

## Mason Hutchinson, MT – 2017

Of all the great things I've had the blessing of doing in my life, none of them could parallel the experience of the United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP). This incredible event not only shifted my perspective on the roles of government, but also gave me a sense of purpose that I've never felt before.

I left The Mayflower Hotel after hearing speakers like Senator Cory Booker and Surgeon General Vivek Murthy feeling loved, inspired, and most importantly: empowered.

All of the speakers throughout the week stressed the single point that "you are the future of America, and I think we are in good hands." To have such renowned world leaders put their faith in my abilities and leadership was something I never expected or imagined. For that faith I am eternally grateful, and I will not take it for granted.

USSYP taught me a lot of things, but my biggest takeaway was the fact that there are so many ways a person can be right. I've always felt so attached to my own opinions, and when people believe things outside of that it's been hard for me to accept. I met so many intelligent students from the other side of the political spectrum, and as crazy as it sounds, I actually look forward to being proven wrong now. Just because something works for me doesn't mean it's right for everyone else.

Another one of my favorite parts of the trip was being able to meet so many of my heroes in person. It helped me realize how incredibly blessed I was to be a part of the program. Not many 18 year-olds get to shake hands with the president of the United States, or see Chief Justice Roberts in person. I'm a first generation college student, and both of my parents spent multiple years in prison. I never was expected to be successful in much, and to be honest, I never expected it myself. I've just held on to the idea of the American Dream. I've worked so hard throughout high school to involve myself in rigorous activities and surround myself with people that are smarter than me in hopes that I will be nurtured to become more like them. Thankfully I was born in this great country where I don't have to be confined to my socioeconomic background; and USSYP affirmed that idea for me.

My favorite speaker of the week was Senator Cory Booker from New Jersey. While his speech was brief, he gave us a humbling taste of what life can be like for African Americans in a community that doesn't accept them. He reminded us that none of us inherently deserve anything that we are getting out of life, and taught us to appreciate everything we are. He stressed that so many people worked hard before us to get to the point we are at today, so to act like our victories are due to the work we've done is disgraceful to our ancestors. He gave a speech of unity, hope, love for our fellow countrymen. I will never forget his words to the USSYP Class of 2017.

While I did learn an unfathomable amount from the planned parts of the program, I may have learned even more from my peers. After the day's activities had come to a close, our Military Mentor group would stay up late in each other's' rooms debating, questioning, and encouraging each other. Whether it was the idea of a single payer health care system, or the age old debate between socialism and capitalism, we were always surrounded by new ideas and theories. Since we represented so many diverse parts of the country, we all had different problems facing our communities that impacted our decisions about the ideologies we follow. I'll never forget how kind and accepting my Military Mentor group was toward each other's' ideas, and I hope to continue that attitude towards other people. It would be the biggest waste of potential and my time in Washington, D.C. if I didn't try to utilize all of the new knowledge I was able to acquire. I will always remember the United States Senate Youth Program as the best week of my life.