

*Practicum Report for*  
*The Master of Arts in International Affairs:*  
**U.S. State Department Virtual Student Federal Service (VSFS) Internship**

Submitted by:

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## **Introduction to the Internship**

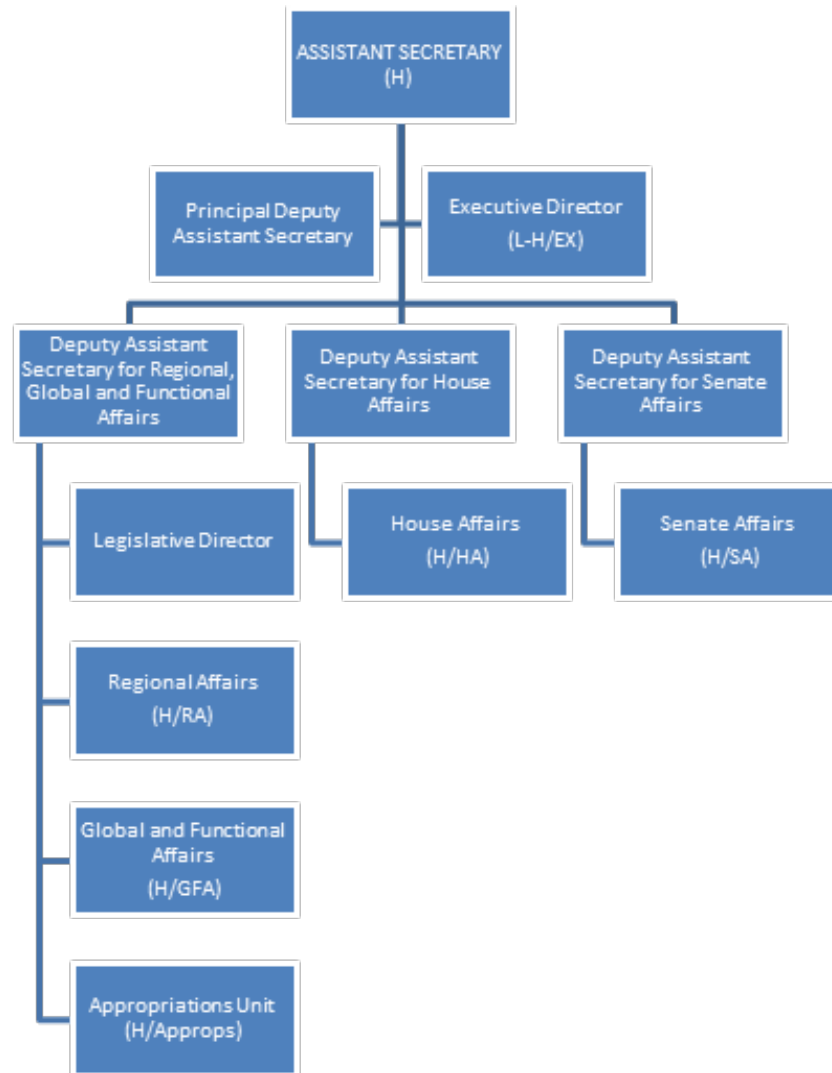
When I applied to the U.S. Department of State's Virtual Student Federal Service (VSFS) program on usajobs.gov in the summer of 2020, I did not expect anything would come of it. In the application process, I listed three positions from a wide selection of intern roles within State. My choices dealt with counterterrorism, communications, and teaching English as a foreign language. I wanted to explore government careers in foreign affairs, so I was looking at the State Department or possibly on Capitol Hill with the House Foreign Affairs Committee (HFAC) or the Senate Foreign Relations Committee (SFRC), and if none of those were fruitful, then I would look at nongovernmental organizations. Since I did not receive any reply from the VSFS program for several weeks, I believed I had been passed over. I began applying to other internships. Then in early September, I received an email from a state.gov address.

I was invited to join the State Department's Bureau of Legislative Affairs, which was not at all what I had initially applied for. As it turned out, the VSFS 2020-21 remote internship program had been extended in light of the Covid-19 pandemic, so they were able to bring more interns into the Bureau. For all the difficulties of the pandemic, it has presented opportunities for virtual work I may not have had otherwise. I accepted the invitation, and on September 14th of last year, I began the internship that I am using as my Master's in International Affairs practicum. The internship is a two-semester program and will conclude in May 2021.

