

## Sadie Polk, DE – 2026

All 105 delegates were huddled elbow-to-elbow, shoe-to-shoe on the steps, yet the air was filled with the longest lasting quiet we've maintained since the beginning of the week. We looked forward, towards our Military Mentors lined in a row in front of us, to the soldier pacing in a steady rhythm, to the plain marble tomb inscribed: *Here Rests in Honored Glory An American Soldier Known But To God*. Arlington National Cemetery was established on May 13, 1864. In the roughly 60,000 days since, it has become the resting place of over 400,000 veterans. One of the gravestones belongs to my own grandfather. The ceremony at Tomb of the Unknown Soldier reminded me of the grim reality that millions now face globally due to war. Watching the proceedings in front of me, I couldn't help but acknowledge the lives that will be lost in our conflict in the coming months. Nevertheless, in spite of the solemn atmosphere, the thing that brought me hope was my fellow delegates. While watching the ceremony, a friend linked arms with me, so neither of us would feel alone in that moment. That instance of human connection and comfort reassured me that the people surrounding me were the type of future leaders who will work to make our world a kinder place. As I reflect on Washington Week, that moment is characteristic of my experience as a whole: feeling the weight of the palpable history around me, internalizing the significance of the decisions currently being made in D.C., and discovering extraordinary compassion in people I didn't know one week before. The United States Senate Youth Program surprised me and inspired me in ways that I would have never anticipated.

Each of our speakers showed me a new piece of the way our government is able to function. Supreme Court Justice Jackson's welcoming demeanor and wise advice showed me the responsibility that our court systems uphold. At the State Department, we learned the power of "soft diplomacy" and the importance of showing respect. Former NASA Administrator Charles Bolden shined a light on the incredible technological advancements we have made by taking risks and collaborating with people different from us. While listening to Rachel Scott, we learned about the necessity of journalists who have the courage and integrity to hold our leaders accountable.

Additionally, the delegates of the USSYP have shaped my outlook on the world. Their experiences have shown me countless new perspectives from across the country: about farmers who struggle with mental health stigma, educational disparities in urban centers, indigenous peoples fighting to maintain their land and culture, students campaigning for their right to speak up, and immigrant families who are worried about their future in our country. The diverse knowledge that my fellow delegates brought to our discussions is invaluable to me. Further, I am incredibly grateful for the community and friendships that we built throughout the week. I would never have expected to be singing karaoke to live piano with dozens of strangers on the first night, making inside jokes in the span of a couple of days, or having a bus ride catchphrase (ooh ahh OORAH!), but all of these parts of the trip made it incredibly special.

Finally, I would like to express my extreme appreciation for the staff and mentors of the program. It is clear just how much care went into making Washington Week happen. Each of the Military Mentors were so gracious in sharing their time and wisdom with the delegates. The USSYP coordinating staff, and bus drivers, and servers were such friendly people. The program nurse and photographers were not just talented at what they do but kind enough to share their experiences and knowledge with us as well. I am beyond grateful for the opportunity to be a part of the USSYP, and I thank each person that was a part of making it possible.