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Hope is a precious commodity for my generation. With stories of conflict and cruelty gracing headlines daily, we find it only too easy to give in, to accept that we live in an imperfect world, and, most of all, to scoff at the idea that real change is possible. We hear news of political strife, violence, and, at the center of all of it, a fundamental lack of civility. Cynicism, if not total despair, is often the obvious response.

This March, the 2015 United States Senate Youth Program reminded 104 of us youth that hope still abounds. We saw it immediately in the dedication of the Hearst Foundations and our Military Mentors - they who believed in us enough to give us their time, hard work, and incredible opportunities that Washington Week represents - and continued to see it in the leaders that we met and heard from throughout the week. Over the diverse backgrounds, roles, and political views that the speakers represented, some common themes prevailed: Secretary of the Senate Julie Adams advised us, "Be kind to people you meet on your way up--you'll meet them on your way down," and Supreme Court Justice Breyer suggested, "Try to do your job as well as you can and pay attention to what others think." Senator Johnny Isakson told us, "We're from different parties, but we're Americans first," while Senator Cory Gardner, quoting his fellow USSYP alumnus Governor Chris Christie, reminded us that "It's hard to hate up close." The resounding message that we delegates received was that there is indeed hope for our generation, contingent on the fact that we work together in spite of our differences.

Asked by one delegate about the apparent inability of Congress to effect great change, Senator Susan Collins turned the question on us, inquiring, "Is gridlock in Congress a cause or a symptom?" Perhaps Senator Collins is correct in her suggestion that the government's grinding to a halt is the direct result of a greater inability nationwide to work with others with whom we disagree. If so, I believe that we are completely capable of addressing this issue and, by extension, greatly reducing the political gridlock that our nation is currently experiencing. If my experience with USSYP taught me nothing else, it certainly showed me that people from completely different geographical and socioeconomic backgrounds and widely varying political views have every ability to come together and effect positive change. Over the course of the week, I witnessed (and took part in) friendships blossoming between public school and boarding school students, east and west coasters, and, most remarkably, Democrats and Republicans. Day and night we delegates debated incendiary issues, but even the fiercest discussions ended peacefully. Every single delegate had something unique to offer to the rest of us, and every single delegate was willing to listen.

Looking back on it now, I struggle to summarize my USSYP experience through any one event that occurred during Washington Week, especially when I must choose from such moments as visiting the Supreme Court and hearing from Justice Breyer, fulfilling a political dream of appearing on C-SPAN, joining in the buzz of excitement among my fellow delegates when favorite senators arrived to the Senate Reception, and the truly surreal experience of making eye contact with President Obama at the White House. USSYP and all of those behind the program made possible not only those incredible individual moments but also the opportunity to spend a week humbled by the talented, committed, and kind individuals around me. Most importantly, USSYP has given me the priceless ability to face the future with unironic and unabashed hope. In his speech to the delegates early in the week, Senator Joe Manchin urged us not to let such an experience go to waste but to take what we learned from the program and do something with it. I believe we will.