

Ellie Neckers, VT – 2025

The power of an elected official is only as impactful as their constituents allow. The American experiment shows that our nation's fragility rests on the balance of regular citizens' trust in upholding the tenets of the Constitution and the government's representation of them. In times of great political discourse, the cracks in the foundations become apparent, and we as people realize just how frail we genuinely are. Going into Washington Week, I felt this divide in my community, with the houses next to me bearing dueling flags, each unwavering in their opinion. I felt the distrust in our nation and the growing unease around me. I was scared to go to Washington and listen to political partisanship; I was ready to hate the speakers who fell under one political umbrella and love the other. I was unprepared for the points I would agree on with the different speakers, how we found common ground, and how USSYP gave an outlet for healthy debate. To see just how incredible our nation truly is.

Coming from a small town, my view of the outside world was not uniform but small; when surrounded by one way of thought, the ability to change opinion becomes harder. When Senator Tillis gave his remarks, I was surprised to see we agreed on many points, especially the war in Ukraine. Or with Secretary Rubio the idea of doing something because you love it, not just because you are good at it, because, as he said, "If you're good at something but you do not love it, you will never be great."

The most significant shift in my perspective came from the Military Mentors. Before USSYP, I saw the military as "other." I come from a family where the last thing you do is enlist, and as such, I was worried that the military presence would be too much. Instead, the Military Mentor experience was incredibly impactful; my mentor filled the shoes of a mentor interested in my life and my growth. They were there for advice and also for excellent dinner conversation, and as a result, I gained a new viewpoint on what it means to serve your country; whether you are involved in combat strategy or cyber, the military is vast, and the experience it provides while not for me is a noble pursuit. The lasting impact of my military mentorship is still not fully understood, but the connection I developed with my mentor is incredible.

Another life-changing part of the USSYP experience is my fellow delegates. Their accomplishments show just how incredible they are. From the late-night conversations in the ballroom to the riveting dinner debates, I felt satisfied and challenged with each conversation. The relationships I have built with my fellow delegates are immeasurable, specifically with the roommates I speak to daily. As a class, we will do incredible things and be there to celebrate each other, big and small! From college acceptances to our first big jobs to when one of us inevitably becomes president, our relationship is built to last a lifetime. My fellow delegates, who truly shaped the week, are what make the experience lasting; the connections and networking opportunities that USSYP provides allow for all of us to know someone in each of the 50 states and to be able to hear from so many different perspectives.

The programming experience was another incredible opportunity for the delegates. Hearing from our nation's leaders in real-time behind closed doors allowed for more personable, meaningful conversation. From the incredible Ambassador George Moose, who spoke of conflict and managing high-tension situations in the United Institute of Peace, to the Senate Parliamentarian Elizabeth MacDonough, who talked about the after-effects of January 6th and her experiences within the Capitol as a pillar to the Senate. I had the honor of introducing Ms. MacDonough and talking with her before her question and answer panel, during which she gave my co-delegate and me incredible advice on her role and spoke to us incredibly personably. The riveting speakers and questions and answers provided opportunities for youth to explore their passions and talk with experts in their fields.

A question that sticks out to me is that my roommate and Wisconsin delegate Isabella Dereszkievicz-Hodowany asked the NASA astronauts how being in space has changed their vision of their religion. They replied that science and religion are not mutually exclusive. Another theme of the week is that the world and politics are not black and white, and nothing can exist without the other, Democrat and Republican, right and wrong, debate and agreement. My week in Washington was nothing short of life-changing, and the lessons I have learned transfer to everything, so much so my friends now have a counter on their phones every time I mention USSYP. My memories are as clear as the day of the incredible week that we shared, and it's hard to remember life before USSYP because the lessons I have learned and the people I met changed my worldview vastly to the point at which I now stand more proud, more empowered, and more independent than before.