

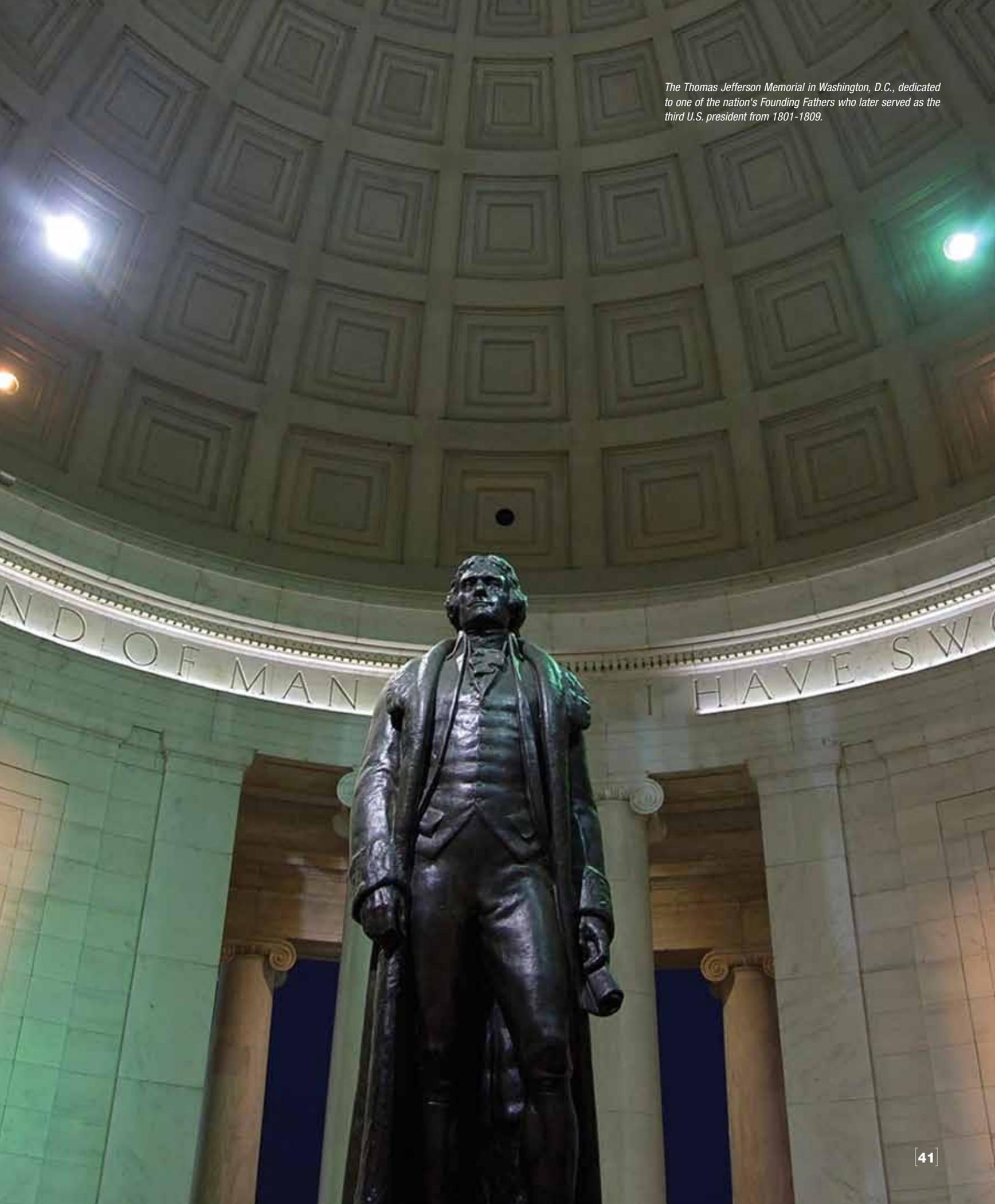
RETROSPECTIVE//  
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**CAPITAL  
CITY  
CLASSROOM**

The Washington Center Gateway  
to Politics and Potomac Fever

 As part of a 10-day seminar in the nation's capital sponsored by The Washington Center, 92 Suffolk University students came to know the one city in the country where the leading industry is politics. Traveling with five faculty instructors, they joined college students from 44 states and 11 countries for a political immersion experience in Washington, D.C. They met with liberal advocacy groups, conservative think tanks, and high-powered politicos. They heard differing voices and views, witnessed history in the making, and fell under the spell of this storied city.

