

Caleb Torgenson, ID – 2026

As I consider the remarkable time I spent in Washington, D.C. as a part of the 64th annual United States Senate Youth program, I am struck by both the broad and specific experiences. In trying to represent my biggest takeaways from that week, I identify three main aspects of the program and with each of those are specific examples of why those made my experience unique. These aspects are the speakers we had, the guidance of the Military Mentors, and most of all, interacting with fellow delegates.

I was aware of and anticipated the caliber of speakers which we had the privilege of hearing from, but nothing truly could have fully prepared me for all of the different ways they would make me think. The prestige, expertise, and professionalism of these speakers is unquestionable, it is the reason that many apply to the program in the first place. However, what surprised me was the level at which we were able to challenge and question our speakers. I had to constantly remind myself not to be awed by the grandeur of those we spoke to, instead emphasizing challenging those in positions of power. The most impactful moments from the lectures we attended were often not the speeches themselves, but what the speaker's responses to questions revealed about their role. It was particularly fascinating to see people like the Senators or bureaucrats who could approach controversial questions in a way that made them less divisive, as is the nature of politics. One of the most impactful speeches that I heard was the one given by former NASA administrator, Charles Bolden. He awed me with his words, reflecting perseverance, love and kindness, and most notably, hope for the future and our generation. The speakers that this program enables its delegates to not only hear from but communicate with are integral to the overall experience.

Secondly, and perhaps most surprising for me, the relationships that I formed with the Military Mentors in this program were some of the most unique connections I have made in my life. The Military Mentors not only guided delegates through the physical actions of the program, but also guided discussion in order to provoke deeper thought. I cannot do justice to every meaningful interaction that I had with the mentors, but there is one moment which I believe encapsulates my experience with them. Major Daniel Sprouse, my Military Mentor, was also the leader of coach two (the best coach) and often addressed the bus as a whole. However, one morning, he and Captain Bohlman collected all of the boys in the back of the bus to talk to them. Earlier that morning, a speaker had been asked about the male loneliness epidemic and brushed it off. However, this did not sit right with the Military Mentors and they decided to collect us, not to lecture about their view of the epidemic, but to have an open discussion about what it meant for us and how we believe it should be addressed. They also gave us advice about how to stay happy and healthy, especially when entering college which can often be isolating. The Military Mentors set a standard for leadership and for just being a good person.

Finally, arguably the most important aspect of the program, I formed many meaningful connections with my fellow delegates from across the country. These were the people who I looked to to help digest the overload of information from the speakers, to debate various topics, and to find connection as fellow Americans. I was very close with my mentor group, affectionately referring to ourselves as the "Brussel Sprouts" (a play on our mentor's name) and especially to my roommate, Saawan. However, some of my most interesting connections occurred, ironically, on the very last day. Final day festivities lasted all the way until midnight and with a 3:00am departure time from the hotel, I decided that it probably wasn't worth it to try and sleep and waited in the ballroom with some other kids before we left. With nothing to do and nearly passing out from exhaustion, I was able to reflect with some of my fellow delegates about the lasting impact the program would have on us and about life in general. All the way onto the bus and even by the time I made it to my terminal, this final discussion gave me a sense of closure on the program as a whole.

Overall, Washington Week was an experience that will be impossible to forget. From the sights to speakers, mentors to moments of connection, USSYP gave me an experience which will forever live on as a part of who I am.