There are about thirty interns in total working for the Bureau of Legislative Affairs, and although it is unpaid, the internship has been an invaluable experience; I see it as a gateway to a future career with State. I am on a team with four other interns, which has helped build my

teamwork and group leadership ability. Our team has excellent communication; we are an efficient operation, delegating tasks and helping each other with projects. I know teamwork is needed in any workplace, so this is more than just resume filler — it is a real skill.

During the internship initiation process, we learned that Legislative Affairs functions as a liaison between the State Department and Congress. Correspondence between the two institutions, both pillars of U.S. foreign policy, is officially channeled through Legislative Affairs. State Department officials from other bureaus are not supposed to communicate with Congresspeople unless it is done through Legislative Affairs. Interestingly, my bureau does not have any interaction with the Executive Branch, which is an even larger pillar of foreign policymaking. That takes place higher up in State, or as they say, “on the seventh floor.” But that does not mean we work in a minor bureau. We answer to the Director of Regional, Global, and Functional Affairs, and he answers to the Assistant Secretary, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary, and Executive Director of our Bureau. The hierarchy is represented below as Figure 1:



**Figure 1: Organization Chart, Bureau of Legislative Affairs, U.S. Department of State**

Legislative Affairs deals directly with overseas embassies and ambassadors, as well as senators and representatives on the domestic side. This reach has broadened my view of where exactly foreign policymaking takes place. Before this internship, I did not know that there are two paths to working for State: Foreign Service Officers (FSOs) and Civil Service Officers (CSOs) with the former working international assignments and the latter operating domestically. Here in Legislative Affairs, Civil Service Officers arrange briefings between diplomats and

Congresspeople to discuss particular issues within U.S. foreign policy. Most meetings are with staffers who represent Members of Congress who sit on one of the two foreign policy committees, the SFRC or the HFAC. By listening in on these calls (which are sometimes conference call lines and sometimes video calls over WebEx or Microsoft Teams), I get an inside look at foreign policymaking in Washington. I have even gotten to listen in on calls with actual Members of Congress. My favorite so far has been Representative Ilhan Omar, whose outspoken views on the Middle East challenge an Israel-biased narrative others conform to.

During the initiation process, we were trained by former interns who completed the summer VSFS program. We had introductory meetings with different areas of the bureau we would be working with, like the cybersecurity sector and the front office, and all interns were given a one-on-one meeting with Danny Stoian, the Deputy Assistant Secretary (or DAS) for Regional, Global, and Functional Affairs. DAS Stoian is a good boss, enthusiastic about his job and dedicated to the career ambitions of his interns.

