

Bridger Rivinius, ND – 2026

When I landed at Ronald Reagan National Airport, I felt intimidated by the caliber of people I was about to meet. I was just a farm boy from a small town in rural North Dakota. While I had often discussed politics and current events with adults back home, having thoughtful, in-depth conversations with peers my own age was rare.

That feeling continued when I first checked into the USSYP at the Mayflower Hotel. Seeing the passion and confidence of the other delegates was both refreshing and nerve-wracking. However, once I began engaging in small-group conversations, my nerves quickly turned into excitement. My fellow delegates showed genuine curiosity, respect, and a shared desire to learn. The level of discussion—both among delegates and from speakers—was inspiring. I found myself wanting to listen for hours, especially as many speakers offered thoughtful and practical ideas for addressing polarization in our country.

The access we were given throughout Washington, D.C. was equally impactful. Sitting in the Supreme Court courtroom, touring the National Archives during a private opening, and speaking one-on-one with our Senators made me realize the prestige and uniqueness of this program. These moments were not only memorable but deeply humbling.

What makes this program truly special, however, is the people. I initially thought of Washington Week as simply a break from school, but it became so much more. I learned more about my country—and about the people in it—than I ever expected. Hearing from leaders who encouraged civic engagement and public service challenged me to grow and to lead with greater purpose.

One speaker who stood out to me was Supreme Court Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson. Her ability to speak about complex issues in a warm, conversational way made her message especially impactful. She didn't just inform us—she connected with us.

Finally, the Military Mentors played a significant role in shaping our experience. From the beginning, they took a sincere interest in our lives, our perspectives, and our success. Their guidance, discipline, and personal stories added a meaningful dimension to the week that I will not forget.

Looking back, my initial nervousness was completely unwarranted. Washington Week was not just an opportunity—it was a transformative leadership experience that challenged me, inspired me, and will stay with me for years to come.