

Ayoub Farah, MN – 2026

Today is the day I beat a Navy SEAL in an athletic endeavor. That was the mindset I had going into my fifth morning of the United States Senate Youth Program.

As I woke at 4:45 AM, laced my shoes, and prepared myself for a matchup with a 39-year-old recreational runner, there was no doubt in my mind that I would assert dominance. Fast forward one hour, and after the second set of a vigorous threshold workout, I found myself throwing up in the bathroom while Lieutenant Commander Spector comfortably held a strong pace.

At no point through the week was I the smartest in the room, most informed, most experienced, or even the fastest runner.

Whether it was sitting directly across from a strategist for the Department of State on Near East Affairs, hearing the astute and challenging questions asked by my peers, or simply taking in the gravity of my surroundings, Washington Week fundamentally altered my perception of changemaking. Collective growth, understanding, and progress start and end with humility and the ability to work as a group.

On the eve of our sixth night, after an incredible dinner, a conversation arose about the accessibility of the American Dream and the bulwarks that opposed it. What started as a conversation between three suddenly grew to one of seven, and two clear factions emerged. What makes this conversation memorable is not that we arrived at some magical middle ground solution to all of America's issues, but that we, a group of high school seniors, attempted, succeeded, and thrived in having a difficult, nonpolarized conversation about the country we all love.

Lt. Commander Spector once elegantly asserted that the most memorable aspect of Washington Week is not the speakers, locations, or resources, but your co-delegates, the changemakers of tomorrow.

It was an honor to represent the wonderful state of Minnesota in the 64th annual delegation of the USSYP and to partake in a storied program and legacy.

Future delegates, Washington Week, however cliché it might sound, is what you make of it. Use the time wisely, engage in provocative debates, push others, push yourself, and above all take the moment in, slow down, reflect, and live in the present.