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“You cannot love your country if you do not love your fellow countrymen.”- Senator Cory Booker, USSYP 2017

The 55th annual United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP) occurred during a time of great political upheaval. Washington, D.C. was fashioned by a contentious Supreme Court nomination, conflicting healthcare plans, and polarized foreign affairs policies. However, during my week participating in the USSYP with 103 other delegates from across our nation, my faith in American unity and patriotism only deepened. I left D.C. with a new passion for our justice system, a new appreciation for the American political process, and 103 new friends.

The U.S. federal court system is a vehicle of democracy. However, Article III of the Constitution established the judicial branch in American government because the Framers believed this branch wielded less power than Congress or the presidency. Even today, federal justices are surprisingly absent from the media, and the public is far more likely to know their senators and president before any Supreme Court justice. This should not be the case. After hearing from former Chief Justice of the 10th Circuit Court of Appeals Robert Henry, and current Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court John Roberts, I hold the judicial branch of our government in far greater esteem than Congress or the Executive branch. In fact, these men inspired me to attend law school after college. The American judiciary’s remarkable ability to remain relatively uncorrupt and nonpartisan in a time rife with party politics should stand as a beacon of authority to every government official. The United States federal court system exemplifies teamwork, open discourse, and compromise; I aspire to lead my life with these same values.

Washington has become a dirty word. When people speak of the U.S. federal government, they usually do so with a tone of disappointment and frustration. After the cheap ploys and dirt flinging of the 2016 election, I counted myself among this population of disheartened citizens. However, my time in D.C. renewed my confidence in the American political process. Although I may disagree with many of our current national leaders, listening to a range of reporters, legislators, and government officials speak about their patriotism and responsibilities demonstrated the value of procedure. After returning home, many friends and family asked how I could remain passionate about a system they believed wasn’t representative of their needs. My message was simple; if you do not have faith in our politicians, have faith in our political process.

Above all, spending a week in D.C. developed new friendships. I cannot overstate the importance of these relationships because they resulted in not only fun memories, but also new ideas. Soon, it will be time for my generation to lead our country, and USSYP gave us a glimpse of what they may look like. The future is bright. All 103 other delegates were unbelievably talented, gifted, and accomplished. It is an incredible honor and a privilege to call these young men and women my friends.