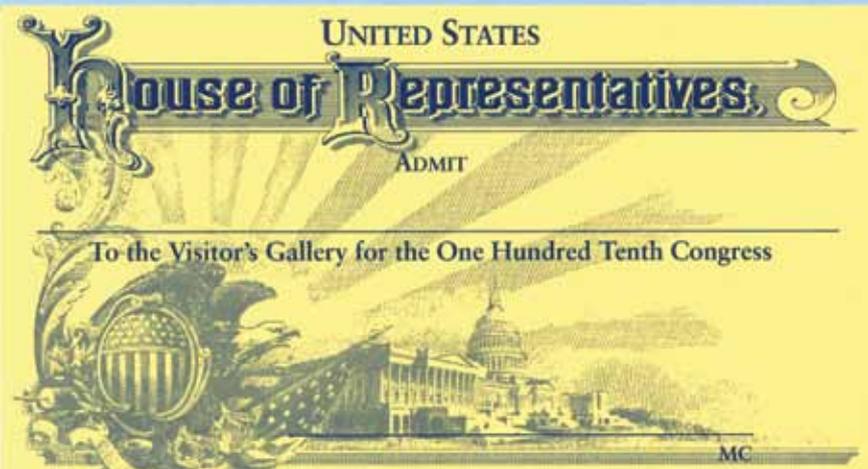
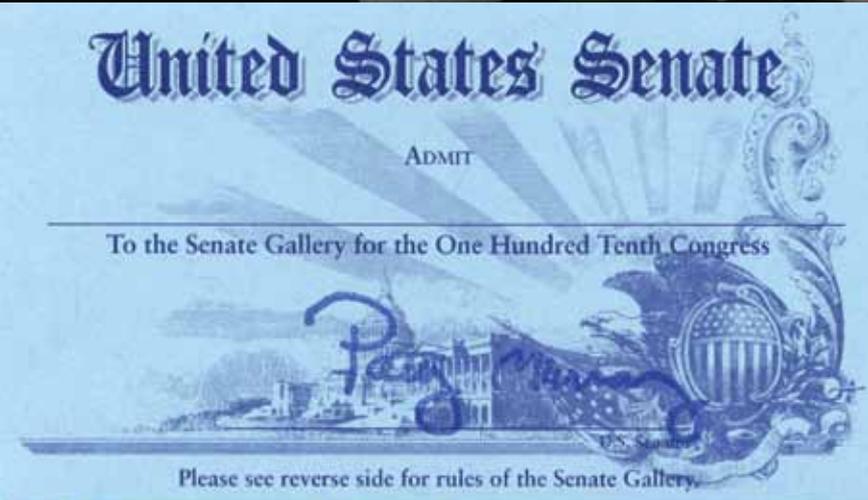


*The Thomas Jefferson Memorial in Washington, D.C., dedicated to one of the nation's Founding Fathers who later served as the third U.S. president from 1801-1809.*





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**Upper photo: clockwise from top:** Students Andrew Kiernan, Molly MacKinnon, Michelle Auterio, Anna-Maria Mueller, Kristin Diamond, Rachel Sledge, Kimberly Cambria, Megan Costello, Allison Brito, Michael Mandozzi, Dana Roy, and Professor Brian Conley.

**THE WASHINGTON CENTER** for Internships and Academic Seminars (TWC), located six blocks from the White House, has been affiliated with Suffolk University since 1978, offering semester-long internships, one- and two-week programs, and, every four years, seminars at the Democratic National Convention, the Republican National Convention, and the inauguration.

“One of the major missions of The Washington Center is to inspire future political leaders,” says government professor and department chair John Berg, who himself spent time in Washington as a student when he interned for Senator Gaylord Nelson (D-WI) in the summers of 1964 and 1965. “It makes the study of government and politics more real; you understand that there is a point to what you’re doing in the classroom. People generally come back more motivated to study government.”

