

Eric Tang, AR – 2026

I didn't really know how to write this essay. There's so much good to be said about the United States Senate Youth Program, so many memories, lessons, and knowledge learned. So, the truth is I miss it a lot. I miss the places, the coach rides, the conversations, and most of all, the people. Every day was better than the last.

I went into Washington Week knowing it would be good. I did not know just how incredible it truly would be, and how it would matter to me the way it has. The speakers were remarkable. Former NASA administrator Charles Bolden talked about his path as an astronaut, and hearing how he overcame his own struggles was inspiring. Each conversation proved how despite big titles and important jobs, we all still share similar values. Secretary Hegseth and Chairman Caine at the Pentagon spoke with a directness that made the weight of their responsibility feel real in a way I hadn't expected. From asking a question to the Secretary of the Senate Jackie Barber, Parliamentarian Elizabeth MacDonough, and Sergeant at Arms Jennifer Hemingway, to speaking with both of my state's Senators, we got to see firsthand how the people running this country are accessible, human, and genuinely interested in the next generation. The places were just as amazing. Standing in the Supreme Court, walking through the Capitol, touring the Pentagon, and sitting in the State Department Reception Rooms felt alive. These are places where real things happen, and you could feel it. However, what changed me wasn't a single keynote address, any single room, or any single speech. It was the 104 people around me, experiencing all of it at the same time.

I didn't expect to find people like this. I think I assumed that a room full of 105 high-achieving students from across the country would have a competitive edge to it. I was wrong. I found a group of people who were surprisingly open, genuinely curious about each other, genuinely kind, and willing to talk about things that actually mattered. We actually wanted to know each other, about where we came from, what we believed, what we were afraid of, and what we were working toward. The Military Mentors were just as incredible. They showed up with real investment in who we were and who we were becoming. Their stories, the things they'd seen and done, chosen to keep doing, and their individual paths made the week feel grounded in real service.

Saying goodbye was one of the hardest things I have done. I know that it sounds dramatic for a week-long program, but I think the people there understand. You spend a week moving through one extraordinary experience after another alongside the same group of people accelerated by the intensity of it all. By the end, it felt less like I was saying goodbye to people I had known for seven days and more like I was leaving behind long-time friends. I spent the last night between the lobbies and hotel basement, fighting to stay awake just to see this incredible group together for a bit longer. The few of us who were at the same airport at the same time, sat together for just a little longer, hoping the week wouldn't end.

USSYP gave me a week I will carry for a long time. I came home with a different feeling of what is possible, for myself, for my peers, and for the country. Although I'm sad about leaving the week behind, I'm excited for the future because I saw just how much we have to look forward to from the people around me.