

Joshua Blake, LA – 2024

104 delegates. The best and brightest our nation has to offer. The ultimate triumph for the delegates of the United States Senate Youth Program was that, once they had reached Washington Week, their efforts had finally paid off. Washington Week was an extraordinary experience not only because of the opportunities for meeting amazing people and exploring incredible workings of government, but it encouraged a spirit of collaboration that encouraged the exact opposite of the realpolitik typically associated with our nation's government. What, then, in a week of such amazing experiences, could one truly consider "the highlights?"

To begin, one of the most beautiful things about Washington Week was how well it demonstrated that even the most powerful people in the world were just that: people. The first perfect example of this was Secretary of Transportation Pete Buttigieg, an USSYP alumni who was the first to show us, no matter how high above their station these people had risen, they remained real individuals with personalities and characters able to be related to. Whether it was being shown the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff's stock photo filled powerpoint, or being regaled with tales of the 1970s Senate by President Biden, every interaction in Washington Week was able to shed insight into the personal journeys of those present, speakers and delegates alike.

One of the experiences which, for me, was most impactful, was the visit to the State Department, where we were truly able to relate ourselves to those working to govern our nation. The intersection between government jobs and "normal" careers is often muddled, and it is difficult to find the entry point for citizens bringing their interests and passions to government work. The State Department, however, brought clarity to such a notion. I was seated at a table with members of the Bureau of Eurasian Affairs, and there I met Elmira Togliatti, a former Olympian who rowed for Bulgaria in 1988 and 1992. Mrs. Togliatti and some of her colleagues were able to detail to me how they worked in a field called sports diplomacy, where they combined their knowledge and experience in the athletic world with the international relations of the diplomacy world. Not only was sports diplomacy something I had no idea existed, but it expanded my horizons to comprehend how any person could have a place in government pursuing something they truly enjoy while serving the nation.

Washington Week was full of too many experiences to ever chronicle in full, but each and every day and night of the program made impacts on me which I will carry for the rest of my life. Meeting inspiring speakers, leaders, and personalities in the political world was so moving to me that it solidified my desire to work in the public sector after law school. Truly, the connections made by USSYP, whether through other delegates or people I ran into during the program, will be of utmost importance and value as I navigate the coming years of my young adult life. I have so many people to thank, people from inside the program and out, and I am forever grateful for being able to have a firsthand look into every way our government is able to find a place for its people.