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OPINION/COMMENTARY

John T. Shaw: Indiana US Sen. Richard Lugar offered a master class in statesmanship



Sen. Richard Lugar, R-Ind., waves for a photo with other members of the Rotary Club of Indianapolis on Aug. 31, 2010, after speaking to the group in Indianapolis. (Darron Cummings/AP)

By **JOHN T. SHAW**

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In early September, several hundred people gathered at Bicentennial Unity Plaza in Indianapolis for the unveiling of a larger-than-life statue of Richard Lugar and to honor the much admired Hoosier. Lugar was the innovative and successful mayor of Indianapolis from 1968 to 1975 and then served for six consequential terms as a U.S.

senator from 1977 to 2013. His work on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee spanned more than three decades and included two stints as chairman.

The nostalgic celebration included tributes from leaders whose careers were shaped by Lugar, who [passed away in 2019](#). Former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice described him as an “extraordinary man” — an innovator, creator and problem-solver. “He was, of course, trusted across the aisle,” she said, adding that Lugar was an unapologetic “national security senator” committed to a bipartisan American foreign policy. Joe Hogsett, Indianapolis’ Democratic mayor, recalled his “unwavering goodwill to all.”

I had the opportunity to know the senator and his work personally, first covering him as a congressional reporter and later spending considerable time with him while researching a book about his Senate career. Lugar was not flashy or telegenic. He was serious, soft-spoken and steely in a kind and modest way. He was rigorous and relentless, plodding and persistent. Lugar was not perfect, but his career exemplifies the central elements of statesmanship: vision, courage, compassion, effectiveness and civility.

Like any successful politician, Lugar was not indifferent to political considerations. However, he contemplated issues by first asking what was in the public interest and only later factoring in personal and party concerns.

So what examples of Lugar’s statesmanship are of continuing relevance?

First, Lugar was willing to break with a popular president of his own party to advance the national interest. He challenged Ronald Reagan in 1986 over apartheid in South Africa. Lugar strongly supported legislation to impose tough economic and political sanctions on that country and worked successfully to round up votes to override Reagan’s veto of the bill. This was a difficult political move for Lugar — and a turning point in placing America on the right side of the apartheid issue.

Second, Lugar was willing to work with Democratic leaders to advance the public interest. In 2010, Lugar, then the senior Republican on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, played a pivotal role in passing the New START treaty with Russia that reduced the nuclear arsenals of both nations. He worked with President Barack Obama, Senate Democrats and a handful of Republicans to win approval of the treaty. He insisted on careful and comprehensive hearings in which supporters and critics were invited to present their views. Lugar was persuaded by the treaty’s strengths but also acknowledged its imperfections. He respected opponents of the

treaty but staunchly resisted stalling tactics and efforts to derail it. Lugar's advocacy of New START was a master class in statesmanship.

Third, Lugar was willing to do hard and grinding work even when it produced few political payoffs. Lugar and his Senate Democratic colleague, Sam Nunn, cobbled together an emergency response to the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 that provided American funds and expertise to the nations of the former Soviet Union in order to safeguard and then dismantle their chemical, biological and nuclear weapons. Lugar not only helped create and expand the landmark Nunn-Lugar program, but he also spent more than two decades traveling to remote facilities in Siberia and elsewhere to meet with local officials and technical experts to ensure that it was implemented successfully.

Fourth, Lugar delved into issues, understood their complexities and then educated his colleagues and the public. He plunged into consequential and arcane subjects such as the Law of the Sea Treaty and gave speeches and wrote "Dear Colleague" letters that are models of rigor, clarity and fairness. He respected his colleagues and the public by telling them the truth.

Fifth, Lugar loyally and proudly represented the Senate and served as Congress' de facto foreign minister. He was a gracious, accessible and well-informed host to diplomats and overseas visitors to the United States. He also worked diligently to make sure the machinery of American foreign policy ran effectively, taking on important but unglamorous assignments such as presidential envoy to Libya, election observer in the Philippines and Ukraine, and congressional observer to arms control talks in Geneva.

Finally, after he suffered a crushing defeat in Indiana's Senate Republican primary in 2012 to a tea party opponent, Lugar gathered himself and finished his term with dignity. And he was not interested in spending his post-Senate life golfing, lobbying or reminiscing about his accomplishments. Instead, he created a nonprofit center to continue working on projects that he cared passionately about — bipartisan governance, global food security, effective foreign assistance programs, and the securing of weapons of mass destruction.

"Our nation and our world are safer because of this statesman," Obama said when conferring the Presidential Medal of Freedom on Lugar in 2013. "And in a time of unrelenting partisanship, Dick Lugar's decency, his commitment to bipartisan problem-solving, stand as a model of what public service ought to be."

The statesmanship that Lugar displayed several decades ago may seem distant and remote. However, the central features of it are timeless and urgent: a willingness to break with his own party's leaders when he judged them to be wrong, a willingness to support leaders of the other party when he judged them to be right, a commitment to develop policies that offered no personal short-term political rewards but strengthened the country and protected the world, a commitment to communicate complicated and sometimes controversial truths, and an insistence to serve the institution that he represented with dignity and professionalism.

The statue in Indianapolis appropriately memorializes Lugar's statesmanship, decency and commitment to the public good.

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