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When people say something was life-changing, oftentimes they don't *really* mean it. But, in this context it is definitely not hyperbolic to say that the 56th Annual U.S. Senate Youth Program's Washington Week was life-changing. It changed my entire mindset, altered my thinking, and gave me an entire new perspective. In every single conversation and class from here on, I cannot help but relate government to every instance. I step into my physics class and think about how NASA operates as a government-funded agency. I walk into English and consider how literature has contributed to monumental policy changes in our country. I even decided to start putting subtle political messages in my artwork.

However, my experience during and after the program was most likely different from all the other delegates. But, that was one of the best things about the program — that it was your own personal experience. It was up to you how much you got from the program, what connections you made, and what lessons you learned. Although it was difficult to choose for this essay, these are the three main lessons I learned from Washington Week.

First, I learned that government officials are regular, kind of, people. What I mean by that is when I first got the schedule of speakers, I was astounded, star-struck: U.S. Representative John Lewis, Executive Editor of *Washington Post*, Marty Baron, Associate U.S. Supreme Court Justice Neil Gorsuch, Director of National Intelligence Daniel Coats, Secretary of the Treasury Steven Mnuchin, the president, and so many more.

Now, this is not to say that these people are not impressive or that they're not prominent people in our society. But, they are people. They were all our age once, and they made it very clear in their speeches that they started out just like you and me, as students or professionals in their careers. It just so happens that public service is a career of prominence in our society, so they are almost regarded as celebrities.

It was Senator Angus King, an independent from Maine, who really emphasized this in his speech, "Ten things I wish I knew before becoming a senator," at a dinner in the National Archives, right next to the original copy of the Constitution, in which he emphasized that anyone can go into politics. Senators and public officials are accountable to a constituency, a huge group of people with a myriad of perspectives, a multitude of experiences, and a variety ideological beliefs. It is their job to extend their reach and their role to others, to be a prominent member of society so that they can get the best feedback from their constituents, so that they can consider that myriad of perspectives in every decision they make. And, it was so incredibly humbling and humanizing to hear them speak, oftentimes candidly. Yes, they probably had an idea of what they were going to speak about, but they did not shy away from questions on controversial topics.

This was especially evident when I had the chance to speak to Arkansas' senators, Senator John Boozman and Senator Tom Cotton at the program's annual Senate reception. It was wonderful to have a conversation with them; we talked about everything from college decisions to North Korea. They were unafraid to answer controversial questions; they realized and acknowledged that it is their job to be transparent, to say what you think, and to be opinionated. But, in our representative democracy, I learned that it is just as much our job, as citizens, to be opinionated — unafraid to say what we think should change and how we should change it.

That leads me to my next lesson: how to compromise in an era of hyper-partisanship and political polarization. Due to the volatile time in politics, this is something my fellow delegates and I focused a lot on. Growing up in this political climate has shaped our generation to recognize the importance of respect in a conversation — the importance of acknowledging that someone has a valid opinion. Throughout all the speakers, it was an evident theme that compromise is necessary in every political move, in every piece of legislation.

A quote that really stood out to me was by the Acting Associate Administrator and Deputy Associate Administrator for Mission Support at the Federal Emergency Management Agency, or FEMA, Brian Kamoie. He was one of the most candid speakers, which I appreciated so much. He said to "be careful of those who stand at the podium and tell you they have a solution for everything." In that moment, it really clicked. Politics shouldn't be about who has the better solution, whose solution would be more cost-effective, whose solution benefits the most people, or whose solution favors the most states. It should be a combination of solutions — that is the most representative type of solution, the most fitting for the principles of our country. We were founded on compromise and so must our solution to current problems be.

In fact, it was Associate U.S. Supreme Court Justice Neil Gorsuch who, even though speaking of the Constitution, said we should evaluate the founder's intent in every governmental decision we make. It's fine to disagree with this, as you rightfully should if you so believe, as that is what it means to voice your opinion, but if not the framers' intent, we should at least consider their principle of compromise.

I also learned this from the other delegates who would often argue their chosen side of an issue, and the Military Mentors, as well, who would ask thought-provoking policy questions. At almost every meal, on every bus ride, or every time waiting in line, there would be some sort of political debate happening. Every single conversation I had, no matter if we agreed or disagreed, but oftentimes when we disagreed, the sentence would begin with "I see where you're coming from" or "I respect your position, but..." And sometimes, quite frankly, they would tear your argument to pieces, but they acknowledged that you had an argument. They acknowledged that you had a belief, which equalized the playing field; it equalized the level on which the conversation took place. Oftentimes, I think that this is what's missing in mature conversations.

Lastly, I learned the importance of being informed. Part of this is knowing the value of your words. Saying the Pledge of Allegiance during a Wreath Laying ceremony in front of George Washington's tomb at Mount Vernon added another dimension to meaning those words held for our country. It provided insight into the true meaning of our founding principles.

The other part of being informed is the acknowledgement and respect that comes from a preexisting knowledge of differing opinions. When a delegate would say, I see where you're coming from, they truly did; they were truly aware of common counterarguments. This point I cannot stress enough. If you are not informed, you cannot carry on the types of conversations that need to take place to cause real, tangible, and effective change. You can absolutely participate, but can you truly compromise if you are unaware of the advantages and disadvantages of the other side? That is why I truly believe that it is our duty as a generation to be part of these important conversations, part of the compromise, and part of the change.

I became aware of this when we had lunch with the President and Chief Operating Officer at the Newseum Institute, and explored the importance of credible facts, as opposed to "fake news" media, and the first amendment.

Overall, I learned an incredible amount from the government officials — I learned about the accessibility of national documents from the librarian of Congress and Senate historian from the top floor of the Library of Congress.

I learned the mechanics of the Senate and controversy that accompanies it from the Parliamentarian of the Senate Elizabeth MacDonough and the Senate sergeant at arms, along with the director of Cybersecurity within the Senate.

I learned about international relations and the importance of being a globally competent citizen from Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Department of State Francisco Palmieri in the Benjamin Franklin State Dining Room.

I learned all about the U.S. Military, how each branch functions, and even some of the inside jokes between the branches from the Military Mentors.

But, I really learned a truly astounding amount from the other delegates. They were all informed on the issues they were passionate about, the issues they truly cared about and were unafraid to talk about no matter the societal stigma—issues anywhere and everywhere from abortion to climate change to gun control.

So, my message to anyone reading this is to become involved in the issues you are passionate about. Do your research. Be part of the conversation; everyone can be a public servant. Everyone can make change if they try hard enough. Most importantly, speak up. Stand up. Be part of the change. Lead the change.