

Zein Saleh, NE – 2022

An initial glance at our democratic governance may appear poorly representative of our nation as a whole. This is particularly true among young voices who make up only a minority of our elected officials. Such representation (or lack thereof) and low voter turnout rates in local and state elections among youth can create conclusions about young people's apathy towards civic and political engagement. My experience as a United States Senate Youth Program delegate strongly indicates this is far from reality.

As early as December, months before Washington Week, intellectual conversations with my co-delegate and other delegates through online discussions highlighted how passionate young voices are about government. I had conversations with unprecedented vitality, impressed by the number of well-reasoned but diverse beliefs the other delegates had on a wide range of political issues – stemming from the filibuster, to U.S. involvement in other nations, to the Supreme Court, regardless of our geographical distances and occasionally differing ideologies – we remained civil, forging mutual respect for each other through a passion for leadership and service.

These discussions only grew in fervency during Washington Week, both in delegate hang-out sessions and military mentor groups. We reflected on big and small takeaways from our engagement sessions such as important changes in rhetoric made by the Mount Vernon tour guides to an ongoing hope for bipartisanship in the American political system in an increasingly divisive climate. My military mentor group offered me an unparalleled opportunity - a concentrated environment for high-level intellectual stimulating discussions in a professional setting. My group not only enabled me to interact with future student leaders but also some of the top young military leaders in the country. In these groups, I was also exposed to a variety of future enrichment possibilities including internships throughout the three branches of government and internationally through opportunities like the Exchange Program sponsored by the U.S. Department of State.

By far, my favorite moment of the week was the Suez Canal diplomacy session where 3 hours of negotiation flew by in what felt like 15 minutes. Although I was nervous going into the simulation, the coordination and research materials provided beforehand made for an engaging, organized, and fun experience. The scenario selected was significant and I'm grateful to have simulated a negotiation/diplomatic solution to a crisis that shifted the paradigm of the geopolitical order. This further helped instill my hope for the future of the international climate -- one built on the foundation of the next generation's cooperation and ambassadorship. The diplomacy center's simulations were a piece of Washington Week I especially looked forward to when I applied through the possibility of an in-person program. Therefore, I am especially proud I was in the group of delegates who conducted the simulation virtually for the first time.

Moreover, many of the speakers' lessons particularly resonated with me. Judge Robert Henry's remarks stressed the importance of unity in the face of emerging threats to our democracy including white supremacy and insurgency, inspiring a new form of hope in our generation to bring us back to what our founding fathers intended for America. I also had the privilege of speaking with Federal Communications Commission Chairwoman Jessica Rosenworcel who gave me direct insight on the feasibility of a (hypothetical) reinstated Fairness Doctrine, a policy that has sparked recent discussion as regulation directly influencing our current media climate. Furthermore, most informationally enlightening for me was the engagement with Senate

Historian Betty Koed whose remarks coined examples such as the recently passed Anti-Lynching Bill in highlighting 3 key conclusions:

- 1) Individuals matter in creating a more perfect union.
- 2) Progress is often incremental and slow, and
- 3) Initial failure doesn't mean it's the end of the story.

In many ways, Dr. Koed's takeaways are emblematic of a re-inspired hope in our future, fueled by our nation's history.