

Adilee Elam, ID – 2025

Washington Week was an extraordinary experience that I can only attempt to capture with words. The connections and experiences gained from USSYP have left a lasting impression that continues to resonate, even in the month since leaving Washington, D.C. When I first applied for the program, I could not have anticipated the paradigm-shifting, endlessly motivating, and truly indescribable impact it would have on my fellow delegates and me.

Not only did I leave the Mayflower Hotel a different person, but I also left with lifelong friends and mentors from every state, various branches of the military, and diverse backgrounds. Together, we learned, laughed, and created memories that will endure for years to come. From our talented and engaging photographer duo to the dedicated hotel staff and program security, every individual involved in organizing Washington Week contributed to an unparalleled experience that deepened my understanding of leadership and diplomacy, while also expanding my appreciation for the diverse perspectives of our nation's future leaders. Meeting delegates from different states and engaging in political discourse—along with other meaningful conversations about virtually everything under the sun—instilled in me renewed optimism for the future of our nation and further fueled my desire to make a lasting impact.

Washington Week was not only a week of outward learning and interaction, but also a time for introspection and personal growth. Through our various speakers and my own reflections, I came to realize that everyone follows a unique path to excellence, shaped by their passions, values, and abilities. I learned that the best way to succeed, the best way to reach true fulfillment, is not through a prescribed path, but through doing what you love. It's not about fulfilling the expectations of family and peers, but rather pursuing what you know is best for you, with dedication and authenticity. As one of seemingly few pre-med-bound delegates, I did not feel the need to fit in with the many political science and pre-law majors; instead, I felt welcomed in my different ambitions. Everyone recognized our shared goal of making a positive impact on our nation and world, yet respected the diverse paths through which we could achieve that goal.

Perhaps my favorite takeaway from the week—one that will remain with me for a lifetime—was the deep connections formed during formal meals, busy schedules, and sleepless nights. I developed meaningful friendships with my peers from the moment I arrived at baggage claim to the final coach ride in my last few hours in D.C. While there were bound to be differences of opinion, political discourse was encouraged; we exchanged ideas while remaining open-minded, yet steadfast in our core beliefs. Each delegate recognized how diversity—both of background and opinion—drives positive change. Yet Washington Week was not only about policy discussions. I will always cherish the small moments that truly defined the week: my vegan friend introducing me to tofu for the first time, the Military Mentors debating who would win the Hunger Games, and JB's iconic introduction: "delegates and distinguished guests," to name a few. Looking back through photos and journal entries, I am reminded of the memorable meal with some of my favorite Military Mentors at the Department of State, my proud 0.5 collection of delegates and staff, and the bittersweet farewell night, filled with picture-taking, dancing, and not "goodbyes," but "see you later." Drawing from previous leadership experiences, I consciously made an effort to live in the moment throughout Washington Week, which allowed me to form lifelong friendships with many delegates. Never before have I met such open, kind, intelligent, and passionate individuals, and I intend to keep in touch with each of them.

As I move forward in my academic and professional journey through this "wild and precious life," I am determined to carry with me the invaluable lessons gained from Washington Week. The wisdom I acquired, the relationships I built, and the inspiration I received have further strengthened my foundation for future endeavors. With great ambition also comes great challenges, but I feel better equipped than ever to face those challenges with confidence, empathy, and a steadfast commitment to public service and the welfare of our nation. Washington Week has not only reshaped my understanding of leadership—it has reshaped my life.