

Iman Snobar, WI - 2021

In the virtual waiting room, I looked at my screen expectantly waiting for the day to begin. This Washington Week was like no other, for the first time in history I had the opportunity to partake in the very first fully virtual Washington Week. A part of me loathed past years' delegates, as we weren't able to attain the experience they've had, but I learned that I got one even better. Entering the Zoom call, the notorious "Delegates and Distinguished guests" echoed across my room by none other than Steve Cox. Alas, Washington Week has commenced.

Watching my other delegates' Roll Call of the States videos flash across my screen I smiled, although I haven't been able to meet them in person I felt like I already knew them. Weeks prior to Washington Week, there was a discord server created to interact with other delegates; this server created not only conversation amongst us as delegates, but a place to share with each other things like our hopes and dreams alongside our excitement for Washington Week. Day one proceeded with none other than Astronaut Scott Kelly, discussing not only his experiences in Space but his dedication to achieving his goals even in the face of obstacles. We closed up the day with our Military Mentors and it was a spot where we were able to share not only civil discourse but share new perspectives.

The days went by slow and fast simultaneously, and all at once, I felt as if it went by almost too quickly. Looking back, I admire the beauty of this new age, because although our experience was unique and far from the norm, we were able to attain a variety of perspectives and had a comprehensible network of accessibility with being in a primarily online environment. I think it can be described most vividly by Judge Henry, "Paleolithic emotions, medieval institutions, and god-like technology." The sentiments of humankind remained (with better articulation), our institutions have stayed and stabilized, but our technology has allowed us to further reach the narrative of life to an extensive amount of people in record time. I think this especially spoke to me when having the out-of-this-world experience to hear from the International Space Station! It took me aback that our technology has managed to even cross the limits to space, as astronauts Victor Glover and Kathleen Rubins so thoroughly implied, "To prepare for zero gravity is really to train your imagination."

Transitioning back to the happenings on Earth, two integral parts of the program for me were the presentations by journalist Norah O'Donnell and my home-state Senator Tammy Baldwin. As a woman trying to constantly defy boundaries to become a governmental leader alongside becoming an attorney, they resonated with me. Listening to Ms. O'Donnell, it was as if she spoke in a cadence, and even virtually all the attention in the zoom where it happened was on her. In the era of COVID-19, many of us felt excluded from the normalities we were so accustomed to, but Ms. O'Donnell reaffirmed my thoughts about the true shift in eradicating germs, "Sunshine is the best disinfectant". And truly, the United States Senate Youth Program was my sunshine. After so many unknowns, Washington Week granted me the clarity to know what was happening and still left me speechless by the opportunity to hear amazing speakers, observe our governmental sphere first-hand, and engage in civil discourse.

Lastly, Senator Baldwin has been a powerhouse since the beginning of her political career. Closing up her presentation when discussing the start of her career and fight for equitable healthcare, she discussed how many who were blindsided by their own beliefs and opinions suffered through "An epidemic of fear, misunderstanding, and ignorance." That phrase struck me in a way I didn't think possible. Various battles have ensued during our very real pandemic, yet even so, we've attempted to find common ground. Observing transitions in leadership, and in others maintaining spots of leadership, I've learned that the temporary will never be forever and for that I am grateful.

Going into Washington Week, I presumed I was going to end up disillusioned but I instead was left with tears of my own design. I am grateful that the temporary is not forever, because alas Washington Week is only truly a week, but the relationships I've gained I am reassured will last a lifetime. In the words of USSYP alumnus and Harvard's first Black Student Body President Noah Harris, "The worst thing you can do is just sit around shaping accomplishments and not really get to know people." I'm happy to say now as a USSYP alumni, I have not only become one of two Wisconsin 2021 delegates, I have gotten to know 103 other amazing students across the country (and the globe, can't forget about you DoDEA!) and have the pleasure to call some of them even my best friends. We are the answer to create change, and Washington Week has streamlined this narrative, and for that, I cannot thank you all enough.