

HOW TO BECOME A STATESPERSON

A PRACTICAL AND ASPIRATIONAL GUIDE FOR STUDENTS AND YOUNG PROFESSIONALS



JOHN T. SHAW



SOUTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY CARBONDALE
PAUL SIMON PUBLIC
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CONTENTS

Introduction	1
1. The Importance of Aspiration	4
2. Personal Inventory	5
3. The Path	7
4. Qualities to Cultivate	13
5. Foundational Skills	17
6. The Importance of Mentors	25
7. Examples of Statesmanship	28
8. Preparing for Your Future	34
9. Statesperson's Checklist	36
Additional Reading	39
Acknowledgements	40
About the Author	41



“It’s not who you are; it’s about what you can become. You don’t do good things because you’re a good person. You become a good person by doing good things.”

Rutger Bregman, historian

“I cannot believe that the purpose of life is to be ‘happy.’ I think the purpose of life is to be useful, to be responsible, to be honorable, to be compassionate. It is, above all, to matter: to count, to stand for something, to have it make some difference that you lived at all.”

Leo Rosten, writer

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that has.”

Margaret Mead, anthropologist

“Consult not your fears but your hopes and your dreams. Think not about your frustrations, but about your unfulfilled potential. Concern yourself not with what you tried and failed in, but with what is still possible for you to do.”

Pope John XXIII



INTRODUCTION

I created a class at Southern Illinois University called “Restoring American Statesmanship.” My students study the concept of statesmanship and then examine compelling examples from American history including Benjamin Franklin, Abraham Lincoln, George Marshall, Dwight Eisenhower, Eleanor Roosevelt, Martin Luther King Jr., Margaret Chase Smith, Richard Lugar, and Jimmy Carter.

At the end of a recent semester, a student thanked me for the class and then asked a simple and direct question: “So how do I become a statesman?” I paused, reflected for a moment, and offered a brief answer, which I immediately recognized was incomplete and unsatisfying.

However, that exchange spurred considerable reading, reflection, and discussion. So how *do* you become a statesperson?

This aspirational and practical guide is my considered response to such an intriguing and consequential question. My hope is that you explore these ideas and use them as a springboard to assemble your own plan to become a superb citizen and then an effective statesperson. This will be a life-long journey.

I firmly believe that statesmanship is not a gift or a genius bestowed on a select few. Rather, it is a cast of mind, a pattern of behavior, a set of skills, and a serious commitment that can be developed and cultivated.

Political thinkers have debated the essence of statesmanship since at least the time of Aristotle and Plato. Discussions and definitions can become abstract, theoretical, and impenetrable. I define statesmanship as exceptional leadership to advance the public interest characterized by vision, courage, compassion, empathy, resilience, effectiveness, persuasion, and inspiration. A statesman or stateswoman approaches policy challenges by first asking what is in the public good and only later by considering personal and partisan factors.

Statesmanship, while rare, has been critical to advances in our nation’s history. From the bravery and vision of the founding generation in the 18th century, to the wisdom and effectiveness of leaders following the

Second World War, to the champions of movements for racial, social, and economic justice in the 1960s and beyond, the U.S. has produced world-class statesmen and stateswomen. It has sometimes occurred in generational clusters, suggesting that statesmanship can beget statesmanship, and that elevated leadership is self-nourishing and perhaps even contagious. However, statesmanship can also be a lonely endeavor with wise and brave individuals taking risks to illuminate the way in the darkness.

America must restore a culture of statesmanship, enshrining it as a noble ideal and cherished ambition for those entering politics, government, and other professions. Statesmen and stateswomen must take the lead in tackling climate change, deficits and debt, immigration, public health, racial inequity, and disintegrating communities. Statesmanship is needed to confront and reverse declining trust in our government and political system and in our major institutions such as business, courts, education, and media.

Statesmanship is learnable and achievable by people of good will and firm determination. The cardinal qualities of statesmanship are not out of reach, even if they are currently out of fashion. We must promote the practice of statesmanship and make it a regular feature of congressional debates, state and local government deliberations, and civic life.

We sometimes think of statesmanship as occurring only on a global stage by larger-than-life figures such as Abraham Lincoln, Franklin Roosevelt, Winston Churchill, and Nelson Mandela. However, statesmanship also takes place within school boards, city councils, state legislatures, nonprofits, the private sector, places of worship, and universities. No venue is exempt from the need for statesmanship—or its rewards. “If you practice statesmanship, history will treat you kindly,” says Sam Wheeler, former Illinois State Historian.

I believe statesmanship is a triangular relationship among exceptional leaders, engaged citizens, and well-functioning institutions. Leaders must challenge and inspire citizens, and both must work together to ensure that critical institutions are solving problems and preparing for the future.

My reflections on statesmanship are shaped by reading, analysis, teaching, and observation. I have long loved to read about history and politics, often through the prism of biography. I’ve always been captivated by leaders who insist on being better and larger than they have to be.

My career after college has taken me in unplanned and unexpected directions—a fellow in the Illinois governor’s office, legislative

staffer in state government, intern at the European Union, graduate student, copy editor at the *Wall Street Journal Europe*, congressional and diplomatic journalist, nonfiction book author, and now, professor and director of a public policy institute. I have observed and studied politics and government from several geographic vantage points: Springfield, Illinois; Sydney, Australia; Brussels, Belgium; and, for a quarter century, Washington, DC. What I have seen has not always been uplifting. But I have witnessed enough examples of elevated and inspiring leadership to convince me that statesmanship is not only essential but possible.

While statesmanship now seems to have all but vanished from the national stage, it is still occurring, often quietly and in smaller settings, even in our divided and deeply polarized 21st century America. However, we need far more of it in all facets of American life. We urgently require a new ethos of statesmanship—and a new generation of statesmen and stateswomen.



THE IMPORTANCE OF ASPIRATION

There is, of course, no single path—no foolproof guide—to becoming a statesperson. However, the essence of this quest must be a serious and considered aspiration as well as a commitment to a path that will often be challenging and difficult. You must make the decision to become a statesperson. In her memoir, *Up Home*, Ruth J. Simmons, a trailblazing and iconic university president, urges students to decide “the person that they are willing to pour their heart and soul into becoming.” The Greek philosopher Epictetus said, “Decide to be extraordinary and do what you need to do—now.”

The path to statesmanship requires a commitment to goodness and greatness. Goodness refers to qualities such as kindness, courage, empathy, compassion, and civility. Greatness calls for a journey from competence to excellence to mastery. It requires vision, persuasion, problem-solving, and effectiveness. Martin Luther King Jr. urged his supporters to have a tough mind and a tender heart, to be idealistic and also practical. “The idealists are not usually realistic and the realists are not usually idealistic,” he lamented. Aspire to be both idealistic and realistic.

Aspiring to become a statesperson may seem audacious. So I suggest you begin with the immediate goal of becoming an outstanding citizen; someone committed to, and skilled in, contributing to your community. The mindset and skills necessary to be an exceptional citizen will establish a strong foundation for statesmanship. Put simply, the path to statesmanship begins with exemplary citizenship.