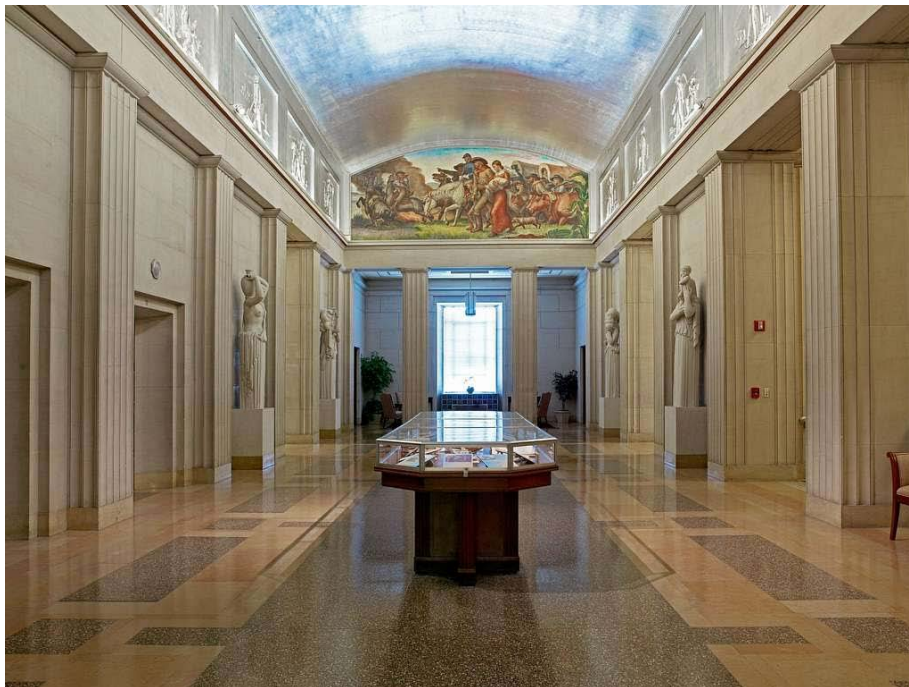
## **A Typical Internship Day**

The interns work within the Regional, Global, and Functional Affairs (RGF) division of the bureau, and within that division, there are separate “portfolios” for various regions of the world (i.e. Europe and Eurasia is EUR, the Middle East is called Near East Affairs or NEA, East Asia and the Pacific is EAP, Western Hemisphere Affairs is WHA, and so on — there are many acronyms I have had to learn working for State) and each of these regional portfolios have specific Congressional Advisors who operate them. Communications, briefing meetings, and such to Capitol Hill are divided into these regional portfolios accordingly. The intern teams

rotate portfolios several times during the semester so we have a clearer picture of the bureau's work. During Fall 2020, we rotated portfolios every two weeks, but this proved to be too short a time. After feedback, it was changed to rotating every month instead for Spring 2021; this way, we spend more quality time with the regions and advisors.

Much of the interns' work is to take extensive notes on calls, write post-engagement summaries after briefings, and deliver this content to the Congressional Advisors. A typical day in my internship begins with my checking my email — I decided to create a separate email account for work purposes — because most of our communication is via email. Congressional Advisors (CAs) will have emailed out “taskers” for either the entire intern collective, where anyone can volunteer for the assignment, or to their specific rotational group, in which case members of that group are expected to do the work. The CAs tell us about an upcoming conference call, briefing, webinar, etc. that they need notes for, and we take the assignments.

What is so advantageous about this internship is the amount of customization we are given. We can set our own working hours and available days based around our school schedules, and only take taskers that we feel we can commit to. Generally, it is expected that we spend 15 to 20 hours per week on the internship, at a minimum, but there is also nobody keeping track; it operates more as an “honor system.” It is extremely convenient to work from home, but there are times when I wish we were in person so we could go for drinks after work, or just explore the State Department building. Hopefully, I will get to work there later this year. That is my goal after graduating with my Masters: to get a job working in D.C. with State. Interior views of the department headquarters, the Harry S. Truman building, are pictured below:



**Figures 2 and 3: Interior views of the Harry S. Truman building**

One of the tasks Legislative Affairs interns are most frequently assigned is to create one-page biographies for specific Members of Congress. Often these bios are needed when a higher-up in the State Department (sometimes even the Secretary of State) will be meeting with a particular senator or representative, and the higher-up needs to know basic information about that person. This includes committee assignments, professional career, and background info about their personal life, should the higher-up need to make small talk. The most important information to include is the Congressperson's foreign policy views, often on specific issues.

Sometimes our CAs will have side projects for us to work on, like Excel spreadsheets of information they are tracking, or creating one-page reports of background information on certain topics. I once had a CA who was getting reassigned to the International Organizations (IO) portfolio and wanted us to create one-pagers about various United Nations topics. I wrote my paper on reform measures the UN is taking and what reforms are popularly called for. And there are times when our advisors simply want us to check the Tweets that different Congresspeople have put out; press releases are more official, but Twitter technically counts as a senator or representative making a statement on particular issues, so it is useful to track Tweets.

## **Memorable Tasks and Opportunities**

The most exciting moments of my internship are when the work directly correlates to the material I have studied in my Master's program. I have listened to and taken notes on many calls for my internship, but one of the most memorable from last fall was when the SFRC and the HFAC were briefed by a third-party weapons manufacturer over its role in the U.S.-Indian strategic relationship. This was in response to the border conflict that occurred between India and



China in the Ladakh region during June of 2020. Because China is a mutual adversary, the border conflict has pushed India closer to the U.S. for security measures. Before this call, I did not fully grasp the role military equipment suppliers play in global security.

Another call that stands out in my memory was about the crisis in the Nagorno-Karabakh region, disputed between Armenia and Azerbaijan. A concern from the Nagorno-Karabakh call that resonated with me was the involvement of other states in the conflict. It is no secret that Russia and Turkey are waging a proxy war by helping Armenia and Azerbaijan respectively. More civilian lives are claimed for the sake of great power competition. Russia is no stranger to the Caucasus, but it is Turkey's involvement that most interested me. Erdogan wants more respect and influence on the world stage; I doubt the ceasefire will last.

