

## Aaron Combs, CA – 2024

I'm fascinated by the word "access" and its derivation "accessibility." Over the three decades since it first entered the mainstream, "access" has become loaded in the sense that different groups of people have added different connotations to it. Disability advocates, for example, have emphasized "access" in the context of building infrastructure that removes physical barriers for those with disabilities. Still others have associated it with Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion movements, turning it into a lightning rod for criticism.

At its root, access is empowerment. Access is ensuring America is truly the land of opportunity, where every law-abiding citizen and resident is given a chance to create the life they desire. Access to education, access to financial stability, access to employment, access to representation: these are the basic principles that make America, America. Having previously never had a clear approach to advancing this incredibly broad idea of access, Washington Week equipped me with those very mindsets I needed.

One of these mindsets I developed was centered on interdisciplinary problem-solving rooted in data and was nurtured by one of our first speakers, Secretary of Transportation Pete Buttigieg. In his speech, Secretary Buttigieg outlined his department's unique approach to selecting projects to fund, which employs data models to track the flow of spending dollars as they tickle through a local economy. This ensures that the department's funding transcends state lines and instead funds economic zones, building access to economic opportunity equally, and maximizing the efficiency of each dollar spent. Now, I'm applying this mindset to found the first-ever youth-led local and state-level ThinkTank, grounding the youth activist movement in data-driven research that then informs systematic policy development.

Another mindset that I left Washington Week with was to always endeavor to develop policy solutions that incorporate all citizens, rather than isolating a group of people out and labeling them as the "opposition." During the diplomacy simulation at the State Department, productive conversations could only coalesce around a desire to find a solution that worked for everyone, rather than desires to villainize or remove communities and nations from the table.

Bringing people together under a single umbrella is undoubtedly extremely difficult; by our nature of being a nation of diversity, we are also a nation of differences. But if Washington Week has imparted any lesson on me, it is the lesson of pursuing what is right over what is easy. It may be harder to unite individuals, but when pursuing what is easy will only fuel division and resentment, it remains each of our responsibilities to do what is right. This is what was echoed over and over again throughout the week, by the Senate Parliamentarian Elizabeth Macdonough, by Senator Catherine Cortez Masto, by my Military Mentor Major Josue Duarte, and one that wove its way throughout the conversations I had with my fellow delegates.

Washington Week has left me with many answers to what is right. I recall Supreme Court Justice Kagan reminding us that the pursuit of a career in industry is critical for understanding our nation's foundation on a strong economy, and I remember Representative Emanuel Cleaver's call for us to defend those who may not have the ability to be heard. But the most powerful thing Washington Week has left me with is an undeniable faith in my ability to envision, implement, and ensure access in our great country's systems. Meeting with these public servants humanized them, and reminded me that they all had a beginning to their path. Now all that's left for me to do is to start walking down mine.