PERSONAL INVENTORY

As you begin your journey, it is helpful to take a personal inventory and reflect on your strengths, weaknesses, and underlying character. The ancient Greeks put it simply: “Know thyself.”

There is much to be learned by asking yourself: Who am I fundamentally? Of course, you will change over time, but it is important to understand your basic tendencies. I suggest asking yourself several consequential questions.

- *Am I primarily a person of action or of ideas?* Are you better at generating ideas or implementing the ideas of others and getting projects done?
- *Am I an introvert or an extrovert?* Do you draw energy and creativity from being with others or by being alone?
- *Am I a joiner or a loner?* Do you enjoy and excel in group projects or do you do your best work alone?
- *Am I a big picture thinker or a tangible problem solver?* Do you prefer dealing in the realm of abstraction and systems or the concrete and specific? For example: Are you more inclined to study comprehensive immigration reform or to help an immigrant family in your community?
- *Am I a liberal or conservative?* Do you believe in a strong and active government or do you believe that the individual and markets should be allowed to operate with few restrictions? What do you believe is the best blend of government action and individual freedom?
- *Am I a hedgehog or a fox?* This question comes from a modern adaptation of a Greek myth and is summarized by the assertion that “a hedgehog knows one thing; a fox knows many things.” Put more simply, do you tend to have one overriding objective, or do you have multiple objectives simultaneously? It has been said that Abraham Lincoln was a hedgehog in his overarching goal to save the Union but was foxlike in his many, and shifting, tactics to accomplish this goal. Some scholars cite Lincoln as the ideal hybrid of hedgehog and fox.

Your answers will prove instructive. We all evolve and can become markedly different as we get older. However, our core strengths and dispositions tend to endure. As you begin your professional journey, it is wise to be aware of—and build on—your strengths and to address your weaknesses

Ask family and friends to describe you; their answers may be surprising. Use all this information to write an essay that describes the person you are now and the person you hope to become. Then identify specific ways to narrow the gap between the two.



THE PATH

Your journey to becoming a statesperson should be built on a solid foundation of noble aspiration, careful preparation, and commitment to excellence. There are several major touchstones ahead.

Education

The path toward statesmanship begins with a broad and rigorous education. Hopefully your college experience has given you a strong academic foundation. But if there are weaknesses or gaps, don't wallow in blaming others. Becoming better educated is your responsibility.

We are all best served by knowing how to think, read, write, speak, and listen well. These skills are non-negotiable for a statesperson.

I'm an unabashed advocate of a liberal arts education, what my mother-in-law described as "learning how to learn." I believe it provides a foundation to understand, question, and appreciate the world. The liberal arts teach us to read critically, write clearly, and think creatively. Areas of study should include the social sciences, physical sciences, international relations, and humanities. Math skills and number sense are critical. You need to learn how to evaluate probability and interpret graphical information. It is also helpful to understand the fundamentals of economics, geography, and technology. A working knowledge of a second language will prove very useful.

A strong liberal arts education will give you confidence that you can learn new concepts, solve problems, navigate the world, and succeed.

Let me offer a brief story about my older brother Dave, who studied philosophy at Northwestern University. During his freshman year he was in an exceptionally challenging class on Ancient Philosophy. Aristotle quickly became his nemesis. He studied and agonized over the philosopher's writings, doing all of the assigned reading. Dave did everything he could think of to understand Aristotle, yet for much of the semester, he was convinced that a failing grade was likely. However, after a long, hard struggle, including finding additional material on his own, he

mastered the central concepts of the class. He received an A but, more significantly, gained confidence that he could confront difficult topics and master almost anything if he had to. This foundation guided him through a successful career, not in Greek philosophy, but in business and teaching.

In fact, decades after college, he worked for Hewlett Packard in Silicon Valley and was assigned a highly complex research project that required background he did not have. Employing the same creative problem-solving skills and utter determination that he first acquired as an undergraduate, he figured out what he needed to understand, learned it, and completed the project successfully. He credits his liberal arts education for fortifying him and teaching him how to learn.

It's equally useful to take advantage of experiential learning opportunities while in college. School governance, student affairs, and community outreach are enriching and rewarding. As is participating on committees, task forces, and the school paper or radio station.

Please know that a college education is not the only path to statesmanship. History shows a remarkable array of statesmen and stateswomen who never attended college yet were superb leaders. Presidents Abraham Lincoln and Harry Truman are striking examples from American history as are scores of leaders from business, labor, the trades, and religious life.

The bottom line is that your intellectual growth is your responsibility. I urge you to fill any gaps either through self-study or classes. Lincoln forced himself to study Euclidean geometry when he was in his 40s to sharpen his mind and improve his logical thinking. This may be a bit more than most of us are inclined to tackle, but it worked well for him!

Training and Development

There is a debate among social scientists about the relative merits of early immersion and life-long pursuit of a specialty versus early experimentation and later concentration. I'm firmly convinced the second path is better—that wide-ranging exploration should precede specialization. I suggest that these explorative experiences extend for about a year and not be just brief forays before jumping to the next thing.

There is no perfect way to launch your career. An internship or volunteer work during college could give you a leg up into paid work with a particular organization or company. However, don't despair if this isn't

possible. Life is long and flying out of the gate in your early 20s is not a requirement for success. Be patient, hone skills, and don't worry about bounding up the career ladder. Don't compare your career trajectory with your peers or measure your accomplishments with the mythical perfect life that exists online but nowhere else. Take every job seriously. Prepare yourself so you will be ready when opportunities arrive. Embrace John Adams' admonition, "We cannot insure success, but we can deserve it."

If you are fortunate, you will find early jobs that sharpen skills and provide stimulating challenges, good colleagues, encouraging bosses, and the opportunity for growth.

But many of us don't find perfect jobs at the start of our careers. There is likely to be trial and error, with disappointing work, imperfect bosses, and dead ends. Don't despair. You can learn a great deal at any job, including factual information, skills, and insights into successful people. Study those who are respected by others in your workplace. What do they do to earn respect? How do they run meetings, organize projects, interact with others, make presentations, and respond to adversity? Think also about what you can learn from people or procedures you don't admire or respect. There is a lot to be gained from "negative" learning.

The central career challenge is to integrate what you are good at with what you enjoy. Commit yourself to lifelong learning, continued growth, and achieving a broad and nuanced view of the world. Get involved in your community. Volunteer for projects, join a club, mentor students, read books, travel, and take notes that chronicle your experiences and lessons. I guarantee you will learn from yourself when you reread them down the road.

No two people's career paths will be identical. We are all faced with different life choices and possibilities. But education, training, and development are the basis of forging your path.

Allow me to offer two, very different, examples of paths that, ultimately, led to satisfying careers.

Jan Eliasson is a Swedish diplomat whom I know well and have studied extensively, having written two books about him. *The Ambassador: Inside the Life of a Working Diplomat* describes Eliasson's creative work as Sweden's ambassador to the United States from 2000 to 2005. *The Education of a Statesman: How Global Leaders Can Repair a Fractured World* delves into his full diplomatic career and the lessons he has learned.

