

## Alexis Thompson, ND – 2026

I was thirteen years old when politics became my primary interest. I was seventeen when serving as a U.S. Senator became my career ambition. Now, at eighteen, I'm beginning my life in public service. Where I'm from, being a young woman with interests like mine is uncommon. When describing my goal to one day hold elected office, I've long received the same response: "why would you want to do that?"

It's no secret that U.S. politics are, well, political - and more divided than ever. While I am confident in my strengths and passions, at times I have also felt the difficulty of basing my higher educational experiences and long-term plans in a field that is currently so polarized. Additionally, the geographical, ideological, and demographic factors that leave myself and others systemically disadvantaged in the political sphere can feel discouraging. For me, Washington Week was a necessary reinvigoration of hope; a bright, shining picture of what U.S. politics - and our world - will one day look like once our generation becomes the leaders we want to see.

"How have your life experiences shaped your political beliefs?" was the question asked on Day Two of the program by a fellow delegate. It was early in the morning, and my Military Mentor group was among the first to sit down around our breakfast table in the beautiful Mayflower ballroom. The conversation that transpired would become the foundation for my greatest takeaways of the week. Inspired by Bill Doherty of Braver Angels' excellent speech on political polarization the previous night, we listened to each other as we shared our stories; stories that spanned numerous vastly different topics but culminated in a shared sense of responsibility and purpose. Going around the table, it was clear to me that each of the delegates had arrived at Washington Week accompanied by unique, well-developed perspectives which I could both learn from and contribute to. Respectful, honest, inspiring; engaging in dialogue with these remarkable women was unlike anything I'd experienced in my hometown - refreshing in an indescribable way.

I attribute the immediate connection and trust our group developed to the outstanding leadership of our Military Mentor, Captain Amelia Weaver. From day one, she stood as the perfect example of humility, attentiveness, and service. Despite her many accomplishments, she actively sought to learn from us, too. Respect was absolutely mutual; spending the week together was a great privilege. Even a month after the program, our group continues to communicate - a bond that transcends locations, time zones, and busy schedules.

I would be remiss not to mention Washington Week's incredible agenda. All we learned, saw, and accomplished in just a few short days took time for me to fully process. Visiting the Supreme Court and hearing from Justice Jackson, spending time in the Capitol Rotunda, having the opportunity to meet our Senators, providing introductory remarks for the Senate Sergeant at Arms ... the list goes on. Upon my arrival home, I found every description I made to friends and family inadequate in portraying how truly impacted I felt. I am still in awe of the speaker lineup, locations visited, and perhaps most impressive, the precision and fluidity with which it all took place. It was evident how much thought, preparation, and care went into every aspect of our time in the program. In addition, we were treated wonderfully by program and hotel staff members alike. I am deeply grateful to USSYP and the Hearst Foundations for their commitment to and investment in our nation's future.

Our final day of the program at Arlington National Cemetery was especially impactful to me. After a week of listening to and learning from extraordinary individuals, from my peers to United States Senators, the gravity and solemnness of the place grounded my experiences in reality. Every one of the freedoms we enjoy are the result of sacrifices made by our armed forces. I recall a profound sense of gratitude that I believe was shared by all 105 delegates. Standing together, witnessing the ceremony at The Tomb of the Unknowns, I thought about patriotism as a shared value. Love for our country and a commitment to the sustained prosperity of its people are common threads between even the furthest ends of the political spectrum. Bridging partisan divides could begin with the recognition that we all care about the ideals upon which America was founded, despite differing approaches to realizing them.

The lessons I learned in conversing meaningfully, listening actively, and serving ethically will benefit me in my daily life and future career as a policymaker. And in addition to the hope that I've regained in American politics, I feel responsible for ensuring that it is not an empty promise. I know that with the continued work of fellow delegates and myself, one day young women will not be asked "why would you go into politics," but "how have your life experiences influenced that decision;" and be heard, supported, and empowered to make positive change - exactly the way Washington Week impacted me.