

## Hamilton Sprawls, SC - 2021

When I received the call from South Carolina Superintendent of Education Molly Spearman about my acceptance into the United States Senate Youth Program, I knew I was in for quite an experience. I was honestly nervous as I waited to join the first Zoom call of Washington Week and even more so meeting my Military Mentor Group, but my worry quickly gave way to excitement and courage as I introduced myself and started asking speakers questions.

I was honored to receive the opportunity to ask a question of Senate Historian Dr. Betty Koed, Senator James Lankford, and Deputy Secretary of Defense Dr. Kathleen Hicks, especially with the challenges of the virtual format. I particularly remember asking Senator Lankford whether he believed it was more important to be involved in the government as a U.S. senator or in the local church ministry, and he answered, "How about a little bit of both?" I believe Senator Lankford demonstrated this answer in his responses to the questions of other delegates, explaining how he lived out his faith in government without politicizing his rhetoric. Senator Lankford's calm and steady demeanor and use of texts and statistics to reinforce his responses provided an excellent example of engaging in respectful political discourse while standing firm in religious convictions, an example I aspire to follow as a young Christian living in divided times.

Although I did not get to ask her a question, CBS Evening News Managing Editor Ms. Norah O'Donnell gave us several concise but highly applicable points of advice. One of my favorites was that "We are not in the business of affirmation, but information." Ms. O'Donnell challenged young consumers of media (including myself and the other delegates) to consume carefully, encouraging each of us to read diverse newspapers because "Tweets aren't the extent of the news," and social media applications profit from polarized "political entertainment." Another keynote of hers I found interesting was that "Ninety percent of getting an answer is asking the right question" in an appropriate tone. Ms. O'Donnell emphasized that an accusatory tone must be absent when questioning an individual, advice similar to that of President Joe Biden when he stated, "It's okay to question a person's judgement, but never their motives." I believe this is a fundamental concept that should stand as a motto of sorts for the United States Senate Youth Program and for political discourse in general. Though some politicians may stand at opposite ends of the political spectrum, they most likely share the same ultimate goals, only differing in their approaches to accomplishing these goals.

This program introduced me to diverse individuals from all around the country (and even the world), and I did not always agree with what other delegates or speakers said. However, over the course of the program, I gradually learned not to grow distressed when others disagreed with me; instead, I started attempting to understand why they held certain ideals. This approach has changed the way I view political discourse and politics in general, softening my generally brusque mental dismissal of opposing ideas. This dramatic change in perspective would not have been possible without participating in the USSYP and learning from incredible speakers, mentors, and delegates. I will forever be grateful for the opportunities extended to me through this program and for the people involved in making it possible. I hope delegates in the future will be able to return to Washington, DC, but I will never forget the unique experience of the delegates of the pandemic.