Eliasson's path is interesting and instructive. He grew up in modest circumstances in Gothenburg, a city in western Sweden. His devoted parents had limited education themselves, but high expectations for Jan and his brother. Eliasson attended demanding schools with exacting teachers.

While still in high school, he spent what he considers a life-altering year as an exchange student in Decatur, Indiana, which expanded his geographical and intellectual horizons. Eliasson returned home to finish high school, graduated from Sweden's naval academy, and then earned a degree in business. He passed Sweden's highly competitive foreign service exam and joined his country's foreign ministry, one of the most professional and skilled in the world.

Eliasson had rigorous diplomatic training, mastering economics, trade, negotiation, and languages. As a young diplomat, he was thrust into a difficult maritime negotiation in Paris and conducted himself with distinction, impressing and surprising diplomats decades his senior. His reputation rising, he was given increasingly more demanding assignments and opportunities, both in Stockholm and overseas. Talented and competitive colleagues, difficult jobs, and supportive and demanding mentors, including the legendary Swedish prime minister Olof Palme, spurred his professional growth. Palme included Eliasson in a small team of UN diplomats working to end the Iran-

Iraq war in the 1980s. This propelled Eliasson into the world of high-level diplomacy. Eliasson matured into an accomplished diplomat with broad skills and specific expertise in mediation and in the United Nations. He became one of the most respected Swedish diplomats of his generation. He served



as Sweden's ambassador to the UN and the U.S., his country's Deputy Foreign Minister, and Foreign Minister. He has also held more high-level UN jobs than anyone in the organization's history, including President of the General Assembly, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, Special Envoy to Darfur, and Deputy Secretary-General.

Most of us will not have the range of experiences and the extraordinary success that Eliasson achieved; however the main elements of his career offer guidance to everyone. He had an exacting education, attained core skills, learned a specialty, and frequently pushed himself out of his comfort zone. He reflected on successes and learned from setbacks. Talent, hard work, supportive mentors, daunting professional challenges, and crucial opportunities were bolstered by his natural optimism, resilience, and sheer determination.

My own experiences are far less exalted than Eliasson's but may be easier to relate to.

I grew up in a large, middle-class family in Peoria, Illinois. My interests led me to major in political science at Knox College. Upon graduation, I was selected for the first class of Governor's Fellows in Illinois and then worked in various state government agencies for several years.

I applied, unsuccessfully, several times for a Rotary Fellowship before being selected to study in Australia. Three years after graduating from college I headed to Sydney and spent a transformative year and a half. I spoke frequently to Rotary clubs about the U.S., traveled widely around Australia and Asia, and earned a master's degree in history.

I returned to Illinois, worked for a few more years in state government, and then moved to Brussels, working first as an intern at the European Union, then as a copy editor for the *Wall Street Journal Europe*. It was there that I learned that copyediting was not for me, but reporting and writing might be.

I moved back to the U.S., attended graduate school for international affairs in Washington, DC, and then pursued a career in journalism. Hard work combined with good fortune led to what became a twenty-five-year career as a congressional reporter and diplomatic correspondent. I've written six books on politics and diplomacy. My earlier careers prepared me to serve as the director of the Paul Simon Public Policy Institute where I'm able to integrate my various experiences into research programs, public speaking, interviewing, and teaching.

I recently read a series of interviews conducted by the Council

on Foreign Relations with a dozen foreign affairs professionals who reflected on their careers. Each person's path was different, but certain themes and recommendations were striking and consistent. Get a good education and seek out jobs based on growth potential rather than prestige. Look for demanding and constructive bosses. Craft a career plan that can be refined to reflect new lessons you learn about yourself. Take chances. Establish an expertise. Master a skill. Keep in touch with friends, colleagues, and mentors. Treat everyone respectfully. Monitor your life for lessons. Demand much from yourself but also be forgiving of mistakes and lapses in judgment. Always make time for family and friends.



QUALITIES TO CULTIVATE

The following qualities are integral to becoming the statesperson you aspire to be.

Empathy

One of the most crucial qualities of a successful statesperson is empathy. It is imperative to respect and understand the perspectives of others. It requires one to listen and observe closely, often hearing and seeing what is *not* being said.

“If there is one quality essential for understanding politics it is empathy, the ability to imagine the other and see the world as they see it, no matter who they are and what they have done,” says Eliot Cohen, the noted military historian and *Atlantic* writer.

Fairness

Strive for a fair-minded and judicial temperament. This does not mean that you can't be a passionate advocate or strong partisan, but your overarching commitment must be to facts, evidence, and truth. To honesty. You must expect, and even demand, that your side lives up to its highest ideals.

I've long admired Lee Hamilton, the former Democratic congressman from Indiana, who chaired the House Foreign Affairs Committee in the 1990s. Hamilton was the most-fair minded lawmaker I ever observed during my twenty-five years covering Congress. He insisted on facts and evidence and was willing to challenge fellow Democrats as vigorously, or perhaps even more vigorously, than Republicans. He expected his party to live up to its best values and to always tell the truth.

Persistence

One thing is certain in your career and life: You will experience failure. There will be times when nothing seems to be going right and your instinct is to retreat and despair. Don't. Intelligent persistence is indispensable. “I

am a slow walker,” Abraham Lincoln once said, “but I never walk backward.”

My father had a saying on his desk that has been attributed to both President Calvin Coolidge and Ray Kroc, the business executive often referred to as the founder of McDonalds. Whoever said it first, it has stayed with me for decades. “Nothing in the world can take the place of persistence. Talent will not; nothing is more common than unsuccessful men with talent. Genius will not; unrewarded genius is almost a proverb. Education will not; the world is full of educated derelicts. Persistence and determination alone are omnipotent.”

Courage

This is a successful life’s most foundational trait, what John F. Kennedy called “that most admirable of human virtues.” To be courageous, he wrote, “requires no exceptional qualifications, no magic formulation, no special combination of time, place, and circumstance. It is an opportunity that is sooner or later presented to us all.”

As you go about life, seize every small moment to display courage. Speak up in a meeting, stand up to bullying behavior, and dissent from a popular consensus that you believe is misguided. Courage is like a muscle; the more you use it the stronger you become.

Mariann Edgar Budde, the Episcopal Bishop of Washington, DC, says that “the courage to be brave when it matters most requires a lifetime of small decisions that set us on a path of self-awareness, attentiveness, and a willingness to risk failure for what we believe is right.”

Civility

Comport yourself with civility. Act generously, admit mistakes, disagree respectfully, defer with grace, refrain from gossip, and treat everyone—from parking attendants to presidents—with respect. Civility is a decision, a commitment, and a way of life.

George Washington said, “Every action done in company ought to be done with some sign of respect to those that are present.” Professor P.M. Forni of Johns Hopkins University wrote, “We have a choice about how we behave and that means we have the choice to opt for civility and grace. . . . Civility is a wonderfully effective tool to enhance the quality of our lives.”

Curiosity

The key to growth and lifelong learning is curiosity. And the core of curiosity is asking questions. You never know where the answers may lead. “The best scientists and explorers have the attributes of kids,” says marine biologist Sylvia Earle. “They ask questions and have a sense of wonder. They have curiosity. . . . They never stop asking questions.” Winston Churchill put it succinctly, “It is always right to probe.”

