

## Emily Nevils, LA – 2025

Patriotism is a dwindling ideal in America. As political issues or foreign wars overshadow the beauty of our nation, people continue to view America in a negative light. We place our hands over our hearts daily but fail to recognize the power behind a salute. We pop fireworks every fourth of July but choose to focus on the revelry instead of the reflection of our nation's victories. Being a victim of this critical mindset, I never realized the true freedom and gift of living in America until Washington Week. The joy of discussing our democracy, reminiscing on our nation's history, and listening to American leaders redefined my sense of patriotism while solidifying my future in public service.

During the final ceremony, I was overcome by an immense feeling of pride as the flag was being folded. With our incredibly intelligent and influential Military Mentors folding the flag, I felt truly grateful for their sacrifices. Through every conversation with them, they breathed out patriotism and a commitment to serving the greater good. From giving college advice to debating youth perspectives in government, the Military Mentors were essential to providing positivity and intellectual discourse. For 18 years of my life, I neglected the true meaning of service. Being led by the embodiment of service, I found myself inspired to serve in every aspect of my life.

Aside from our Military Mentors, Sergeant Major Troy E. Black made Washington Week the most impactful. With his authoritative stance and genuine loyalty, immediate respect gathered throughout the room at the Pentagon. Speaking without a microphone and encouraging harsh questions, I was entranced by Sergeant Major Black's attitude toward life. Sergeant Major Black expanded on the three routes of service - public, civil, and military - and how our role as public servants is to serve the United States Constitution. Americans are entranced by this ideal that we serve our President or leaders. We should only be serving the merits and prosperous history rooted in our Constitution. Furthermore, Sergeant Major Black left us with various quotes that were the perfect end to the week. In response to someone asking about his motivation, he claimed, "If not you, then who?" While discussing how to serve one's nation if you don't agree with current policies, he claimed, "We the people, not me the person." Through every one of his remarks, Sergeant Major Black showcased his patriotism and commitment to serving the Constitution. America is not a nation to ridicule, yet it is an ideal to serve to protect our foundational ideals of democracy.

Along with the impact of the military, the various speakers brought a sense of reality to political culture. Hearing about the childhood of Senator Thom Tillis or the comedic moments among the International Space Station from NASA astronauts reinstalled the humanity in our nation's leaders. We often neglect the reality of being a public servant and place our leaders into boxes of criticism or support. By hearing the personal anecdotes of Justice Kavanaugh or Secretary Marco Rubio, I found relatability and a larger respect for our leaders. Following each speaker, the delegates would always find a way to criticize or show support for the words shared. Through each debate, I realized the value of remaining opinionated and the beauty of connection stemming from differences. Learning to treat every interaction as an interview, I built life-lasting bonds that continue to motivate, inspire, and push me out of my comfort zone. I will forever be indebted to the passionate minds and democratic conversations shared amongst our cohort.

Washington Week has become a defining moment in my life. Coming from a small town where parish lines defined your beliefs and a life outside seemed impossible, I never believed I would be in a room with so many influential and intelligent minds. Washington Week has instilled a growing sense of allegiance, bipartisanship, and confidence in me. I am so thankful for this program taking a chance on me and inspiring me to become a public servant who advocates for all. Through every pledge or celebration of America, I will forever remember my experiences in Washington, D.C., while showing my genuine gratitude toward our nation's freedoms. Living by the motto, "If not you, then who?" I will devote myself to the advancement of society and the protection of our Constitution's sacred ideals.