

Jonas Pak-Lin, NC – 2026

At the beginning of Washington Week, each delegate is told to expect an unforgettable experience – one that is simultaneously exciting and tiring, mentally exhausting yet the intellectual thrill of a lifetime. To me, the 64th Annual United States Senate Youth Program fell nothing short of this promise.

This year placed a strong emphasis on political polarization, in fact, so much to the point that my fellow delegates will groan as they read this sentence. Yet, words cannot represent how much I was struck by the line that Charles Bolden, former NASA administrator and astronaut, opened his speech with: “You want me to talk about space. But I can’t talk about space if we don’t have a more perfect union.”

It was at this moment that I finally understood the magnitude of this statement, and perhaps the mission of the entire conference. Where else will you gather 105 of the nation’s most influential changemakers, and truly unite them? It is for this reason that the Senate Youth Program fosters the creation of a new era of government leaders, and ushers in the future of American politics.

However, it would be insufficient to say that polarization was the main takeaway of this conference. Rather, it was the courage that I left with, because it requires courage to break partisan bonds, and courage to prioritize what our nation truly needs. I believe this mindset is perfectly represented by Elizabeth Macdonough, the 6th Senate Parliamentarian, who told us that “if nobody is mad at you, you’re not doing your job right.”

It also takes courage to ignite discussion with others, and seek out alternative perspectives. From learning about West Virginia’s coal industry to discovering Alaskan spiritual beliefs, I left Washington Week with a more complete worldview.

I would now like to leave our delegates and distinguished guests with a quote that I believe sums up the true Washington Week experience. From Brian Kamoie, managing director of Deloitte: “If Chief Justice John Roberts ever offers you a donut, take it.”

While we did not in fact meet Chief Justice Roberts nor receive donuts from him, accepting the promise of Washington Week was the best decision of my life. If this opportunity arises in your life, you would be wise to accept it.