There is always an element of learning on the job in this internship, and that was certainly the case when I took notes about a conflict in the Tigray region of Ethiopia. It was then that I learned about the civil war, which was at the time on the verge of breaking out, and the human rights violations both sides were accusing the other of committing. The conflict is between the Ethiopian armed forces and the secessionist Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). The mass murder and physical and sexual abuse of Tigray civilians, allegedly by the Ethiopian military, has been called a genocide. This was one of the most disheartening calls I have been on.

Another upsetting briefing set in Africa was about abducted school children in Nigeria, who were believed to have been kidnapped by Boko Haram, although the terrorist group did not claim responsibility for the action. This was thought of as unusual, since Boko Haram's normal modus operandi is to take credit for their actions. Other forces at play in this call was the UN,

who are providing security assistance to Nigeria, and the Covid-19 pandemic, which has factored into international affairs in almost every way imaginable.

For disturbing calls, the only one that trumps those two African calls was one about White supremacy terrorism. I have heard a call about a specific incidence of White terrorism that involved the forces of Diplomatic Security and members of the SFRC and the HFAC, and I have had a more general call about the terminology and the Biden administration's strategy going forward. The latter call specified that it was labeling the activities as "White identity terrorism." As a former English major, the word choice fascinated me. White identity terrorism is now being categorized under Racially or Ethnically-Motivated Violence or Extremism (REMVE).

I provided notes and a summary for a webinar briefing about the crisis in Yemen; this was the call where I got to watch actual U.S. Representatives, not simply their staffers. The briefing was to discuss the Biden administration's plan of action in the Yemen area, and the guests of honor were various specialists from the region. These speakers were from NGOs, and they tried to persuade the representatives to provide greater humanitarian assistance and stop selling arms to Saudi Arabia. This call stayed mostly polite, though I notice certain Members of Congress have a shorter fuse than others. I was excited to watch and listen to Representative Ilhan Omar, as I admire her boldness and bravery despite the hurdles placed before her.

In addition to my team's work with our monthly regional portfolio, I also volunteered to be a front office intern. There are about ten of us, and we work on supplemental projects that help the Legislative Affairs front office in some small way (side projects that the actual staff don't have time for). One of these projects is to write chapters in what could potentially become a published book titled Profiles in Service. The project is modeled after John F. Kennedy's

Profiles in Courage, which tells the stories of Americans whose courage, Kennedy felt, had not been fully appreciated. Our book has a similar purpose, but we are telling the stories of ambassadors and diplomats: members of the U.S. Foreign Service.

The project is worked on by three teams, and each team is writing a chapter centered on a different ambassador. My team is writing a preface to begin the book, which traces the history of diplomacy and explores the meaning of “national service.” My preface goes from the American Revolution, through the twentieth century and George Kennan and Henry Kissinger, and into modern day. When planning the book, we decided that we would tell the stories of ambassadors who are diverse in some way: they can be women, people of color, LGBTQ+ people, a religious minority; diplomats who represent America today. I am grateful for the chance to flex my writing muscles, and study diplomats’ personal stories, with this project.

## **Relationship to Coursework**

Every aspect of this internship relates to my coursework for my Master’s program in one way or another. I created my curriculum to focus on U.S. foreign policymaking and relations with Europe, Russia, and the North African states, or as I like to think of it, the Mediterranean world. My internship work has given me the chance to see American diplomacy up close, to understand the role of Congress, and to see the leftover effects of the Cold War in the modern day. This is all directly supported by my coursework; my classes are listed for reference:

❖ PS 5190	Contemporary Middle Eastern Politics	Fall 2020
❖ PS 5240	American Foreign Policy	Summer 2020
❖ PS 5770	Russian Politics	Spring 2021
❖ PS 6110	Intl Security in a Changing World	Fall 2019
❖ PS 6120	Peace and Conflict Resolution	Spring 2020

