

## Garrett Li, KS – 2026

If I close my eyes, I can still see the ballroom of the Mayflower Hotel. I can still hear JB's voice addressing delegates and distinguished guests, I can still taste the thick white chocolate of the Capitol dome dessert. But I know this will not last. What once took me an instant to recall now takes me seconds, seconds I am afraid will someday stretch into minutes, until all I can see when I close my eyes is the hazy void of loss. One day, I will realize I've misplaced my navy Moleskine notebook with all its doodles and journal entries; one day, the final message will be sent in my favorite USSYP group chats; one day, I'll forget the password to my Poop Map account and lose all the logs I logged along the way.

Memories fade away.

And yet, that's not entirely true. Behind every game of Imposter played on Coach 3, during that brief pause between raising a hand and asking the question, in every conversation with Military Mentors at dinner, something changed. *I* changed, slowly but surely. The first time I felt the weight of this shift for the first time was in the National Air and Space Museum, as Major General Charles Bolden began describing the vision our founding fathers had for our nation. It was their vision of a more perfect union that drove them to declare independence, their vision that had driven my parents to leave everything they'd known behind in order to emigrate to America. A "city upon a hill" vision shared by each and every single one of us. In that moment, I vowed to choose a perspective of hope, rather than cynicism. A perspective for change. Later in the week, as ABC News Senior Political Correspondent Rachel Scott talked about how important it was to move past rejections in order to be ready for future blessings, I once more felt myself changed, inspired, ready to put myself out there for as many opportunities possible no matter the number of rejections that would entail. And as Mark Shriver emphasized the importance of today's youth in politics, I was invigorated knowing that— although it's corny— we are all the future of this nation.

Reconciling the world I hope to see with the world we have now is a difficult task. But it's a task I've realized that I don't face alone. Because at its heart, the U.S. Senate Youth Program has always been about the delegates. When Brian Kamoie first asked us in those early days, "what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?", I wasn't entirely sure how to answer. And to be honest, I still don't. But I feel confident knowing that the collective wild and precious lives of our 64<sup>th</sup> delegation will someday change the world for the better. I'm so excited to see what the future has to hold for each one of us, no matter which form of service we choose to pursue.

Uniquely, that level of service was exemplified by each and every Military Mentor. I had the blessing of having Major Tony Starks as my mentor; under his leadership, the Avengers formed— *easily* the best group at the entire program (I promise I'm not biased!) I will forever miss the late-night discussions we shared in that little nook, no matter how hot it would get. I can't wait to Assemble once more in the future.

Clearly, vividly, painfully, the sights and sounds and tastes of the U.S. Senate Youth Program come back to me when I close my eyes. They are fading away. Washington Week was an inevitably ephemeral experience. But I can confidently say that being a delegate to the 64<sup>th</sup> Annual United States Senate Youth Program has changed my life.