Closing Remarks at the WHF 50th Anniversary Gala

Good evening! My name is Ziad Haider from the class of 2011-2012 and in addition to having the dubious distinction of being the last speaker between you and the door, I have the honor of standing before you as the next President of the WHFFA.

Now in any given year, it would be an honor to be serving in this role but as we charge forward into the next 50 years, it is even more so.

Because at the core of the Foundation is not just principles of “leadership” and “service” but people and a community. A remarkable community that has been painstakingly built over 50 years. And I see myself and my Fellow Board members as tasked by all of you to serve as custodians of this community – to keep the ties that bind strong leading into the next fifty years.

Now chances are you would not be a White House Fellow if you didn’t belong to many different communities – if you didn’t have many identities and facets that made you the type of multi-dimensional candidate that the Fellowship looks for.

That is why it on us to make sure that as we enter the next fifty years this Foundation and community changes with the times, continues to speaks to you, engages you, and honors every dollar and cent you have given it.

It is on us to make sure that this community is not just DC centric but reaches out across geography AND generations. That is why we will continue to hold regional events across the country each year, such as the one we did earlier this year at the LBJ Presidential Library.

It is on us to make sure the brand of this Fellowship that you all care about remains strong. That is why we will be focusing on our recruitment efforts, including being more adept in using social media.
And it is on us to make sure that the Fellowship experience that is the reason why you are all in this room today is one that remains enriching. That is why we will be working closely with the Fellowship office to move beyond extending general budgetary support to support for specific skill building sessions for the class, such as on negotiations.

Now in the coming months, you will hear from me more about the vision for the Foundation as we enter its 51st year but for now I want to close with what will remain my enduring image from this celebration.

On a sunny afternoon two days ago, four hundred people gathered outside the White House. As I stood in that line next to as it happens General Wes Clark, a little girl and her mother walked by. The girl asked her mother, “Why are all these people standing here?” And her mother responded, “they are in a line waiting to enter the White House.”

And from the outside I am sure that is all it looked like: just another line stretching around the block to enter the WH. But what it was was a line stretching through five decades through four hundred people from all walks of life all bound together by a single thread: the WHF.

From a General from Arkansas who led our intervention in the Balkans to a kid growing up in Pakistan who watched it all play out on CNN half a world – all going through that same nerve wracking selection process, all honing those questions before meeting the President and other leaders, all seeing our government in action from the very top, and all refusing to be, as President Johnson admonished, a spectator society.

That is the singularity of this community.

So as our line stretches forward into the next fifty years, I hope you feel the same sense of change, energy, and momentum as I do. I can’t wait to see the distance we cover and the bonds we forge in the next chapter.

So with that, please raise your glass one last time not to the Fellowship but to our Fellowship: to the next fifty years!