Suffolk typically sends students to TWC seminars each January and May. In January 2009, 92 students in Government 503 attended TWC’s Presidential Inauguration Seminar, which drew nearly 700 students from 135 schools to Washington. Suffolk was the largest contingent, representing one in seven students and five of 57 small groups. “Suffolk can be congratulated for its true commitment to experiential education and civic engagement in allowing so many students to participate,” says Gene Alpert, senior vice president of The Washington Center.

During the seminar, students attended speaker sessions, kept a daily journal of observations and activities, wrote a paper, reviewed a book, and met with faculty leaders in small groups led by government professors Roberto Domínguez, Teri Fair, and Brian Conley, government department coordinator Meri Power MSPS ’08, and graduate student Erin Chevront MSPS ’09.

#### IMPORTANT PEOPLE, HISTORIC PLACES

The seminar began with a bus tour of Washington, stopping at the World War II, Iwo Jima, Vietnam War and Korean War Memorials as well as the Jefferson, Lincoln, and Franklin D. Roosevelt Memorials, and the U.S. Capitol Building. “It was a good overview of official Washington,” says assistant professor Brian Conley. “It gives the students context for where they are.”

In the mornings, students attended sessions with prominent political and media figures. “Part of the excitement is that students can talk to people who talk to the president. Or talk to people who talk to the president-elect,” says Alpert. “They can meet someone who sees the president every day, whose office is within steps of the Oval Office.”

For example, the seminar theme was “The Media and the Presidency,” and speakers included Dana Bash, senior congressional correspondent for CNN; Special Agent David J. O’Connor of the U.S. Secret Service; USA Today columnists Cal Thomas and Bob Beckel; Ted Koppel, former host of ABC’s Nightline and senior news analyst for National Public Radio and the BBC; Clarence Page, columnist at the Chicago Tribune; His Excellency Ambassador Husain Haqqani of Pakistan; political humorist Mark Russell; Sam Donaldson of ABC News; a panel of members of the U.S. Association of Former Members of Congress; and Bob Schieffer, CBS News chief correspondent and moderator of Face the Nation.

“It was obvious that The Washington Center has been doing this for a long time,” says Conley. “They had the venue; they had the contacts; they had an extraordinary array of people.”

Students also participated in two live tapings of C-SPAN’s Washington Journal call-in show and asked questions of guests on

**Middle left:** Tonya Benjamin at the Newseum. **Middle right:** The Washington Center. **Lower left:** the House of Representatives wing of the Capitol Building

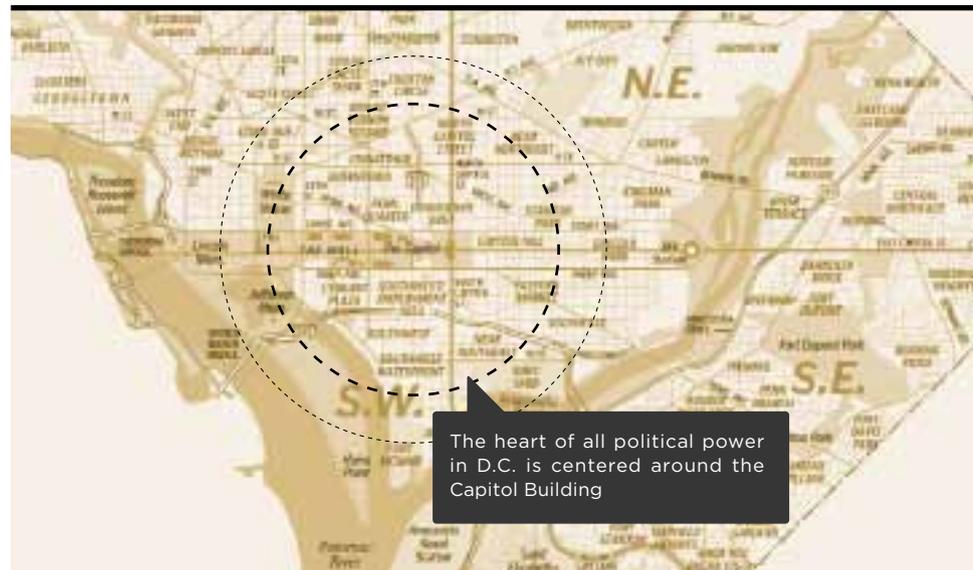
C-SPAN’s Q&A interview series. “There were so many Suffolk students asking questions that Brian Lamb, president and CEO of C-SPAN, stopped and acknowledged Suffolk University during a live broadcast because we were so active in the discussion,” says Conley.

