

Peter Jefferson, KY – 2025

Over a single week in Washington, D.C., at the United States Senate Youth Program, I had a once-in-a-lifetime experience. However, the magic of Senate Youth is not the time frame itself. It is the minute-by-minute experience, each imparting a different lesson, that I will carry with me for the rest of my life. Here are my 9,360 minutes of Senate Youth.

Minute 1. Touching down in Washington, D.C., still fighting off the drowsiness from my flight. The student delegates were some of the most interesting, kind, and insightful people I have ever met. At the airport, I spotted three other slightly overpacked, badge-wearing teenagers who I knew must be other delegates. Within minutes, we were talking and laughing like old friends, warming up to each other instantly in the bright sunlight of Washington Reagan Airport.

Minute 1,730. Sitting down for dinner to officially meet my Military Mentor group. Our experience in Washington was guided, in part, by our Military Mentors and, for me, by Captain Bean. Our group of 6, nicknamed the Beanstalks, became a close-knit family bonded together by the sheer volume of shared experiences over the thousands of minutes we spent together. The Military Mentors provided a unique perspective on the armed forces, an honest and invigorating group of people whom I was honored to have met.

Minute 3,890. Watching Secretary of State Marco Rubio step on stage before a lavish lunch at the State Department. As a kid from Kentucky, the trappings of international diplomacy seem impossibly far from my hometown of Lexington. However, Secretary Rubio and the speakers at the State Department presented a diverse range of perspectives on public service and diplomacy, broadening my understanding of the various ways our government defines and serves national interests.

Minute 4,250. Stepping into the United States Institute for Peace. We had a late dinner and heard from two incredible public servants, Ambassador George Moose and Deputy Ambassador Ana Luisa Fajer. As I watched planes descend past over a view of DC every 2.5 minutes, I was humbled by the dedication and experience on display. One of the best aspects of the Senate Youth program was the ability for every person to see themselves reflected in it, to hold a mirror up to the program and see their own reflection somewhere within. For me, Ambassador Moose was the vision of what I wish to be, a public servant who has devoted their life to the pursuit of peace.

Minute 6,050. Sitting with friends, finally out of my suit, chatting about the size of the highways in our state. While we had numerous 30-minute bus rides to talk, this was one of the few moments when all the delegates got to learn about each other and form the connections that are the basis for genuine cooperation and problem-solving. This program is the future of public service, as we engage with each other in an intense shared experience, albeit for only a few thousand minutes.

Minute 7560. Pausing to applaud Senator Thom Tillis as he condemned Putin's war in Ukraine. Washington Week 2025 took place during one of the most tumultuous periods in our nation's history, particularly in Washington, D.C. However, throughout the week, I saw the human side behind both the politicians I agreed with and those I disagreed with. A 30-minute question-and-answer session will never solve polarization, but Washington Week opened my eyes to the personal side of politics. A two-minute tangent about his childhood humanized Senator Tillis more than any policy or national address could.

Minute 9,000. Saying goodbye. Our final dinner was an incredible mixture of sadness, anticipation, disappointment, and hope. Sadness for the end of our week, anticipation for what our fellow delegates would do in college, careers, and beyond, disappointment that we couldn't relive these moments over and over again, and hope.

Hope that we have the opportunity to make the world a better place.

Hope that this program has drawn us closer together, that the speakers and public servants who gave us their time and engagement will one day be proud of us, that we can make the most of our lives as a public servant, no matter the capacity.

And acceptance. That our 9,630 minutes are coming to an end. And that we have made the most of every single one.