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When I decided to apply to the United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP), I spent hours browsing the program's website, longingly looking through yearbooks, blogs, tweets, even C-SPAN profiles. In all my reading, one phrase kept jumping out at me: "life-changing". *Okay, sure*, I thought, rolling my eyes. How could a single week with a bunch of weird, random teenagers possibly be life-changing? Still, I applied, never anticipating that I would actually be accepted. Upon opening the UPS package that included my letter of congratulations and additional information, I noted that the paper was really heavy and a business card was included in one of those special notches in the folder - this was when I realized that USSYP is actually super fancy and I was going to be among some of the most brilliant students in the country.

I was thrilled, surprised, and terribly nervous. When I joined the GroupMe chat for delegates, I noticed that the group avatar was a picture of Nicholas Cage from *National Treasure*, and I knew I had found my people. Over the course of the three months leading up to Washington Week, I got to know some of the most amazing kids I've ever met. They were from all walks of life, all ends of the political spectrum, and they all were wonderful people. They wanted to be politicians, comedians, journalists, doctors, lawyers, scientists, activists, and everything in between. On Arrival Day, people hugged one another like they'd been friends their whole lives.

Washington Week was the most incredible experience I've ever had. From Mr. Cox giving a seven-minute lecture on bathroom policy in the ballroom of The Mayflower Hotel, to a fascinating meeting with President Trump, to a student implying to Justice Neil Gorsuch that his Senate confirmation was illegitimate (Justice Gorsuch shut him down real fast, and it was a sight to behold), to tear-inducing handshakes with John Lewis and Bernie Sanders, every moment of USSYP was enthralling. We learned about every branch of the government from those who lead it, met with prominent journalists, and heard from the lesser-known, but vitally important, leaders of our nation. Even the evenings after agenda events were amazing, with Oscar night parties, Cards Against Humanity games in the hallways, and very, very awkward dances.

I didn't really want to mention food in this essay, but I feel compelled to mention that every meal included at least three (3) forks and post-meal coffee service, and that's when you know this program is the real deal. To this day, I internally hear Mr. Cox seriously announce that "dinner is served" every time I sit at my kitchen table.

Of course, the most incredible part of USSYP wasn't the memorials or museums or even the speakers, but rather, my fellow delegates and the Military Mentors. As most of my fellow delegates know, I'm a science nerd at heart. Scientists know that there isn't always a single best answer to a question; the goal of science is to throw out a bunch of ideas, try them out, and see what works best. An idea that doesn't work well is just as valuable as one that does, because regardless, the scientist learns something new. At USSYP, every delegate had a different hypothesis about how our political society should work, but every single person listened to others, even (perhaps especially) when they didn't agree. The point wasn't to be proven right, but to listen to realities to which we hadn't been exposed, to learn from one another and come up with a better solution. The Military Mentors, who were kind and brilliant and hilarious, added a new perspective to our discussion, and I learned an enormous amount from them - I was actually calling my mentor, Lieutenant Commander McManus, "mom" by the end of the week. The idea that over a hundred students and rising stars in the military, all from vastly different backgrounds, could come together, agree, disagree, hug, debate, learn, and walk away as friends gives me an enormous amount of hope for the future. To my scientist's soul, that's a beautiful thing.

In short, Washington Week actually *was* life-changing, as much as I suspected it wouldn't be. I learned not only about the government, but about what it means to be a good citizen, a good leader, a good human being. I learned how much I don't know, and I learned how far I still have to go. USSYP has been not a culmination of my accomplishments so far, but a launching pad for my future, and I can't wait to see how far I and my fellow delegates will go.