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Washington Week has been truly the single most impactful and transformative week of my life. It was filled end-to-end with experiences that singularly would have been the highlight of my year, but back to back are unimaginable to a teen from a small Ohio town. It is incredibly difficult to condense the experience, from its impact to its highpoints, in just a couple pages. Before I left for D.C., I saw past delegates refer to USSYP as "life-changing." Looking back, I recognize the description was spot on. Washington Week prompted a sea change in my perspective, understanding, and aspirations.

There are not suitable words to describe the prestigious caliber of national leaders who addressed us. I was particularly honored by how they so willingly gave their time and full attention. When Justice Gorsuch spent over an hour taking questions from us, I was overcome with respect for him and the Supreme Court. I would have been deeply grateful had he just been there for ten minutes, but instead he indulged our stream of questions with no indication of his pressing schedule that surely awaited him. Another example of going beyond expectations was when Defense Secretary Mattis made an unscheduled appearance during our time in the Pentagon. I was absolutely awestruck, not only for everything Secretary Mattis has done in his service, but that he observed our session under no obligation to be there. Both of these leaders, along with the rest of our speakers, impressed upon me the importance of showing the people you serve that you care. It is a lesson I will never forget.

Our excellent Military Mentors were also a source of leadership lessons and insight. Many of the conversations I had with them will stick with me in the years to come. Captain Smith emphasizing how important it is to remember how policy affects actual people was particularly impactful, as it can be so easy to look at numbers when discussing policy and not see the people behind them. I am extremely grateful for our excellent Military Mentors.

My fellow delegates were one of the best parts of the program. I have never had the pleasure of being surrounded by such a kind, intelligent, stimulating, and informed group of peers. I remember the first day when I mentioned something I had read about, and the person I was talking to knew the exact article I was referring to. It was incredible! Where else could I hear a really interesting argument for agricultural tariffs and the next day discuss the negative effects of giving extremist individuals media coverage? Their thoughtful, hearty discourse was inspiring. It was so incredibly invigorating to be taking in so many ideas and different perspectives from across the country! Every single person had something interesting to contribute, be it an experience or idea. My fellow delegates have been the part that I have missed the most since Washington Week ended. Not only was it great to make new friends, but they have truly impacted me for the better.

Being around such an extraordinary group of people has affected me deeply. It has given me further motivation to do more. I seek to be informed more so than I did before. I've now applied to programs they've done, investigated organizations they are part of, and sought to model outreach projects they have undertaken. There are so many opportunities to serve and excel that I would have never known about had I not met my fellow delegates. Their passion has further fueled mine; their stratospheric dreams have lifted mine higher. Just meeting them alone would have profoundly changed me.

Seeing the inner workings of the Federal government at its highest levels has aligned my North Star. I have always wanted to serve, but how I want to serve is now aligned and my aspirations are heightened. Washington Week both deepened my understanding and also made the highest levels of government seem attainable. Not only do I want to work in D.C. to effect real, meaningful change, but I feel now that it is possible that some day I could. This shift in my worldview is abstract, yet palpable. I would not have my current focus without experiencing Washington Week, and that is something that I am very thankful for. Coming back to rural Ohio, I am forever changed. My dreams are more focused, yet my perspective is broadened. My circle of friends is now seven thousand miles in diameter, yet I feel closer to my fellow delegates than I have with just about any other group. I am immensely grateful for the Hearst Foundations, the U.S. Senate, our speakers, our Military Mentors, and my fellow delegates for making Washington Week such a profound, compelling, and formative experience.