

Landon Resendes, RI – 2025

As a student from Rhode Island, the smallest state in the country, I've always felt close to my local government. But nothing could have prepared me for the experience of standing inside the Capitol, visiting the White House, walking through the Pentagon, and having lunch in the Benjamin Franklin State Dining Room at the State Department. These are places most Americans never get to go, let alone as teenagers. The 63rd annual United States Senate Youth Program wasn't just a trip to Washington, it was a complete immersion into the heart of American government and public service. And as someone who had never even been to D.C. before, it was nothing short of surreal.

From the outset, our emcee Johnathan Bissell—JB, as we all came to know him—told us the week would be exhausting, exciting, interesting, thought-provoking, and life-changing. Every word turned out to be true. Each day was packed with events that challenged the way I think about leadership and what it means to serve. But what stood out most wasn't just the buildings or the history, it was the people. The speakers, the delegates, the military mentors. Each person added something that made the week unforgettable.

We heard directly from leaders across all three branches of government. Justice Brett Kavanaugh gave us a window into the inner workings of the Supreme Court. Senators like Thom Tillis, Jeanne Shaheen, and Amy Klobuchar shared insights on how they navigate partisanship to actually get things done. And some of the most impactful voices were the ones who don't often make headlines—the Senate Historian, the Secretary of the Senate, the Parliamentarian. These individuals, working behind the scenes, keep the legislative branch functioning. Their commitment to the institution itself, not just any one party or personality, was deeply inspiring.

Then there were the quotes that stuck. Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth told us, "The two most important days of your life are the day you were born, and the day you figure out why." That line hit me hard. I don't know exactly what I want to do yet—but that quote gave me permission to keep asking questions, to keep searching for that "why." Secretary of State Marco Rubio echoed a similar theme when he said, "You don't need the answer to what you want to do now, just know what you love." That idea of focusing on passion over a fixed plan helped me breathe a little easier. In a room full of high-achieving students, where ambition is practically a given, it was a reminder that purpose isn't something you force, it's something you find.

Speaking of the other delegates, this was one of the most eye-opening parts of the entire experience. These were some of the most accomplished students I've ever met. Some were working in their state legislatures. Others were leading national advocacy groups or taking college math courses I'd never even heard of. Just listening to them talk about how their schools were run, what policies they cared about, or what their communities were facing was educational in itself. Delegates came from all 50 states, Washington, D.C. (shoutout Pierce), and DODEA, and no two perspectives were the same. It reminded me how incredibly diverse this country really is—not just in geography or culture, but in thought.

Throughout the week, we were guided by our Military Mentors, each of them outstanding in their own right. My group, led by Lieutenant Commander Vikram Kanth of the U.S. Navy, became a tight-knit team. We called ourselves "Vikram's Vikings" and proudly chanted our name whenever we reunited after stops across the city. Lieutenant Commander Kanth shared his journey with humility and humor. He wasn't just a chaperone - he was a leader, a storyteller, and a source of wisdom. His mentorship added a level of depth to the week that I didn't expect but came to truly value.

And then there's the logistics. I can't overstate how remarkable it was to move 104 teenagers—plus staff, security, and mentors—across Washington, D.C., day after day, without a hitch. We never once had to worry about where to be or what was next. Everything was handled with quite literally military-level precision. I felt safe, respected, and taken seriously at every stop—from the National Archives to the State Department to NASA. (Though I did learn the hard way that you can't bring a NASA snow globe in your backpack—it's over the TSA liquid limit.)

One of the most personally meaningful moments for me came during our session with Ryan Nobles, Chief Capitol Hill Correspondent at NBC News. As someone who serves as Editor-in-Chief of my school's newspaper, I felt a deep connection to what he said: "The number one thing you have at your disposal is the truth." That line landed hard. In a time when facts are often debated, distorted, or dismissed altogether, the role of truth in journalism, and in leadership, has never felt more urgent. His message was a reminder that telling the truth isn't just about being accurate; it's about building trust, credibility, and real change.

The most emotional part of the week, though, came at Arlington National Cemetery. Watching the Changing of the Guard at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier was breathtaking—every movement deliberate, every second filled with meaning. It was a reminder of sacrifice, of silence, of respect. Seeing some of my fellow delegates lay a wreath in honor of the 63rd USSYP delegation brought a tear to nearly every eye. In that moment, everything we'd talked about - service, duty, country - felt very real. It grounded the entire week.

But there was also joy, humor, and friendship. My fellow Viking from South Carolina, Carson, somehow convinced our group that *Nokia* by Drake was the best record of all time - and by the end of the week, a few of us actually agreed. We laughed, argued, shared playlists, and imagined a future where some of us might room together in college, start a law firm, or even run for president side by side. I'll carry these connections with me for life.

By the end of the program, I left with more questions than answers. And that's the point. The United States Senate Youth Program doesn't give you a roadmap, it gives you a spark. It shows you what's possible, introduces you to people who've dedicated their lives to public service, and surrounds you with peers who are already making a difference. I left D.C. more inspired, more curious, and more hopeful than I've ever been.

I didn't expect one week to change the way I saw my country—or myself—but it did. And I've never been prouder to be an American. I'm especially grateful to my high school Social Studies teacher, Jennifer Haskell, who first put me on the fun and unpredictable adventure that is government and politics. And to my Mom, thank you for always being there for me and my brothers. Without your constant support, I can't imagine being where I am today. This week was unforgettable, and I owe so much of it to you.