

Beyond the Dome: Lessons in Leadership, Service, and Self

Before the United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP), the government felt like a distant concept, reduced to headlines, history, and lessons I learned about in the classroom. Standing beneath the Capitol dome, shaking hands with Senators, and sharing stories with peers from across the nation, I discovered democracy is shaped by the voices and actions of those who dare to stand up.

Being selected for USSYP was an honor that felt surreal. All the work compiling and creating the essays, videos, and interviews it took to get here was worth it. I could never have anticipated the transformative nature of the experience or the profound impact it would leave. Having never traveled to DC, I was nervous and intimidated. Yet, as I entered the hotel lobby and met my fellow delegates, I sensed this was not just another trip. Surrounded by 103 brilliant, self-driven, and thoughtful individuals from diverse backgrounds, each with their unique stories and individual passions, I realized I was about to embark on something extraordinary. Reflecting on those moments now, I struggle to measure the influence of every delegate, speaker, and military mentor I encountered within just that one week.

Secretary of State Marco Rubio's speech is one I will never forget. He said, "You cannot be great at something you don't love doing." He inspired us to explore areas that ignite our passion and encouraged us to focus on our "why." When understanding our purpose, we discover our true path. He reminded us no one at the end of their life wishes they had made more money, but rather that wish they had spent more time doing what they love. Secretary Rubio's words served as a powerful call to action. Though these reflections represent just a tiny portion of my week in Washington, I left every session with a growing certainty that I wanted to be part of something larger than myself.

Some of my favorite moments occurred outside of the formal settings. Personally, I'm proud to say I went 6-0 in guessing the meals this week, from the much raved about white chocolate Capitol Building dessert to the fantastic short rib at the Department of State lunch. The food itself became a cherished memory. While discussing food, it's essential to note the meals shared with each delegate and Military Mentor fostered lasting connections through personal stories, whether it was bonding over math teachers, or engaging in discussions about today's issues. I was constantly learning something new. My running quote log which is filled with words from speakers and comments from fellow delegates, always brought a smile when I needed one. From the group tours at George Washington's Mount Vernon to the White House or the Pentagon, each tour offered another memorable experience during Washington Week. The quiet moments also held significance: observation of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier and the Changing of the Guard, and the silence on the Coach as we reflected on the day, and journaling before bed. The significance of sharing laughter over dinner with newfound friends who felt and became like family in just a few days.

It's also essential to highlight Hallgren's Heroes—my Military Mentor group. This group became my home base amid the whirlwind of Washington Week. From brainstorming names to finally choosing Hallgren's Heroes, we created a strong bond. I heard how fantastic it was to be in a Military Mentor group; I just never realized the depth of wisdom and advice I would gain. Through their grounded yet approachable leadership, the Military Mentors made Washington Week even more inspiring. To Major Hallgren, thank you for being the exemplary Military Mentor I wished for, from your invaluable advice to your attentive listening. Your impact on me is profound, and I will always be grateful for meeting you. Each mentor contributed unique achievements and insights, always ready to listen, guide, and encourage. I will forever appreciate each military mentor I had the honor to meet.

To either the past or present delegate reading this, I want to let you know your roommate will become your best friend. In my case, I had no idea my roommate, whom I had briefly met at the airport, would turn into my best friend. Being from the East Coast and having someone from the West as my roommate was a refreshing, but compelling experience. My roommate and I were practically the same person. From wearing necklaces representing our states to having the same color toothbrush and hairbrush to finishing each other's sentences, it was a little scary meeting someone so alike. From sleeping past our alarms and having to get ready in twenty minutes to being so distracted laughing, not realizing I was using my debit card trying to get into my hotel room. Or the late-night conversations, although we had promised to go to bed earlier. The extra time spent together added another layer of closeness to Washington Week, making the week even more meaningful.

Since the end of Washington Week, I have cherished connecting with my fellow delegates. The more we text and call, the more I am grateful for the incredible opportunity to meet such inspiring young adults. I eagerly anticipate seeing what everyone accomplishes, reflecting on our lively dinner conversations and the heartfelt moments we shared during the farewell video and speeches. The memories from this short week will forever be etched in my mind.

The beauty of this program lies in the ability to meet each delegate where they are. While, propelling them to step outside their comfort zones, in challenging and realistic ways. Reviewing my notes from the week, I now see how USSYP pushed and challenged me. It cemented the type of leader I aspire to be. Justice Brett Kavanaugh, who encouraged delegates to "live on the sunny side of the Mountain," illuminated that the path to happiness is to pursue what you love. As I explored my interest in law, DC opened my eyes to the vast array of careers which exist within public service. My opportunity to introduce Mr. James Byron, the Senior Advisor to the National Archives, ignited a new career path I had only dreamt of. I realized entering public service begins with a passion to lead and serve. Leadership is the readiness to listen and learn from everything and everyone, even when the road ahead is unclear and the ideas and perspectives vary from your own. USSYP is more than just a prestigious, week-long experience; it becomes intensely personal. It shaped and compelled me to challenge myself, for which I am profoundly grateful.

As my plane left Reagan National, glancing out the window one final time at the Capitol dome, I realized Washington Week had not only immersed me in the heart of democracy—it had also guided me to discover my own passion. The friendships, late-night discussions, and transformative ideas will remain with me long after the week fades into memory. Although I returned with just a suitcase, in reality, I returned enriched with lifelong friends and experiences that will influence me for years. Most importantly, I returned home with a clearer vision of who I want to be: someone who leads with heart, listens with intention, and serves with integrity.