

James Howard, MD – 2024

For the first week of November 2020, I could only sleep on unforgiving intervals, couldn't pay attention in my Zoom classes, and was generally detached from my day-to-day life. The mail-in ballots in Pennsylvania, Georgia, and Michigan were, with each new batch of a couple thousand votes, slowly moving the states—and the fate of the presidency—in Joe Biden's direction. When Biden was finally declared president-elect on Friday, November 7th, I marveled at how much time and energy I had invested into polls, New York Times anecdotes, and Twitter punditry surrounding the election over the preceding months.

I never stopped obsessively following the twists and turns of American politics, but Washington Week has made me realize that until now, I have been little more than a passive, if passionate, observer of our governmental system. Closely following politics is fun—thrilling even—but it pales in comparison to fighting for the values you hold most dear, as the speakers, military mentors, and fellow delegates I met during Washington Week so clearly do.

In an itinerary full of poised leaders and sincere change-makers, this urge to involve myself in public service came over me most strongly at the White House on Thursday night, March 7th. President Biden was delivering his State of the Union Speech that night, and we were given the immense privilege of watching it from the East Wing! I remember sitting at a table with the Minnesota delegate, discussing the political calculations beneath the surface of the president's speech and providing standing ovations along with other delegates as he promised to cap insulin costs and defend American democracy.

Once the speech ended, we were asked to line up on a set of bleachers and given specific directions by our Military Mentors about how to position ourselves. For over an hour we just stood there, refusing to let ourselves believe what we knew was not just possible, but likely: we would soon be face-to-face with the leader of the free world. At midnight, the president finally came into the room; despite my best efforts I was unable to conceal my excitement, grinning from ear to ear and cheering. For the next 20 minutes, the president told us about the integral role young people played in his 1972 Senate campaign, and how he himself got involved in politics following the Civil Rights movement. Driving back to the Mayflower Hotel in the wee hours of the morning, I reflected on his calling for us—for me—to be America's future.

More than any one event or speaker, however, what makes Washington Week such a life-changing experience is the people you are surrounded by. All 17 Military Mentors act as a constant source of wisdom on everything from college admissions to using the proper utensils at dinner (more challenging than you might expect!) They were of the highest personal character, not to mention remarkably funny and down to earth. Most importantly, they carried themselves with an unmistakable sense of purpose: dutiful service to our nation. Indeed, they were such an inspiration that I and countless other delegates couldn't help but feel drawn to serve in uniform after witnessing them.

Over the course of Washington Week, my fellow delegates—particularly my Military Mentor group—went from being complete strangers to brothers and sisters. On the first night, as anxiety about meeting an entirely new group of people came over me, I had an incredible conversation with my roommate, a Massachusetts delegate, that assuaged my worries. I spent countless bus rides to the Capitol building discussing the politics of countries around the world

with a Pennsylvania delegate, marveling at his encyclopedic knowledge of geography that I could only dream of having. On one walk back to the buses from the Senate Office Building, I listened in awe as one of the Florida delegates explained his work for a Miami-Dade County Executive campaign. The week was filled with these little interactions, and I can't wait for more at the reunions! In the meantime, however, I have been enjoying staying in contact with all of the delegates I met over text and Instagram.

Before we went to bed on the first night, my Military Mentor asked my group members and me a simple question: what motivates you? As my fellow delegates articulated their responses with evident passion, I struggled to give a meaningful answer beyond merely appreciating politics' twist and turns. After Washington Week, I can now do so confidently: I want to serve my country, whether in our Armed Forces or as a lawyer fighting undemocratic gerrymandering efforts in the courts. Thank you to the Hearst Foundations, the Military Mentors, the speakers who volunteered their time, and to the 62nd Class of Senate Youth delegates for providing me this clarity; I will forever be grateful.