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Our nation's capital

Each year the association treks back east to meet with our elected and unelected officials in government. As I was reflecting on our trip this year, a few things stuck out to me.



Leigh Geschwill
OAN PRESIDENT

First, despite all the naysayers and doomsdayers, our nation is still the leader of the free world. A tour around the National Mall, the war memorials and the U.S. Capitol remind us that for 240 years, we have been fighting for our freedom and discussing how to preserve it.

I have pride in our Founding Fathers who knew that there could be a more "perfect union" of governance, and the rag-tag rabble-rousers that decided to put it all on the line for those ideals. The original troublemakers weren't criminals (despite what the British thought) — they were farmers, small-business owners, laborers, doctors and a myriad of professions high and low.

Not only did our nation make sacrifices then, but those continue through to now. We have faced attack and struggles from external and internal enemies alike. Our nation is like that old married couple you know. We didn't make it through life because everything was rosy. We made it because we have grit and determination and love for our fellow man.

My second big lesson from visiting D.C. is that our relationships with our elected officials are critical. If you had a "best friend" that you didn't talk to or see for years at a time and they called you up out of the blue asking for \$1,000 just to fund a pet project, with no "payback," you might be taken aback. Well multiply that by millions of people, and you have our nation's capital.

As we walked amongst the various House and Senate office buildings, we saw the many constituent groups coming in and out of offices. One office had powerful groups from the Teamsters Union and health care companies. Another welcomed a young family and their children. All walks of life, all manner of issues, all vying for a small slice of time from their congressional representative or senator.

An important factor in any relationship is balance. It is important that we present our struggles and opportunities, but it is also necessary to ask our legislators what issues they are facing. We often think of advocacy as a one-way street. In reality there are spheres of influence that both sides have. By working together, we can get the ball moving in a forward direction — even if it is incremental and slow.

The same holds true for our government officials. In our meetings with various USDA groups it became clear they face concerns from around the nation and abroad. Horticulture, and more broadly, agriculture are evolving at a rapid pace as technology enters our field. We saw how Oregon is viewed as a leader in these fields, from policy to emerging technologies such as the "Intelligent Sprayer."

It is easy to lump our politicians and government employees that are miles away together under "Washington" or "Congress" or "Department of Ag." For us, the people they represent, these folks are often unseen for long stretches of time. But when you meet with them as individuals you get to see their passions and interests. While they may not be on your side of every issue, they are on someone's side. It is on us, as half of the relationship, to reach out to our officials. We need to put faces and names to ideas and policies, just as they need to put faces and names to crops and industries. When you do that, you learn that the high-powered lobbyist is really just a country boy from the South, that the congressional staffer grew up in a small coastal town, or that the USDA director is a farm girl from the Midwest.

Lastly, remember to have fun! After slogging through full days of meetings, we enjoyed the beauty of our capital, and even watched a good ole American ball game. The headaches and stress we face daily should be worth a few minutes to enjoy the world around us, share a few laughs with friends, and remember that life is to be lived. ☺