Optimism—or at least Hope

There is a lot of pain and sadness in the world, and it can be challenging not to succumb to the difficulties you, or those close to you, may be facing. Forge a sense of optimism. General Colin Powell said that “perpetual optimism is a force multiplier.” Other leaders have acknowledged the importance of projecting confidence to inspire colleagues and followers through hard times. President Dwight Eisenhower who, as the American general who planned the D-Day invasion, consciously presented an optimistic and confident public persona. He realized that the non-verbal messages he projected in newsreels inspired his troops and demoralized the opposing armies.

Hope is equally necessary. Barack Obama spoke famously about the “audacity of hope,” calling it “God’s greatest gift to us; the bedrock of this nation; the belief in things not seen; the belief that there are better days ahead.”

Wisdom

We have all met people who are innately brilliant, with powerful and probing intellects. They deserve our respect. Intelligence is impressive. However, wisdom is far more important than intellect—and can be acquired. Work intentionally and relentlessly to cultivate sound judgment about people, events, and institutions. Find practical ways to get things done.

The Chinese philosopher Confucius said, “By three methods we may learn wisdom. First, by reflection, which is noblest. Second, by imitation, which is easiest. And third by experience, which is the bitterest.”

Character

One of life’s great challenges is to continually strengthen your character. You are not fixed or constant; but a work-in-progress. Endeavor to become stronger and more honorable and keep working at it until the very end. There

are no secrets or short cuts.

Dumbledore, the wise and formidable wizard in the *Harry Potter* series, put it well: “It is our choices, Harry, that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities.”



FOUNDATIONAL SKILLS

So, what skills will you need to acquire as you accept your first jobs and move through your career toward becoming a statesperson?

Critical Thinking

The ability to think clearly and logically, to evaluate complex ideas, and to process often contradictory information, is vital. Critical thinking requires one to examine assumptions, challenge biases, listen actively, ask questions, and resist jumping to conclusions.

Former Treasury Secretary Robert Rubin's perceptive book, *The Yellow Pad: Making Better Decisions in an Uncertain World*, describes how he analyzes problems, assembles evidence, and makes decisions. He argues that there are almost no certainties in life, and we should think in terms of probability. Rubin recommends that we calculate odds, weigh risks, and consider trade-offs as we make difficult decisions.

There are many ways to nourish critical thinking. I offer a few suggestions. The next time you attend a lecture, as soon as it concludes, write down the three most compelling points the speaker made. Watch a documentary and identify its central theme and the specific arguments that amplify it. Read a book and at the end of each chapter, summarize its two most noteworthy themes. These simple exercises will strengthen your critical thinking skills.

Reading

We are all continually bombarded with information and tend to passively absorb much of what we read. Increasingly, we read in snippets and headlines. Many people avoid books or long-form essays.

Reading challenging books fosters a nuanced understanding of the world. They teach you to appreciate rigorous arguments and persuasive use of evidence.

To improve reading comprehension, I suggest a technique created decades ago called SQ3R. This is not a special code but a five step process for active reading: survey the material, then formulate questions, read it carefully,

recite what you have read, and review the major themes. I don't recommend this technique for beach reading, but is very useful in most other contexts.

Writing

Endeavor to write concisely, accurately, and vividly. Clear writing flows from clear thinking; the two go hand in hand. Precise and persuasive writing is the result of hard thinking and disciplined editing. It's difficult work! Even a gifted writer can improve by reading excellent writing and by paying attention to language.

Eliasson, the Swedish diplomat, urges young professionals to “study synonyms,” which is his shorthand for delving into language and experimenting with words. He contends that mastery of language is a fundamental professional tool. During a tense negotiation in Sudan in the 1990s, his proposal to replace the divisive concept of “ceasefire” with the neutral term “humanitarian corridors” broke a stalemate and led to an agreement that saved tens of thousands of trapped refugees.

For most of us, the creative use of language will not save lives, but it will allow us to be more effective. Every year, I reread *The Elements of Style* by William Strunk and E.B. White and find that it keeps me attentive to language and improves my prose. There are other excellent practical guides to writing worth studying, including Stephen King's terrific book, *On Writing* and *Writing Tools: 55 Essential Strategies for Every Writer* by Roy Peter Clark.

Advances in AI are raising questions about the need for writing skills. I believe that effective writing is intrinsically beneficial and can also enhance leadership. Abraham Lincoln wrote some of the most consequential speeches in American history. He frequently jotted notes on scraps of paper, put those scribbled notes into his hat, and later took them out and used them to organize his thoughts. His writing was highly attentive to logic, flow, and meaning. The result was often poetic language and profoundly compelling ideas that were his own. AI couldn't have come close.

While I'm no Lincoln, I write a great deal including a monthly column for the *Chicago Tribune*. Writing can be a consuming, exasperating, and even painful process. However, when my final draft is polished and submitted, and especially when I read it in the paper, I have a sense of accomplishment that would never occur if the article had been composed by AI.

Public Speaking

One need not be a mesmerizing public speaker, but you must speak effectively when the occasion or opportunity arises. The ability to make extemporaneous remarks or give detailed presentations is a learnable skill. Become comfortable with the basics of public presentations and find opportunities to practice. Consider taking a class or joining Toastmasters, an organization that encourages public speaking and effective communication. You can also record yourself speaking off the cuff or making a short presentation. Be mindful of your choice of words, verbal tics, and physical mannerisms, and give yourself honest feedback.

John F. Kennedy began his political career as an unimpressive public speaker but improved dramatically by practice, soliciting critical assessments, and professional coaching. He matured into one of the great political speakers of the 20th century.

Project Management

Throughout your career, you will be called upon to analyze problems, identify possible solutions, recommend a course of action, and implement your plan. You must be able to conceive, organize, and see a project through to fruition.

In most areas of life, accomplishments are the result of teamwork, working in a collaborative and collective endeavor. This requires active and respectful listening and building consensus. George Marshall, as the Army chief of staff during World War II, won global praise for his ability to build and train the American military into a powerful fighting force. Winston Churchill called him “the organizer of victory,” referring to his genius for planning and logistics—for project management. This same skill helped him conceive and implement the Marshall Plan, one of the most successful foreign policy initiatives in American history.

It’s useful to study successful project management case studies, focusing on the teamwork that made it possible. See how people embraced different roles: conceptualizer, detail person, networker, contrarian, provocateur, and consensus-builder. I encourage you to read the chapter, “The Searchers” in *Who is Government?: The Untold Story of Public Service*, edited by Michael Lewis. Written by Dave Eggers, it details the remarkable project management by NASA’s Jet Propulsion Lab to design space telescopes to explore the universe. Your ambitions may be more modest, but it pays to shoot for the stars.

Organizing Meetings

You will probably spend more hours of your life in meetings than you imagine possible. They are a ubiquitous, and sometimes frustrating, feature of professional life in business, government, universities, foundations, politics, and even places of worship.

