been referring to as the technological age, rapid change and resource constraints will be the historical hallmarks of the transition. It will also be a period where our national challenge will be to find more significant roles in the National Guard for managers and ensure that they will be in all positions of responsibility to manage those critical decisions the future will require. This means that our soldiers in positions of responsibility must be trained to be good managers. We must strive to raise the civil service education levels and to train our officer and enlisted ranks as well as ensure that our military schools teach up-to-date management techniques and philosophies. This education and training must continue throughout each soldier’s career.

Laying the “manager” issue aside for the moment, let’s consider leadership. The phrase “born leader” is a misnomer. If we truly are, we cannot assume that we would long ago have developed the test to identify born leaders and with some additional training (management included) we would have the ideal officer or NCO. Regrettably, it doesn’t work that way; leaders are developed. This development requires, among other things, time, maturity and the opportunity to fail as well as to succeed. In essence leadership is learned through trial and error. You can teach the theory of leadership in a classroom and learn it on a piece of paper.

But because leadership involves people and situations, it must be practiced. No two leaders are the same, no two groups are led to be the same, and rarely is the environment under the control of a leader. To develop the young lieutenants and sergeants of the National Guard as good leaders, we must ensure our schools accomplish what they can by teaching the principles of leadership and placing students in leadership situations wherever possible.

For example, during weapons qualification, does the squad leader stand with the squad while the range officer tells the unit what to do and then disappears into a foxhole to qualify with his weapon? If he does, you are paying for a sergeant and using him as a private. Why not have the first firing order made up of leaders while the remaining troops undergo concurrent training. Then during the succeeding firing orders, the leaders can be “in charge” of their units rather than just another part of the group. You don’t lead by being part of a group...you lead leadership by being “in charge” of the group.

Managers deal with things, leaders deal with people. Often the distinction between “things” and “people” is not clear, and senior commanders will fail to challenge their subordinates to defend their decisions from the aspect of leadership. For example, when we discuss mechanics, fire opens in trucks, companies and battalions in terms of why we assigned them a certain mission or job, we are acting in a managerial role...identifying requirements and assigning resources to fill these requirements. When we discuss why we assigned Corporal Jones, Sergeant Smith’s fire team, Captain Harris’ company and Lieutenant Colonel Williams’ battalion to a particular task we are in a leadership role...assigning people to the tasks because they need the experience, or it’s their job, or it will improve the unit, etc. Naturally...this is in the addition to ensuring that the mission or task is accomplished.

In other words, managers assign tasks to employees (things) for the purpose of having that task accomplished. Leaders assign tasks to people for the purpose of having the task accomplished as well as for the development of subordinates. Our junior leaders must learn to make decisions as leaders not just managers. It’s up to the senior commanders to make sure they learn.

Now that we’re focusing on the differences between leadership and management, let me challenge each of you to answer this question: Are you developing leaders in your unit that would be willing to follow in time of war? Remember, units with good management will survive in time of peace. Only the units with good leadership will survive in war-time. The best units will have both. The National Guard must produce the best units.