

Isabella Baldisseri, OR – 2026

Five hours of nonstop discussion had passed before the plane landed. My co-delegate and I had unearthed just about everything there was to learn about a stranger, from sports to college applications to politics to hobbies. Of course, once we finally reached D.C., we were informed that we would be unable to deboard for another 90 minutes. Backdropped by the hilariously random sound of a ukulele from a passenger behind us, we sat there and kept talking in excited murmurs about what was to come.

Personally, I could not have anticipated just how inspiring the United States Senate Youth Program would be. From questioning top federal leaders like Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Dan Caine, to being feet away from Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson, to shaking hands with Senator Jeff Merkley and Senator Ron Wyden, the surrealness was overwhelming at times. Stepping into the Pentagon, looking up at the marbled figures carved into the ceiling of the U.S. Supreme Court, and touring the White House felt like moments I never imagined possible.

The most impactful part, however, was not as glamorous or exclusive. It was sitting at a round table, pulling up extra chairs as my fellow delegates and I leaned into respectful, informed, and civil discourse. Students from across the United States, each carrying different political perspectives, came together in a way that felt both intricate and deeply intentional, a model for what American dialogue could be now and in the future. We spoke about the communities we represented, wrestled with identity politics, debated the messages of our speakers, and even speculated about potential 2028 presidential candidates.

That is not to say those conversations were easy. At times, they were uncomfortable, even unpredictable. There were moments where I disagreed deeply, where I felt the instinct to respond quickly or defend my perspective. What made those exchanges meaningful was the shared commitment to remain at the table, to keep asking questions, to keep listening, and to resist the urge to reduce complex issues into simple conclusions. While the grandeur of the spaces we visited represents the structure of our democracy, it is conversations like those that sustain it. They reminded me that public service is not just about proximity to power, but about how one chooses to engage with others in its pursuit.

As I look forward, I carry with me a clearer understanding of what it means to lead. I want to approach policy with the discipline to ask better questions. I want to remember that meaningful change requires both conviction and humility. Most importantly, I want to ensure that spaces where decisions are made remain accessible to people from varying walks of life. USSYP did far more than introduce me to America's leaders; it reshaped how I intend to practice leadership myself.