

Zev Wacks, OR – 2026

“The most important thing you’re ever going to have in your life is people,” General Caine told us in his address at the Pentagon.

My interactions during the U.S. Senate Youth Program generally followed the same model: the obligatory “what state are you from?” and “where are you going to college?”, sometimes followed by an impromptu and rapid-fire discussion about some policy issue, and more often than not ending with a new inside joke. What started as 104 awkward conversations with strangers quickly thawed into a group of 105 friendly, business-professional acquaintances.

I first felt this on my cross-country voyage with my co-delegate. Over the course of a 10-hour journey, we met at an airport gate and got to know each other during our flight, but we truly became friends over the 90 minutes that our plane waited on the tarmac in DCA when another passenger sang and played their ukulele in an effort to lighten the mood (it had the opposite effect).

There was a similar thaw between us, the delegates, and our excellent Military Mentors. In the first couple of days, we hesitated to ask sensitive political questions, but we later realized that our mentors were more than willing to engage in honest, albeit careful, discussions about nearly any topic. I’ll never forget the excitement of speaking with Major Cale Barber following addresses from General Caine, U.S. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and Secretary Hegseth in the Pentagon. What started as a reserved “what did you think?” became an involved talk about our differences in opinions about the addresses as we enjoyed a tour of the Pentagon. I’m not sure if I’ll ever be able to casually recall having a lively debate in the Pentagon ever again.

I don’t think that our relationships and mentorships could have formed so rapidly if it hadn’t been for the shock and honor of physically attending the program. We often forgot that we were essentially strangers to one another when we focused on the awe-inspiring words of figures like Major General Charles Bolden, Philanthropist Mark Kennedy Shriver, and Supreme Court Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson, as well as the grandeur of settings like the Lincoln Memorial and U.S. Capitol. It was easy to find common ground on the chilling earth of the Arlington National Cemetery, where fallen servicemembers are honored with rows and rows of the same modest headstones, just as it was natural to respectfully debate in the Supreme Court, a center for meticulous interpretation and (usually) courteous advocacy.

There’s still so much more that I wish I could include in this reflection. I’m so grateful for the friendships that formed in the last eight hours of the program; our outstanding photographers, Erin Lubin and Jakub Mosur; each and every Military Mentor who led and inspired in their own way; all the speakers who shared our patriotism and optimism; the accommodating staff at the Mayflower hotel; and of course the Hearst Foundations for making it all possible.

But most of this could be reasonably inferred from reading a description of the program. Of course, we all made new friends and had ideological debates and learned new things at a large, selective program based in the nation’s capital. It was the unapologetically candid, silly, and childish moments that were unforeseen and defining: the karaoke performances (some beautiful, some less so), the volatile games of imposter, the repetitive inside jokes, the piano singalongs, the vlogs filmed on someone’s phone, the impressions of famous political figures, the ridiculous pictures, the nicknames, the all-nighter on the last night of the program. At the end of the program, we were still kids, perhaps better-educated and better-connected, and definitely eager to serve.