Impressions of America

America—the land of liberty, diversity, democracy and opportunity. Home of Tinsel Town, basketball and the Big Mac. A place where every man can eat, shoot and drink to their heart’s content and share in a common dream. As I stepped onto the plane at Heathrow Airport, all these fabled images went through my mind, accompanied by numerous questions. How far had American government lived up to the Founding Fathers’ vision? How would the contemporary South compare to its reactionary image? And how often would my British accent be remarked upon? All these questions, and more, would be answered when I spent four weeks on the Benjamin Franklin Transatlantic Fellowship.

The institute was based at the Wake Forest campus in the bustling town of Winston-Salem, North Carolina. The surrounding area contained much of what one would expect from a rural Bible Belt state: quaint houses, towering corn fields and church after church along the many miles of desolate road. The countryside was picturesque and unspoilt, with views from the local peak, Pilot Mountain, surpassing those of our own green and pleasant land. The town centre of Winston-Salem contained many signs of the area’s rich history. A smattering of former industrial buildings served as a reminder of the once powerful tobacco companies such as the Hanes family and R.J Reynolds, who built much of the city’s infrastructure. Theatres and museums hinted at the cultural tradition of the town nicknamed “the City of Arts and Innovation” whilst the six colleges and universities illustrate Winston-Salem’s reputation as a hub of higher education.

The first week centred on classes at Wake Forest, with topics encompassing social, political and economic spheres. It was a welcome chance to learn one another’s views and exchange opinions on a range of topics. Social entrepreneurship was taught by the formidable Len Neighbours, a passionate advocate of unfettered capitalism, states’ rights and the Second Amendment. It clashed beautifully with some of the more liberal members of the class, who passionately argued the merits of universal healthcare and gun control. Citizenship and conflict meanwhile provoked much stimulating debate between representatives of four fictional nations, before ending abruptly when a rogue state declared nuclear Armageddon. Set in the shadow of the imposing Wait Chapel, the university seemed to offer us the authentic American college experience. A generous number of fraternities and sororities were dispersed around the many immaculate playing fields and elegant white stone buildings, whilst libraries and museums mixed with Subway and Starbucks. That initial week offered us a number of opportunities to engage with both the student body at meal and local communities. The often repeated caricature of Americans as boorish, insensitive xenophobes could not have been more wrong. All those we met were warm and welcoming, taking a real interest in all of our different cultures as shown by the high attendance at events such as the International Dinner. The Fourth July picnic brought it with the predictable avalanche of jokes about George III and British military acumen, accompanied by one or two topical gags about the Royal baby. But nevertheless as the sun went down that evening and sparklers were handed out to each of us, I couldn’t help but look at the smiling faces in the dancing, crackling light and feel as though I was partaking in something very special.

The celebrations could not however conceal a number cracks throughout American society. The issue of race was a constant theme, with the trial of George Zimmermann dominating the airwaves and print media throughout our stay. Zimmermann had been charged with the murder of Trayvon
Martin, a 17-year-old black student who was shot outside the gated community where he was temporarily staying. Zimmermann, the neighbourhood watch co-ordinator for the community, said there was an altercation between the two and that he shot Martin in self-defence. The reaction to Zimmermann’s acquittal illustrated worrying divisions, with television pictures and newspaper polls indicating a racial split between African-Americans who overwhelmingly disapproved of the verdict, and a majority of white citizens who supported it. I was given some insight into existing tensions when I spoke to three of the Wake Forest cafeteria staff, who had befriended me after hearing my accent. I asked one of them if he was doing anything to celebrate the Fourth July, joking how “your country beat mine in 1776”. He looked at me blankly before replying solemnly “This ain’t my country- I came here in chains”. The other two African-Americans echoed this sentiment. How serious these remarks were, I do not know. It nonetheless left me with the impression that much historical tension remains unresolved. This thought was intensified by lunch with Assistant Professor Betina Wilkinson who told us of a number of stories of “covert rather than overt” racism in contemporary America, including instances of minorities being given false directions to voting booths and Mississippi police establishing road blocks to try and delay ethnic groups from exercising their democratic right.

Philadelphia was a whirlwind of colour and noise, a vibrant mix of old and new. For three days we wandered around the bustling metropolis, absorbing the sights and sounds in sweltering heat. Much of our time was spent delving into the city’s historic role as the birthplace of a nation, through trips to Independence Hall, Franklin Court and the Constitution Centre. Any free time was spent browsing the many shops and sampling local cuisine such as the famed Philly Cheesesteak. After a visit to the Chemical Heritage Foundation, we clambered back onto the coach to spend four days in Washington DC. George Bernard Shaw once said that America and Britain were two countries separated by the same language. A taste of American politics proved that statement false. The sheer venom with which television pundits and policy makers tore into one another on MSNBC and Fox News, denouncing their opponents as traitors and sell-outs, seemed a world away from the dulcet tones of British broadcasting. Classes at Wake Forest had shown worrying statistical levels of apathy amongst the American people, particularly with Congress, long lampooned as the “opposite of progress”. Anecdotal evidence suggested that most Americans preferred the vibrant debate of our Parliament to the slightly stale, gridlocked proceedings of Congress, with a number of those I spoke to expressing dismay and frustration with an increasingly polarized political debate.

