

Abhishek Shah, LA – 2015

"Our government sucks. It's filled with self-serving, corrupt politicians who create problems instead of fix them."

Where I come from, this perception of our government is quite common. Growing up in such an environment, I had always viewed our government as an evil institution, but by the time I left the Mayflower Hotel on March 14th, 2015, my entire perspective on our government had changed from tenuous pessimism to unwavering optimism.

Over the course of Washington Week, I was fortunate enough to have the opportunity to meet our "government" face-to-face. There was no buffer, no editing, no hiding. This was the perfect opportunity to confirm my pessimism about our government. But I was wrong. As the week progressed, I realized that our government is composed of people who genuinely care. They want to create a better America for us. They listen to our opinions. They, gasp, actually compromise. As Senator Isakson said, "IDWIC." I do what I can. All of these revelations began to wither away my pessimistic viewpoint on our government. It was, however, the people who affected me the most.

During Washington Week, I was able to interact with the nation's finest military personnel and a surreal group of delegates. Previously intimidated by men and women in uniform, I began to realize that they were just normal people who were paying the ultimate sacrifice. As Captain Z said, "we're still people. We're entitled to our own opinions too." And the opinions they had were quite eye-opening as were the ones from other delegates. I was happily forced to adjust and alter my beliefs and opinions as a result of debating with a group of kids who were respectfully disagreeing. There was no yelling or arguing. There was just enlightening discussion about anything ranging from economic policy to the influence of Kanye West on society. It was incredible.

In retrospect, USSYP not only changed my opinion on our government but also changed my life. The lessons and experiences that I gained from the program will stay with me forever and will be shared with all of my community. Thank you again to the Hearst Foundations and everyone who helped make this week such a life-changing adventure. After this program, I know that I can make a difference. I now know the true meaning of USSYP: Uniting, Strengthening, and Spotlighting Youth Power.