

## **Emily Ren, MN – 2025**

The American flag rippled in the brisk air as the plane jostled to a stop. My eyes traced the movement, registering that I was finally in Washington, DC after months of anticipation. As I traveled to the Mayflower, countless government buildings and memorials flew by in a dizzying blur. Vaguely, I felt a flash of patriotism rush through me.

"We have Military Mentors at USSYP? Why?" Heading into Washington Week, I had many questions, but the presence of Military Mentors had to be one of the biggest. Having never really interacted with service members, I was not sure what to expect. I was not particularly patriotic or well-informed on the functions of the military beyond combat.

My connection to patriotism has always existed, but it felt like a fishline instead of a tether. I was pulled to it, but I was never truly tied to it. As a Chinese-American constantly pulled between two cultures, before Washington Week, I struggled to label what patriotism was. Where was the line drawn between nationalism and patriotism? However, after meeting my Military Mentor, Lieutenant Esther Kangas, and several other incredible military mentors, I knew my worldview was about to change.

Hearing Lieutenant Kangas' story about joining the Navy and rooming with a Department of Defense Educational Activities student drastically broadened my worldview on what it meant to serve and humanize servicemen and servicewomen. I learned why people join the military and what it means to protect our country. By the time I witnessed the presentation of colors, I couldn't look away.

The next day on Coach 2 (the best coach), I asked Lieutenant George Denove about his journey in joining the Navy and how he fit into the grander scheme of the military. How did he continue to serve even when he disagreed with orders? He responded that service means doing good work, even when it's difficult. A good officer always serves with their country and constitution in mind, putting others' needs above their own.

So there it was. In plain words, American culture was the grit, selflessness, and dedication to create a better world. This was only reinforced by the incredible speakers we had at Washington Week from Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth to Secretary of State Marco Rubio to my very own Minnesota Senator Amy Klobuchar. Again and again, they hammered in how important it is to remember the countless opportunities afforded to us and how we can never forget those who came before us to give us these opportunities. Whether it is the trailblazers who created spaces for minorities like me to chase their dreams or the millions of soldiers who have fought for our freedoms, I have never been more confident in knowing my responsibility to give back and continue being a force for positive change.

Standing in Arlington National Cemetery on our last day, a sense of serenity washed over me. The buzz of the week had culminated in a period of peace and respect for the beating heart of this country: our servicemen and women. Truth be told, I was the closest I will probably ever be to enlisting after Washington Week. Knowing that there are genuinely good, selfless, and brilliant people like our Military Mentors serving this country was the greatest lesson I took from USSYP. It is unimaginable not to feel the pulse of patriotism in your heart when you look into their faces and see the passion behind it. It is impossible not to trust our institutions when you see the stories and humanity behind them. I hope I will never forget the experience USSYP gave me.

The American flag now ripples proudly at my home (albeit, as a small handheld flag). As I pursue a career in public service, dedicating myself to the Constitution, our great nation, and the incredible people in it, I am confident that the American principles that have guided our leaders for centuries will guide me. I have learned and witnessed what it means to be a servant leader who is open-minded, empathetic, and caring. As I retire my title as a Senate Youth, I am so incredibly grateful for this opportunity and cannot wait to see where these lessons take me next.