

## Mason Slaughter, GA – 2026

I live in South Georgia. The closest city with a population over 100,000 is two hours away. We don't have any tall buildings, there is a single red light in my hometown, we rarely ever get snow, and just about everybody goes to church. I love it, but DC is the opposite of this. Thankfully, this failed to hold in many instances. Many delegates, speakers, and events surprised me in wonderful ways. In an attempt to keep myself on topic, I am going to break this essay up into several sections and dive into each one separately.

First and foremost, my fellow delegates were amazing. You think a week isn't long enough time to make life-long friends, but, believe me, it is. Going into Washington Week, I knew that I would hold vastly different cultural beliefs from many of my fellow delegates, but I severely overestimated the effect that would have on our relationships. Let me make one thing clear: there were plenty of people I didn't like, but there were far more people I did. By the end of the week, I had invited one person to go to a concert with me. And not just any concert, Alan Jackson's farewell concert. This guy wasn't even in my Military Mentor group.

I remember the very first day we got there, I sat down at a table discussing the conflict in Iran. I prepared myself to have to fight for my opinions. The entire week, all we heard about was polarization, and it seems like a joke after a while, but it honestly isn't. Modern news outlets make it seem like there is no communication over party lines because cooperation doesn't sell. Any two educated people of different beliefs should be able to sit down and have a respectful conversation, and either who closes their ears to their opponent's argument is only a fool. My views didn't change much, but I listened to what the other people were saying, and it turns out what we were saying wasn't all that different.

Throughout the week, we had political debates, but most of the time we were just having fun. We were able to separate the political from the personal and bond over our shared interests and, sometimes, over our shared disinterests. One of my favorite conversations with my roommate was about our shared dislike for the same person. The night before that, we were talking about religion, but it was out of genuine curiosity.

Going back to the fun, most nights, we would hang out downstairs, play card spoons, imposter, and mafia, and would gather around the piano to sing songs. The best time, however, came when we had a karaoke night. Needless to say, this was one of the greatest nights of my life. I added a few songs to the queue, including "Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue" by Toby Keith. When that song played, you better believe I grabbed the mike and started singing word for word. When the line "We'll put a boot in your ass. It's the American way" played, I jumped up on the stage and did a massive kick off. Then a girl from Alabama, a guy from Idaho, and I all gathered around the mike and started singing together. Even the Military Mentors got in on the action. I had the time of my life.

Eventually, the end had to come, but we went out with a bang. The downstairs party was a blast, but our real selves came out at 2 a.m. when you're doing everything in your power to stay awake. I had four cups of coffee that night, and I got a little jittery. You can't really tell in writing, but that was sarcasm. I ran the full race, but we lost many great soldiers. Even at the airport, four other delegates and I waited patiently for our flights, enjoying our last minutes together before boarding our planes back home.

Even after Washington Week, many of us are in an Instagram group chat and text daily. Additionally, I look forward to Saturday every week because that is when we video call. We formed bonds that will last a lifetime, and I'm so excited to see where we go with them.

Moving on to the adults we spent every day with, many wonderful people all added to this great experience. The very first conversation I had at the Mayflower was with Ms. DeSmet, and off the bat, I hit a home run. It was a very brief conversation, and it probably wasn't all that I'm making it out to be, but there was something about it that made me happy. My conversations with the adults would only grow in number. I spoke with Erin and Jakob more than I did with most delegates. They were truly wonderful people. I can't remember her name (Caroline comes to mind). Still, the lady coordinating our meetings with our Senators accidentally mixed up Georgia with South Carolina, so we were told we were going to meet our Senator, who wasn't at the reception, when it was actually South Carolina's. She felt so bad, and you could tell that she deeply cared about each of us. Our Master of Ceremonies was, of course, the best. I had the privilege of eating with him three times, each by accident, and our conversations were always fun. He has a child's heart and loved spending time with us. The same was true for us with him.

Most of all, our Military Mentors were one-of-a-kind. In my bio, I wrote about my favorite singer, Sandi Patty. During our first meeting with our Military Mentor, Major Daniel Sprouse told him he was in charge of our bus and would play some music by Sandi Patty during one of our drives. Music is one of my greatest loves, and Major Sprouse spoke right to my heart. As the week went on, I grew closer and closer to all the Military Mentors, having meals with just about all of them at some point, and it was great to see them on casual nights when they were out of uniform and wearing normal clothes any of us delegates could wear. They really were just slightly older versions of us. Their perspectives were always so interesting and insightful because, at the end of the day, the mentors were hardly any different than the delegates. Even beyond this, they were some of the most impressive people I have ever met. My mentor has a Purple Heart, and somehow I didn't learn about it until the latter half of the week. Lieutenant Colonel Britney Hensley owns a real estate company in addition to her military job. That is crazy to me. They were some of the best and most incredible people I have ever met, along with the rest of the staff. I would prefer conversations with them over some of the speakers, but the speakers and events were still great.

All of our speakers were great, but many stood out. Most of all, I loved the entire Department of Agriculture (USDA). We walked into the building, and "John Deere Green" by Joe Diffie was playing. I never thought I would say this in DC, but it felt like home. The speakers went on about agriculture, rural development, and faith, and it was wonderful to listen to them discuss topics that impact me daily. All of this culminated with Dr. Alveda King. When she spoke, something about it made me happy. She got the entire program to sing "This Little Light of Mine." Once she finished, I had the privilege to thank the whole USDA for hosting us, and I had so much fun doing so. I thanked them for playing "John Deere Green" and went on about my love for agriculture. Afterward, I spoke with Dr. King. Being religious myself, we had a conversation about faith and our love for Christ, and I will never forget it. She hugged me afterward, and I felt like a bundle of joy. Once I finished speaking with her, the lady who made the event's playlist even came up and spoke to me. I feel repetitive, but it was a wonderful experience. Saturday, March 14th, was only the end of the beginning. The USSYP will forever serve as a turning point in my life for many wonderful reasons. I cannot thank the Hearst Foundations enough for this experience, and I am eager to see where these lessons lead me in life.