

## **Kirsten Kraske, MT – 2019**

How does one even begin to put Washington Week into a two-page essay? This week was the best week of my entire life. Never in a million years did I think I was ever going to meet the President of the United States, the Chief Supreme Court Justice John Roberts, or the Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. We also had the privilege of meeting our U.S. Senators, as well as meeting the Secretary of the Senate, and various other Senators from the United States. While meeting all of these very accomplished leaders was truly amazing, I have to say the best part of this trip was the other delegates.

I applied for this scholarship not thinking I was going to get it. I received an interview and tried not to get my hopes up quite yet. I was told I would find out if I got this scholarship in the first week of December and by the middle of the week, my friend and I assumed we did not get it. However, I was wrong. On Thursday, December 6th, I received a big UPS packet with my name on it and opened it and saw the acceptance and I screamed for a good five minutes with my family. When I arrived at the Mayflower Hotel I was really nervous, but upon entering, I had nothing to worry about. There was good food waiting and that night at dinner, Mr. Cox explained to all of us not only the rules of the trip, but also the importance of the trip being a “No Nut Zone.”

I had never been to Washington, D.C., so this was the best way for me to go for my first time. Seeing Mount Vernon and the Potomac River was amazing. Just being able to actually see D.C. was such an experience that I had never had before. It was not until the third day in until I started journaling and once I did, the days seemed to go by so quickly. Thankfully I did start to write because I would have forgotten some key details. The first day I started journaling was the morning Ben Carson came to talk to us. I had always wondered why Mr. Carson went into politics especially when he could make twice the money working in the medical field. Someone else also had that question and he responded with “I don’t really want to be in politics, but I am because everything is so broken.”

My favorite speaker of the whole program was Senator Joni Ernst. She came and spoke to us in the ballroom of the Mayflower and I strive to model my life like hers. She grew up in a small town in Iowa, joined the ROTC, had a small business, and only then did she run for public office. I do not want to be in ROTC, but I think it is super important to get some experience in the private sector before going to the public sector. She has been an awesome senator for the United States and because of all her accomplishments, I strive to be like her.

Another amazing speaker that we heard from was The Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo. He took two questions in the most beautiful ballroom I have ever seen. The first question was “How does the U.S. plan to address the humanitarian crisis in China?” He responded with “To make sure that the U.S. is always clear about their values and that China has a right to treat their people how they wish and the U.S. cannot do much to change that.” Another question was asked regarding his military experience and business background and he said this was the most beneficial part of his job because he knew how to talk business with other leaders. He had owned two small businesses and this proved to help in his diplomacy talks. A quote that I gathered from Mr. Pompeo was “It takes about half a second to destroy your integrity and a lifetime to get it back.”

I also had the pleasure of listening to Martha Raddatz from ABC news. She was particularly interesting to listen to because she is from the news and President Trump has called many news organizations “fake news.” One of the delegates asked the question of “How do you respond with Trump calling ABC ‘fake news’?” Her response was one of much distaste. She makes a point to not make it a big deal on ABC news, however if anyone asks her about it when she is not on the clock, she will speak freely about it.

The day I was most excited for was to meet President Trump. I was really nervous, but also very excited because he is one of the most powerful people in the world. The entrance to enter the white house was very extensive and with 104 plus people, took about an hour and a half. After getting through security, we were allowed to look around the East Wing at old china patterns and libraries. We did this for about an hour before we were asked to start lining up on the risers. We were told it would be about ten minutes once we were all set, however it ended up being another thirty and we were all very close together. Once he turned the corner to walk down the red aisle, the whole room went silent until he looked at us all and said “Well?” We then began to clap. This gesture alone made him seem more human and oftentimes I think we all forget that leaders are human as well. I was not expecting him to shake hands with the delegates, however, he did shake some hands and mine was one of them. I will never forget what he told us next. It was “Have a nice life.” I had never had someone say that to me in a positive tone, but it set nicely. After meeting President Trump, we ate the fastest three course meal yet to make it to the symphony in time.

The saddest day of the trip was the last one, especially at night. However, the farewell banquet was also my favorite. There was a particular moment when Kate Carpenter from Oklahoma was giving a speech and she said “How many of you are considered “weird” or “try hards” in your school?” Everyone raised their hands. She then proceeded to say “USSYP is a place where we aren’t those words, USSYP is a place for kids like us to call home.” These words have stuck with me now for a month and I think they will stick with me the rest of my life. Most teenagers are not into politics or looking to make a difference in their community, but rather focusing on what they can do for themselves. The group of kids at Washington Week made me realize that I’m not “weird,” just that I have goals and I plan to reach those goals.

The majority of the delegates stayed up all night to spend some last minute time with one another before everyone went home. I was so tired when I got onto my first plane that I immediately fell asleep. Needless to say, when I got home, I came home with new hope for my generation. If the kids at USSYP will be running the country in the next fifteen years, then our country is in good hands. Thank you to the Hearst Foundations for a truly enlightening experience and the best week of my life.