❖ PS 6200	Comparative Politics in Intl Affairs	Spring 2021
❖ PS 6250	Concepts and Cases in Intl Affairs	Fall 2020
❖ PS 6290	Practicum in Intl Affairs	Spring 2021
❖ PS 6400	Global Governance	Fall 2019
❖ PS 6500	Professional Skills in Intl Affairs	Spring 2020

One of the simplest ways my intern work has related to my coursework has been researching different elected officials' opinions "on the issues." This has given me a look at how Congress approaches international affairs. Some issues fall along party lines: Republicans prioritize national security, defending Israel, and curtailing Iran; Democrats emphasize cooperating with allies and international organizations, climate change, and clean energy. But for all their disagreements, they all share a common love for their country. Learning their foreign policy views related to my American Foreign Policy class, which I took with Dr. Livingston. That course stayed relatively modern, focusing on the fallout of the Cold War, and I see how past trends influence the opinions of certain Congressional stalwarts (a less kind term is "dinosaur"). The shadow of the Cold War looms large, and many in Congress act as if it never ended.

Although all eyes are on China and the threat they may pose to the Pacific, I perceive the United States-Russia-European Union triangular relationship to be crucial to Atlantic and Mediterranean security and prosperity going forward. That is why I took Russian Politics when I did not need the credit hours; it is simply an area of academia in which I want more expertise. I also had the good fortune to take notes on a call with Congress regarding the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, and that call became one of the best I have listened to. It is a real-time situation of great importance to global harmony and disharmony, and that made it especially exciting.

In class, Dr. Korobkov has taught us that Russia's relationship with energy, particularly oil, has always been a large part of its international presence. Since losing its bread basket in Ukraine and Belarus after the dissolution of the USSR, oil is the one export that Russia has counted on. That is why the Nord Stream 2 pipeline is of such importance to the Kremlin, because it allows Russia a deeper relationship with the E.U., and Germany in particular, but decidedly not the U.S. The position of Congress was made very clear on the call: they want the pipeline stopped at all costs. The relationship of the pipeline with climate change regulations also interested me, and that ties into the first half of Concepts and Cases in International Affairs, the class with Dr. Hejny. The coursework taught me about the geopolitics of energy, and that Russia is more reliant on its oil and gas sectors than renewable resources. Clearly, the Nord Stream 2 pipeline is a means to ensure Russia's enduring global relevance.

The call about the U.S.-Indian strategic relationship also directly related to my coursework; it made me take another look at my research paper and presentation I did for International Security in a Changing World. My research paper explored the need for a closer trade and defense relationship between the U.S. and India, as well as other Southeast Asian nations, as a response to the growing threat from China. It is validating to know that the U.S. government is taking the course of action that I advocated for. But it was evident from the call that Modi's India wants to preserve their autonomy and not be too dependent on the U.S. for arms. To quote Harsh V. Pant from *India Review*: "The Modi government is redefining strategic autonomy as an objective that is attainable through strengthened partnerships... underlining that in today's complicated global scene, strategic autonomy and non-alignment are not necessarily a

package deal” (Pant 2019, p. 346). Modi must therefore navigate between partnership and dependency, and perhaps not rely on the U.S. exclusively for military supplies.

That brings me to another point from my presentation: the possibility of growing Indian-Russian cooperation, and here again, the briefing validated my research interests and initiative. The relationship between India and Russia is a real concern. I would be interested in returning to my research paper and including the fallout from the June 2020 border conflicts. I will be keeping an eye on how the Biden administration engages India in the future, and how China and Russia’s actions affect that engagement. It is probable that closer coordination between the Quad (i.e. the U.S., India, Japan, and Australia) will be a mainstay of U.S. grand strategy for decades to come. How exclusively they coordinate remains to be seen.

But in my later coursework, I had narrowed my focus to the Mediterranean world, which I believe the U.S. should not overlook. Egypt has been the fulcrum of my studies. My final project for Dr. Tesi’s class, Contemporary Middle Eastern Politics, dealt with the sorry state of education in Egypt. I wrote a deep dive into how the wealth gap manifests in public versus private schools, how private tutors factor into the disparity, what the main problems Egypt’s classrooms were facing, and then I created solutions to those problems and defended my reasoning. I did not touch on Egyptian human rights, but that was a topic addressed in Dr. Tesi’s class. Early this year, I took notes on a call with staffers from Congresspeople on the Egypt Human Rights Caucus, a new group dedicated to Egypt’s domestic crisis. In 2011, protestors in Cairo’s Tahrir Square demanded an end to the Mubarak regime, and like the many demonstrators and activists who have come after them, they were met with rampant police brutality and mass arrests. Sadly, that is a situation that continues today, which is what the Caucus discussed.

