

Hannah Tang, NE – 2024

I had been anxiously awaiting Washington Week since December of 2023. I imagined bonding with my fellow delegates, dining alongside historical documents, and indulging in the infamous white chocolate Capitol domes. Yet, the eight days I spent in our nation's capital surpassed all of my expectations.

As an aspiring dermatologist, I feared that I would be out of place in the political sphere. The clinic and the chamber seemed to never converge; a white coat in a sea of white dress shirts felt like a fashion faux pas. However, Washington Week opened my eyes to the opportunities between these realms. Two of our speakers, Senator Bill Cassidy (R-LA) and Senator John Barrasso (R-WY), both had careers practicing medicine prior to running for political office. Their multidisciplinary experiences simultaneously inspired me to chase my calling as a physician and galvanized me to work as a public servant. No matter our title, we all have a civic duty to serve the people around us.

These discussions were also humanizing. From conversing with Senator Cassidy in the Hart Senate Building elevator to watching delegates trade friendship bracelets with Secretary of Transportation Pete Buttigieg, I realized that we had much more in common with one another. I am so thankful for these interactions because they shifted my perspective: recognizing officials as not just changemakers, but fellow humans.

I first heard about political polarization in 2020. Since then, I have dug into why it exists and more importantly, how we remedy it. One of my fondest memories in Washington was hearing Associate Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court Elena Kagan speak about healing division. Despite her contrasting opinions with former Justice Antonin Scalia, they relished in hunting ducks together. This spoke to me. In a world pervaded by labels and antagonizing tendencies, there still is hope in finding community and commonality— even at the highest levels of governance.

The historical buildings I witnessed almost had their own voices. Being 5'3", I was in awe of the 44-foot-high ceilings in the Supreme Court. Yet, I was more moved that I was sitting in the room where landmark rulings were made. As I took in the ornate pillars, rich red curtains, and elaborately designed ceilings, I recognized these objects also heard the historical cases I learned about in government class: *Marbury v. Madison*, *Brown v. Board of Education*, *Loving v. Virginia*. I am eager to see the changes that my generation will make in this very court.

I also had the privilege of visiting the Department of State. There, we dined in the Franklin Room, listened to Secretary of State Antony Blinken's remarks, and devoured blackberry tarts (the most delicious dessert all week). As we walked through the halls, I admired the Department of State's array of paintings and pottery. Each artifact is a physical embodiment of Americans connecting with people all across the globe.

I expected to see stagnant scrolls, but I left feeling the impact of kindness seeping into everyday interactions. This experience would not be possible without my Military Mentors and my fellow delegates; they demonstrated the highest standards of servant leadership. From late-night conversations in the ballroom to Coach One's Country Roads rehearsals, I found myself inspired by their talents, unique personalities, and authenticity.

As we enter the next step of our lives, I look forward to seeing our paths cross again. I have no doubt that America's future is in capable and compassionate hands. I would like to thank the United States Senate Youth Program directors and staff for their efforts, the Hearst Foundations for their generosity, the Military Mentors for their service, and my community for their support. I am beyond grateful and honored to have experienced the 62nd United States Senate Youth Program.

Best regards,
Hannah Tang