

Aaron Miller, NY - 2013

America has faced a series of identity crises since its independence. Are we a nation of conservative or liberal ideology, of world leadership or isolationism, religious foundation or separated church and state? These questions amongst others have challenged the identity of America, which has seemingly wavered throughout its history. However, after participating in the 51st annual United States Senate Youth Program, a single-handedly life-changing event, I feel confidently apt to address this daunting question and pinpoint America's identity.

Representing New York, I had the opportunity to learn about the inner workings of the federal government, including those of the FBI, Pentagon, Department of State and Congress. We also spoke with the leaders shaping our government; Secretary Kerry, Justice Kagan and even President Obama himself addressed our delegation. But these experiences were merely complimentary to the program's real highlight and most unique aspect: spending a week with a diverse and brilliant group of students from throughout the country, which ultimately shaped my perspective.

I remember touring the National Archives, which was beautifully illuminated by faint lights, and speaking to Missouri Delegate Zach Bequette. He told me about his friends, who, after hunting, dump their kill onto their sturdy pick-up trucks to show off in the parking lot before school starts. He also explained a form of fully skinning prey that I never would have imagined: one slits the prey's skin at the limbs, tying two limbs to a tree and two to an ATV, and drives. Possibly the most shocking was learning about noodling, fishing with one's bare hands, and how it's among Paul Ryan's top hobbies!

Needless to say, I had the innate inclination to believe that he had been joking about these aspects of his life. But these comments served more than to provide amusement; they represented the vast diversity of culture in America. Having lived in the New York City metropolitan area for most of my life, I would have never imagined that such a foreign-sounding culture would resonate with so many Americans. This sense of disbelief precisely embodies the large scope of society in our country.

Another memorable moment was speaking to Wyoming Delegate Josh Dillinger. He described his rurally based life, showing me photos of the picturesque, titanic mountain ranges and luscious plains that surround his community. It seemed that this geography could serve as a haven, a place of refuge away from the clamor that often clouds people's fast-paced lives.

My tallest surroundings are more often skyscrapers than mountain ranges, and the closest thing I can think of in my life remotely paralleling this serenity is the forested park bordering two main roads where I can sometimes escape to walk my dog. Therefore, his stories signified for me the array of lifestyles that constitute America.

Arguably the most unique experience was one of the many debates held with my fellow delegates; this one was about gay marriage. Surrounded by a small crowd of delegates peeking their heads into the circle of conversation, one delegate from "The Deep South" strongly asserted his opposition to homosexual marriage. He cited America as a Christian nation founded on and with allegiance to its religious values. And his literal interpretation of the Bible strictly prohibits this practice.

I had met my share of politically conservative people and those that oppose gay marriage, yet never one with an approach so engrained in religious beliefs. I was, in a way, staggered by the delegate's conviction and realized to a greater extent that not only Americans' political views, but also Americans' mere approaches to issues levitate on a broad spectrum.

Stories like these shaped my experience in Washington and broadened my conception of America. As other delegates similarly expressed, I had always subconsciously identified my own

northeastern, urban surroundings as the authentic embodiment of our country and as “real America.” However, by the end of my week, I was able to look around and see the most culturally, geographically and politically diverse crowd I may ever be a part of. And I recognized that among the 104 delegates, there were 104 perceptions of America’s “true” identity.

Although, each speaker had emphasized that collectively, the program’s delegates represented the future of American leadership, thereby giving me the ability confidently identify what “true America” is.

America’s identity cannot be defined by any of the polarities prevalent in American society – neither my life nor those of my friends personifying a completely different set of ideals embody America. Rather, America’s identity rests in the conglomeration of its diverse populous. It rests in the unification of all of its citizens’ cultures and beliefs. It rests in the melting pot metaphor that the heterogeneity of America in fact stands as one coalesced nation.

The United States Senate Youth Program demonstrated this focus of American society and our nation at large, justifying its place among the greatest weeks of my life thus far.