

Andrew Puthumana, MO – 2024

“Be where you are.”

It's certainly hard advice to follow during a week so extraordinary like Washington Week where every single moment feels life-changing. Nevertheless, these words were among the very first I heard from my Military Mentor after landing in Washington, D.C., and, more than a month removed from the U.S. Senate Youth Program, I can firmly say that living in the moment that week has affected me to my core.

Yes, walking into the Mayflower Hotel and seeing the actual people behind the Instagram profiles I had known for months felt surreal. Yes, after hearing from political leaders larger than life like Elena Kagan, Pete Buttigieg, or Antony Blinken sometimes I questioned if it was all real. Of course entering the White House to watch the State of the Union or seeing an extremely energized President Joe Biden walk into the East Wing at the stroke of midnight felt movie-like. However, despite all of this, the moments I find appreciating the most after Washington Week are the ordinary ones that emphasize the humanity of public service.

Instead of remembering specific policy attitudes or a speaker's stance on polarization, it was the personal stories our speakers that stay ingrained in my memory: Secretary Buttigieg buying a suit for USSYP, Justice Kagan going bird shooting with Justice Scalia, Brian Kamoie proudly holding up his USSYP name badge, General C. Q. Brown recounting how his approach has never changed despite rising in the ranks. Every single speaker throughout the week emphasized their own humanity, urging us as future leaders to never hold our public servants above ourselves on a pedestal but rather to see them as reflections of the change we wish to embody each and every day. To me, as someone on the fence about following public service as a vocation, seeing the genuineness, empathy, and character of our speakers is what solidified my stance that regardless of whatever I do in the future, it'll be done for the good of someone else.

“Being where you are”, though, also includes remembering one's roots, a theme underscored by each of our speakers as well. With few people knowing what Missouri is known for at the beginning of the week, I'm proud to have acted as the first impression of my home state for so many people and am incredibly honored to have shared my story with my fellow delegates. It felt like I came full circle when I was given the opportunity to introduce Representative Emanuel Cleaver II (my own Representative from Kansas City) where I could share a piece of my hometown pride while still fitting into the larger framework of Washington Week. To anyone interested in USSYP from Missouri, I urge you to apply and please reach out! The world deserves to hear your story and how your roots have impacted you so far also.

Still, I can't speak about the beauty of the humanity of the U.S. Senate Youth Program without my fellow delegates! Whether it was every mealtime food flick, staying up late to dance to *Cotton Eye Joe*, flip water bottles, or even the simple conversations, I am so thankful for my new group of friends across the nation. Although, we can't talk about delegates without including the true distinguished guests of USSYP: our very own Military Mentors! Legitimately, if

I talked about each one of their stories, I could fill up ten pages. Ultimately, their leadership, kindness (especially their senses of humor!), and authenticity makes me look up to each of them as role models, and without them, USSYP would not have had nearly the impact on me that it did. To Lt. Clay Shepherd, I hope you know that any time anyone mentions the Navy, I obnoxiously start telling them about the Nuclear Navy, Hyman G. Rickover's principles, and my dear friend and mentor in the corps who taught me so much in so little time. One of the most beautiful things in life is having something that hurts to say goodbye to, and if the last night was any indication, I miss you all so, so dearly.

To conclude, this one magical and transformative week has changed me beyond belief. I truly believe that the program's ability to help one discover new friends, new experiences, and a newfound direction in life in the span of a single week makes it unlike any in the world, and I left the week full of hopes and dreams about my place in the future leadership of our great country. Thank you to the Hearst Foundations, and for all future delegates and public servants of our country, always remember:

"Be where you are."