

## Lena Ashooh, VT - 2021

I was looking into Leon Panetta's wise eyes, eyes that seemed to carry his years of civil service.

That is the interesting thing about Zoom meetings, being able to look directly into the eyes of people hundreds of miles away. It becomes easier to study people's faces on the computer screen, and in them, you can find the most marvelous of things: compassion, intelligence, burning passion, courage, and confusion.

As I intently studied the eyes of Leon Panetta, a man whom I had once believed to exist only in my government books, I found his words to carry a strikingly direct impact. "I honestly believe that we could be an American Renaissance in the 21st century," he said, "We could become a nation of Renaissance."

During our week in Washington, in the halls of one of the only administrations to devote its first weeks in office pushing for equality, the potential of a Renaissance was potent in the colloquy of our federal officials. And that same language of Renaissance was palpable in the bold and thoughtful voices of the Senate Youth.

The principle that President Biden uses to articulate the Renaissance proposed by Mr. Panetta is "Build Back Better." President Biden emphasizes transforming historically corrupt and unjust political systems rather than returning to the "normal" before the pandemic. Our speakers' visions for U.S. foreign relations made this principle of Renaissance strikingly evident. The global crisis presented by the pandemic revealed structural diseases across the world such as racist power, economic inequality, environmental degradation, and the fragility of democratic governments. As we heard from U.S. diplomats, heads of federal departments, and senators, their shared goal of collective international progress was so preeminent that it imprinted in my mind a generational spirit of optimism. White House National Climate Advisor, Ms. Gina McCarthy, explained the position of the U.S. as a "rich country who has benefitted from the pollution we have created." She told us that on April 22nd the United States would be meeting with world leaders to discuss investing \$100 billion into clean energy in developing countries and pressuring domestic and international banks to invest in clean energy development. Ms. McCarthy was blunt about our nation's obligation to spearhead the global movement towards sustainable development.

Ms. Jalina Porter, the Deputy Spokesperson of the U.S. Department of State, shared Ms. McCarthy's demand for the transformation of international relationships, relationships where, for example, "human rights are always at the forefront of the foreign policy." Ms. Porter spoke of the Biden Administration's commitment to rebuilding relationships with foreign allies and echoed Ms. McCarthy's sentiment that foreign policy is "not about the money, it's about the people and the environment."

The hands, eyes, and mouths of our nation's international representatives, the U.S. foreign service officers reflected on the direct impact of the "Build Back Better" model on their relationships abroad. Fiercely passionate about the community she works in, Ms. Manuela Hernandez is working to set up systems to protect indigenous rights. She acknowledged that "we have to recognize that our country is not perfect and our history is not perfect." Similarly, Ms. Katherine Ordonez noted shifts in the regard of

foreign service officers' values and thinking, which enabled them to be "well-positioned to advocate changes in our relation with the environment."

These were voices of political and social Renaissance.

As our political figures spoke of dismantling systems of corruption, inequality, and environmental degradation, I was moved by their own beliefs in the importance of developing interpersonal relationships and strong moral values. As Department Chair of Homeland Security Distinguished Chair of Leadership, Mr. Brian Kamoie impressed, the fundamental activity of civil servants who uphold American democracy is "bold and ethical action." Our keynote presenters' commitment to bettering the lives of their community members through bold and ethical action upheld their guiding principle of building a stronger and more just democracy. "Don't compromise yourself and your values," Ms. Jalina Porter had said, a counterpart to Ms. Norah O'Donnell's belief that "truth should be at the core of everything you do." Relationships with members of one's community founded on these resonate beliefs carry the power of representative democracy, a power that has been chipped-at and rattled. This rhetoric of bold and ethical action, upheld by the moral values of each individual, spearheads the hopeful Renaissance of anti-corruption that Mr. Panetta posited.

Throughout my Senate Youth journal, I scrawled quotes from my fellow youth delegates and my Military Mentor, Captain Boivin. I frequently flip back to make sure I have correctly tucked their words away in my memory. Words such as, "Don't disappoint who you are fundamentally," and "The answer to speech you don't like is not no speech, it's more speech," struck me as the words of leaders who will protect and transform U.S. systems of democracy and equality. Invigorated by our elected officials' actionable words, words that roll off the back of the Coronavirus, I find immense hope and strength in the Senate Youth delegates.

I am eternally grateful to the USSYP staff, The Hearst Foundations, our generous presenters, our Military Mentors, and the Senate Youth. In the midst of the pandemic, you have created an experience filled with a spirit of optimism that will impact all of the 104 delegates from across the country for the rest of our lives.

Together, we will be a nation of Renaissance.