

Tucker Leck, KS – 2024

When I arrived at the Mayflower Hotel, it was an evening I had never experienced before. As the second class to return in-person following the COVID-19 pandemic, the long and hectic afternoon of plane rides and travel never halted or limited our energy: we were excited, ambitious, and for me, especially, honored. As a junior from the ruralist sections of Midwestern America, it is not every day that a middle-class Kansas farm boy, who raises pumpkins, show-pigs, and honeybees has the fortune of experiencing the foundation of our republic's governmental institutions. But as a proud agriculturalist, patriotic American, and faith-filled farm boy, this experience cultivated an opportunity of a lifetime and a week-long engagement with 105 fellow delegates and colleagues that has allowed me to create lifelong friendships, courageously celebrate our nation's democratic achievements, while confidently conversing in captivating conversations about our country's biggest challenges.

Ultimately, it was in my first official conversation with a group of seven state representatives in a small hotel conference room, specifically selected for week-long group discussions, team bonding, and character building, where for the first time, I met our Military Mentor, Captain Daniel McGurkin. A United States Marine, an intelligence operations leader, and most importantly, a heroic White House intelligence briefer, Captain McGurkin is the proudest American I have ever met. In that evening's conversation, he opened with a story I will never forget.

Second Lieutenant Terrence Collinson Graves, in the Republic of Vietnam, on February 16th of 1948, while on a long-range reconnaissance mission with an eight-man patrol, observed an approaching enemy. Instantly, Lieutenant Graves reacted, deploying his men, and directing their fire on the opposing target. While initially his group of eight were able to eliminate the enemy troops, the unit would soon after come under heavy fire, leaving three Marines and Lieutenant Graves injured.

However, he refused medical attention and adjusted the airstrikes and artillery fire of his team. Thereafter, he led his team to a new landing site, where he skillfully guided the incoming aircraft and boarded his men while he was still exposed to hostile fire. He soon realized that one of his troops had not embarked on the aircraft and he immediately decided to remain with the injured soldier while directing the aircraft to leave. Graves was able to utilize supporting arms until a second helicopter arrived, but after the volume of enemy fire intensified, it was shortly after liftoff that the helicopter crashed, killing all aboard. However, 2nd Lieutenant Graves' courage, fighting spirit, and leadership impacted the conclusion of The United States Marine Corps, when during his Medal of Honor ceremony, The U.S. Marines presented Lieutenant Graves as a hero who "gallantly gave his life for his country."

In the ultimate reflection of Lieutenant Graves' heroism, leadership, and bravery, Captain McGurkin asked us to remember this: as leaders, we must understand that in our future years of public service, our decisions and civic engagement is not about us, and that we should always choose to showcase our best character and integrity in every mission to build our eulogy rather than our resumé.

Later, with this same spirit and sense of reflection, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Charles Brown Jr., led his Pentagon presentation on Friday with a forward-thinking, uplifting message. “It doesn’t matter if the glass is half full or empty, it’s about how you fill it.” This resonated with me then and it does especially with me now. As I reflect on my experience, I cannot help but mention the present fear I had before traveling to Washington, D.C. I was unsure if my experiences, specifically those regarding farming and agriculture, had prepared me for this opportunity. However, I knew in my heart that I would share commonalities with other attendees: I love this country, I hope to engage in public service for the betterment of our nation, and I value and respect meaningful conversations, even if that means disagreement or contention. But this togetherness was transcended as General Brown mentioned this analogy with what our glasses were filled with, and it allowed me to reflect that for me, my glass is filled with a middle-class background with a passion for agriculture and a burning desire to utilize the toil of farmers and ranchers in America to export our democratic values around the world. Whether it be the tours of the Department of State, the Pentagon, or even the White House, in the end, I was able to more clearly understand that we can utilize the products of America’s farmland to promote the ideals of peace across the globe. With that impactful reflection led by the inspiration of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, I not only felt respected and valued at the USSYP, but I also felt that when I listened and observed this “filled cup” of other delegates, it ultimately helped us find common ground in a divided political age with so much polarization.

Personally, my favorite speakers were Mr. Brian Kamoie, a former member of the White House Security Council, Justice Elena Kagan with the United States Supreme Court, and Senator John Barrasso, the Chairman of the Senate Republican Conference. Uniquely, as I reflect today on each of these three speakers, they each represent a different branch of our nation’s government with contrasting views, roles, authorities, and powers. But most remarkably to me, as I glance at the reflections recorded in my journal, I write that at the end of each of the speaker’s presentation, my conclusion is the same. NSC Member Kamoie, Justice Kagan, and Senator Barrasso each are examples of what America stands for: hard work, patriotism, and discipline. Those values, each represented in their addresses, are what I admired most about them.

Captain McGurkin ended our group’s reflection on the final day by expressing a personal sentiment privately with each member of his military mentorship team. On a small card, he wrote to me in closing that in every moment of adversity or hardship, I should ask myself, “did I do all that I could?” I firmly believe today and for the rest of my life that because of the United States Senate Youth Program, I can positively solve each situation and do “all that I can” because the USSYP has taught me how to work with others in moments of discord, express the values of our republic in every moment, and “gallantly” serve our nation by remembering that it isn’t about me, but it is about this country, just as Lieutenant Graves expressed and showcased in the final moments of his life.

I want to express my deepest gratitude and appreciation to The Hearst Foundations, Dr. Randy Watson, The Kansas Board of Education, my principal, Mr. Eric Swanson, USD 461 Superintendent, Mrs. Juanita Erickson, and most importantly, my family and God for gifting me with this once-in-a-lifetime experience that has and will forever transform my life.