What interests me about Egypt, apart from the fascinating early human civilization, is the many ties to foreign countries that the nation-state has. Egypt had links to the Soviet Union before pivoting towards the United States during the Cold War, and a defining moment in that pivot was the Camp David Accords. In Peace and Conflict Resolution with Dr. DiCicco, we looked at these accords in detail. That case study was a fascinating example of a negotiated give-and-take situation; quoting from the reading we had in class about the Camp David Accords by Saadia Touval in *The Peace Brokers*: “Israel decided to offer Egypt the restoration of Egyptian sovereignty over all of the Sinai within the context of a peace treaty... Egypt decided to recognize Israel even before a peace treaty” (Touval 1982, p. 285). That is the essence of diplomatic negotiations — it is all give-and-take, push-and-pull, a carrots-and-stick strategy. And that is exactly what came up in my call over the Egypt Human Rights Caucus: what leverage the U.S. has over Egypt, like arms sales, that can be used to achieve results. Because I want a career in diplomacy, that was an invaluable lesson to learn. I read about it in class, and the message was reinforced in my internship.

We also discussed peacekeeping operations in the Peace and Conflict Resolution class, and I got the chance to take notes on a call regarding UN peacekeeping efforts. This was a monthly briefing called “Round the World,” and they discussed the status of the missions in Cyprus, Somalia, South Sudan, Mali, Lebanon, Western Sahara, Central African Republic, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. In addition to learning the UN acronyms for all these missions, I got to hear about the obstacles they must overcome and the targets they are aiming to meet. An author we read for class, Paul F. Diehl, in his book *International Peacekeeping* discussed evaluating the success of such operations by their “ability to facilitate the resolution of

the disagreements underlying the conflict” (Diehl 1993, p. 37). I agree that this is the proper criteria: a UN mission should only be considered a success if it creates a lasting peace.

The course that gave me practical skills for my future career was Professional Skills in International Affairs, the class taught by Dr. Maynor and Dr. Carleton. Everything I have described so far from the internship sounds very high-stakes, important conference calls about real-time international crises, and while it can be a bit depressing at times, there are fun moments too. I have hosted virtual parties for the Bureau of Legislative Affairs, and for these afterwork parties, I have had to create flyers similar to the infographics we created for the class. We learned many important tips, like how to make the words pop by paying attention to color contrast, and to avoid both overstuffing the infographic and leaving too much blank space. It can be tricky creating the perfect flyer, but I am proud of the two that I made for my internship.

The first was for a trivia night I hosted. The topic was world history and geography, so I came up with a list of medium-to-difficult questions about countries and capital cities, world leaders, landmarks, wars and conflicts, and more. The second is for a webinar I hosted about “Leadership Lessons in Hamilton,” since there are several fans of the *Hamilton* musical in the program. There, we discussed life lessons that can be found in the smash-hit Broadway show.





Figure 4: Infographic flyer I created for the Bureau's trivia night

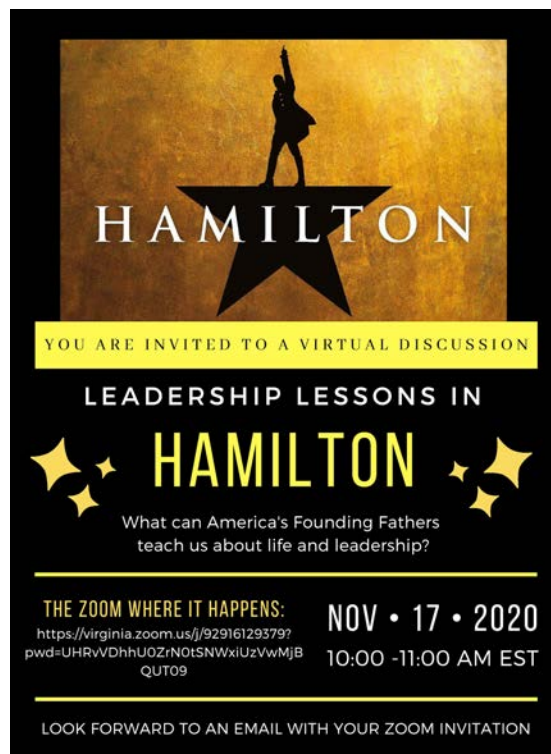


Figure 5: Infographic flyer for a webinar on "Leadership Lessons in Hamilton"

