

Hayley Cunningham, SD – 2026

Inside the Institutions of Democracy

My week at the United States Senate Youth Program was one of the most transformative experiences of my life—a rare opportunity to step inside the institutions I had long admired and to interact directly with the leaders who shape our nation.

From the very first morning, the program balanced inspiration with immersion. Over a breakfast of waffles, fruit, and orange juice, I began to connect with peers from all over the country who shared my passion for public service. That same day, we traveled to Mount Vernon, where the view of the Potomac River stretched endlessly. As we peered into the rooms the Washingtons once inhabited, we saw their legacy come to life in the details of their home and its history. Later, at the National Portrait Gallery, I found myself reflecting on the individuals who had defined American history. Their faces were a reminder to us that leadership is both deeply personal and profoundly impactful. The evening concluded with a Military Mentor presentation, followed by dinner of delicious lasagna and meaningful conversations.

Just as I thought it couldn't get better, Day Two brought us to the heart of American democracy: the United States Capitol. Standing in that space, I delivered a speech for the Secretary of the Senate, an experience that I will never forget. We continued to the Library of Congress for lunch, surrounded by the vast knowledge that bolsters our government. Later, we visited the Supreme Court and had the extraordinary opportunity to meet Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson. Hearing her perspective on the Constitution and her journey to the bench made the judiciary feel both more accessible and more consequential. We ended the night with Capitol-shaped dessert and a game of spoons.

On the third day, we explored the foundations of our nation's records and its global presence. At the National Archives, I stood before documents I had only ever read about, their significance only magnified in person. Our visit to the Department of State deepened our understanding of diplomacy and international relations, while the monuments we toured served as powerful symbols of national ideals and struggles. The day concluded with visits to NASA and the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum, where innovation and exploration took center stage, reminding us that public service extends far beyond politics alone.

Day Four shifted our focus to domestic policy, beginning with the Department of Agriculture. Learning about rural policy resonated deeply with me, particularly given my own South Dakotan background. Later, meeting with Senators offered an unfiltered look into the realities of legislative work—both the challenges and the compromises.

The fifth day was perhaps the most surreal. Touring the White House brought history into the present. Then, meeting with Senator Baldwin allowed for a candid discussion about leadership and advocacy. A Capitol tour reinforced the significance of the space where laws are crafted, and the unforgettable ambassador dinner that evening highlighted the global dimension of public service, as we engaged with perspectives from beyond our borders.

Our final day was both solemn and inspiring. At Arlington National Cemetery, witnessing the ceremony at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier was a profound reminder of the cost of freedom and the weight of national service. The precision and respect displayed in that moment left a lasting impression. We then toured the Pentagon and shared a final lunch, concluding the program with a meeting that tied together themes of defense, leadership, and responsibility.

Throughout the week, I was not only exposed to the inner workings of government but also challenged to consider my own role within it. Each conversation, each site, and each experience reinforced the idea that public service is not confined to a single path, it is a commitment to making a difference, however one chooses to serve.

As I left the program, I carried with me more than just memories. I left with a renewed sense of purpose, a deeper understanding of my country, and a strengthened belief that I, too, can contribute to shaping its future.