

Sophia Hsu, KS - 2025

"You can't fight someone in the same way when you know their heart."

This remark from Bill Doherty resonated deeply in the room as we were all left to grapple with the country's current political polarity. I had been joined by 103 other delegates from every state, DC, and DoDEA in hearing this address. We all had one goal in mind: to unite the country once again.

For 63 years, the Senate program has persevered through the best and worst parts of our history. Created in the wake of McCarthyism, the program has overseen a plethora of historical events in real-time: JFK's assassination, the first man on the moon, 9/11, the Covid-19 pandemic, and most recently, the age of extreme political polarity, perhaps enough to trump that of the 1950s (no pun intended). Keep in mind, none of us knew what the government would even *look like* when we applied in the early fall prior to the election. But one thing would ring true then and now: we have to figure out this mess together.

To be a delegate in this program is an honor because you are in the footsteps of giants. You will quickly learn how many alumni in this program have gone on to be prolific politicians, historians, activists, and protectors of the country. By no means will the majority of us go on to be Senators. In fact, the program teaches you that public service, regardless of the way it manifests, whether it be as the Librarian of Congress, Senate Sergeant at Arms, or the President, is a selfless act of service to the country and the people that live within it. Many times, we were told that the future president was sitting in the room with us. After meeting all 103 other delegates, I am certain that this statement is true.

To be in DC during 2025 during all of this political volatility was eye-opening. The new administration had just gotten comfortable, and in real-time, as we were traveling from place to place, the news was actively reporting on the most recent cuts, sweeping policy decisions, and court rulings in DC. Over everything, however, I was taken aback by a stunning observation; the other side is just like me.

It all came in a flash, really. Talk of reaching across the aisle was a vague concept that more often than not was an unrealistic dream, especially coming from Kansas. But when I saw Republican Senator Thom Tillis actively condemn the Trump Administration for its actions against Ukraine, I was left to reevaluate my opinion that had so steadfastly opposed the other side. It made me reflect back to that first night, when Doherty evaluated how we can overcome partisan divide. I mean, this is like my life goal. I had literally written my USSYP application about wanting to conquer gridlock partisanship, and here Doherty comes laying this out exactly for us. In a time so significant as now, I realize how important it is to find common ground. But to do this, we have to listen to the other side (yes, even if you really really don't like them, I promise it's worth a shot).

USSYP, you have changed my life. I commend anyone who applies to this incredible program and believe it will change your life as well. To leave you with some advice, I highly encourage you to evaluate how your bias affects your views. Right now, it's extremely easy to alienate the other side, to the point where they don't seem like people anymore. But if you've done debate before, which you probably have, think about it in this context. You need to know both sides. If you tried to go into every debate only believing in advocating for the topic and called everyone who argued against it stupid, then chances are you would lose at least 50% of your rounds because the side you debate on is determined by a coin flip. There is not an objective right or wrong, but there are holes on both sides that you will know when you have come to debate on both. So often, in real life we forget that there is often not a "right" or "wrong" side. I'm not saying you have to agree with the other side at all, but in Braver Angel's Bill Doherty's words, know why you disagree with them, and figure out where that common ground is. If Amy Klobuchar, Jeanne Shaheen, and Thom Tillis have taught me anything as the most bipartisan Senators, when we know the other side's heart, we have to fight differently, and most importantly, we have to go TOGETHER.