You will have opportunities to organize and to run meetings. Doing so effectively requires preparation. Know what you want to accomplish, whom to invite, and how to set a clear agenda. Solicit ideas, anticipate problems, and structure the discussion to arrive at sound decisions in a timely fashion. Unnecessarily long meetings cause boredom, sometimes anger, and possibly rebellion. Okay, probably not rebellion, but they are not productive.

Rather than endure meetings, use them constructively to confront problems, identify solutions, and inspire people to work together.

General Colin Powell, as both a military leader and as Secretary of State, was renowned for effectively organizing and running meetings. He had clear objectives and a focused agenda. He knew what he wanted to get out of every meeting. And they never lasted a second longer than necessary.

Negotiating

Much of life involves negotiating, even when we are not aware of it. Whether in business or government, dealing with family, friends, or co-workers, people often reach decisions through negotiations. The key is to work for solid and sustainable agreements that meet the legitimate interests of all sides and fairly reconcile conflicting interests.

Negotiation is a skill that deserves intentional study. Start by observing negotiations that unfold at work or within community projects. There are a plethora of classes and books on negotiation. A good primer is *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In* by Roger Fisher and William Ury with Bruce Patton. The authors' framework is smart and practical: Separate people from problems; focus on interests, not positions; come up with multiple options; seek mutual gain; and assess results with objective standards. *Foreign Policy* magazine hosts a terrific podcast called "The Negotiators" that provides fascinating examples of negotiation in contemporary diplomacy.

The remarkable American diplomat, William Burns, provides a brief tutorial on negotiating in his memoir when he describes his former boss, Secretary of State James Baker, this way: "He was as good a

negotiator as I ever saw, always thoroughly prepared, conscious of his leverage, sensitive to the needs and limits of those on the other side of the table and with a lethal sense of when to close the deal.”

Planning and Strategic Thinking

President Dwight Eisenhower famously said that plans are nothing, but planning is everything. What he meant is that the discipline of planning is more valuable than the details of plans. The practice of identifying your goal, outlining steps to achieve it, establishing a clear timeline, and measuring its success will help in all aspects of life.

Successful planning requires a rigorous process and deliberate thought. Former Secretary of State George Shultz recommended scheduling time each week to sit quietly and think about what you are trying to accomplish, aligning your time commitments and resources with your long-term goals.

Strategic thinking is related to planning. It requires that we balance long-term goals with a realistic understanding of available resources. It applies to our smallest projects and our grandest dreams. Military historian Eliot Cohen outlines seven strategic questions to pose when facing challenges. They are simple but profound. I think of them often when dealing with a complicated situation.

- *What is going on here?* Know the environment you are in and what the central question at issue is.
- *Who are these guys?* Understand who you are dealing with, what each of their interests are, and what each wants to achieve.
- *What are we trying to do?* Be very clear with yourself and your colleagues about what you seek to accomplish.
- *What are my resources?* The essence of strategy is to be certain that your capability and capacity are adequate for your needs and aspirations.
- *What is the proper sequence of responses?* Implementation is one of life’s most daunting challenges. Determine the most logical and effective response sequence to get the best outcome.
- *What is my top priority?* Be clear about your ultimate goal.

- *Why will this work?* Have a clear understanding of how the various steps you are preparing will lead to success.

Time Management

Most of us feel overwhelmed at least part, if not much, of the time. Put simply, we try to do too much. Success is not just being busy. You can be frantically busy and accomplish very little—or get the wrong things done, given your main priorities.

Time management is key. I strongly recommend *4,000 Weeks: Time Management for Mortals* by Oliver Burkeman. The author argues that the key is not cramming more tasks into your day but to be exacting, even ruthless, about what you try to accomplish. Focus on the most important, not the most urgent.

Don't neglect time for rest and relaxation. Downtime, or restorative leisure, is indispensable for your health, peace of mind, and ability to function fully. George Packer, one of my favorite journalists, refers to the importance of "creative goofing off time."

I go for a long walk every day, not only for my health, but also to clear my mind, think through projects, and plan. The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche may have exaggerated only a little when he said, "All truly great thoughts are conceived while walking." I will acknowledge that I don't always generate "great thoughts" on my strolls, but they greatly contribute to my well-being.

Managing Social Media

I must confess I am skeptical that the explosion of social media over the last decade or so has improved public discourse in the United States or has helped us come together as a nation and solve problems. Too often, social media divides and inflames rather than unites and calms. Still, it is a powerful tool for leaders to understand and deploy.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's effective use of social media to build global support for his embattled nation is inspiring and instructive. U.S. Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's skilled use of social media has allowed her to shape the debate within the Democratic Party and build a national following. Donald Trump's use of social media helped him win the presidency in 2016 and 2024.

Aspiring statespeople should find ways to use social media to communicate about and build support for their positive agendas. But you must be mindful that

it is a tool, not an end unto itself. Focus on credibility not visibility or notoriety.

Thinking Historically

Every challenge and opportunity that you face has a history. Thinking historically inspires and requires us to dig beneath the surface to understand situations in their full complexity. Almost nothing is as simple as you initially expect or hope. Historical thinking prompts you to ask fundamental questions, examine evidence fairly, and reach conclusions prudently. It makes you humble about the limits of what you really know.

When you deeply immerse yourself in a historical question or controversy, you realize how remarkably complicated the situation was and appreciate the dangers of simple assessments or speedy conclusions.

Professor Frank Gavin of the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies has written powerfully about what he calls historical sensibility in his terrific book, *Thinking Historically: A Guide to Statecraft and Strategy*. “A rigorous understanding of the past provides insights and tools that enable better choices in the present,” he writes. “It may seem obvious that we should employ history to improve decision-making, but it is rarely done.”

The best way to nourish a historical sensibility is to seriously study history. Few things are more enriching for me than a thoroughly researched, thoughtfully organized, and superbly written history book. History can teach us about human character, the complexity of issues, the uncertainty of life, the importance of chance and luck, and the value and limitations of facile comparisons.

The quest for historical sensibility can be enhanced by reading excellent biographies and memoirs. They are life’s instruction manuals. At their most inspiring we learn about people who lived honorable, productive, and joyful lives. But reading history also helps us better understand people and events that have negatively shaped our world and do not deserve our admiration.

Study the Current Moment

I assume that as an aspiring statesperson you keep up with national news. Expand to follow local, regional, or international news—depending on your focus. Find rigorous and credible sources and read and listen to them regularly and critically.

With information overload a grim reality of our lives, there is a tendency to limit your sources of information to perspectives you

agree with. Resist this temptation mightily. Go out of your way to read authors and viewpoints that differ from your own, and learn from them.

Also, to the maximum extent possible, deal with people in person, face to face. As our world has shifted online, we have fewer and fewer genuine human interactions. This has eroded our ability to communicate and has damaged our communities and degraded the quality of civic life. Talking with people in person is both worthwhile and good for you. Avoid living online.

Foresighting

While it is crucial to study and understand the past and to live intensely in the present, it is equally valuable to think about the future. The world is in constant flux. We need tools to anticipate challenges, take advantage of opportunities, and ward off potential disasters. I'm intrigued by a technique called foresighting, a form of planning and preparation. It includes several techniques including scenario building.

