

William Drake, NC – 2024

How to describe the indescribable? Do justice to the extraordinary? This is the problem that confronts me as I reflect on Washington Week, primarily for the benefit of America's *future* future leaders who have yet to apply to USSYP. As a sophomore, it was these essays that persuaded me to take the plunge in the fall, and after I was selected, I reread them weekly for glimpses of what was in store for me during Washington Week. I certainly hope that my reflection, just a shard in our class's mosaic of lifelong memories and friendships, might have that same effect for a curious delegate-to-be in the coming years.

American public discourse is increasingly prone to hyperbole, which is why I hesitate to use that oft-overused buzzword—life-changing—to describe USSYP. Yet there is simply no other way to capture the gravity of the experience from which I was so deeply fortunate to benefit last March. Let me put this in no uncertain terms, especially to prospective delegates: Washington Week will change your life. Personally, I left the Mayflower Hotel a more tolerant, trusting, patriotic, altruistic, and grateful student, son, friend, leader, and American than when I descended, wide-eyed, through the fog to Reagan Airport a week earlier. I departed with a friend in every state; a mentor in every branch of the military; membership in a vibrant national alumni network; and a set of lifelong memories, words of wisdom scrawled in my diary, and a thousand photographs that I will cherish for the rest of my life.

My observations are best summed up in four broad categories: kindness, service, humanity, and perspective. *Every single individual* with whom I interacted in this program—from the servers at the Mayflower, to our security staffers and bus drivers, to tour guides and legislative aides, to Senators, to Cabinet officials, to President Biden himself—embodied all of these subthemes with the utmost grace.

The kindnesses began with the promise of a \$10,000 scholarship—but for USSYP, this is just the tip of the iceberg. Perhaps the greatest kindness I have ever been shown was on the part of USSYP alumni, working in the West Wing, who made our State of the Union watch party and audience with the President and Dr. Biden possible simply because they wanted us to have a truly once-in-a-lifetime experience. Kindness was embodied in the endless stream of public servants who spoke candidly with us, from the Secretary of the Senate to the Secretary of State. It was in Kuba, co-photographer extraordinaire, learning all of our names and states before we arrived. Most importantly, it was in my fellow delegates—laughing, dancing, talking, cheering, hugging, singing. It was in the embrace of friends and mentors as I fought back tears when the emotional weight of what we'd experienced that day was overwhelming. It was in the tiny compassions and warm smiles, the months of advance planning and the abundant generosity of the Hearst Foundations, and the tirelessness and good humor of our program staff. In a world on fire, sheer goodness still abounds; indeed, it causes me to choke up as I write this. Let it be known: there is hope for America.

At USSYP, I was surrounded by leaders. Every delegate is a school board representative, a campaign manager, a nonprofit CEO, a civics educator—and some of them do all of those things at once. Yet these accomplishments are dwarfed by those of the Military Mentors who have dedicated their lives to our country. It is impossible to interact with these remarkable officers and not be overwhelmed by their sacrifice. Some leaders, though, have given and overcome even more—from Rep. Cleaver's journey from public housing to the chairmanship of the Congressional Black Caucus, to General Brown's methodical four-decade ascent to the chairmanship of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Most movingly, we had the opportunity at Arlington Cemetery to honor those who have made the ultimate

sacrifice for our country. Chills will forever run down my spine when I see the inscription on the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier: "Here rests in honored glory an American soldier known but to God." The access USSYP affords to Americans who have dedicated their selves and souls to bettering our country is truly awe-inspiring.

Even civil servants, however, are only human. Chairman Brown has an unhealthy obsession with Patrick Mahomes and the NFL, and Senator Cassidy ran for office because, after 25 years as a gastrointestinal physician, he'd had enough colonoscopies for a lifetime. Even President Biden regaled us with the story of Delaware Democrats interrupting a late-night stay at a Motel 6 in 1971 to encourage him to run for the Senate. Our speakers' more raw displays of emotion were moving, too. Secretary Buttigieg almost choked up when a delegate asked him a heartfelt question about the importance of being a role model for LGBTQIA+ youth. Parliamentarian McDonough urged us not to forget January 6. The lead DOJ prosecutor in Ahmaud Arbery's trial articulated his front-row seat to history. Behind the media smokescreen and cable news dramaturgy, it is very clear that our public servants are beautifully, imperfectly, wonderfully *human*.

Really, USSYP could only happen in America, because this is the *only country in the world* with the melange of perspectives and backgrounds, geographies and genealogies, that is necessary to build such a diverse class of 104 high schoolers year upon year. From the plains of Nebraska to the skyscrapers of the Big Apple, from libertarians to socialists, with accents characterized by everything from a Southern drawl to the rounded midwestern O, my USSYP delegate class was a magnificent blend of individuality. Many delegates say this, but it is true that the conversations with peers from across the political spectrum that I had during Washington Week, on topics ranging from domestic education policy to America's involvement in foreign conflicts, were informative and thought-provoking. And needless to say, sitting in the East Room with a friend from every state in the union watching President Biden deliver the State of the Union provided a once-in-a-lifetime perspective of its own.

In closing, I need to express my eternal gratitude to the Hearst Foundations, Rayne Guilford, Lynn DeSmet, J.B. "Delegates and Distinguished Guests" Bissell, Kuba and Erin Mosur, Nurse Rose Menendez, our security staff, bus drivers, servers, travel agent, and the Washington Week volunteers. To our Military Mentors, you will inspire me for the rest of my life. Thank you for your service to our country. To our speakers—especially President and Dr. Biden, Secretary Blinken, Justice Kagan, General Brown, Secretary Buttigieg, Ms. Judy Woodruff, Press Secretary Jean-Pierre, and Senators Tillis and Budd—thank you for carving out time to speak with us. Those memories will never fade. And most of all, thank you, USSYP delegates, Class of 2024. Mr. Brian Kamoie quoted Mary Oliver to us on Wednesday morning: "Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?" If Washington Week proved anything to me, it's that we will spend our lives building a better world together.