

John Teague, OK – 2015

Growing up near downtown Oklahoma City, I often pass by the Oklahoma County Courthouse. Scored on its art deco façade is a quote from Samuel Adams: “He who has most zeal and ability to promote public felicity, let him be the servant of the public.”

Washington Week exposed me to 103 zealous and able young Americans who are committed wholeheartedly to serving this republic. The backgrounds of my fellow delegates were diverse. Hailing from all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Department of Defense schools overseas, these students held manifold political views, claimed divergent ancestries, and embraced unlike outlooks on the world. The conviction for service to country amongst the delegates, however, was uniform; each possessed lofty aspirations for the future of our nation and fervor to lead it. Whether as a teacher, doctor, or public servant, most — if not all — of the United States Senate Youth Program students plan to tread a service-oriented career path.

The opportunity to be included in such a talented and passionate assemblage of young Americans was a high honor — never before have I been surrounded by a group of young men and women with such intelligence and civic literacy in so great a number. Spending a week with those students is a memory that I will cherish as long as I live, along with the many relationships that I was so fortunate to forge with them. Meeting the president of the United States, eating dinner in the National Archives rotunda, and hearing from an associate justice of the Supreme Court—among many other honors — were certainly privileges of a lifetime; those privileges were enriched tenfold by the company in which I experienced them.

My fellow delegates and I heard many honorable ideals espoused by distinguished speakers throughout the week — republican government by the people, service to country, national unity, optimism for the future. In my mind, nowhere were these principles of optimism and unity more evident than at NASA headquarters.

The visit to NASA and the speech given by Administrator Charles Bolden rank highly on my list of prized memories from the U.S. Senate Youth Program. NASA embodies the very best of the American soul; it endeavors to map and explore the cosmos, discover life on other planets, and even land a human on Mars in the coming decades. Surely, this is government at its best: a public commitment to knowing more about the universe in which we inhabit such an infinitesimal part. If ever there were government programs worthy of funding, NASA must be one.

The belief that space exploration “is one of the great adventures of all time,” as President Kennedy claimed in his noted speech at Rice University, fuels the existence of NASA. It is an attitude especially pervasive at its headquarters. But Kennedy recognized a darker, more pragmatic truth about this odyssey as well: “only if the United States occupies a position of pre-eminence can we help decide whether this new ocean will be a sea of peace or a new terrifying theater of war.” NASA is committed to the occupation of that position: more Americans have crewed the International Space Station than astronauts of all other countries combined; America will unveil the most powerful rocket ever constructed, the Space Launch System, before the decade is over; the James Webb space telescope, which will be able to observe for the first time some of the original galaxies formed in the early universe, will be deployed by NASA in 2018; and we are already the chief architects of bringing the first manned crew to the red planet. NASA is a powerful symbol of human brilliance in general and American exceptionalism in particular—one that we witnessed firsthand during Washington Week.

This was only one of many powerful symbols on display during the United States Senate Youth Program. We delegates learned about the efforts taken by the National Archives to digitize some of the 12 billion paper documents in their possession—a testament to the commitment of the American government to be open and accountable to its citizenry. We were received by President Obama in the White House, demonstrating the leader of our country's obligation to foster civic engagement among the American youth. Military Mentors from all branches of the armed services led us through our daily activities—a constant reminder of the fact that the United States military ultimately serves the public. Supreme Court Justice Stephen Breyer spoke to us in the very same court room where *Brown v. Board*, *Roe v. Wade*, and *Bush v. Gore* were argued and decided—laying bare our heritage as a nation of laws.

My confidence in this country was galvanized during Washington Week not only by the leadership capacity of the student delegation, but by the adults who currently hold leadership positions as well. It became abundantly clear to me that the state of the union is indeed strong; our bedrock principles are indeed righteous. Those who stand watch over the perpetuation of this union, this young American experiment, do so with virtue—and do it well. The United States Senate Youth Program has assured me that when the time comes for a changing of the guard, there will be successors to answer that call with zeal and ability.