An excellent example of scenario building occurred in South Africa in the early 1990s as the apartheid regime was ending. National leaders sought a unified vision to unite the country. A thoughtful planning process brought two dozen prominent South Africans together to design, and then debate, four distinct future scenarios of what their country would look like in a decade. After extensive discussion, the leaders coalesced around a scenario based on expanding democracy and broad-based economic growth. This became the basis of the multiracial democracy that was eventually established.



THE IMPORTANCE OF MENTORS

Mentors are role models and advisors. We learn from them by instruction and example and, almost always, example is far more powerful than words. Inspiring and challenging mentors can profoundly shape your life and career.

There are several different kinds of mentors.

Daily Mentors

These are people we spend considerable time with often at work, school, or in our community.

For more than a quarter of a century, I was a reporter in the Washington bureau of Market News International, a global financial news service. Our bureau chief, Denny Gulino, unintentionally became one of my most consequential mentors. I never once heard him outline his philosophy of management or leadership. But he was the first to arrive at work every day and the last to leave. He assigned himself all the hard and thankless chores. Denny broadcast to the entire international company virtually everything his staff did well and reserved our mistakes for quiet, brief, private discussions. He worked tirelessly and laughed endlessly. When he retired we presented him with a plaque that said simply, “Example is everything.” From Denny, I learned that the best approach to management is optimism, kindness, positive reinforcement, and sheer hard work.

Middle Distance Mentors

These are people we observe from a distance, either casually over time or more intensely over a short period.

One summer during college, I worked on a railroad crew in my hometown. It was the hardest job I’ve ever had—difficult physical labor repairing railroad track while suffering the intense heat, stifling humidity, and endless mosquitoes of an Illinois summer. It was misery.

There was a middle-aged man on my crew named Jose Silva. He was quiet, intelligent, dignified, and extremely competent. Unlike many of his younger

coworkers, he refused every opportunity to take short cuts or slack off in the shade. He took extraordinary pride in his work. I'm certain Jose never knew what an impression he made on me. But forty years later I can still see him clearly—working with me and our crew at the Peoria & Pekin Union Railway. From Jose, I learned that no task is too small for excellence, that all work provides opportunities for honorable behavior, and there is enormous dignity in doing the right thing, even when you are pretty sure no one is watching.

Glimpsed Mentors

These are people we meet in passing but whose impact is far larger than these brief encounters suggest.

While researching my book on Republican Senator Richard Lugar of Indiana, I joined his small delegation that traveled to Russia, Ukraine, and Albania. The entire trip was well organized, but I especially remember the American ambassador in Russia. He did everything right. He met our plane at the Moscow airport, attended all of our meetings, hosted receptions and briefings that were informative and welcoming, made a point to have conversations with each of us in the traveling delegation, and saw us off at the airport when we left for Ukraine. His name was William Burns. He went on to serve as the Deputy Secretary of State and the Director of the CIA. From Bill (as he introduced himself), I learned that professionalism can be modest, unassuming, and manifested in small gestures and tiny details.

Historical Mentors

These are people we read about in biographies and history books whose lives and career journeys are packed with instruction and example. Several have become mentors to me. George Marshall, the soldier-statesman, Eleanor Roosevelt, the First Lady and human rights crusader, and Abraham Lincoln, the most remarkable president in American history. These are mentors you can seek out anytime, always there to inspire you.

Literary Mentors

While I encourage you to find mentors who are real people, we can also find mentors in literature who challenge us to live honorably and provide examples of how to face hard challenges. Is it possible to read *To Kill a Mockingbird* and not want to be a little bit more like Atticus Finch?

My wife loves Louise Penny's mystery novels and tells me that Chief Inspector Armand Gamache is unforgettably wise, kind, competent, patient, compassionate, and professional. I hope to meet him one day.

Having terrific mentors, including family members, does not ensure a career without mistakes or failures, but their guidance in navigating difficult times and challenging situations is indispensable. Don't hesitate to seek out mentors. But also be on the lookout for those who may appear in unexpected places and in surprising ways throughout your life. You're never too old to be mentored.

7



EXAMPLES OF STATESMANSHIP

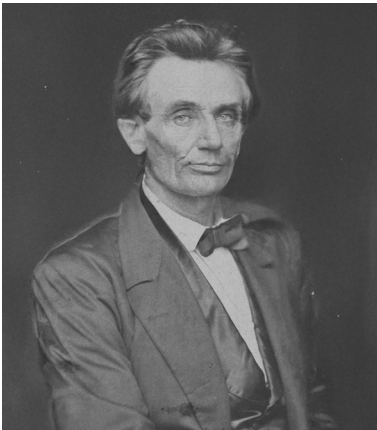
Statesmanship can sound like a lofty, even unachievable, goal. What does it look like in the real world? Below are sketches of people who exemplify statesmanship. Two are large figures in American history and two are contemporary leaders who, though less well known, demonstrate inspiring and attainable statesmanship.

Abraham Lincoln

Abraham Lincoln is the towering ideal. It's difficult to write about Lincoln without lapsing into cliché. For me, he is the archetypal statesman who combined vision, courage, compassion, civility, wisdom, persuasion, empathy, and effectiveness.

During the darkest days of the Civil War, Lincoln not only managed a complicated and brutal conflict but continually looked to the future. He supported legislation to create Land Grant Colleges, complete the transcontinental railroad, and settle the West through the Homestead Act—all while engaged in an existential battle.

He had the fundamental qualities of statesmanship yet had almost no formal education and enjoyed few of the advantages that many of us have had. How did he do it? What can we learn from him?



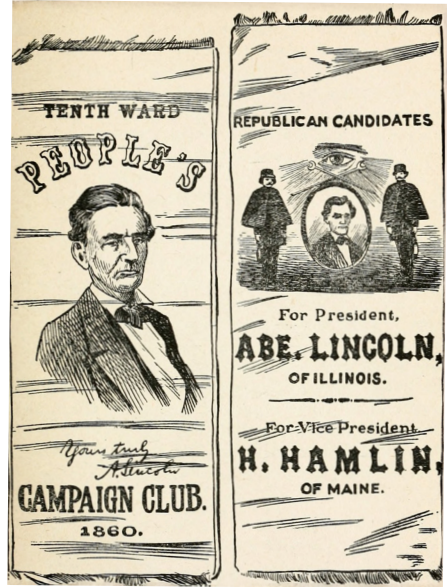
Lincoln's capacity for, and commitment to, self-education and improvement was one of his most impressive traits. His life began inauspiciously. He grew up in rural poverty in Kentucky and Indiana, his mother died when he was a child, and he had a difficult relationship with his father. He moved away from his family in his early 20s, settling in New Salem, Illinois, where he worked as a clerk, surveyor, laborer, and barge operator. He

taught himself the law and became an eloquent writer and storyteller, in part, by immersing himself in Shakespeare and the King James Bible.

