

Matea Gordon, SD – 2022

During Washington Week we had a wonderful lineup of speakers such as NATO Deputy Assistant Secretary General for Public Diplomacy Carmen Romero, Associate Attorney General of the United States Vanita Gupta, General Mark A. Milley, U.S. Secretary of Transportation Pete Buttigieg and so many other influential people in our government. We also participated in virtual tours of Mount Vernon and inside the Supreme Court and well as did an interactive diplomacy simulation. By attending this event I have gained a better understanding of the work done in the government, leaders support for bipartisanship, and learned the importance of foreign relations especially during a time where our world is at war.

I was very eager to meet all 104 delegates from around the country who are all so passionate about government and making our world a more perfect union. I feel that my role in this event was to better educate myself from very well known, educated and experienced government officials so that I can help make a difference for the future. I enjoyed being able to ask questions and gain a better perspective on a variety of different current issues, such as the war in Ukraine, mental health, and education. I believe that this is an important part of being an effective citizen as our government is a democracy, and I therefore have a say and should take advantage of it. After attending this once in a lifetime opportunity, I have a greater appreciation for those helping to lead our country, a better understanding of how our government works, and have gained a hope for the future and bipartisanship.

The conference was held via Zoom due to Covid restrictions, but I still enjoyed how interactive and supportive the USSYP staff was which gave us an opportunity to learn and meet others. Before Washington Week was held, the other South Dakota delegate and I got to meet (virtually) with Senator Mike Rounds and John Thune and got to learn more about how they got involved with government at a young age as well as ask them questions about current issues we were interested in. Here are some of my favorite messages and quotes from speakers throughout the week. Senator Cory Gardner spoke on the importance of listening to others and although you may disagree, it is important to find middle ground to help bring people together.

Furthermore, a delegate asked a question regarding mental health services in schools and the new 988 number for the suicide hotline, and I found the response to be very excellent. It was stated, "the new 988 line will be wonderful for people to not have to memorize a 7-digit number, however we need to make sure we have enough responders for more calls because we cannot have a busy signal in these life and death situations." This spoke volumes to me since I am so passionate about mental health. This is a very valid concern we will have to overcome. I also really enjoyed listening to the speaker from NATO, especially during the struggles in the world right now and thought it was very important that she pointed out NATO will not close off airspace to Russia because then they would be entering the war, which was a very important point to make. Many of the speakers were USSYP alumni such as the former delegate from Hawaii who toured us around the White House. He showed us that no matter your age if you set your mind to it you can achieve your goals. All of the speakers highlighted the importance of getting involved young, taking internship opportunities, and realizing that our country is divided so we must find ways to come together with a common goal of making America great.

Perhaps my favorite activity of the week was the interactive diplomacy simulation which allowed me to meet more delegates and learn the importance of negotiation and foreign relations. Our challenge was to create a solution to the Suez Canal while making sure all countries involved could agree on a plan that supported all. While it may have taken a lot of debate, negotiation, and time with our countries, in the end we created a solution that was suitable for everyone involved.

In conclusion, this was a life changing experience that has made me a more informed citizen, interested in government and politics. I am meeting new amazing, academic, students from across the country that are just as invested in our futures as I am. This experience has taught me a lot about the importance of being an involved citizen helping make a difference in my community, my country and my world. As many speakers pointed out we are the future generation, so we must come together, listen to others, and while we may have our differences, that is what makes us so great because of the ideas, voices and teamwork we can have to create a more perfect union.