

Washington Week '09 Essay

As I look back on my 2009 Washington Week experience, it is at first difficult to point to the most memorable speakers, for the entire week's schedule was literally filled with phenomenally interesting people who took their time to share their insights with us. Each speaker with whom we were given the opportunity to converse had something unique to say, and that has made the process of determining who was the most inspiring or the most memorable all the more challenging.

As an ardent student of history, there is little I appreciate more than a historian who not only can discuss events, facts, names, and figures, but also can apply historical lessons in a pragmatic sense. This is what most distinguished Associate Senate Historian Don Ritchie from the myriad other historians whom I have heard. Over lunch at the Reserve Officers' Club, Ritchie examined the pivotal 1932 election and gave us eight lessons that can be learned from it. The Senate Historian also drew many relevant connections between then and the reality of the present. He explained that in politics, it is never wise to underestimate one's opponents, and that in desperate times, hope trumps fear. Focusing his next lessons more specifically on governance, Ritchie reminded us that there can only be one president at a time, that a quick start to an administration depends on whether or not the executive and legislative branches of government are functioning in a synchronized fashion, that the relationship between any president and Congress is a 'two way street', and that governments exist to protect citizens. Offering a corollary to that last lesson, he said that citizens do not tolerate the appearance of a passive government in tough times. He also instructed us that before Congress repeals laws, it must be sure to comprehend what they were created to do. Ritchie ended his remarks with one broad, overarching principle. History, he told us, has important lessons to teach, but it is up to us to listen and to heed them. As one who thoroughly enjoys history, that truly resonated with me.

I also relished the opportunity to meet with Mel Martinez, my senator, at the Bipartisan Luncheon in the Hart Senate Office Building. I was able to personally speak with the Senator as well as his legislative assistant, and they both gave me valuable insight into the inner workings of the legislative process as well as the details behind managing the office of a U.S. Senator. Along with the other Florida delegate, I had the privilege of introducing the Senator, who then spoke with the delegates. In his speech, Senator Martinez emphasized the necessity and the importance of public service, sharing with us the inspiring story of the many obstacles which he overcame on his road to the United States Senate. The Senator explained that in a democracy, it is the responsibility of representatives of the people to vote their convictions, even when those convictions may conflict with the majority opinion of his or her constituents. In turn, citizens must elect representatives who share their own convictions. This concise and convincing answer to a complex question as old as our democracy was highly memorable.

Easily the most awe-inspiring event of Washington Week was meeting with President Obama. The inspiring presence of the stately columns and graceful curvature of the Truman Balcony, the impeccably manicured White House lawn and gardens, the mystique of the exalted office, and the thrill of shaking hands with the President of the United States combined to form one of the most memorable experiences not just of Washington Week but of my entire life. It was undoubtedly the climax of my week.

Washington Week 2009 was an incredible opportunity for which I am extremely grateful. I extend my sincerest thanks to the members of the William Randolph Hearst Foundation for so generously providing both the trip and the scholarship. I also thank the coordinators, the military mentors, and all of the staff who made the amazing week possible. Without their help, Washington Week 2009 could not have happened.

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