Lincoln was elected to the Illinois General Assembly in 1834 and served until 1842. He failed to get elected speaker but gained formidable legislative and leadership skills. He sought out helpful mentors, served one term in the U.S. House, became a skilled attorney, and ran an inspiring, but unsuccessful, Senate race against Stephen Douglas in 1858. He was elected president two years later, in

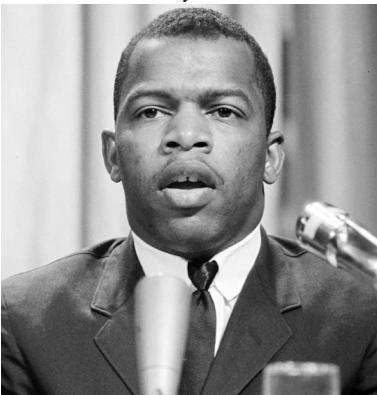
large part because the Democratic Party self-destructed. He assumed the presidency during the most serious crisis in American history and, despite numerous personal, political, and military setbacks, became our most consequential president. He is largely responsible for the survival of the Union.

Though Lincoln is endlessly fascinating and formidable, it's worth noting that for most of his life his contemporaries—even some supporters—found him an impressive but eccentric and flawed man.



John Lewis

Abraham Lincoln had time to steadily mature into statesmanship before the extraordinary crucible of the Civil War. In contrast, civil rights icon John



Lewis was thrust into the forefront of his battle at a young age with little formal training. But he rose to the occasion in impressive, even heroic, fashion.

The third of ten children whose parents were sharecroppers in rural Alabama, Lewis felt called to a life of faith and social justice from childhood. As a student, he was captivated by the discipline and practice of nonviolence and peaceful



protest.

At twenty, Lewis was a leader of the 1960 Nashville sit-ins that protested segregated restaurant seating, and in 1961 he was one of the original Freedom Riders challenging segregation on interstate transportation. He helped organize and participated in the legendary March on Washington in August 1963, where he was the last speaker before Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his

immortal “I Have a Dream” speech. Lewis helped lead, and was badly beaten, in the first Selma to Montgomery march—what became known as Bloody Sunday—two years later.

His most influential mentor was King. Lewis said the civil rights icon taught him “to be optimistic, to never get lost in despair, to never become bitter, and to never hate.”

A civil rights stalwart his entire life, Lewis was arrested more than 40 times for getting into what he called, “good trouble.” His political career included service on the Atlanta City Council and more than three decades in the U.S. House of Representatives, where he was referred to as the “Conscience of the Congress.”

President Barack Obama awarded him the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2011 saying, “Generations from now, when parents teach their children what is meant by courage, the story of John Lewis will come to mind—an American who knew that change could not wait for some other

person or some other time; whose life is a lesson in the fierce urgency of now.” In his 2020 eulogy, Obama said that Lewis “brought this country a little bit closer to our highest ideals.”

John Lewis led one of the most compelling lives and had one of the most passionate voices in American history. He once said, “If you don’t do everything you can to change things, then they will remain the same. You only pass this way once. You have to give it all you have.”



Lincoln and Lewis are epic examples of statesmanship in American history. However, statesmanship can also occur on smaller stages, by people who stay closer to home and work to make their communities and institutions better.

Patricia McGuire, president of Trinity Washington University

This is a perilous time for college and university presidents in the United States. They are battered and beleaguered by a hostile administration, grim demographics, bitter curricular controversies, micromanaging alumni, and poisonous academic and partisan politics. Many hunker down in their offices, huddling with legal teams and spin doctors, avoiding substantive comments on public policy, civic life, electoral politics, and academic challenges—on almost everything of consequence.

Not Patricia McGuire, the president of Trinity Washington University, a women’s school in Washington, DC.

McGuire, a Trinity alum herself, has been its hugely consequential president for more than 35 years. The school was established in 1897 and would likely have been shuttered several decades ago were it not for McGuire’s inspired and inspiring leadership. Her statesmanship combines words and action, kindness and toughness, softness and steel.

When McGuire became the president of Trinity in 1989, the school was in free fall, losing both students and purpose. McGuire realized that tinkering at the margins was not the road to success or even survival, so she transformed Trinity from a school geared toward the daughters of upper middle class white Catholics into one that reaches out to low-income students of color. She kept Trinity’s soul and then made sweeping reforms. In consultant-speak, she pulled off a “paradigm shift.” Trinity’s student body is now 55% Black and 30% Hispanic, many of whom are first generation college students from Washington, DC’s public schools. Trinity has retained its commitment to the liberal arts and to service and aspires to be, in McGuire’s words, a place of “hope and justice.”

McGuire reorganized the school, turned it into a university, raised a lot of money, and built things—a \$20 million Center for Women and Girls in Sports in 2003 and a \$50 million Academic Center in 2016. Enrollment,



which had fallen to 300 in 1989, has stabilized at 2,000. The College of Liberal Arts remains Trinity's core and is now complemented by schools of Nursing and Health Professions and Professional and Graduate Studies.



McGuire is an activist administrator who knows Trinity like the back of her hand and manages the university with benevolent firmness and relentless attention to detail. A visible and respected force in Washington's political, business, and civic communities, McGuire is frequently included on lists of the most powerful women in DC.

Among McGuire's most compelling qualities is her absolute refusal to avoid, evade, or dissemble. She tells the truth, even when it makes some donors and supporters uncomfortable. In 2017, McGuire blasted a prominent Trinity alum, Kellyanne Conway, for creating "alternative facts" in the service of President Trump.

She implores fellow academic leaders to support free speech, even when inconvenient and uncomfortable. "We talk a lot in higher education today about making students feel safe, and safety is an important objective to make learning possible. But real higher learning cannot occur in comfort; our work requires us to make students feel uncomfortable and uncertain and yes, even angry. Our responsibility is to teach our students how to channel their passions, their demands, their anger, and their sense of purpose into persuasive expression that leads to action."

Robert Eschbach, former mayor of Ottawa, Illinois

Ottawa is a small town of about 18,000 in northern Illinois. Robert Eschbach served as its mayor from 1999 to 2019. His leadership was inspiring and worthy of reflection. A quiet, self-deprecating man, Eschbach accomplished extraordinary things by combining a long-term vision with the practical skills needed to bring people together.

An Ottawa native, he attended Illinois Valley College and graduated from Illinois State University. He earned a law degree from the University of Illinois in Champaign and then returned home to practice. Eschbach also plunged into community affairs, volunteering for environmental protection, historic preservation, and downtown and neighborhood



revitalization projects. He served on the city’s planning, zoning, and historic preservation commissions before he was elected mayor in 1999.

When he entered office, Ottawa was on a dispiriting descent, battered by job loss, recurring flooding from its position at the confluence of two rivers, a badly deteriorating downtown, and sagging community morale. Mayor Eschbach urged his fellow citizens

to come together, roll up their sleeves, and build a hopeful future.

He crafted a comprehensive city plan, the first in Ottawa’s history. It was later updated and won the prestigious Daniel Burnham Award. He worked with colleagues to create a floodplain plan that won national awards. Eschbach led a successful city-wide effort to attract jobs, revitalize downtown, develop the riverfront, and beautify the city. The America in Bloom organization recognized Ottawa with a special award for the “most dramatic transformation of a downtown streetscape.”

Those who have worked with Eschbach describe him as kind, optimistic, and confident. He encouraged hundreds of citizens to join advisory boards, committees, commissions, and volunteer groups to revitalize Ottawa. Like Lincoln, he even reached out to defeated opponents and invited them to serve the city in various capacities.

