

Jay Thornber, RI – 2026

Coming from the smallest state in the union, my view on government has always been best captured by the words of former Speaker of the House Tip O’Niell, who said: “all politics is local.” In Rhode Island, elected officials live right down the street, the capital is no more than an hour away from any point in the state, and it’s not uncommon to see Senators at the local grocery store. As a result, my government interest usually stays centered around the Ocean State, as do the perspectives I’m exposed to in my political conversations. While visiting DC for Washington Week, however, I was exposed to a breadth of views and experiences from my peers, Military Mentors, and speakers that I engaged with. These conversations nurtured my curiosity and inspired me to resist the cynicism that far too often encompasses American politics today.

From the first day, I knew that Washington Week would be a challenging yet rewarding mix of exhaustion, exhilaration, and experimentation. From the moment my co-delegate and I were greeted by our cohort of fellow delegates, the conversations started. At first, most interactions followed the same rhythm of exchanging names and states, and then bemoaning our flight delays. By the time we started to visit the mentoring tables, however, our conversations began to take a more intellectual tone. Later that night, as we were sectioned off to our Military Mentor groups, those talks continued. Throughout the week, I debated every topic from government-funded social programs to the conflict in Iran. The conversations I had with my roommate and during our group meals challenged me to listen before I spoke and accept when I was wrong. It seemed as if every day brought a host of new questions that needed to be answered in the seven days that we had together. Every meal brought me to new groups of people, and I built close bonds with peers from New England and the West Coast alike. The constant intellectual stimulation was tiring but engaging. More than once, I felt myself on the brink of sleep as we sat down to listen to a speaker, only to be immediately rejuvenated by their knowledge and words of encouragement. My notebook, which started as hundreds of blank pages, became covered in notes, often accompanied by quotes written sloppily from a rush to write them all down before the next memorable statement began.

It was incredible to listen to such accomplished people. From Cabinet members to Senators, our speakers represented both sides of the aisle and held various roles in the American political system. I began to grasp a greater understanding of all the different roles that shape our government. More important than the policy advice they shared with us, however, I was significantly impacted by beginning to understand the speakers as people. Away from the cameras that often suffocate our public officials, I saw the hope that they held for the future of our country and their motivation for seeking it through roles in the government.

We also got the chance to listen to impactful speeches from those covering the politicians, such as Rachel Scott, the Senior Political Correspondent for ABC News. Ms. Scott’s reflections on the importance of believing in oneself and always advocating for a spot in the room inspired me. Her determination to always ask tough, thoughtful questions that actually mattered to the American people was even more admirable, shaping my understanding of the importance of media in today’s society.

Furthermore, listening to both Major Charles Bolden and my Military Mentors shaped my understanding of service. I was inspired to serve my country by Major General Bolden’s stories of his time in the Naval Academy and the impact that his service in the Marines had on his life’s trajectory. The essentialness of military service was even more apparent to me during our meals, where I spoke to the Military Mentors who guided our conversations and added wisdom and nuance to our debates. The way they spoke of America with such care is something I will never forget, and it has made me infinitely more sure of the importance of supporting our service members as a society.

Washington Week challenged my sleep schedule. It forced me to embrace the awkwardness of introductions and the tension of disagreement. Most notably, however, it taught me to believe in myself and the delegates around me. From Senators to Supreme Court Justices, the speakers all shared a message of hope with us. They believed that the 105 teenagers sitting in front of them could one day change the world. And, because they believed it, we began to believe it too.