

Diab Eid, NH – 2016

Before I experienced it, the United States Senate Youth Program was merely a goal to be achieved, an honor that brings with it prestige but nothing more. It wasn't until I had the opportunity to meet global leaders, fellow students, and driven military mentors that I truly appreciated what the Senate Youth Program had to offer. My intellectual and social growth over Washington Week has changed my life in ways I never expected.

I was under the assumption that Washington Week was merely a time to meet some cool people, shake their hands, get a picture, and rejoice in my achievement of being selected as a delegate. However, one by one, each speaker and leader we met with offered so much more than aesthetics. Jeffrey Herbst, president and CEO of the Newseum, gave a lecture on the relationship between technology, media, and consumers. In his speech, he explained how consumer-driven social media algorithms are being used to feed people news and opinions they agree with, thereby creating internet "safe-spaces" where one rarely hears the opinions of the other side. He, along with a later speaker, MSNBC correspondent Jonathan Capehart, challenged us to seek out people who disagree with us and like their pages and feeds to learn more about their opposing viewpoint. This is just one of many examples when a speaker unexpectedly gave insight that changed my intellectual philosophy.

On top of the academic growth I experienced, Washington Week gave me the possibility of meeting extraordinary individuals from across our country. What surprised me the most was the diversity, not just of race, but also viewpoint, life plans, and interests. From all backgrounds and all lifestyles, we came together for one week to exchange ideas on our nation's most pressing issues. There were many disagreements, but I don't remember one time such disagreement turned into disrespect. Many of the friends I made came from the opposite end of the political spectrum. This is the kind of atmosphere I want emulated in college and beyond: an environment of open discourse, respect, and tolerance.

The military mentors of Washington Week, specifically my mentor, Captain Erik Forestiere, have taught me incredibly valuable life lessons. These outstanding individuals conveyed to me self respect, professionalism, patriotism, honor, and service in many ways, but there was one teaching method that has stuck: role-modeling over the dinner table. Manners were things I was not particularly good at, but by watching the military mentors, I learned a tremendous deal about them. Furthermore, it was over the dinner table that I learned about the military mentors' amazing experiences and devotion to our country. Each mentor cared about us, and truly wanted us to fulfill our potential over the week and throughout our lifetime. The military mentors embody everything the United States Senate Youth Program stands for, and after living, learning, and dining with them, I have a new sense of respect for their motivations and values.

America has historically been a place of great promise for many, including my family. The United States Senate Youth Program brought me face to face with the people working to make sure our country remains a beacon of hope and opportunity for all who seek it. I am grateful to have been given this incredible opportunity, and I hope I can live up to the program's standards in all aspects of my life.