

Aden Klein, TN – 2019

As I disembarked from the plane and walked across the tarmac at Reagan National Airport, the Washington Monument towered above the skyline, an unmistakable sign that I had arrived in Washington, D.C. Inside the airport, I met a group of my fellow delegates and several Military Mentors; after a blur of introductions, we boarded a bus to The Mayflower Hotel. Between conversations touching on politics, personal experiences, and dreams for the future, I stole glances out of the window as we passed through the heart of our nation's capital. There was an almost palpable sense of energy, inspiration, and anticipation among the delegates and throughout the city. Throughout the evening, as more and more delegates arrived, the energy only grew; as the program officially began, I glanced around the room and saw 103 incredible individuals, complete strangers just hours before, who would become close friends through the experiences and lessons we would share.

The first lesson that I learned throughout the course of Washington Week was the true intersectionality of all three branches of the government, the press, and the military. Throughout the week, my fellow delegates and I spoke with an incredible range of speakers, from Chief Justice of the Supreme Court John Roberts, Jr. to FEMA Associate Administrator Brian Kamoie to Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Paul Selva. This incredible diversity of perspectives allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of the democratic process from a variety of angles and approaches. We are always taught that America's government is a complex system of three branches, each with separate responsibilities; however, my experiences during Washington Week developed my understanding and appreciation of this system. The insights of leaders at all levels of the government helped me form a far more nuanced image of the process necessary to address the challenges facing the country, but it also encouraged me to see the work that goes on each day to keep the country running behind the scenes.

The second experience I took away from Washington Week was the exhilaration of discourse, exchange of ideas, and exposure to new perspectives. For the first time, I was truly able to embrace my passion for policy and politics and discuss my ideas with my fellow delegates. I developed my own opinions and learned from those of my newfound friends. Each discussion taught me new ways of looking at the most pressing issues facing the country and broadened my perspectives. These moments made my time in Washington truly special: I remember debating the economic future of the United States as we walked through the Newseum, discussing the extent of the 2nd Amendment in the National Archives Rotunda next to the U.S. Constitution, talking about policy with my roommate long after the day ended, and sitting around The Mayflower Hotel learning about the local and state issues that my fellow delegates cared about most. For a boy from a small town in the mountains, the opportunity to debate policy with friends and peers with entirely different experiences and backgrounds was irreplaceable and transformational.

Ultimately, Washington Week was truly unique because of the friends I made and the experiences we shared. Though we began the week as 104 strangers, we soon became close friends; experiencing Washington Week with my incredible fellow delegates made every experience more meaningful and the discussions that ensued taught me as much as the speakers themselves did. From dinner conversations to touring Washington to the dance floor in The Mayflower Hotel, I found new friends from all over the country.

Within my Military Mentor group especially, I found eight of the most amazing and supportive people I have ever known. Additionally, experiences like the diplomacy simulation at the United States Diplomacy Center brought us together, as we had to negotiate a solution to a diplomatic scenario within pressing time constraints. However, we succeeded, and the challenging discussions made us a stronger group. My fellow delegates, each with unique passions and talents, each dedicated to improving the nation through some form of public service, inspired me beyond words. As America faces new, unimaginable challenges in the coming years, I have confidence that my fellow delegates and I will rise to the challenge.

Finally, Washington Week would not be the same without our amazing Military Mentors, some of the most incredible people I have ever met. These individuals have each dedicated their lives to serving America, and their mentorship and insights added an essential element to the experience. During each meal, we sat with a Military Mentor, and those conversations exposed me to perspectives I had never considered and taught me more than I can convey. Our Military Mentors were always available to provide advice, encouragement, and support, and they helped me establish and define my life goals. I will be forever indebted to the Military Mentors who did so much for my fellow delegates and for me.

I would like to close this reflection by relaying a few of the most powerful messages we received from speakers during the course of the week. Principal Deputy Director of National Intelligence Susan Gordon, when discussing the fulfillment she found in her career, stated that she approached life with the perspective that a life that matters will always be enough. FEMA Associate Administrator and USSYP alumnus Brian Kamoie said that we all have two things to give away in life, love and labor, and that we should focus those and commit to serve, think big, and take bold action. Finally, Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Selva explained how he dealt with disagreements by sticking to the mantra "Speak the truth. Period." The words of wisdom of these incredible individuals, and so many others, have resonated with me since Washington Week and will continue to guide me throughout my life.

I am eternally grateful to the Hearst Foundations and the United States Senate Youth Program staff for making this truly life-changing experience possible. Thank you for all that you have done and continue to do!

Sincerely,
Aden Klein (TN 2019)