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GWU College Republicans Speak About Inauguration Experience



Guest Blog by David Cole

The views expressed in this piece do not necessarily reflect the views of GWU-Today as a whole.

My name is David Cole and I am a Political Science/Public Relations major at Gardner-Webb, as well as an active member of College Republicans. I, along with seven other students and two university administrators, traveled to Washington D.C., to see the presidential inauguration of Donald J. Trump on January 20, 2017.

The funny thing is, we were never supposed to go to Washington. In October 2016 Eli Hardin, our club president, asked us if we would be interested in travelling to Washington to see the inauguration if Trump won. At the time Trump was dramatically down in the polls and nobody, not even his own supporters, expected him to win. With that mindset, we all agreed that we would travel to Washington on the off-chance that he did make it into the White House. To the nation's surprise, Trump won the presidential election of 2017 and all of us who said that we

would attend the inauguration made good on our promise. It is safe to say that when we replied to Eli's message in October, we had no idea what we were signing ourselves up for.

This was not the first inauguration that I had attended. In 2012 I had embarked on a school-sponsored trip to see Barack Obama's Presidential inauguration. Since the group was large it had been a highly orchestrated affair involving tour guides, strict schedules, and the usual ruckus that accompanies high school trips. This time, however, it was much more involved since our group was smaller, more mature and more interested in experiencing the event.

We traveled with Mike Hardin, the university CFO, and Dr. Jeff Tubbs, our College Republicans adviser. The trip would not have been so successful had it not been for the legwork of Eli and another one of our members, AJ Horner. Eli was able to get us front-row tickets to the inaugural parade on Friday and AJ contacted his Congresswoman, Virginia Foxx, to give us an in-depth tour of the Capitol Building the day after the ceremony. Both were near-impossible feats to accomplish, so I commend both of them for their meticulous planning. We departed from Gardner-Webb on Wednesday evening, January 18, and stayed the night in Richmond, Virginia. Early Thursday, we woke and drove to our designated hotel in Dumfries, Virginia to check-in and then drove the rest of the way to the city.

Since parking spots in Washington are hard to find on a good day, and this was inauguration weekend, we knew that there would be no where for our massive 12-passenger van. Thankfully, Eli had planned for this and obtained transit cards for the whole group, so that we could park in the suburbs and take the Metro subway in and out of the city each day.

On Thursday, our first day in the city, we went to Arlington Cemetery. After making our way through all the metal detectors and wading through a massive crowd of bikers, we found ourselves hoofing up the drive to the top of the hill, where General Lee's Mansion stands watch over the cemetery and the city. From there we could see the cleared streets and hordes of police cars. After a few minutes, a fleet of black suburban SUVs made their way up the drive, twisting through the cemetery and ending at the tomb of the Unknown Soldier, where President-elect Donald Trump made an appearance. After he left, we could hear the crowds cheer as the motorcade proceeded back down the streets. We hurried down back through the cemetery to try to intercept the vehicles and along the way we walked right past Nigel Farage, a member of the British independence movement who orchestrated Brexit. This was the first encounter of a long string of famous people that we got very close to.

We made it to the road as Trump's motorcade passed. We saw him waving from the second SUV, not five feet away! The crowd went berserk as both Trump and his running mate Mike Pence drove by. It had been a long time since I've heard people this excited about politics.

The next day was the main event. We set out for the city at 3:30 a.m. to get a good seat in the parade. It was cold, windy and occasionally rainy. Despite our early start, everybody was hyped up about the coming experience. We parked the van in the parking garage at the Metro station and boarded a moderately full train to our stop in the center city. Once we reached downtown, we disembarked to the mixed sight of police officers, military, and civilian Trump supporters. After trying to enter the event area through various security checkpoints, we were finally admitted around 7:30 a.m. to the spot where our seats were located. We forewent standing on the Mall so we could get good spots at the parade and see the Trump party up close. I remember being held back by a police

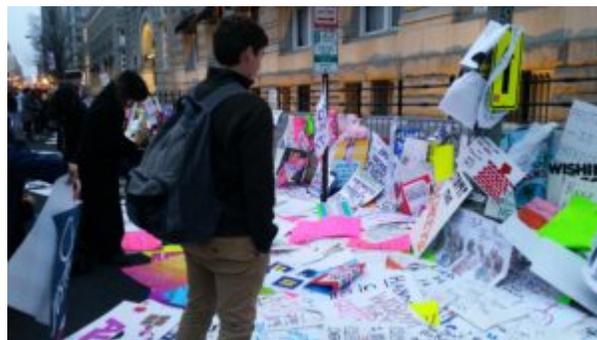


squadron from Texas and seeing Kelly Anne Conway, Trump's campaign manager, drive up to the crowd. Everybody cheered as she began to take selfies with a few select college students.