#### BRIDGING ACADEMICS AND REAL WORLD POLITICS

“What’s unique about the program are the site visits—the intimate opportunity to go to an embassy, to go to a think tank, to go to a media organization or a political consulting organization and ask questions,” says Alpert. “Students can talk to these experts one-on-one, without cameras and sound recordings, and hear an honest assessment of their perspectives on the world.”

“We visited the Human Rights Campaign, which is the lead advocacy group in the United States for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender issues,” says Conley. “They had a very large building on the corner of M and 17th street, and they’re saying, like a lot of these groups, ‘We’re here; we have a presence.’”

“Advocacy work—like the Human Rights Campaign—happens here because they know they can be heard here,” says instructor Erin Chevront. “They believe so passionately in what they do and in their cause, whether it’s the green movement, the environ-



ment, or human rights, and all of them have a government relations department that lobbies Congress, or they may work with a lobbying firm on K Street, the breadbasket of lobbying, because if you want to be heard, that’s the street you go to.”

At a visit to the Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank, experts in health care and economic policy presented the students with a conservative take on policies being formulated and debated.

“It was frustrating at first to listen to people who exist on the opposite end of the political spectrum from you,” says Mike Mandozzi, a political science student. “But we heard from Cal Thomas and Bob Beckel the day before about reaching across the table and finding common ground, so I tried to go in there with that mindset. It was amazing to see my fellow students drilling these people with questions; they were fighting them on everything they said. That made me optimistic, to see that at 20 and 21 years old, my fellow students have these beliefs that they’re willing to speak up about.”

**Clockwise from top:** The U.S. Capitol Building; an attendee at the presidential inauguration; touring the Newseum; Molly MacKinnon, Kristin Diamond, Rachel Sledge, and Professor Brian Conley at the National Archives Building; KyQuan Phong and Alexander Rittershaus.

**ACCESS TO THE PROCESS**

Many students were interested in attending the confirmation hearings underway during the week on Capitol Hill. The schedule spread like wildfire in the mornings. “During our time in Washington, the students could literally charge over to the Hart Senate Building and have a chance at getting in the door,” says Conley. “And that’s exactly what we did.”

“We went to Senator Clinton’s confirmation hearing,” says economics student Colin Hansen. “Kerry was giving closing remarks, and people were excited to see Hillary Clinton as she was leaving. Politics is so abstract for us. I’d never really seen D.C. before and it’s kind of mythical if you haven’t, and then you see the room the Senate meets in—the Gallery—and it makes it very real.”

“The Gallery is the public viewing place where you can watch the government do what it does—it’s where members of Congress speak, give speeches, and take a vote,” says Chevront. “During a State of the Union address, it’s usually where the First Lady sits, as well as special guests of the press. There are seats reserved for the public to view every day.”

Chevront requested Gallery passes from her senator’s office and took her group to the House of Representatives office building. “I’d say half of the students were surprised that we were just allowed in the building. Many of them have said that when they are in D.C. they will always make a point to stop by their senator or representative’s office because now they know they can. Before they felt that they didn’t have that access to their government.”

**WITNESSING HISTORY**

As the inauguration drew closer, students watched this city on the bank of the Potomac River and in the spotlight of the world get dressed for a party. Luminous limestone and marble buildings wore

my friends, who is kind of a big guy, held me up on his shoulders and I took people’s cameras from around me and took pictures of the crowd all the way back to the Washington Monument. There were that many people screaming and crying and cheering. I could have a conversation with anyone there, then. Maybe not any other time, afterward or before, but there, we were one people.”

On this historic morning, attendance at a presidential inauguration reached an all-time high, with an estimated two million gathered at the Lincoln Memorial and along the length of the National Mall to the Capitol, cheering and waving flags as they watched Barack Obama shatter the ultimate whites-only glass ceiling and be sworn in as the first African-American president of the United States.

The end of the inauguration marked the end of the seminar, and students fell in line with others who walked back the way they came, hobbling down sidewalks and across streets, frozen by wind and cold and fatigue, yet carried forward with a shared sense of satisfaction and purpose. They had accomplished their goal, each of them, to be in Washington during this moment in America’s story.

