

Nayan Rao, OH – 2017

When I stepped out of the car and into the magnificent Mayflower Hotel I was speechless. Here I was, in our nation's capital, with some of our country's greatest minds for an entire week. I was speechless as my fellow delegates and I were lead through this hotel to our home for the week – The Grand Ballroom. I had no idea what to expect, but almost immediately I felt like I was surrounded by lifelong friends. Everyone was incredibly kind and absolutely brilliant throughout the entire week. By the end, I knew this wouldn't be the last time I saw my new 103 brothers and sisters.

First, I have to thank the Military Mentors and USSYP staff for bringing together my new siblings during this program. Your investment in us and constant love and support throughout the program and beyond made me feel confident and joyful about the future of our country knowing that I will always have support from USSYP and that every year 104 young adults will be experience what is truly a week to shape a lifetime. I have to especially thank Mr. George Irish and Major Bissell USA, my two "Ohio Guys," for pushing me and my fellow delegates to do the most good we can and to always keep a strong sense of purpose. I also want to thank my military mentor Lt. Ryan Vandehei, USCG, for pushing us to talk about difficult issues and to always seek the truth regardless of who is saying it. I will always carry these lessons with me and I will always consider you to be my mentor and friend. Our new family of 104 students learned so much from the staff and speakers, and we all truly love and believe in this great nation. We are all truly dedicated to the relentless optimism and constant experiment that is the United States of America.

Coming from the Great State of Ohio, I was not new to the political diversity our nation has or from the often polarizing statements and attacks that our leaders launch at each other as if they were sworn enemies. My home county constantly ranks near the top for political ads and almost everyone I know has seen the polarization affect their life. I thought that Washington and my fellow delegates would reflect that divide and separation our country appears to be facing in recent years. I have never been so glad to be wrong. I was truly surprised that, even with the great diversity of views and backgrounds present in the program, we could debate and have a disagreement, but all come together as a family in the end. The polarization in our politics is not present at USSYP, and while we had difficult conversations about controversial topics, we all learned the value of compromise and collaboration in our government and in our discussions.

After several days of listening to different speakers and visiting different government and historical sites, I am proud to say that I am hopeful for where this country will be in the next twenty years. Our civil servants serve the people regardless of who is in charge, and they are always trying to help people, which should be the requirement to serve in government. As the week came to a close I thought, "You cannot pay everyone who helped you back, you have to honor their investment and sacrifice and pay it forward." When USSYP 2017's time comes, I have no doubt that we will all be ready to step up to the plate and serve our nation as a way to pay back the communities that helped us to become the Americans we are today.