

Brandon Lee, CO - 2015

First, I would like to thank the Colorado Department of Education for choosing me as a delegate, and thank you to the Hearst Foundations for not canceling my selection, because it was probably a mistake. Thanks to some of the best friends I created at USSYP- Vishal, Will, Trevor, Talha, Carter, Ben, and many more- for creating countless memories with me and challenging my initially cynical view of our youth. Thank you to my wonderful co-delegate, Serene, for her exuberance in the simplicity of life and her great friendship.

Now, let me begin my essay with a disclaimer - my essay does not contain multitudes of interesting quotes from the incredibly powerful and prestigious politicians we met during Washington Week, nor will any non-USSYP alumni reading this essay understand the various references I am about to make.

My week in Washington was a surreal and profound experience. Bustling with energy, D.C. was very dynamic and always active, quite unlike our Congress. USSYP granted me many rare, behind-the-scenes opportunities - eating dinner next to the Constitution, meeting President Obama, President of the World Bank Jim Kim, Colorado Senators Bennet and Gardner, visiting the Department of State, NASA headquarters, Arlington National Cemetery, the Pentagon, and many more.

The other 103 delegates and staff that attended, however, were the most interesting part of the trip. When I walked into the breathtaking Mayflower Hotel, the first conversation I had in D.C. regarded gerrymandering in Alabama congressional districts. I met my Military Mentor, Captain MacDougall, who proceeded to douse us with wisdom throughout the week. From "He's the President of the United States. We're not gonna shoot him up into space. That's stupid..." to "That's ridiculous! Holding me accountable to things I did ten years ago... I'd be in jail right now..."

Every curse was also a blessing. While I was examining the Constitution for too long in the National Archives, I lost my chance for a good seat with friends directly in front of speaker Senator Isakson. Resignedly, I sat with USSYP staffers, photographer Jakub, and First Lieutenant Jace Yarbrough, U.S. Air Force. What followed was surprisingly stimulating analysis of *Interstellar* with 1st Lt. Yarbrough (was the ending really a message of hope or despair?) and a chance to hear Jakub's incredible story as a young Hungarian living under the Eastern communist bloc to his immigration and realization of the American dream.

And no Washington Week would be complete without debates. Of course. Debate topics ranged from political polarization, abortion, Ferguson, political polarization, Obamacare, welfare, and did I mention political polarization? Somewhat unfortunately, I honestly believe that my fellow delegates spoke the words 'political polarization' at USSYP more times than I had hours to sleep. My fellow delegates surprised me because they were so passionate about and observant of Congress. For the first time in my life, I had found more young adults interested in bipartisanship than the legalization of marijuana.

It's an incredibly humbling feeling, to know that the best student leaders in the United States had gathered into one room. Victor has made national news recently because he has been accepted to all eight Ivy League universities. One of my best friends, Vishal knew more about the state senate and gubernatorial elections in Colorado than I did. My roommate Will lectured me until 2 AM on the first night on welfare and Obamacare until he simply refused to answer more of my questions. This led me to think... How was I selected? What if the other delegates thought of me in the same way? What if I would not be remembered? What if I would not be respected? What if no one liked me? It was then that I realized this is what President Obama must feel like on a daily basis.

But President Obama reassured us that this was not the case. When he spoke to us, he emphasized key issues in our time, especially ethnic and economic inequalities. He also subtly 'dissed' republicans for not believing in climate change. But most importantly, he told us- "Don't worry about who you want to be... focus on what you what to do."

And with this, I humbly headed back to Colorado, inspired and changed, ready to end political polarization. The youth, ages 18-24, after all, make up 18% of eligible voters, but only about half of that number voted in 2014. While we are upset with Congress, which has an 12% approval rating (lower, than, shall we say, the rating of Nickelback and cockroaches?), we, the people, the constituents, are electing them in the first place. We must use Washington Week with purpose, where the youth can express their ideas, fears, and goals. By implementing the invaluable ideals that the youth possess, a true impact can be made in the U.S., which will reflect our large, growing constituency. Soon, the youth will be responsible for America's issues, as these problems fall to us. And with hope, determination, and confidence, I am confident, content, and complacent with America's future, with our 103 delegates at its helm.