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The United States Senate Youth Program Washington Week was a transformative experience that opened doors and opportunities I had never encountered before. It is one of those rare, once-in-a-lifetime experiences that will continue to shape my future. One of the most impactful speakers was Mr. Doherty from Braver Angels. From the very first day, he set the tone for the entire week by emphasizing the importance of understanding over argument. He challenged us to ask “tell me more” instead of arguing with others, and his message will stay with me for years to come as I navigate polarization and division. His perspective stayed with me throughout the week and shaped how I approached every conversation and experience.

Whether hearing from Senator Katie Britt, Secretary Pete Hegseth, Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson, or Senate officials, I approached each opportunity with intention and openness. Walking through places like the Pentagon, the White House, the Senate, and the Supreme Court, I began to understand that these buildings are not just institutions—they are filled with history, purpose, and responsibility. Being present with an open mind allowed me to absorb far more than I ever could have otherwise.

Another speaker who deeply impacted me was Rachel Scott, an ABC Congressional Correspondent. Throughout the week, discussions about polarization and media bias came up repeatedly. Many perspectives were shared, often critical of the media’s role in division. However, hearing directly from someone in journalism allowed me to see the other side. Ms. Scott taught me the difference between true journalism and sensationalized media. She explained that responsible journalism is rooted in asking the difficult but necessary questions in order to report on the facts. I realized it is not fair to generalize entire groups. While similarities exist, no two people or organizations are the same. Understanding requires looking at issues on an individual level rather than through broad assumptions, which directly connects back to Mr. Bill Doherty’s message: understanding begins when we choose to listen.

Some of my favorite interactions were with the other delegates. While all 105 of us shared common interests in government, each individual brought their own unique perspectives to the program. The conversations during meals, on bus rides, and in informal moments allowed me to connect with everyone on a personal level. These relationships reminded me that leadership is not only about engaging with those in positions of power, but also about learning from peers.

Equally impactful were our Military Mentors. Representing nearly every branch of the Armed Forces, they provided invaluable insight into service, sacrifice, and leadership. Hearing their personal stories and understanding why they chose to serve deepened my respect for their commitment. More importantly, building personal connections with them allowed me to see beyond the uniform and appreciate them as people. Their willingness to dedicate time away from their duties and families to guide and support us made a lasting impression on me.

Washington Week was an experience I will never forget. While it is impossible to capture every moment—the conversations, the questions, the history within each room—I will carry its lessons forever. More than anything, this experience reinforced the importance of being an informed, thoughtful, and engaged citizen. I hope that more youth will seek out opportunities like this. Whether through the United States Senate Youth Program or in their own communities, it is essential to understand government and be an informed citizen. By approaching our world with open minds and a willingness to listen, we can become better leaders and better citizens.