

Selom Bediako, TN – 2022

“We the People of the United States, in order to form a more perfect Union...” These words rang in my head, a constant chorus echoed by almost every speaker thus far, reflecting on the state of American democracy. As I sat in front of Zoom in my stark business attire (cup and cookies in hand) anxious about how the rest of the program would unfold, I could not help but ponder the immense task it was to form a more perfect union. In a dismal few years marred by brutal racial violence, injustice abroad, and death and poverty exacerbated by the pandemic, I must admit that I went into Washington Week unhopeful about the state of the union. Although skeptical, I held out hope that our esteemed cohort of speakers, ranging from Supreme Court justices and the Cabinet Secretary of speakers, would restore a sliver of my faith in the American democracy as the foremost leaders of our nation.

I resolved to keep an open mind heading into our conversation with Justice Kennedy, a man whose career had spanned decades and whose decisions had helped shape the very fabric of our country. I listened intently as he described his decision-making process and upheld the Constitution as the gospel that our framers expertly crafted to guide this experiment. Yet, I myself could not revere a document written by slave owners who denied these same self-evident truths to an entire subset of the population on the basis of race and ultimately established the systemic inequality that has yet to be undone. And in this thought process lie the dichotomy that troubled me throughout the week: while I was incredibly grateful to be granted this prestigious opportunity and the chance to speak with some of the nation’s most highly respected officials, I found myself disagreeing with much of their philosophies and perspective on the challenges that plagued our country.

Even my favorite insights held some twinge of disappointment in how far the country had to progress. One particular conversation that stuck with me was with Senate Historian, Betty Koed. Dr. Koed’s expertise on the rich history of Senate proceedings and her work to illuminate the many contributions of female Senators were particularly fascinating to listen to. In her stories about the less known actors on the Senate floor, however, it became exceedingly clear that American progress came at a snail’s pace on account of its inability to reckon with the sins of its past and present. Detailed were the chronicles of the Costigan-Wagner antilynching bill and the century-long fight to pass any legislation of this form as well as the filibusters that derailed it at every turn; furthermore, we were told of Senator Carol Moseley-Braun’s battle to reject the Confederate flag as a congressionally approved patent design for the Daughters of the Confederacy. Despite the fact that these narratives were positively framed as an ode to the perseverance it takes to make progress and the tireless labor necessary to enact change, they further heightened my sense of disillusionment. Why should it take over 100 years, the labor of individuals for their entire lifetime, and a century of blockades to pass legislation as simple as acknowledging an unequivocal lack of tolerance for lynching? Why should the emotional labor fall on the first African American female senator to make impassioned pleas to deaf ears in regard to a symbol of hatred?

In the end, my real sliver of hope came from my fellow delegates. Cutting through the haze of disappointment came my delegate’s hard-hitting intellect, dedicated to pinpointing the cracks in the foundations of our institutions and resolved to fix them. From questions about the U.S. military’s involvement in polluting Hawaiian lands to NATO’s history as an aggressor in conjunction with the loss of life, even though a Zoom screen, these words posed a reckoning for nation’s leaders in an attempt to hold them accountable. Overall, I am grateful for my Washington Week experience for all that it was and wasn’t. Washington Week elucidated the hard questions that truly need to be asked moving forward in order to form a more perfect union as well as introduced me to a cohort of incredible individuals that I hope will be asking those questions and creating tangible change.