

My heart pounded wildly with anticipation as the plane touched down at Reagan National Airport. I had no idea what this week would hold—only that I was about to embark on something extraordinary.

Looking back, I couldn't have known just how true that would be.

Over the course of a week, I filled a journal with hasty scribbles and sketches during keynote speeches and learned from the most brilliant youth minds across the country. Visits spanning from the Supreme Court to the Senate Chambers stripped the prestige of institutions we see on TV to their core, revealing the hands of passionate human beings who believe in the power of working together to achieve something far greater than themselves. Regardless of partisanship, each speaker offered an impartial view into their journeys to and within government. Marco Rubio's address at the Department of State reminded us to never forget our history, but to prepare ourselves for a fast-paced, everchanging, and technologically dense political landscape that our founding fathers had not foreseen. Ryan Nobles highlighted the importance of rebuilding trust between the American people and the media, reemphasizing the importance of accessible journalism in bringing government closer to the people. As my journal immersed itself with the knowhow of my peers and role models, I too, became immersed with my position in our political environment, motivated to become an advocate for the true complexities of government.

Continuing further, we peered beyond the politicians and changemakers on earth, turning our gaze skyward towards those brave enough to chase the stars: the trailblazing NASA astronauts from Crew 71. "Courage is fear after saying your prayers" was a mantra from Astronaut Tracy C. Dyson that perfectly captured the idea that progress, rather than being born from comfort, is instead created from our willingness to dream big, take risks, and challenge convention. In this sense, NASA's mission to explore our universe became a metaphor for something greater, which spoke to every delegate in the room. Although each of us navigates our own orbit guided by a wide array of values and convictions, it is our willingness to reach across the aisle and disrupt the status quo that holds the promise of a brighter future.

It must be said, however, that the magic of Washington Week truly came to life through the 103 delegates from around the country and world that I had the utmost honor of meeting. Together, we represented a myriad of backgrounds and political beliefs, carrying unique stories shaped by our own idiosyncrasies—and it was these very differences that transformed this experience to be truly unforgettable. Whether it was heated discussions about pressing world issues, absurd topics of conversation that made us laugh until we couldn't breathe, and everything in between, every interaction has etched itself into my memory. Meeting my fellow delegates changed my life, inspiring me in ways I never before even dared to dream. On departure day, we stayed up until sunrise, refusing to let sleep take over, determined to spend every last second with each other before goodbyes had to be said—a commemoration and tribute to the bond we had formed.

To end, I wanted to share a personal anecdote: my last memory of USSYP. With another delegate, we sat in front of the towering windows, staring out onto the same tarmac on which we arrived, watching planes take off towards the skyline. Ridiculously sleep deprived, we rambled on about the incredible week we had just lived, knowing that the moment we left each other, the spell of Washington Week would come to an end. However, I knew the impact of this week would live on.

As I boarded my flight back home—like many delegates before me, and like many more thereafter—I carried a torch with me, one that calls us to rise as leaders, nurture the minds of tomorrow's changemakers, and give back to the community what we were given.

USSYP has left me with a heart fuller than I could have imagined, an inordinate amount of inspiration, and friendships I'll carry with me for a lifetime. In a short seven days, I found myself back home, in my Seattle nest—unpacking my bags, goodbyes still lingering—but a forever changed person.