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I first heard about the United States Senate Youth Program from an email my guidance counselor sent out with the link, just as she always does for various opportunities. As always, I clicked on the link and was soon impressed by the high profile of speakers and longevity of the program. So, I began the application process. After my test and application was complete, I forgot about the program until I was asked to interview. After that step, I once again put the program out of my mind until December 16, the day I was notified of my selection. After my initial shock, my first thought was, "How did I get to this point?" which leads me up to March 5, the day it all started to become real.

I don't think I've ever met so many new and friendly people in one day. Being a military child, I've attended plenty of first days at new schools, but none of these compared to meeting 103 other people who were ecstatic to embark on this journey together. Although some events of the week blur together, the feeling of being in the Mayflower ballroom with all these new people is one of my most treasured memories.

Prior to this program, I would not have considered myself a political nerd. While I had a textbook idea of what government was and how it worked, I was not able to spew out political facts like some of my fellow delegates. The United States Senate Youth program truly brought my understanding of government to life by showing me that these are real people who actually facilitate the democratic process of the United States. One of the most memorable speakers for me was Senator Cory Gardner from Colorado, a USSYP alum himself. However, it was not his political opinions that struck me the most, rather his personal advice and eloquence. Senator Gardner said "You don't have to act like you belong because you do belong. You belong in this nation, not as passive observers but as active participants who will solve these great challenges." This especially struck a chord with me because I have often felt out of place in my high school, but Senator Gardner's words summed up my entire Washington Week experience by reminding me that whatever path I choose to pursue, my greatest goal needs to remain helping others.

Although the people I heard speak during Washington Week were incredible, nothing can compare to being around and hearing the ideas of my fellow delegates. The intelligence and passion of these people cannot be accurately described by any single word. This group of young people has already accomplished more than most can ever dream of. From giving TED Talks, to opening food trucks, to running organizations that span multiple states, the 54th annual USSYP class is truly outstanding. I am reminded of dinner at the National Archives, where the two topics of discussion were the current presidential election and the existence of God. Yes: politics and religion, the two things that have been advised to never be discussed at the dinner table. This is just one case that exemplifies the level of intelligence and respect that every delegate brought to every single conversation. I am eternally grateful for getting to spend time with this group of people and to call every one of them my friend.

There are many people and groups that deserve great thanks: the USSYP staff, the military mentors, The Hearst Foundations, and of course, my fellow delegates. Upon reflection of the entire program, I am so overwhelmed to have been blessed with such an incredible opportunity. Although I am still not certain exactly what path my life will lead me on, I am certain that I will serve others in some capacity. I leave Washington, D.C. with renewed confidence in the political system of the U.S.A., as well as the upmost confidence in the leaders who will take this country to become the best it can be.