“My hope for all the students is that in 5, 10, or 15 years they will have a really profound understanding of what they were able to witness as part of this seminar,” says Chevront. “That isn’t going to happen for a long time. But I think when they talk to their children, or talk to fellow colleagues or friends or family years from now, remembering that they were at this event and what it means in the overall perspective of U.S. history, I hope that they’re able to see that.”

**THE SPELL IS CAST**

The Presidential Inauguration Seminar gave students a chance to be part of history. It also introduced them to the participatory side of politics: they saw the institutions at the center of government, and the surrounding network of advocacy groups, think tanks, embassies, the media, the secret service, and national and international nongovernmental organizations.

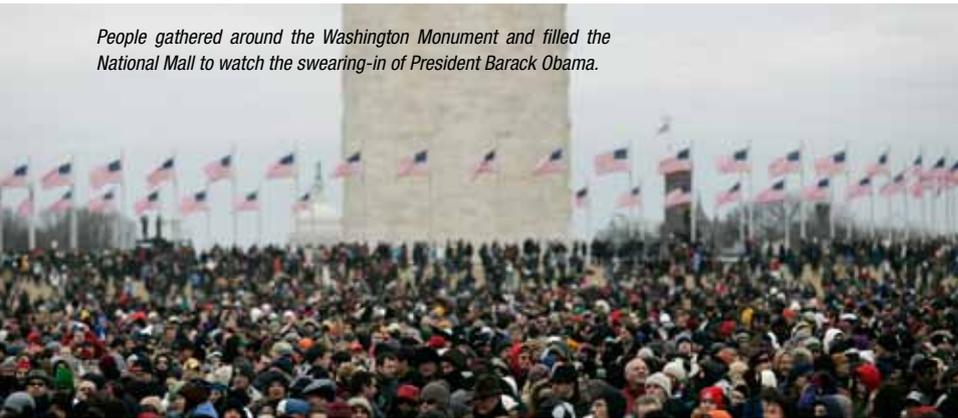
They learned that politics is made up of people, that their government is accessible to them, and that they have a right to be heard. These 92 Suffolk students became part of 40,000 TWC alumni, and for 10 short days, part of the community in the nation’s capital.

“D.C. is a special city,” says government student KyQuan Phong, president of the mock trial team. “Everywhere you go, you’re around senators and representatives. You’re meeting all these different people, and it’s an opportunity to expand your network whether they’re politicians or other students.”

“There’s nothing like Washington in that sense,” says Conley. “There’s almost something startling about that. They call it Potomac Fever. A lot of students picked up on that. I have a handful of students who are saying they want to come back here, work for the State Department, get various graduate degrees, and work on Capitol Hill. They want to be in Washington.”

“Students become familiar with the city,” says Alpert. “They feel that it’s their second home, and they’re not afraid to come back and look for a graduate school or a job. Some of them will catch Potomac Fever. Some of them already have. They say, ‘I want to be like that person I heard at such-and-such a think tank,’ or ‘A person I met, I want her to be a mentor to me.’ It’s really a life-changing experience for the students. I tell them on the first day they will never be the same.” ■

Info// The Washington Center for Internships and Academic Seminars is a nonprofit educational organization providing students with opportunities to work and learn in Washington, D.C. Visit TWC online at [www.twc.edu](http://www.twc.edu).



People gathered around the Washington Monument and filled the National Mall to watch the swearing-in of President Barack Obama.

garlands of red, white, and blue bunting and wall-sized flags, the proud and customary attire for inaugural ceremonies in Washington.

“The day before, I was out on the Mall taking pictures,” says Chevront. “I ran into a few of the students when I was there—they were the Republican students. They were very funny. They just decided they were going to be Obama supporters for the next couple of days. They were jumping up and down, and I said, ‘What are you so excited about?’ They said, ‘We’ve decided to embrace all this happiness, Erin; what do you think?’ and I said, ‘Hey, knock yourself out!’”

At midnight that night, Hansen and some friends claimed a spot on 4th Street, the closest viewing area for those without tickets, and stayed there for the next 12 hours. “After the sun rose, one of

