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From the steps of United States Capitol to the ballrooms of The Mayflower Hotel, the 54th annual United States Senate Youth Program fulfilled the dreams of dozens of delegates and moved one from New Jersey to embrace the country that, 12 years prior, had embraced him and his family.

As an immigrant and aspiring public servant of the United States, I was an enthralled participant of Washington Week. Every speaker, monument, and document elucidated the values, principles, and challenges that inspired my family to move from rural Sri Lanka to northern New Jersey in pursuit of the American dream.

Jeffrey Herbst, CEO of the Newseum, highlighted the foundational roots of the First Amendment and its role in sustaining a well-functioning democracy. He stressed the value of free speech and a free press in a world where countries are making arguments against this basic tenet of American government. His words connected with my own experience a student-journalist who has covered local issues — he reminded me of our collective responsibility to truth and transparent self-governance.

Mt. Vernon, the lavish home of George and Martha Washington, was an awe-inspiring relic that took me back to the earliest years of the United States. The historian-led tour of this ancient mansion featured seminal artifacts, from a key to the Bastille to the desk where the Declaration of Independence was ultimately delivered. Furthermore, Washington's legacy — one in which he sacrificed self-interest for the greater good — reminded me of this country's legacy of admirable leaders.

President Barack Obama, the leader of the free world, described his career in public service and the issues facing the United States today. For over 45 minutes, he held the attention of over 100 high school students as he described political roadblocks, constitutional theories, and various ways to approach a life in government. This was the highlight of my week — and it reminded me that even the highest levels of government exist in order to serve the needs and aspirations of the simplest people.

Washington Week was filled with many more inspiring experiences. Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg exalted the legal system in a fascinating manner. NASA scientist Dr. Piers Sellers described both the alarming necessity for action against climate change and the breathtaking view of Earth from outer space. And perhaps most significantly, my fellow delegates renewed my love for public service, politics, and **my** country, the United States of America.