

Andrew Sandweiss, ME - 2015

"Why do people dislike this town so much?"

It's the question founder of C-SPAN Brian Lamb asked to our United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP) Class of 2015, about Washington D.C., on the final full day of Washington Week. As he weaved around the ornate ballroom of the Mayflower Hotel, answers from fellow delegates flowed in. While each of us could answer the question about why nearly 80 percent of the public (according to a Pew Research Study) mistrusted D.C., it prompted another question in my mind.

How do we get people to like this town again?

As I played with the thoughts of regaining trust and fixing our government, I suddenly realized that the entire week at the United States Senate Youth Program had accumulated to an answer.

The incredible speakers I had the opportunity to meet over the course of seven days - from senators, to judges, to justices, to administrators, to presidents-were outstanding. Each leader we met gave us advice and knowledge invaluable to all of us - but as mentioned earlier, I found a common theme: how to restore trust and productivity in our government.

Administrator Bolden, one of my favorite speakers of the week, showed us how to regain Americans' trust in government: by simply telling what the government is doing. He stated that technologically, we are the leaders of the world. He went on to explain the NASA's mission to Mars, its outreach on climate change and its commitment to STEM education. As Administrator Bolden went through this list of tasks NASA was completing, I was enthralled. To know that our government was funding (for the most part) this important research gave me an undeniable pride in our nation. The talk given at the agency's headquarters was one of the most compelling of Washington Week and it too connected back to trust in government. If more people were aware of what programs such as NASA were doing, I believe our conceptions of Washington would change.

Thursday's lunch at the Senate Hart Building was an unforgettable event. While the view and food were both fantastic (we ate all of our lunches in a variety of spectacular settings), the two speakers at our lunch were what elevated the experience to a whole new level. It was that day when we were able to see two senators who were also two USSYP alumni. Senator Cory Gardner of Colorado and Senator Susan Collins of Maine (my home state!) symbolized what it meant to be a good public servant. Their recollections of their time in USSYP and as senators gave inspiration to everyone in the room and again brought up a central theme. Senator Gardner said something that I will never forget: "It's hard to hate up close." This phrase brought up the issue of a dysfunctional government-of party gridlock and polarization-that gives Washington D.C. such a bad reputation. What the words made me realize was that the dirty campaigns, name-calling, hate-filled speech against politicians from other politicians could be averted if people were physically together. Up close, politics would become more civilized and hopefully more productive.

The answers to how to regain trust and fix our government were not limited to the men and women behind the podium. While the names of our official speakers were printed on the 53rd annual United States Senate Youth Program brochure, I came to find that in reality, there were 103 unofficial speakers: the other delegates. With them, I learned about our nation from all possible viewpoints. In my conversations there were agreements, arguments, but above all: civility. Senator Gardner's aforementioned statement was proven well. The discussions we had amongst ourselves were respectful, but informative and productive. If Congress could show the American people similar conversations on national policy, D.C.'s reputation, and its productivity, would increase significantly.

The president of the United States made a lasting impression on me. Being in the White House and listening to the President Obama was an extraordinary moment. President Obama discussed the issues facing our world, from ISIS to climate change, but he, too, leaned towards discussion of how to fix our government. The most memorable phrase from his surreal speech was when he told us, "don't worry about who you want to be, worry about what you want to do," suggesting that some of those in Congress are there to be senators or congressmen, not to help their constituents. A reduction in those who strive for a position instead of service would be beneficial to the country - a lesson I was able to learn directly from the leader of the free world.

Finally, there was Senator Joe Manchin III, though he was our first nightly speaker. His statements gave a lasting message intended directly for us. He told us to diffuse the knowledge gained at the United States Senate Youth Program. He told us to get people involved back at home, to get our friends, family, and acquaintances familiar with our government - to give back. By the end of the week, having learned the many answers to how we can get our government working again, I finally understood what he meant. Fixing our nation was not just a political issue, but a personal one. To get people to have conversations like the ones we held on the mezzanine of the Mayflower Hotel, to get people to interact with their leaders like we had done, to get people to rise against apathy and take full charge of their individual right to participation in our great nation - that is what I realized that Friday morning with Mr. Lamb. It's what I realized has to be done to fix our country.

When one trip ends, another one always begins. My memories of the United States Senate Youth Program will remain with me eternally. The friends I made, the leaders I listened to, and the interaction I had with our nation's capital were almost unbelievable, and when it ended, I'll admit it was tough. However, I remember the suggestions from Senator Manchin. With the advice absorbed from the speakers throughout the week, I understood what I had to do-I understood where to go next. My trip to Washington, graciously sponsored by the Hearst Foundations, had ended, but I knew that because of the United States Senate Youth Program, my trip into public service had only just begun.

PEW RESEARCH STUDY: Renee, Montagne, and Inskeep Steve. "Majority Of Respondents Don't Trust Washington." *Patient and Provider Perspectives*. NPR, 19 Apr. 2010. Web. 18 Apr. 2015.