We had secured seats in the front row of the stands to the right of the platform where Trump and his advisers would eventually take their seats and watch the rest of the parade. For hours we huddled on the bench, but the great part about this situation was that the White House was behind us. We were essentially on the sidewalk outside the White House grounds. We witnessed the Trump, Pence, and Biden motorcades arriving at the residence and watched intently from the top of the bleachers as the Obamas greeted the Trumps. Later, we watched President Obama and Michelle leave the White House for the last time, which was when the gravity of the event hit me.

After listening to the inauguration on the loudspeakers set up around the increasingly crowded bleacher sections, the famous people started to arrive. Ben Carson, flanked by his aides, walked down the street first, to the loud sounds of whoops and cheers. Throughout the course of the day we saw Nikki Haley, Omarosa, Rick Perry, Chuck Schumer, and hordes of other important people that we couldn't recognize. The skies were gray, and as rain started to come down, the parade advanced through our section. Soon, the crowds went berserk as U.S. military bands strutted in front of the massive motorcade, where Trump and his wife, Melania, exited near our stands. The rest of the Trump family followed, as well as Mike Pence. It was so surreal seeing all the people I usually see on the news in front of me in real life. Everybody in our group crammed the standing zone by the rails, trying to get good video of the new president.

Unfortunately, the parade was so delayed that we were unable to see all of it, but we saw the president, which is what mattered. Situations were becoming volatile just a few blocks over; we could hear flash bangs in the distance and watched as the riots unfold on twitter. I remember seeing people anxiously checking Google Maps and the news to see how close the riots were to our location. We were safe as long as we remained in the security barrier, but when we left that to return to the hotel, we saw cleaning crew picking up litter and putting boards over broken windows. The atmosphere on the streets felt tense, and the constant wail of sirens, the churning of helicopter rotors, and the barricaded streets made the city seem like it was preparing for the zombie apocalypse. Cold, exhausted and swollen, we decided to return to the hotel before more riots cropped up downtown.



The next day was a different atmosphere entirely. We had our capitol tour planned for 9:30 that morning, but quickly learned that we would be late. Hundreds of people packed the train platforms, most in pink hats and holding signs. The Women's March was coming to town. The train was standing room only, and with every stop more protesters crammed into the cars, until we had to start skipping stations. As the train rolled across the Potomac, the protesters in the car cheered at the sight of every bridge jam-packed with cars trying to get into the city.

When we finally made our way into the city, through the slow-moving crowds, we were struck by the sheer size of the protest. While some of us didn't align with the ideology of the Women's March, we all respected how they managed to get around a million people onto the Mall and Pennsylvania Avenue peacefully. It seemed to take ages to wade through the noisy crowds to the capitol, where we were late for our Capitol tour, but it was a favorite of most of the group. Congresswoman Foxx gave us an in-depth look at the grand building, as well as an excellent narrative. It felt surreal to talk and joke with such a prominent congresswoman. We got to sit in the House Chamber and stand on the inauguration platform where Trump was sworn in just the day before. From there we had a view of just how huge the protest was; from the Capitol to the Lincoln Memorial was a shoulder-to-shoulder crowd that spilled into side streets.

After our tour, we proceeded to the Smithsonian. I tried to wear a Trump toboggan that I bought at a stand the day before, but made it halfway into the dense crowd before I felt it was too dangerous to keep on. Either way, it was funny that we accidentally found ourselves in such a historic moment. I was struck by the creativity that so many women and men put into making their signs and outfits. The rest of the day was uneventful by comparison; we went to the Natural History Museum and then when the foggy night rolled in, we saw the Washington, Korean, Lincoln, World War II, and Vietnam Memorials. It was so cool walking by the Washington Monument as the top half became shrouded in fog, with the light of the city bouncing off the clouds. That last night, Washington felt like a truly magical place.

The morning before we left, we went to the National Cathedral for their 11:15 a.m. service. It was a building too big to comprehend, both inside and out, and hearing the organ echo through the vast hall was unforgettable. The Episcopal service was highly structured, and came as a new experience for many in the group. One tradition the church has is letting guests carry the communion cups and plates down the aisle, and this time they tapped Sydney Hardin and Lauren Mahoney, two people in our group! They were viewed live on the webcast as well as by the whole congregation, walking down the aisle in step with the music. I'm sure that is something that they will never forget. After service, we proceeded on the nine-hour journey home.

Washington was such a great experience. I'm thankful that we had such a close-knit and flexible group of College Republicans, and that we had influential people like Eli and AJ to get us front row seats for the parade and then in the capitol. I don't think that I'll ever again see such a high concentration of influential people in one weekend. Now we get to wait and see what fruits Trump's presidency will bring to this nation. We got to witness firsthand the passion, the division, and the controversy that the election has caused, and I hope that we will also get a front row seat for the resolution of this conflict.

For more information about Gardner-Webb's College Republicans, email Dr. Jeff Tubbs at jtubbs@gardner-webb.edu.