

A.J. Braverman, VT – 2017

On the morning of our first day 104 delegates wandered to breakfast weary from socializing, traveling, and meeting our new companions for the next week. It was not coffee, tea, or any other caffeinated beverage that jolted our systems into gear, but rather the former Chief Justice of the Tenth Circuit Court Robert Henry. A United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP) alumnus, Judge Henry brought a jovial and engaging tone to his speech. Wildly waving his hand above his head, he told us folk tales, described experience, but most importantly he gave us his political philosophy. "In terms of a political decision you should vote for a person." He said, "You should never let something as temporal as an issue get in the way."

At first, I vehemently disagreed with Judge Henry's philosophy. Issues are not something of temporary effect, but rather of imminent importance. Yet, our modern politics does often seem to be lacking in connection between politicians and their constituents. This is not an indictment of our politicians, our system of government, or our citizens, rather it is the disadvantage of the age in which we live and our nation's geography. We live in a time when politicians can reach millions of constituents via the internet, a time when nearly anyone can broadcast their opinion on an issue, and a time when the work that is done in Washington can often seem distant and disconnected. For me, USSYP personalized politics. The greatest component of the U.S. Senate Youth Program was the unique opportunity for personal interaction that it provided.

The Military Mentors were the first aspect of this opportunity for interaction. As delegates of the U.S. Senate Youth Program we had the opportunity to be facilitated by distinguished members of our military who played the role of the most overqualified camp counselors ever. I had never had extensive interactions with members of our military so I was not sure exactly what to expect. I could not have asked for anything better. The phrase "Military Mentor" is not simply employed as a clever use of alliteration, these men and women were genuine leaders and role models. They not only gave me a personal insight into work in the military, but also allowed me to see some of the incredible leaders who have devoted their life to service.

Over the course of USSYP we had the opportunity to meet many other incredible individuals, some with immense political influence and some with more intimate and intricate work. It was evident from the first speakers that everyone who spoke no matter their political affiliation was dedicated to our country, our cause, and our future. Often times in our distance from Washington small differences in personality, belief, and opinion can be magnified and used to either demonize or elevate our politicians. It was here that I began to see Judge Henry's words shine through. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy was an example of a man who came across as a good-willed person. Holding a position which blends the fields of medicine and politics, he brought a unique view of working in Washington. He covered topics ranging from health care, to science, to our future, but what he emphasized most was that "although we are a nation that prides itself on the strength of individuals... we need uniters now more than ever." It can often appear that there is no hope for or no effort towards unity in modern politics, but this message was a resounding theme throughout the program. Surgeon General Murthy called for unity, Senator Cory Booker demanded a "grand conspiracy of love," and Bob Schieffer described the importance of having the courage to work together within our political system.

These speakers may have allowed us to have a more personal interaction with individuals who were shaping the landscape of modern politics as we spoke with them, but the Senate Reception was an entirely unique experience. I was lucky and ecstatic to have both my senators take time out of their day to meet our USSYP Vermont delegation. I will never forget the cheers that erupted when Senator Sanders entered to room or our nearly half-hour-long conversation with Senator Leahy whose signature and note to me will forever be, as he said, "proof that you can still get a job with bad handwriting." The Senate Reception was an experience that changed the way I viewed politicians and further personalized the inner workings of our Capitol.

Finally, unquestionably the greatest piece of the USSYP experience was the other delegates. We were told many times that week that we were "special." We were told that the people who were sitting next to us, at our tables, and in each room were the future politicians, entrepreneurs, and leaders of America. Yet teenagers can often be diffident. Many brushed off the praise as flattery and I, personally, still do not think that many of our speakers thought that each one of us would be in a role of great influence in the future, but what they did recognize was this group had unique passion, ambition, and

virtue. They called us special because, like me, they wanted the 104 delegates in the room to be the future. I found that I disagreed drastically with many people over the course of Washington Week on many issues. I agreed wholeheartedly with just as many, but I hope, for the future of our country, that each and every delegate at USSYP has an opportunity to shape the landscape of America. This was a collection of exceptional young Americans with a drive to learn, with critical yet open minds, and with the passion necessary to devote their lives to service; these were the people that Judge Henry was referring to when he said, "vote for a person."

I would like to thank the U.S. Senate for hosting us, The Hearst Foundations and its staff for assuring the continuing success of this program, our Military Mentors for being role models like no other, and everyone else who helped to make this program possible. It was truly the experience of a lifetime.