

## **Emmett Appel, ME – 2025**

My first exposure to Washington, D.C. and the federal government was through my 6<sup>th</sup> grade Social Studies class. I remember rehearsing the names of my state's Senators and placing them into memory. As my education progressed, I took it upon myself to learn about other politicians, whether through the radio or internet, noting facts about their lives and policies. When I found out about this program, my mind filled with the possibilities of meeting these people, those on the news every day and who make policy affecting our society. However, this program was a lot bigger than meeting Capitol Hill politicians and bureaucrats. USSYP is a bastion of thought-provoking conversation and optimism, made possible by participants and organizers alike.

Arriving at Dulles on Saturday morning, I met only one delegate on my way to the Mayflower hotel. While I was certainly anxious – and suffered from mild imposter syndrome – that feeling quelled when I spoke to him. Later, I would discover this trait in every delegate. The students selected to the program, however qualified and intelligent, are equally supportive and empathetic. The delegates there are ready to learn, make memories and connections, seek the most of such a fortunate opportunity. I discovered that tomorrow's leaders are kind, joyous, and the type of person to sit you down and ask you about your day – as a Mainer, I deeply appreciated this quality. In Washington, whether walking in the Capitol, sharing dinner, or perusing around our hotel in free time, my fellow delegates desired to build friendship and lasting memories. That's what's special about this program; not the prestige or illustriousness, the people surrounding you are chosen for their humanity, care, and passion.

I would be remiss if I didn't talk about the thought-provoking nature of the program as well. Whether it was Senators Tillis and Klobuchar answering provoking questions, or foreign adversaries getting brought up in conversations on the bus, I was constantly thinking about policy. There is so much to be inspired by in Washington. This program is not for the close minded. It's for people to absorb new perspectives and take a moment to reflect on others' opinions. Some of my favorite moments were the times I spoke about the government not with the officials but with my fellow delegates. I had conversations and respectful debate on the topics of Ukraine, the Middle East, and tariffs. There was no despairing tone, no judgment, just enlightened conversation from some of the most politically educated youth our nation has to offer. If you attended Washington Week and didn't come back with a new perspective, a revival of interest, a flame behind your political aspirations, or any other change in views, you probably hid in your hotel room the entire week.

Another incredible part of USSYP is the Military Mentors. These dedicated individuals showed us one crucial aspect of public service, an avenue that uplifts and protects our nation and the world. From all branches, they are there to talk about their experiences, give advice and teach what it means to serve our nation. When I say these people are professionals, I say it very sincerely. They are top officers who are there to assist, guide the delegates, and inspire others about the meaningfulness of public service. They help at every moment to ensure a week of productivity and education, and without their guidance the program would go awry.

Lastly, I want to express my great appreciation for the program directors and assistants for creating such an impossible looking schedule. Planning for this program starts a year in advance, and I noticed the high level of organization the moment I stepped into the Mayflower Hotel. Getting 104 students all across DC to museums and governmental buildings is an incredible feat. Then, add in coordinating an agenda filled with Secretaries, US Senators, and a Supreme Court Justice. The fact that the week takes at least a month afterward for delegates to process and reflect on its amazing moments, quotes, and insightful conversations speaks to how engaged everyone was. From sitting in the Supreme Court and hearing a Justice talk about legality and morality, to the Secretary of State discussing the rewards of public service, there was no moment that didn't make me recall that 6<sup>th</sup> grade social studies class when my appreciation for policy and societal leaders began. This program makes the seemingly untouchable aspects of the federal government, which feel above you and out of reach, materialize in front of your very eyes. Those selected will see the humanity and affability of government officials, often unseen by the public. People you couldn't dream of meeting a month before, will just be scheduled in between meeting the Secretary of Defense and the Senate Parliamentarian, demonstrating the immense foresight, organization, and thoughtfulness the USSYP's directors possess.

When I say this program was life changing, I mean it. I left at the week's end saddened about an experience ending, but optimistic and inspired. This program highly influenced or is directly responsible for multiple Senators and other people in high-ranking positions getting into public service, and I can see why. The delegates' firsthand exposure makes them see these opportunities as obtainable and necessary. It provides the context for their dreams of helping the world and their future constituents. We all joked that someone in our group would one day become President. I say this in all confidence, I don't doubt it. The sheer level of innovation, wit, and passion all crammed in one room is awe inspiring. It's a program that seriously makes you return home, look at yourself in the mirror and ask, "why not me?"