

Arthur Pettit, MT – 2016

Two of the most often criticized groups of people in our country are millennials and the United States federal government. Last month, I had an opportunity to spend a week with members of both.

To their critics, millennials and members of the government seem to have quite a lot in common. Both groups tend to be seen as tech obsessed (looking at you, N.S.A.) and ignorant of the world around them. Even worse, they seem to accomplish little to nothing at all. If there is one experience that could change even the staunchest detractors' opinions however, it would be Washington Week.

Even for someone like myself, a millennial and aspiring diplomat, Washington Week was a truly eye-opening adventure. I was never a self-hating millennial or future bureaucrat, but it can be difficult not to become a little cynical when, for example, a senator attempts to disprove climate change with a snowball, or you realize that your generation is the reason that Kim Kardashian's new hair color is news on CNN. Yet by giving me the chance to spend a week discussing the issues that define our times with members of my government and 103 of the brightest people I've ever met, Washington Week dispelled all of my cynicism.

The first thing you notice during Washington Week is just how talented every single person there is. While it seems like every person you meet is going to either Harvard, Yale, or Princeton, their more impressive achievements are the brilliant ideas that they share with you throughout the week during conversations about everything from campaign finance reform to the refugee crisis.

The second thing you notice is just how reasonable every single person you have the opportunity to speak with is, even the people you disagree with. You may dislike the GOP because of Donald Trump or Ted Cruz, but then you learn that the many Republicans dislike them more than you do, and suddenly you realize that Republicans are people too. You even realize that you agree with quite a bit of what conservative senators like Lamar Alexander or Cory Gardner are saying. Senator Gardner's four point plan of Energy, Economy, Education, and Environment incorporated many common sense solutions. His plan to make buildings owned by the federal government more energy efficient spoke to me. I know that many of the Republicans I talked to had the same experience listening to liberals like Senator Mazie Hirono and Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg.

The third thing you notice is that our government does more than even the most informed citizen may have realized. Despite partisanship, in the past year, our government has increased funding for NASA, brokered a ceasefire in Syria and abolished the disastrous No Child Left Behind law. Nearly every official I met expressed their plans to make this country better. For example, President Obama expressed his desire to end gerrymandering, and Secretary of Energy Ernest Moniz talked about changes that need to be made to our energy policy to combat climate change. Even though our leaders may disagree more often than not, they still work together to meet the challenges our country and our world face today.

The fourth, and final thing you notice is that Washington Week is over. Unfortunately, a week is simply not enough time to get to know your fellow delegates or learn everything there is to know about our government. Even so, the brief time I spent in Washington showed me a side of my government and my generation that I wish more people could witness. Washington Week was one of the most positive experiences of my life thus far. When Senator Gardner spoke to us, he talked about the importance of "lifting big rocks" as a nation. Many may believe that my peers, and my country will be unable to confront the obstacles it faces. I know however, that my nation is in very good hands.