

Ryan Wallace, NC – 2017

Stepping off the surprisingly prompt American Airlines flight to Reagan airport, I felt a plethora of emotions ranging from sheer excitement to limited anxiety, but I was eager to know what Washington Week had in store for me. Shaking hands with the Military Mentors and the other delegates for the first time, I wondered they would think of me from a small town in North Carolina. I think it is easy to agree with countless remarks throughout the week however, that the United States Senate Youth Program was perhaps the most fulfilling, amazing, tiring, and insightful week of my life. From the early, drowsy meetings with my Military Mentor to the late nights of brilliant conversation with fellow delegates, it was a true honor to represent North Carolina in the 55th annual United States Senate Youth Program.

The delegates and I certainly got off on a phenomenal foot before the program even started. The countless debates, memes, and pictures in the GroupMe demonstrate our class' intelligence, quirkiness, and trust for one another. Even before Washington Week, I could always count on my fellow delegates to provide advice, read college essays, and have a structured, political conversation, which unfortunately is lacking among young people in America. Even after the program, I constantly receive a notification on my phone with a picture of the group from a monument, a political question, which will certainly be debated, or a funny story about someone's day. Social media certainly allowed us to connect early on, which is what allowed all of the delegates to become so close during the program.

Every one of the delegates whom I interacted with, dined with, and laughed alongside certainly had an impact on my experience during Washington Week. Every single delegate was knowledgeable and passionate about political issues and had well-constructed opinions on a variety of issues. Perhaps what impressed me the most about my fellow delegates, was that regardless of political ideology, background, or affiliation we all debated and challenged each other in a positive manner and never criticized one's view before listening to it. Our group certainly represented the textbook definition of what it means to be open-minded, as we always listened to each other. Perhaps what was even more a benefactor to our group dynamic was that we all sought out topics we didn't understand and learned from each other's political experiences and ideologies. As a moderate centrist, I had the privilege to meet brilliant individuals who voted and supported a variety of political candidates and learned never to judge one solely off their opinion. When my views were put to the test, I embraced it as an opportunity to learn from my fellow delegates and I certainly left Washington Week with a better understanding of the political dynamics of the next generation of leaders.

Perhaps the most amazing aspect of Washington Week were the incredible speakers who provided us with insight, advice, and a crystal clear understanding of the functions of our government. Some of the legendary keynote speakers included Chief Justice Roberts of the U.S. Supreme Court, President Trump, Secretary Tillerson, and a variety of senators, philanthropists, ambassadors, and those who truly represent the ideals of what it means to be a leader. My favorite speaker was Chief Justice Roberts, whose brilliant, well-articulated responses to our questions reminded me just how blessed I am to be an American. One quote that I will always remember from him was this: "The sacrifice we took to govern ourselves is important and people need to always be grateful by being involved." His words reminded me of the true sacrifice our founding fathers, men and women in uniform, and others take to defend our freedom, which truly makes America something exceptional.

Although the speakers were truly a feature of the week, which I will never forget, the Military Mentors perhaps taught me more than I could ever have imagined. My mentor, Captain Jeffery Dierling, was funny, smart, and truly the most down to earth Marine I have had the privilege to meet. Captain Dierling reminded us that the most important aspects of a leader are to always remain calm and be the better man in a situation. He treated my group as if we were his family and fellow Marines and reminded us the importance of being humble, prompt, and well dressed. "Wallace, your tie is too short," still echoes in my ear when getting ready, something I will always remember from his great advice.

Whether debating Senator Heitkamp over the dinner table about energy efficiency, taking a selfie with Bob Schieffer, or talking on C-SPAN with Brian Lamb, the experiences I had at the United States Senate Youth Program were truly life-changing and had an impact on me on a variety of levels. Looking back at my time in Washington, I will always remember the wonderful people I met, connections I made, and important voices I had the privilege to hear. Perhaps even more importantly, I was reminded of the strength of America's core values and their importance in our drastically changing world. A quote that we were constantly reminded of was the brilliant words of President Ronald Reagan who said, "Freedom is always one generation away from extinction." If he met the 104 delegates in the 2017 class however, I believe President Reagan, alongside other great leaders, would be thrilled to know that America's values are still cherished by young people in a world where they are often belittled. Washington Week truly changed my life and opened my eyes to all of the wonderful opportunities the world has in store for me. Washington Week was truly the greatest experience I have ever had and I will always be thankful to have the honor to be involved as long as I live.