

Erik Vincent, AK – 2026

As I stepped onto the Alaska Airlines jet, set to take me on nine hours of travel to the United States capital, my mind (albeit briefly) ran over what I expected my next week to hold. Thinking simply based on what I had heard from past sources, I expected many prominent, “headline-y” guests, and a very focused program itinerary devoted entirely to surveying the inner workings of the national government. A week later, stepping onto my then Anchorage-bound jet, I again mentally ran the week over.

Washington Week, while it did indeed showcase exemplary figures of the capital and give us a close view of the central government, proved to be an experience of so much more and a core lifetime memory. Through the entire week, I built friendships and had meaningful conversations with some of the most amazing people that the United States has to offer, from Hawaii to Maine and everywhere in between. My constant thought was that the entire environment of the program was one of tremendous hope and optimism, especially so given its superimposition over a political landscape of today that is so often divisive and vitriolic.

A central theme of the program, whether formally or otherwise, was that of finding common humanity among all, regardless of demographic, political persuasion, or any other preconceived notion that might discriminate. Though none of us said it then, we delegates all quietly understood in our discussions with another that everyone had the same ultimate goal of creating the best America possible.

The lived experiences of all our program speakers added to the hopefulness of the entire week. Senators known to disagree bitterly on the floor revealed their truths of good personal relations with each other, and the same sentiments were echoed by many on other levels of government. Still more inspiration was gleaned from other narratives, such as that of Major General and NASA Administrator Charles Bolden, who defied long odds to become one of the very first Black astronauts for the United States; and FEMA Associate Administrator Brian Kamoie, whose words, “adversity reveals character,” replay through my mind periodically.

The week in a broader sense showed me the best and the brightest of my generation, however clichéd such phrasing may be. As I met my fellow “delegates and distinguished guests,” I felt an excitement for the future that previously had not existed to near the magnitude in which it manifested then. I left the ballroom of the Mayflower Hotel feeling not just enriched with wisdom and experience from our speakers and guests, but joyful that the leaders of our future would be all the same exemplary leaders that I met over the course of the program. My time with the United States Senate Youth Program felt almost transcendental, and left me with a fulfillment that is too magnificent to accurately describe in words; to all future delegates, it will be one of the most incredible weeks of your life.