

Nathan Kalhan, OH – 2025

When I was a kid, I'd get up early in the morning and watch the news with my parents. American politics has always fascinated me. But when I learned of my selection for the United States Senate Youth Program, my childhood fascinations became very real. This program was more to me than the opportunity to meet high-ranking government officials, eat delectable desserts, or even visit America's most historic and symbolic sites. The people I met and learned from changed the trajectory of my life.

My Military Mentor, Lt. George Denove, asked our group to share a little bit about ourselves on arrival day. When it was my turn, I talked about my aspiration of becoming a lawyer or judge and my experience working at a law firm. Lt. Denove already knew that, though. Looking at his handwritten notes on our delegate profiles, he said to me, "And you like reading Supreme Court cases too, right? I'd love to hear about some of your favorite cases." Even this small gesture of curiosity was surprising to me; it encouraged me to keep my mind open to hearing new viewpoints.

The United States Senate Youth Program provides two things: access to real-world experience and lifelong connections. I never truly *listened* to what government officials on the other side of the aisle had to say before this week. The truth is, Washington Week 2025 occurred during an incredibly unique time in our nation's history. Reading the news in the weeks leading up to the program, I felt like polarization had broken our democracy. I left feeling more hopeful.

I gained access to real-world experience throughout our jam-packed schedule. I saw the work that went into maintaining procedure and decorum in the Senate after hearing from Senate Parliamentarian Elizabeth MacDonough, Secretary of the Senate Jackie Barber, and Sergeant at Arms Jennifer Hemingway. Despite the growing ideological divides in the legislative branch, all three were committed to interpreting Senate rules and procedures and applying them to Senators. Our Supreme Court visit also stood out to me. I respected how thorough Justice Brett Kavanaugh was in answering questions from delegates, talking about his journey to becoming a Supreme Court Justice, and reaffirming the role of the judicial branch. Nothing can beat being an aspiring legal expert and sitting six feet away from a current Justice on the Supreme Court.

This group is a once-in-a-lifetime delegation of dedicated students and public servants. I heard about what it's like to be a student at a U.S. military base. I debriefed speaker remarks with students who were deeply interested in current affairs, whether they agreed with those remarks or not. I met students influencing state policies, working for government officials, and finding ways to contribute to their communities. Behind every speaker and delegate at Washington Week, I saw people. People who were determined, passionate, and hopeful. People who cared.

Most of all, I connected with the personal stories of our speakers and delegates. Each delegate had a story to share that made me consider my worldview. In every group discussion over meals, delegates weren't just sharing their ideas but also *listening* more to what everyone else had to say. The most meaningful message all week was something all delegates experienced — together. We heard from Assistant Secretary Michele Exner and Secretary of State Marco Rubio at the State Department, both of whom talked about their upbringing, the importance of exposure to new experiences, and how we as delegates should commit to the unique calling of public service. As Secretary Rubio recalled a piece of advice that encouraged him to run for the U.S. Senate, "I've never heard one of my friends tell me, 'I wish I made a little bit more money.'"

I will never fully process attending the United States Senate Youth Program. Washington Week gave me remarkable memories and connections that will carry me through the rest of my life. I hope future delegates will embrace the wisdom gained during this week, challenge their beliefs and character, and create positive change. This country needs you.