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Senior year of high school is a time of great uncertainty. The decisions made at this pivotal juncture of life prepare one for success in the future. All too often every senior questions whether he or she is on the “right” path. When people ask me what path I plan to study in college, I reply “political science;” my response is often met with visible scorn or skepticism. This common reaction is not exactly encouraging to one wondering whether he’s making the right choices regarding his future. Therefore, I entered Washington Week looking for confirmation and affirmation, a sign, that my plans to pursue a path in political science and public service are worthwhile, meaningful, and fulfilling. Many times throughout the week I received those signs, sometimes explicitly through the words of a speaker, sometimes more subtly by the thoughtful and selfless actions of others, and consistently through my like-minded, motivated peers who have decided to walk the same path as I.

“Don’t focus on who you want to be, focus on what you want to do.” These words, from the mouth of President Obama, illustrate the importance of one’s actions, rather than the positions one possesses. Sometimes ambitions of lofty titles interfere with making a positive difference, and a perception that the public has about government is that our leaders work primarily for personal gain. Contrary to this perception, each speaker I had the opportunity to hear, possessed a genuine passion and commitment to their roles in our government. For example, Astronaut Piers Sellers, despite suffering from terminal cancer and having perhaps just months to live, has been tirelessly researching climate change. Sellers works solely because he cares about our future, despite knowing that he will not be a part of it. When I learned of his cancer diagnosis, his devotion became clear to me, moving me to tears and providing a sign that my path toward public service is not about me, but as Obama states and Sellers demonstrates, it’s about what I do.

The speaker that I found most personally impactful was Senator Cory Gardner. To hear the enthusiasm of a man who had been in our shoes as a USSYP delegate, who had taken the same path that we are currently trekking, was truly inspiring. He issued a challenge to our generation. Senator Gardner told us that we are the people who will fix the problems facing Washington and America. His confidence in our potential uplifted the whole group, and his words gave us a sense of purpose as we grew throughout the week. Senator Gardner’s affirmation in our promise was another sign that I am on the “right” path.

Ultimately, the most lasting part of the week is the 103 amazing people that I have befriended. From talking via the internet to nearly everyone in advance of our week in Washington, I knew that I would be in the midst of a remarkably talented group of students. However, there is no way that I could have envisioned the way that we became a family during the week that we spent together. In retrospect, I suppose it is only inevitable that a group of the biggest political nerds in America would bond over a shared experience that is so vastly transformative. Each and every one of the students holds a place in my heart. This is evidenced by the fact that when I hear or think about any state, the two delegates from that state immediately come to mind. The diverse perspectives captured by the fact that delegates hail from each state provide us all with a unique view of our nation that I found extremely enlightening. To meet so many people that were so motivated and passionate about leadership, service, and politics truly was refreshing to me, and I am sure that my USSYP friends will serve as inspiration and support for my endeavors well into the future.

In short, I’ll always remember Washington Week. I wholeheartedly thank The Hearst Foundations for providing me with this distinctly unique opportunity and for the scholarship which will allow me to further study political science in college. In addition, I am grateful and appreciative to the USSYP staff for organizing such an amazing week. I would also like to thank the military mentors for always being by our side and guiding us from the perspectives of those already immersed in service. This once-in-a-lifetime experience provided the signs sought and the assurance needed that government and service matter. Before Washington Week, I had reservations about whether I was choosing the right path. Now, I am confident that although following my passion for government and leadership may not lead me where I anticipate, wherever my journey takes me, I am capable of making a difference in the

lives of others. The United States Senate Youth Program was truly a remarkable experience, and I expect its impact on me and the people I serve to be timeless.