## **Skills Learned and Take-Aways**

Completing this Master's program and finding this internship have been the best things to happen to me in recent years; together they have revitalized my career ambitions and given me direction and purpose in life. Interning with the State Department has greatly improved my resume. I can add skills like Congressional and legislative research, webinar and Q&A session hosting, public speaking and project presentation, individual and teamwork and team management, leadership and guidance to fellow interns, infographic and event flyer creation, spreadsheet utilization, and many more. But I did not do this unpaid work just for my resume.

The real value of this internship has been the relationships I have built. I have improved my networking ability, and I am happy to say that I count many of my coworkers as personal friends. I have also learned the value of having a mentor figure in the workplace; they are someone to look up to and learn from, a higher-up who is willing to take you under their wing and guide your professional development. There are a few Congressional Advisors who I can call my mentors, and from MTSU, I think of Dr. Jon DiCicco as my academic mentor. Knowing these people has made my graduate school and internship experience more worthwhile.

There are many key points to take away from my internship with State, but I have decided on four that I believe are most important. They are as follows:

1. Virtual or remote internships open a new world of work possibilities. When I first began my Master's program at MTSU and learned of the practicum requirement, I anticipated an on-site internship. I looked at several opportunities in the Nashville Metropolitan area,

dreading the commute to work for an internship that was likely unpaid. I was pleasantly surprised to find that, with the Covid-19 pandemic, the State Department had expanded its Virtual Student Federal Service program. I believe tools like Zoom, WebEx, and Microsoft Teams that offer remote opportunities will permanently change the nature of work, and bring new possibilities to many formerly unemployed people.

2. The Foreign Service is every bit as essential as the armed forces. It is important to honor every person who serves the United States, not simply those in the military. The ambassadors and diplomats also risk their lives going overseas to some of the most dangerous countries in the world, all to improve America's standing on the World Stage and make the country safer for the ordinary citizens back home. I am glad to be working on the interns' *Profiles in Service* project to shed light on the valuable contributions of the diverse range of men and women enlisted in the U.S. Foreign Service.
  
3. American foreign policy is a compromise between many institutions. The movements of the United States at home and abroad are not decided by a single person, save the executive orders of the President him or herself. But beneath the presidential level, there are hundreds of people who contribute to U.S. foreign policymaking, from the House of Representatives and the Senate to the State Department and ambassadors overseas. I have not yet interacted with the National Security Council, but in the Executive Branch, they are another important pillar of foreign policy with considerable influence.

4. What you get from an internship or degree is what you put into it. There are interns who routinely volunteer for assignments and there are interns whose name I cannot put to a face. At the start of the program, we were told that what we put into the internship is what we will get out of it, and that could not be more accurate. I have put my whole heart and mind into this internship, and it has rewarded me in return. The same is true of my Master of Arts program. Perhaps the expression is just applicable to life itself.

It may sound cliché, but this internship has been a life-changing experience. Before I got the email offer, I had no idea how to begin working in government, let alone the State Department; I only knew I wanted to make that my career, somehow. Legislative Affairs was not the first bureau of the department I would have picked to work for either — I ideally wanted either the Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations; the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor; or the Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs. But I believe the bureau I ended up interning with gave me a wider view of U.S. foreign policymaking than any of my initial picks would have. After all, Legislative Affairs is the liaison to Congress, so in a sense, they have to represent the entirety of the Department of State.

At the time of writing, I have been a virtual intern for eight months now, since September 2020. I have learned that I enjoy management and leadership positions — I like to think I have a good head for seeing the bigger picture, and how every individual's role contributes to a shared goal; almost akin to game strategy — and I would like to pursue leadership roles in the future and see where it takes me. Once I have graduated, I will begin applying for jobs in the Washington, D.C.-Baltimore area, with a goal of moving in with my uncle, who lives in

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Baltimore, over the summer and commuting to work by train. It will be the next phase of my life, and Middle Tennessee State University's Master of Arts in International Affairs program has taken me there. For all that you have taught me, thank you.