

Daniel Mann, VT – 2026

To visit Washington at this political moment would hold significance for anyone. Yet what the United States Senate Youth Program's sixty-fourth delegation experienced surpassed even that. Stepping inside the White House and the Pentagon and speaking with those at the center of American power set us, if only for a moment, within history as it was being made.

With the country deeply divided and the world on the edge of war, there could hardly be a more consequential time to participate in this program. In such a moment, I wondered how delegates with opposing perspectives would engage, and whether the program's commitment to bipartisanship could truly hold. I arrived expecting division to define the week, but early on, that expectation dissolved. Guided by Bill Doherty, we examined the roots and consequences of political polarization. We also considered the work required to move beyond it, ensuring that party lines did not dictate whom we spoke to or how we listened.

Several moments from the week stand out in my memory, two of which took place in the Kennedy Caucus Room, where senators sought answers after the Titanic sank, probed Pearl Harbor, and confronted the crisis of Watergate. The room itself is a reminder that the country has faced moments of division not unlike this one and found its way through. In that storied space, I had the chance to introduce Senate Parliamentarian Elizabeth MacDonough, who on January 6, 2021, helped safeguard the certification of the presidential election as the Capitol was breached, and to meet Senator Bernie Sanders, whose nearly four decades in Congress amount to one of the most sustained arguments in modern American political life that this country must answer to the many, not merely the few.

Later, we visited the Pentagon as American military power reshaped the Middle East. In the days leading up to our arrival in Washington, rising tensions had cast real doubt on whether this part of the program would proceed. Yet it did, and there we sat before Secretary of War Pete Hegseth and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Dan Caine, men directing that power as its consequences exceeded their control. Our later visit to Arlington National Cemetery ensured we understood what those consequences ultimately look like.

What remained with me most was not the speakers we met, nor the lessons they imparted, formative as both were. Instead, it was the relationships our delegation built and the conversations we shared, which challenged and often changed my thinking, and ultimately left me with a deeper confidence in the country's future. My fellow delegates compelled me to see a life of public service not as an aspiration set apart from me, but as a commitment I intend to fulfill alongside them. President John F. Kennedy, who signed the United States Senate Youth Program into law in 1962, told its first delegation that every American owes a duty to sustain the country through public service. After a week in the White House, the Pentagon, and the Senate, alongside a delegation of the nation's most promising young leaders and in the presence of senior U.S. officials, that obligation now feels unmistakably my own.