

Ryan Casey, NH – 2025

It was hard for me to appreciate Washington Week until it was over. When I finally arrived back in my room, it hit me. I was back in my small town in New Hampshire. Washington seemed so far away, so distant, so unimaginable. I could no longer engage in meaningful conversations in the Grand Ballroom or sit down to a three-course meal in the Benjamin Franklin State Dining Room. There would be no more late-night talks, card games, or Bus 1 karaoke concerts. I wouldn't be able to visit the Supreme Court or the Pentagon. Instead, I had to return to school. It was a hard reality to face.

When I was selected to represent New Hampshire, I received an Instagram direct message from a past delegate whom I'd never met. He told me the experience would be life-changing, and it was the single best week of his life. I initially thought he was exaggerating. I didn't understand the monumental impact a single week could have. I was excited to see the monuments and meet my U.S. Senators, but I didn't anticipate the most valuable portion of this trip: the incredible people at USSYP. Being selected for USSYP was like entering into a family. It was as if we had been lifelong friends and were picking up where we left off. The moment I walked out of the airplane terminal, I was immediately greeted by about ten other delegates waiting to catch the bus. We became fast friends. As I met more and more people throughout the day, I was astonished at the accomplishments and humility of my amazing cohort.

I developed many deep friendships through late-night talks about life and cordial political debates. Simply hearing about someone's home state and the issues they hoped to address was insightful. Every person had an incredible story to tell, and many carried a burning passion to enact change in the world. It was almost as if by osmosis, their enthusiasm and energy infected everyone they met. Simply being around these students, I was encouraged to become more involved and to work harder. I am especially grateful for my Military Mentor group and my amazing roommate, Carson!

Although our country is in a tense political time, I did not see this throughout Washington Week. Many distinguished speakers spoke about the importance of remaining open-minded and civil when discussing politics. I was fortunate enough to have dinner with my Senator, Senator Jeanne Shaheen, and she talked about her experience working across the aisle to get things done. When I arrived at the Mayflower, the first distinguished guest speaker was Bill Doherty, and I learned about his work at Braver Angels to bridge the partisan gap. He challenged us to understand how a person's life experience has shaped their political beliefs and to find the common ground that we share. In Anjali's keynote speech, she encouraged us to raise our flashlights if we would commit to limiting the partisan divides. Seeing the entire room illuminated by 104 flashlights after each commitment left me feeling optimistic about the future of politics in our country.

I left Washington with a much stronger sense of patriotism. My favorite event was going to the Pentagon and hearing from Secretary Hegseth and Sergeant Major Black. Secretary Hegseth encouraged us to pursue a military career. He spoke about the important yet difficult task of recruiting the brightest minds for military service. I was struck by the caliber of the Military Mentors. Throughout the week, I learned about their accomplishments and stories from their experience. My mentor, LCDR Kanth, was especially inspirational, and he has made me consider joining the military in a similar role. One of the most powerful moments of the week was the changing of the guard and the wreath-laying ceremony at Arlington National Cemetery. My great-grandfather is buried there alongside thousands of others. It was an emotional moment when the playing of taps cut through the silence of the ceremony.

Two of the most powerful talks were from Supreme Court Justice Kavanaugh and Secretary of State Rubio. Walking into the Supreme Court was a surreal experience, and it was an honor for Justice Kavanaugh to spend so much time talking to us. He left us all with the powerful sentiment that he tries to "live on the sunrise side of the mountain to see the day that is coming, not the day that has passed." Visiting the State Department and hearing from Secretary Rubio was equally unforgettable. The lavish dining room provided the unforgettable backdrop for Secretary Rubio's message. He strongly encouraged us to pursue our passions and make a career out of something we love. Finally, Brian Kamoie asked us, "what will you do with your one wild and fleeting life?" That became the theme of the week for most of us. We have limited time, and we need to make the most of every opportunity we are presented with.

On the last night, I was one of the last delegates to leave in the morning, but I refused to go to sleep because I wanted to live out every minute I had left in Washington. Though the week felt like it flew by, I still established many meaningful friendships. As I said goodbye to each bus leaving for the airport, the realization slowly started to sink in that the trip was over. I will be forever grateful for the opportunity I was provided to represent the great state of New Hampshire, and I will cherish these memories for a lifetime. Thank you to all the USSYP delegates, the Military Mentors, and especially the Hearst Foundations!