

Chris Alfano, VT – 2024

From a distance, I have always viewed the federal government as a sluggish machine. Washington Week made that machine seem a lot more human. As I walked the halls of the Department of Commerce, traversed the rings of the Pentagon, and toured the State Department's Diplomatic Reception Rooms, I remarked, "They're just...office buildings?" Each high-profile venue was awe-inspiring, but I always overlooked the fact that they are, first and foremost, places of work. Something about this seemingly obvious realization was empowering. Gone was the mystified, contorted perception of the government I always held. Washington Week helped me realize that beyond their grandeur, these are just buildings, and beyond their fame, government officials are just people. I departed Reagan Airport on Saturday with a newfound confidence that those hallowed corridors could one day house my own office, too.

Our luncheon with Secretary of State Antony Blinken underscored the honorable nature of public service. His own motivation for serving the nation was particularly inspiring. Gesturing to the American flag hanging behind him, he spoke about what the Stars and Stripes mean to him — an enduring reminder of our nation's history and values, a living representation of the American people, and an assurance of the promise of tomorrow. With such a profound symbol of our nation's past, present, and future behind us, both literally and figuratively, I have renewed faith in American possibilities.

The surreal experience of meeting with President Joe Biden helped me grasp the necessity of answering the call to service. Remembering the days he decided to run for U.S. Senate, the President paraphrased a quote from Plato that his former college professor told him: "The penalty good people pay for not being involved in politics is being governed by people worse than themselves." Washington Week reassured me that the federal government is composed of well-intentioned and dedicated public servants. Yet, simultaneously, it showed me that the highest officials are ultimately people just like myself. President Biden empowered me to overcome self-doubt and trust in my own potential and abilities.

Above all, Washington Week taught me to trust in our next generation of leadership and the potential and abilities we collectively hold. Amidst a fractured political climate, I had respectful dialogue with delegates from every ideological perspective, background, and experience. That alone is cause for optimism. No matter what challenges our nation faces, my fellow delegates and I have been moved by the wisdom of today to chart a course for a more compassionate tomorrow.