

Ananda Deacon, WI – 2017

There comes a time in every young woman's life in which she can procrastinate something for no longer: that time has come. I admit to putting off writing this reflection of Washington Week because to reflect upon it would be the final proof that the greatest time of my life is truly over. But with each new photo staff photographer Jakub Mosur uploads, with each new handwritten letter I get in my mailbox, and with each new message I receive in the huge group chat of all 104 of us, I am lovingly reminded that although the trip itself may have only spanned that of seven days, the connections I made there with some of the brightest people I've ever met will ensure that the experience lasts a lifetime.

From being given the honor to lay a wreath upon the graves of George and Martha Washington to debating some of today's most polarizing international conflicts inside the United Institute of Peace, there were so many interactive opportunities to learn about our role in society that it's hard to pick just a few to speak upon. But if pressed to pick a favorite location, I would undoubtedly say the National Museum of African American History and Culture. Being a young black woman in America, I am always aware of the underrepresentation of black people in our media and the lack of accurate black history education in our school systems. Coming from a background where my peers begrudgingly participate in the black history month program and I've only encountered one teacher who looks like me in my eighteen years of life, spending some time in this museum was, for lack of a better phrase, kinda a big deal for me. We went to this museum on our last day of Washington week, and as I got to bear witness to the stories of my ancestors in a place where black history does not begin with slavery, I easily became overwhelmed with appreciation for how much I had learned that week. One of the Military Mentors, in fact, stumbled across me during this emotional reflection and gave me a warm embrace as I wept with the joy of having come on the trip and the pain of having to leave, and so sympathetic were they to my plight that they joined me in crying, for it is not only the delegates who embark on this life-changing experience, but the Military Mentors as well. And as impactful as being in that museum was to me, I believe I will remember this encounter much, much longer.

The great part about this week was that it wasn't about just walking the walk, but talking the talk as well. We had the pleasure and privilege of speaking with several individuals from a wide range of public servitude, from the Librarian of Congress to a CBS journalist, and from the chief justice of the Supreme Court to the president of the United States. Each speaker left us with different takeaways as we scrambled to write down every word that was said, but my favorites would have to be Surgeon General Vivek Murthy and Senator Cory Booker. Surgeon General Murthy talked about the importance of doing what is right no matter your age, but at the same time to not be overwhelmed by doing too much. He stressed the importance of embracing the blank spaces in life, and he argued that it is within these lulls of not doing much else besides recharging our batteries that we are most creative. Senator Booker spoke the truth about how we are not truly loving each other the way we are meant to, that we must confide into a conspiracy of love for one another before we can truly love our country. Personally, I enjoy writing spoken word poetry, so these words were easily inspirational enough to maneuver into a poem. I have already had the opportunity to perform said poem to my peers, some of whom needed to hear this message more than others, and so I am thankful that our speakers have been so articulate and relatable with messages so easy to grapple with that were still incredibly thought provoking.

Let it be noted that my heart sank a little bit in my chest just now when I realized that now I'll be writing about the incredible people I've met, of whom I miss so dearly. This program introduced me to a diverse group of friends who are not only diverse in ethnicity but diverse in thought, and it's showed me how easy it is to have different political affiliations and not only be civil with each other, but genuine

friends. Refraining from naming names and having this essay be several pages long, I will simply say that this trip introduced me to 103 indispensable people with different ideologies who have come from almost every background imaginable. I was very humbled by each new encounter and I could practically see the stereotypes my brain defaulted on certain people flying out of the windows of the coach bus with every new conversation I had. I met a girl with the exact opposite political beliefs as me, and yet we talk practically every day and sometimes she can make me laugh so hard that I am on the verge of tears. I met a guy who fell smack in the middle of the political spectrum, and he was so open minded that he'd listen to me ramble on and on before politely disagreeing or admitting that he couldn't speak upon the topic because he didn't know enough about it, and to admit that one can't form an opinion on something one doesn't have all the facts about, in a world where everyone else is so quick to form an opinion on anything and everything, was refreshing indeed. I met a girl who is objectively one of the smartest people I have ever, and will ever, meet, but instead of discussing policy nonstop, we gossiped to each other whenever the opportunity arose, and I know she, along with anyone else I was able to spill tea with, will be a lifelong friend. And I'm terrible with checking in on people, but my roommate during this trip checks in on me every so often, and seeing that she was one of the sweetest people on God's green Earth, I am making the mental note to return the courtesy in the upcoming years. This week has been the epitome of learning to not judge a book by its cover, and I can only hope I stay true to this message as I transition into college.

If I could go back and do anything over, I would ensure that past me doesn't stress out quite so much about preparing for this trip, worried that she doesn't know all she needs to know about politics or economics or how to seamlessly drop the word "polarizing" into each sentence she utters. If you're a future delegate reading this, my only advice to you would be this: stop tripping. This program picks only the best and brightest young adults that society has to offer, all of whom have an interest in our changing world and a determination to make things better. This trip will make having a position in government a tangible aspiration and teach you how to be a better public servant, and no amount of worrying is going to make you more or less ready this late in the game. The secret is to allow yourself to fully experience everything in the moment, and that being said, it truly isn't a secret. That will become clear the second your Military Mentor rounds you up in the airport and you're surrounded by a handful of the people that will change your life significantly, and for the better. As the sayings go, "the years start comin' and they don't stop comin'," and "feel the rain on your skin - no one else can feel it for you, only you can let it in." Release your inhibitions during Washington week this year. I know I did.