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I left my phone on the bus while touring Mount Vernon, because I wanted to truly appreciate the beauty and history of George Washington's estate. Unlike so many people in our grossly connected and distracted world, I choose to experience life, and set aside the burdens of reality, for moments, here and there, to appreciate the opportunities which I'm so often afforded. Opportunities that are missed, for so many others, simply on account of their not looking. Upon boarding the bus, I sat down in my seat, and reached in the seatback pocket for my cell phone. I had received an update from CNN that Nancy Reagan had passed away that morning. For a moment, I reflected on the former first lady's contributions to our nation, to its children. My experience as a delegate in the United States Senate Youth Program can be summarized by this quote of President Reagan's devoted wife: "To my young friends out there: Life can be great, but not when you can't see it. So, open your eyes to life: to see it in the vivid colors that God gave us as a precious gift to His children, to enjoy life to the fullest, and to make it count. Say yes to your life."

Before Washington Week, I had many expectations. I expected that the most important person I would meet would be the president. I anticipated that my peers would not understand or respect my political positions. I presumed that Washington would operate more closely to House of Cards. I am surprised, upon my reflection, to discover that every single one of my expectations could not be further from the reality of my experience.

We met a soldier from the 3rd Infantry Regiment; the Old Guard. He is one of the few who is entrusted with protecting the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. They work 25 hour shifts - in rain, shine, freezing cold, blistering heat. The tomb has been guarded, without pause, since 1937. He is the most important person I met all week. I'll never forget his sacrifice. I don't think any of the 104 of us will. And while it was a distinct honor to meet the president of the United States, when I looked into the stone eyes of that infantryman, who sacrifices so much so that we can live in freedom, I realized how insignificant I am, we are, the president is. Later, we visited the Arlington Cemetery. Rows upon rows of white tombstones adorn the grassy hills. I realize that my freedoms, and opportunities aren't possible because of the men and women on the other side of the Potomac, but instead, the men and women beneath my feet.

During Washington Week, I was vocal with my political positions. I'm proud of my ideology, I believe in it, and I see it as the way forward. The other 103 delegates feel the same way, respective to their own diverse and widely contrasting ideologies. One should expect, as I did, that when you put these 104 young adults in a room, conflict will arise. This was not the case. Rather, each of us learned from one other, debated one another, and found middle ground with each other. We operated with more respect and grace than today's state and federal governments.

This brings me to my closing point; my number one, capital T, Takeaway from my Senate Youth experience. Our nation faces troubling times. We have nearly 19 trillion dollars in debt, the world is at war, and we live in constant fear. One might look at our nation, as I have, and wonder whether he is looking at a rising sun or a setting sun. In one week, I found the answer to this question. Our collective future is a bright one, as evidenced by our experiences, our relationships, and our interactions during Washington Week. The future is in our hands, and I can say with confidence, after becoming friends with 103 of our world's future leaders, America is a rising sun, with undiscovered potential, that my generation will unlock for the world to enjoy. To conclude, I'd like to extend my deepest appreciation to the staff and leadership of the United States Senate Youth Program, to The Hearst Foundations, to our security detail, our bus drivers, the hotel staff, the United States Armed Forces who provide us with the safety and freedom to enjoy this experience, and to God, for all the opportunities which I've been afforded. It is my promise, that in return for your investment in my future, I will live a life of integrity, honor, and leadership. I will use the voice I've been given to shine a light in our world's darkest corners. I will share the lessons I learned during Washington Week with my community, my family, and my peers. I will serve as an ambassador and supporter of the United States Senate Youth Program, in all that I do, for the rest of my life. Most importantly, I'll never stop working to ensure my freedoms, liberties, and opportunities, are available to every person who says 'yes' to life.