

Douglas Stewart, SC – 2017

I was once told to be on the lookout for events that were so monumental they would change the entire course of my life. It seems that I have recently failed in that duty as the United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP) managed to blindside me completely. If I had known what was in store for me in a few days, I would have been much more excited to wake up that fateful Saturday morning for my plane ride to Washington, DC.

USSYP swept me off my feet and never stopped. Starting from the moment I walked into the Mayflower Grand Ballroom, I was surrounded by people. People welcoming me to D.C., people handing me folders full of information, people taking my photo. Four hours flashed by and I was still on my feet, shaking new hands (somehow) and from the small sample of people that I was able to meet, I knew that this trip would be like no other.

USSYP was a *tour de force* of Washington with an intensity that only foreign dignitaries can achieve. Shuttling from one three-course meal to the next, we met speaker after speaker who inspired us, challenged us, and presented us with new world views. My favorite speakers were Senators Heidi Heitkamp of North Dakota and Cory Booker of New Jersey, two people I had never heard of before. I grew up in a sea of red, born to a red family, living in red states, with red friends. I had only ever heard of “Yankees” through TV, and didn’t have much respect for the few, pushy Democrats I had met in South Carolina. But these two senators changed my mind. They made me see that Democrats love this country just as much as I do. They may have different ideas about how to fix the problems that we face, but we all share common ground as Americans. And above all, they gained my confidence as a citizen. For the first time since becoming politically conscious, I found Democrats not only won my respect, but also my vote.

While the speakers we met were incredible, the other delegates were even more so. I was blown away by their achievements, unable to believe that they had accomplished so much at such a young age. I found myself in a crowd of people only found at the Yale-Harvard Crew Race. This group was more diverse, more intelligent, and more passionate than any I have ever had the joy of meeting. Hearing them talk about convictions they held as strongly as my own taught me how to listen. Not only did I learn a textbook’s worth about differing views on politics, race, and religion, but I made some of my greatest friends. Not a single person failed to impress me, and I wish I had six months to get to know them rather than a scant six days. My fellow delegates taught me so much, but one of the most important lessons I learned was how to have civil discourse. With mutual respect and a willingness to listen without being quick to criticize, even the most sensitive of hot button issues can be discussed. Civil discourse has been pushed to the fringes in current politics, but these friends shown me that it can be restored.

Fixing the problems of our nation will be no easy task. But USSYP gives me hope. As Americans, we may not always agree, but we can still cooperate. We always have more in common than we have apart. Our different views are what make America vibrant and dynamic. Our politics is a never-ending torrent of controversy, which is both a challenge and a joy. What would our country be like without diversity of thought? If our government is to function efficiently again, we will have to learn how to work together, despite our differences. We must overcome our party allegiances and start compromising. This currently sounds like an impossible future, but after meeting my fellow delegates at USSYP, I can say with confidence that it can be done: *E Pluribus Unum*.

Life after USSYP will never be the same. I’d like to thank everyone at The Hearst Foundations for all their hard work running this unique program. Without you, none of this would be possible. I’d like to thank the Military Mentors for teaching us which fork to use and for injecting the discussion with novel viewpoints. And most of all, I’d like to thank the other delegates. You all have challenged me to become more active in my community. I have no doubt that all of you will be massively successful, and I hope that the friendships we built will last a lifetime. So until we meet again, best of luck and farewell!