The few days we spent in DC did little to dispel this disconcerting image of disillusionment and partisanship. The ornate splendour of Capitol Hill, with its beautiful artwork depicting great chapters of American history, could not deflect from the rather disappointing proceedings of the Senate. A single septuagenarian stood alone on the chamber floor, denouncing Obamacare as an affront to liberty in a somewhat rambling monologue. Clearly there was a gap between the grand theory of the Founding Fathers and the harsh reality of modern politics. But far from being dismayed, I found there was much in Washington to take heart from, namely the respect and pride with which Americans held their Constitution. This was illustrated above all by the huge crowds at the National Archives, where queues gazed in awe at the three documents that underpin their individual liberty—the Declaration of Independence, the Bill of Rights and the Constitution itself. The optimism and faith demonstrated by so many of those I spoke to gave me hope that in the future America will be able to overcome the many political problems it currently faces.
A visit to the State Department saw us participate in a NATO defence spending simulation. We were all split up into four delegations representing Albania, UK, US and Germany and had to reconcile maintaining international security with the high costs of national defence spending. As the spokesperson for Albania, I enjoyed a light-hearted opportunity to denounce my own country and on a more serious note came to appreciate the challenges faced by smaller nations who do not enjoy the same power and status of Britain in the international arena. Whilst in DC we also visited the Newseum, an interactive museum of news and journalism that gave us the chance to look at the role of the media throughout America’s history as well as the freedom of the media in each of our respective countries today. The final day in Washington was spent predominantly at the Holocaust memorial museum. After two weeks of life and laughter, it was a chance for sober reflection on one of the great crimes of modern history. Walking around the museum was a fascinating if grim experience, with a number of exhibits leaving a lasting impression. The piles of possessions belonging to victims, gathered as they entered concentration camps. The railway carriage that had once carried thousands across many miles of railway to their deaths. The correspondence from desperate Jewish organizations to government bureaus in Britain and America, begging them for asylum or intervention.

But the experience that made the most lasting impression however was the conversation with a Holocaust survivor. Leon Merrick, an eighty seven year old Pole, had spent four years in a ghetto in 1940 before being taken to two labour camps and then at the end of December 1944, spending three months in the infamous Buchenwald concentration camp. He was then taken to Flossenburg, where three weeks later, as the war came to a close, the Germans led the camp’s survivors on a death march that lasted days. After liberation in April 1945, Leon immigrated to the United States where he met his wife and Fellow Holocaust survivor Nina in Washington. As he relived being separated from his family, the experience of mental and physical suffering at Buchenwald and learning of the true extent of the genocide after the war, a number of us felt tears pricking in our eyes. Leon’s story personalized a great tragedy, conveying to us the struggle of the Jews in a way that cold statistics would have been unable to do. It was a great privilege for me to shake his hand and thank him for what he had done. The rest of the afternoon was spent in the Georgetown district, wandering around the university and looking at the local shops, a chance for many of the Balkans Fellows to buy goods not available in their own countries. A handful of us spent the evening dining out at a lovely local restaurant, talking about our different backgrounds, experiences and ambitions.

The return to Winston-Salem saw us spend ten days with an American family. Both myself and the Hungarian Fellow, Miklos, stayed with Sally and Dave Harman, a retired couple who lived in a spacious sun kissed house twenty minutes away from Wake Forest. They were generous with time and money, taking us to a number of local attractions and treating us as family. Indeed, it took Dave a whole thirty seconds before he mentioned how “we saved you back in 1941”. We explored much of North Carolina, journeying from the Southern border to the picturesque Sunset beach. A mutual love of history also meant we were given the chance to explore the esteemed battleship USS North Carolina, which frequently saw service in the Pacific theatre of war. During the stay we also did a number of traditional activities including bowling, attending a baseball game and touring the local NASCAR museum. Weekdays at Wake Forest were spent preparing our social entrepreneurial projects, with classes on topics such as documentary film and media technology teaching us the skills necessary for productive civic engagement.
Monday 22nd July saw us return to stay at the university for the final six days. The days were predominantly spent completing, refining and presenting the pitch for each of our projects, with a number of Fellows submitting applications for follow on grants to make their ambitions a reality. Evenings comprised of playing football on the lush grass fields or debating the issues that affected each of our respective countries. On Wednesday the Fellows and their homestay families met for the final time at the Farewell dinner. The event was accompanied by a number of performances by some of the Fellows, adding a touch of gaiety to an otherwise sorrowful evening. There were songs from Rebecca and Sena from Iceland and Turkey, violin from Tim and Joseph, the California and Arizona delegates, a reading from Washington representative Ella, dancing from Fjolla from Macedonia and piano from the Azerbaijan Fellow Rashid. The Maltese Fellow, Jacob, joined me in duet to round off the evening. The final two days were spent packing our possessions, completing the final presentations and saying goodbye to all the staff at Wake Forest. On the last night we were treated to an eclectic mix of transatlantic tunes at the farewell disco. After an evening of frenetic dancing, we sat under the full moon in the cool night air and wrote notes to one another, to read on the plane home. The sentiments expressed in the ones I received ranged from the amusing to the touching. They serve as an indicator of the close friendships created by the many shared experiences, a testament to the extraordinary power of the course to bring young people together from across the world.

But what of America itself? Is it still the country that sets the mind racing and the heart beating a little faster? Certainly there was evidence to suggest it is no longer the power it once was. The reaction to the Zimmermann trial, the pockets of poverty and squalid housing across areas of North Carolina and a flawed political culture all show America as far from perfect. Moreover Detroit’s bankruptcy and the sight of crumbling battleships in the Philadelphia dockyard suggested a story of decline. But as we prepared to leave Wake Forest after four unforgettable weeks, my mind cast back to that day at the Constitution Hall. At the head of the serried rows of mahogany desks stood the Convention president’s chair, upon which was carved a sun. We were told of how Ben Franklin, then in the autumn of his extraordinary life, was said to have pointed at the inscription at the end of the Convention and remarked how he had “looked at that sun behind the President without being able to tell whether it was rising or setting sun. Now at length I have the happiness to know it is a rising and not a setting sun”. America is still that same rising country today. The reactions of the European Fellows, many of them from newly independent nations, show that the land of the stars and stripes can still amaze, educate and inspire.

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