During his twenty-year tenure, Mayor Eschbach did not preach or lecture about leadership. He practiced it. In his final State of the City address, the mayor presented a simple and compelling vision of leadership and self-government. “We are all ordinary people working together to accomplish extraordinary things,” he said, “and though we may have many different titles and stations in life, we all share in a common heritage of self-government, and we all share in probably the most precious of titles—that of citizen.”





PREPARING FOR YOUR FUTURE

How to begin this quest to become a statesperson?

Become an Excellent Citizen

This is your first challenge, your foundation, and bridge to your future. As you begin your career, commit to being an active and engaged citizen who makes your community better. Join a club, volunteer, meet your neighbors, work on local projects, and vote. Learn how to solve problems and make government and other organizations work. Become a pillar of your community worthy of trust, respect, and admiration.

Play the Long Game

Don't aspire to achieve overnight success; there is no need to become a CEO before you turn 30. Take your time, explore, experiment, study, observe, and build an expertise. Focus on improving skills, learning how systems work, and reading people. The life of a late bloomer is far more satisfying than that of a child prodigy.

Develop and Keep Improving Good Habits

Understand your strengths and weaknesses. Don't be afraid to fail, but use failure to learn and stretch yourself. Probe and expand your comfort zone. Keep a journal to track your progress and record the lessons you learn. Successful diplomats and entrepreneurs frequently cite the words of playwright Samuel Beckett, something of a patron saint for productive failure. In his novella *Worstward Ho*, Beckett wrote, "Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better." It's a motto to live by.

Beware of the Inner Ring

In a remarkable essay, the novelist C.S. Lewis offered a powerful warning about the allure of the "Inner Ring." This refers to the very human desire to be accepted and to be part of the preeminent group in our orbit and

“the terror of being left outside.” Strikingly similar to today’s FOMO, Lewis articulated this eternal quest more than 80 years ago. It often leads to ignoble compromises, shading the truth, putting our values on hold, and losing perspective. Be willing to forge an independent path and aspire to be, in Lewis’s words, “one of the sound craftsmen.” Permit me to modify his words — “one of the sound statespeople.”

Commit to Excellence

First become competent, then achieve excellence.

The novelist Pearl S. Buck put it slightly differently. “The secret of joy in work is contained in one word: excellence. To know how to do something well is to enjoy it.”

My favorite historian, Barbara W. Tuchman, writes that you either do things right, or half-right, and that your approach is either careful or sloppy. Always work to do things right and with care.

Understand Different Types of Virtues

New York Times columnist David Brooks describes the difference between résumé virtues and eulogy virtues. Résumé virtues refer to our professional accomplishments, our quest for greatness. Eulogy virtues refer to the way we treat others, our goodness. Remember, the two are complementary, not mutually exclusive. Strive for goodness *and* greatness.



STATEPERSON'S CHECKLIST

As you work to become a statesperson, there are many areas to think about and challenges to undertake.

1) Work hard and learn on every job

You can learn a lot in every job, even those that aren't that great. Focus on:

- factual information
- mastering skills
- who the successful people in the organization are—and why.

And, if you have a bad work experience, move on, and resist taking parting shots.

2) Sample then specialize

Try various jobs early in your career. Take chances, don't be afraid to fail, reflect, and recalibrate if needed.

3) Read, especially books

And especially biographies, memoirs, and history. Reading is one of the most accessible ways to learn from others. Let their stories become part of your life's instruction manual.

4) Keep improving your skills

Especially writing, public speaking, and negotiating. Persuasive writing and effective public speaking require clear thinking. All are imperative.

5) Stay calm and steady

As Barack Obama said during his 2008 presidential campaign, things are usually neither as good as you hope nor as bad as you fear. Stay calm and keep moving forward.

6) Persistence

This is one of life's most needed qualities. You will encounter many, many,

obstacles and frustrations in life. Find ways to overcome them or improve because of them.

7) *Control the controllables*

A critical challenge in life is focusing on those elements that you can control. Don't waste time and energy on things you have no control over.

“Have big dreams but focus only on what you can control: your own thoughts, words, and actions,” said Eboo Patel, founder of Interfaith America.

8) *Courage*

Find opportunities, even small ones, to be courageous. Robert Kennedy argued that moral courage is more difficult than physical courage. But once embraced it becomes a powerful, even contagious force.

As he said in one of his most famous speeches, “Each time a man stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring these ripples build a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.”

9) *Travel*

As much and as far as possible. It will teach you more than you can imagine, make you a larger person, and broaden your perspective. And it's fun.

10) *Keep in touch*

Send notes, make calls. Network the old-fashioned way—personally, not solely online and through social media. It's good for your soul and, quite possibly, your career.

11) *Be curious*

Ask questions, starting at home. Talk to and listen to your parents and grandparents. Respectfully ask your bosses and coworkers about their lives and experiences.

12) *Seek mentors*

In his book, *Lincoln's Mentors: The Education of a Leader*, Michael Gerhardt attributes Lincoln's greatness, in considerable part, to his search for, and

embrace of, mentors. Lincoln, he writes, “had a handful of men to whom he turned for guidance and inspiration throughout his life. Even as a young man, Lincoln knew enough to know he needed mentors. He could not learn in isolation all the skills he needed to become a great leader.”

13) Enjoy life

Al McGuire, the legendary Marquette University basketball coach, sent a congratulatory note to one of his successors, Tom Crean. McGuire’s handwriting was not completely legible, so Crean guessed that the note ended with either “Enjoy the sun,” or “Enjoy the run.” Whichever McGuire intended the meaning resonated.

I hope this guide has encouraged your aspiration for statesmanship, deepened your commitment to the quest, and offered practical ways to begin.

Van Gogh once wrote about a painting he was working on, “I am seeking, I am striving, I am in it with all my heart.”

Be in this journey with all your heart.



ADDITIONAL READING

Meditations by Marcus Aurelius

Moral Ambition: Stop Wasting Your Talent and Start Making a Difference by Rutger Bregman, 2025

The Road to Character by David Brooks, 2016

How We Learn to Be Brave: Decisive Moments in Life and Faith by Mariann Edgar Budde, 2023

Transforming Leadership by James McGregor Burns, 2005

Supreme Command: Soldiers, Statesmen, and Leadership in Wartime by Eliot Cohen, 2002

A Passion for Leadership: Lessons on Change and Reform from Fifty Years of Public Service by Robert Gates, 2016

Thinking Historically: A Guide to Statecraft and Strategy by Frank Gavin, 2025

Lincoln's Mentors: The Education of a Leader by Michael Gerhardt, 2021

Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln by Doris Kearns Goodwin, 2005

George C. Marshall: Statesman, 1945-1959, Forrest C. Pogue, 1987

How I Got Here: Lives in Public Service, Council on Foreign Relations, Gideon Rose, Editor, 2021

The Education of a Statesman by John T. Shaw, 2024



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“Our country will be stronger if we have the courage to do what is right, rather than what is expedient.”

U.S. Senator Paul Simon

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