

## **Liam Reaser, VA – 2022**

It's only been one short month since Washington Week, and I already can't help but feel an overwhelming sense of nostalgia for truly one of the most extraordinary experiences of my life. And I really do mean extraordinary: the speakers, the staff, the delegates, even the gargantuan thousand-calorie white chocolate Capitol dome I was sent that I not-so-elegantly gobbled down in between speakers was extraordinarily well-crafted. I'm not sure my words alone can do this program justice – I can imagine a past me being skeptical that anything over Zoom could have a profound impact on anyone – but I truly do believe that the memories and friends I've made over the course of Washington Week have changed my life forever.

Most of each day, as you might expect, was spent with the incredible range of speakers that the Program brought in to talk with us. Among them were Senators, military officials, a Cabinet Secretary, and a Supreme Court Justice. The sheer magnitude of the opportunity to engage directly with people actively shaping world history began to set in for me as I asked a question, my hands shaking, to NATO Deputy Assistant Secretary General Carmen Romero about our evolving relationship with Georgia, Finland, and other possible future NATO members given the war that had broken out just weeks before. Additionally, beyond the incredible opportunity to ask our policymakers about their work, many of our speakers were very candid with us about the problems they saw in Washington that, they implied, our generation's work might solve. For instance, almost every speaker at the Program, irrespective of party and even what branch of government they worked in, lamented our hyperpolarized political culture. Only watching commentary from the news might seem to imply our leaders in Washington begrudgingly care about bipartisanship only when the cameras are rolling with the opportunity to gain good PR, but listening to Senator Collins convey her genuine sadness at the present lack of dinners between the families of Senators (often from different parties), a tradition she was once accustomed to at the beginning of her time in the Senate, clearly calls that narrative into question. After hearing about the loss of personal relationships between politicians across the aisle from at least a half dozen different officials, I believe that for nearly every one of our guests to place such emphasis on the one particular issue of polarization, clearly we as a nation are not placing enough urgency on collaboration and openness to those that might disagree with us. After all, politicians are not just elected officials, they're personal experts on politics itself, and candid analysis into that more personal side of politics was one of the most fascinating and unique aspects of the conversations we had with those officials throughout Washington Week.

Finally, and in my view most importantly, the delegates and distinguished guests of our wonderful program made Washington Week's impact on my life last well past a single week. Quite frankly, I still find it surreal that I get to talk to 103 amazing young people, doing amazing things like testifying before Congress and their state legislatures or leading thousands of others in their activism and nonprofit work, almost every day in just an ordinary group chat. I've made friends for life, and in addition to the openness and friendliness of quite literally every single delegate I met, that's also in large part because of our staff and Military Mentors. From my Mentor, Major Pellegrine, to the infamous USSYP Tech Admin 2, you all crafted an unforgettable experience that will shape my life for years (likely decades) to come. I cannot thank you enough.