

Mert Kayabas, DE – 2024

“There is no way this is happening right now.” I probably said that a hundred times in just one week. Washington Week stands out as one of the most unforgettable and remarkable days of my life, every element being so unique and special.

My journey to Washington Week was not as extraordinary as others; I had a simple two-hour drive with my parents. On our way to the Mayflower, we made an accidental wrong turn that took us to the front of the White House. In retrospect, it’s amusing to think that at that moment, I had no idea that five days later I would be at a State of the Union watch party inside the White House. Not to mention, standing next to President Biden (the benefit of being from Delaware).

Through the week there were two apparent themes: the importance of bipartisanship and recognizing the humanity of those in power. Both are equally important. Our voters must understand that those they elect are still human, especially through the ideological differences we may have with our elected leaders that we witness through TV screens. Future generations of American politicians must also work together to bridge the ever-growing divide that is so apparent today.

Throughout the week, a less apparent yet crucial theme emerged: the significance of individuals willing to challenge tradition. This notion was exemplified by one speaker whom I had the privilege of connecting with. Assistant Secretary Naz Durakoglu, towards the conclusion of her address, diverged from the customary approach we had been so used to by fielding three questions simultaneously and addressing them methodically one by one. This seemingly simple yet symbolically powerful gesture not only conserved time but also facilitated the amplification of more voices within the confines of the Benjamin Franklin room at the State Department. From my perspective, this underscored the necessity for individuals prepared to challenge political and social norms, breaking away from tradition, without which meaningful change within our flawed systems would remain elusive.

On the first night, Lieutenant Barge, my military mentor, introduced our group to the concept of ‘accelerating your vulnerability.’ As we sat on the floor of the Mayflower hallway he asked us, “What inspires you to serve?”. In a matter of 20 minutes, a group of seven strangers formed a connection by sharing the extremely personal stories of our individual motivators. To me, the most valuable lesson I learned from Washington Week was the importance of accelerating connections through vulnerability.

The Hearst Foundations, via the Senate Youth Program, achieved the seemingly impossible throughout Washington Week: they instilled in myself and many others a sense of agency. Through the many immersive experiences and inspiring speakers, we departed the Mayflower with a newfound confidence in our ability to be the change, poised to positively contribute to society.

I struggle to find my favorite story, my favorite speaker, or my favorite delegate. Instead, I will forever have 133 hours worth of my favorite stories (accounting for the 5 hours of sleep I got a night), 30+ speakers who offered invaluable insights, and 103 other delegates who will go on to be the change makers that America so desperately needs.