

## Grey Fearon, VT – 2025

The United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP) is so much more than a series of important speakers. It's an irreplaceable experience of intense debate and discussion in the nation's capital between some of the most intelligent students in the nation. Every single aspect of the program is an opportunity to meet someone with new beliefs and perspectives. The staff, the speakers, and the other students are all willing to speak on the most intense issues facing America, creating a unique environment of diverse thought. When preparing our country for the future, it's essential to place open discussion above everything else. People have a tendency to get trapped within their own ideas, so a chance to expand knowledge and experience at the same time, like at USSYP, is irreplaceable.

The speakers are the most obvious eye-opening experiences. Each one presents a different vision of America. Senator Amy Klobuchar spoke out boldly against President Trump's automobile tariffs, criticizing their impact on the American consumer from the perspective of someone within the government. Similarly, Ambassador Ana Louisa Fajer condemned the tariffs for their impact on the citizens of Mexico, providing a new point of view. We spoke to Ambassador Fajer at the United States Institute of Peace on the day the tariffs were supposed to come into effect. She was a dynamic speaker, and wasn't afraid to address hot topics like the fentanyl crisis in the US, the gun crisis in Mexico, and issues happening at the border. The importance of a speaker like this cannot be underestimated. She made students more comfortable asking hard questions, and answered them all in earnest. Both Ambassador Fajer and Senator Klobuchar helped us to better understand the debate around these new tariffs as they were enacted.

Senator Thom Tillis was another example of the type of speaker that truly makes the USSYP experience worthwhile. I knew beforehand that I didn't agree with Senator Tillis on many things, as we land on very different places on the political spectrum. That being said, he was without a doubt one of the most impressive speakers we got a chance to meet. He's someone that clearly understands the importance of debate and discussion, as he was quick to open the floor up for lots of questions. He openly encouraged difficult questions, and was not afraid to give clear, partisan answers, even if many people disagreed with him. He spoke on the nature of bipartisan collaboration within Congress, balancing his own experience working across the aisle while criticizing the partisanship of the Democratic Party. Speakers like him and Ambassador Fajer changed how we interacted with the speakers throughout the week, as they both encouraged us to ask difficult questions and engage in a real dialogue on major issues. Asking questions to the speakers during the week is a special opportunity, because it's a real change to ask pressing questions. There are no news cameras rolling at Washington Week, and the interaction between students and speakers is very personal when compared to the conversations we often hear happening across America. Asking specific questions is exactly what makes USSYP more than a leadership program, as it truly prepares students for real ethical, political, and philosophical discussion.

Despite the engagement with speakers, the first thing I realized when I arrived in D.C. was that some of the most important people I was going to meet in the whole week were already working there. From the program directors to the Military Mentors, every single person involved with the program is brilliant and has their own perspective to offer. Sitting with a different Military Mentor at each meal allows for fantastic conversations, whether we talk about the media's twisting of politicians, an experience in the Space Force, or what it's like working directly for the President in the White House. These are the little conversations that can't be anticipated going into the week and can't be replicated outside of it. The connections formed in these discussions are exactly what the week is all about. Jakub Mosur, one of the photographers, was the smartest person I met the whole week. He talked with me about everything from ending homelessness to Epicureanism. One Military Mentor had written his thesis paper about gun control in the US, and opened dinner by asking us to guess the top three things that statistically prevent gun violence the most. When we weren't able to come up with the number one method, he placed a \$50 bill on our table and gave us each one more guess, before finally telling us that the answer is refurbishing vacant lots (which, as he suspected, none of us guessed). Cumulatively, the staff at Washington Week have enough important stories and experiences to fill a library.

Finally, the most impactful part of Washington Week was the other delegates. The program assembles one hundred and four of the brightest minds in the country, and it's truly remarkable what they can do when they're all together. Every conversation, from breakfasts to bus rides, is full of rich experience and thoughtful deliberation on issues. Some of the best, healthiest, most well thought out debates I've had in my entire life took place over dinner during Washington Week. Those connections aren't just momentary either, they're connections for life.

Every part of the USSYP program is a special type of magic, the kind only experienced when kind, passionate, dedicated individuals come together to form something greater. The amount of compassion I witnessed in one week gave me hope in an otherwise unsettling time. Sometimes being in D.C. felt like watching the world come to an end, but everyone I met gave me hope in the future of our country. It's programs like USSYP that bring high schoolers together in wonderful ways and shape the leaders of the next generation.