

Chicago Tribune

OPINION/COMMENTARY

John T. Shaw: A statesman's formula — statecraft, stagecraft and soulcraft



Jan Eliasson, then-deputy secretary general of the United Nations, talks at a news conference ahead of the World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul on May 22, 2016. (Lefteris Pitarakis/AP)

By [John T. Shaw](#)

May 26, 2025

For the past two decades, I've had the good fortune to know and study Jan Eliasson, an extraordinary Swedish diplomat and global statesman. His career offers insights about statesmanship and provides guidance for all aspiring leaders.

I first met Eliasson in Washington in 2003 when he was Sweden's highly successful ambassador to the United States. Sweden has one of the most respected foreign

services in the world, and Eliasson's qualities — intelligence, resolve and charm — allowed him to ascend to its apex. His post-ambassadorial career included serving as Sweden's foreign minister and a number of senior positions at the United Nations: president of the General Assembly, special envoy to Darfur, Sudan, and deputy secretary-general.

Eliasson is the kind of person you always want in your corner — but especially during challenging times. He is a statesman with vision, courage and compassion. He is also incredibly adept at problem-solving, which is urgently needed at all levels of government and civil society. Competent governance is the best antidote to angry populism, which disrupts and destroys rather than unifies and builds.

Eliasson has three skills that aspiring diplomats should reflect on.

First, he's a master of statecraft, which requires leaders to know what they want to accomplish and how to do so. This sounds far simpler than it is. In a world of constant change and unrelenting pressure, it is hard to clearly identify and to balance short-, medium- and long-term objectives. It's even more difficult to implement policies that actually work.

As president of the U.N. General Assembly, Eliasson led an extraordinarily complex negotiation to replace the discredited United Nations Human Rights Commission with a new entity that, while imperfect, was a significant upgrade. Negotiating in multiple languages, juggling the demands of more than 190 countries and keeping in mind his overarching goals, Eliasson worked through scores of complex and politically charged issues and ultimately assembled a strong package that won global approval. It was a case study in purposeful and effective diplomacy.

Second, he's an expert at stagecraft, which is persuasion through gestures, symbols and stories. It's the theater of policymaking. Eliasson is a consummate storyteller, possessing an actor's sense of timing, delivery and impact. Compelling narratives have helped him build support for human rights, clean water and sustainable development reforms. "You have to have stories, vivid examples," he said. "That's what people remember and that's what inspires them."

Third, he's superb at soulcraft, which seeks to understand and respond to people's deep-seated needs. Eliasson has used music, drama and other forms of art to bring people together — to open minds, touch souls and lift spirits. As a U.N. leader, he organized concerts that combined classical music with meditative readings to underscore our shared humanity and to elevate, encourage and comfort. "We have too much fear and too much distrust in the world," he said.

Eliasson has many other equally compelling qualities.

Now in his mid-80s, he is more idealistic than many in their 20s. However, it's an idealism tempered and tested by personal exposure to refugee camps, war zones and brass-knuckled negotiations. He has seen humanity at its worst, but remains hopeful and convinced that problems can be solved by cooperation and decency. "Without passion, nothing happens in the world," he said. "Without compassion, the wrong things happen."

Eliasson's idealism is rooted in realism. Leaders, he said, must narrow the gap between the world as it is and the world as it should be: "We have to deliver. We have to connect. We have to be very practical. We have to be very hands-on. We have to make life better."

Eliasson has had a singular career, but it offers enduring lessons in leadership. Statesmen and stateswomen must have a vision, solve problems, clearly explain their work and inspire hope. They need to understand our world but also envision a better one — and offer guidance on how to achieve it.

Above all, they should show us how to move forward during difficult times when the path is perilous and success is far from certain.

"There is always a way. There is always hope," Eliasson said. "Giving up is unacceptable. It's undignified."

John T. Shaw is director of the Paul Simon Public Policy Institute. Shaw's columns, exclusive to the Tribune, appear the last Monday of each month. His most recent book is ["The Education of a Statesman: How Global Leaders Can Repair a Fractured World."](#)

<https://www.chicagotribune.com/2025/05/26/column-jan-eliasson-united-nations-statesmanship-shaw/>