

## Caleb Bello, OR – 2023

Sunbeams illuminated our cold breath on the Monday morning of Washington Week, as the 104 delegates piled out of our three coaches and onto the front steps of the Russell Senate Office Building. Across the street was the Capitol, and as we slowly filed through security and towards the Kennedy Caucus Room, where our first government speaker awaited us, I was awestruck by the elaborate white marble columns and hushed atmosphere of solemnity. As a first-time visitor to our nation's seat of government, I tried to impress within my memory every detail of the majestic place, knowing what events had taken place here in our country's past from Senate committee investigations on Pearl Harbor to Watergate. Coming from Oregon, a state not yet 170 years old, my first reaction to D.C. was amazement that I was seeing, standing, and sitting where our nation's history had first lived and breathed centuries ago.

Enthralled with this past, I did not realize I was next listening to the woman who had organized the saving of the ballots, ensuring the preservation of our democracy, on January 6, 2021: Senate Parliamentarian Elizabeth MacDonough. As she frankly shared with us her traumatizing experience on that day and her challenges finding the motivation to continue to serve in the aftermath, with goosebumps and hushed breath I pondered her metaphor that our government was a "living, breathing creature." After Washington Week, I truly understand it is real people that transform our government as an institution into a "living, breathing creature," and these are the people we aspire to become.

Throughout the week, every tour, speaker, and dinner conversation reinforced this theme that our government's strength lies in the people who serve. Eating lunch at the United States Institute of Peace, I looked through the glass windows surrounding us, into the offices of public servants currently leading our nation in the pursuit of peace. I heard from Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines, who organizes the President's Daily Brief for President Biden, understanding the significance of writing with total "analytic objectivity." Over a dinner conversation with Military Mentor Major Hollister, I learned first-hand how the Space Force operates on a daily basis to ensure we are technologically-advanced and prepared to combat adversaries in space. Though the specifics changed, one thing remained constant: a government composed of public servants, each with their individual talents and skills, who altogether combine to create our "living, breathing," functioning government.

In the presence of these awe-inspiring government officials who actively direct the daily steps and future of our nation, I expected to hear repeated stories of lives single-mindedly dedicated to achieving a certain position. However, in the words of Caroline Gao (OR '22), Washington Week made me realize these "seemingly untouchable" government officials were in fact just as human as myself and my fellow delegates. As Democratic Co-Chair Senator John Hickenlooper phrased it, "a truly terrifying moment is when you realize the people who run the country went to high school with you." Yet this moment was also indescribably empowering, because we saw behind the media facade into who these officials truly are, and their expectation-defying and oft-unexpected journeys to their current positions serving our constantly evolving government.

For Surgeon General Vivek Murthy, this journey crossed continents in his dedication to expanding and improving healthcare for both Americans and Indians, in part leading to an unexpected phone call on his birthday from President Obama; an invitation to become the first Surgeon General of Indian descent and youngest-ever active duty flag officer in federal uniformed service. For Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona, this meant progressing from teaching fourth grade students to serving as the Connecticut Commissioner of Education to becoming the first Latino Secretary of Education. Ultimately, the reality that many of these now-esteemed officials had once been everyday citizens like the rest of us confirmed Murthy's statement that "if our lives were governed by probability, most of us wouldn't be doing what we're doing." Despite every official's vastly differing career path, I find it immeasurably

comforting to know I and my fellow delegates do not have to fit within a single mold, but instead can reflect the wonderful diversity of our nation in the life paths that we choose.

Each delegate, hailing from across the entire U.S., reflects a nation composed of bright young people who are equally committed to leaving this nation and world better than they found it. We stand united by our shared desire to ensure that our government will successfully achieve its goal of serving all Americans. Although we only spent a week together, I am so grateful for having seen friendships flourish which extended beyond every geographic or partisan border, and their testament to our shared humanity in a seemingly polarized nation. Washington Week brought us together, readying us as the public servants of tomorrow to receive the baton from the public servants of today; setting our foundation to wholeheartedly know it is due to all who have and all who will devote their lives and breath to public service that our government shall remain a "living, breathing creature" for generations to come.