

Cameron D. Leahy, MO - 2015

“Polarization” was a major buzzword in dialogue about government during Washington Week. Every single delegate embarked on our journey with an underlying distrust of our seemingly broken system of government. Such frustrations were understandable considering amplified media attention on low approval-ratings and omnipresent gridlock within the government. Though somewhat initially justified, delegates like myself quickly realized that our pessimism was unwarranted in many ways. Through conversation with real public servants and fellow aspiring leaders, we gained insight into the motivations and methodology behind government.

Parliamentarian of the United States Senate Elizabeth MacDonough was one of the first speakers of the week, and her words were among the most heartening to me. Her commitment to ensuring the proper function of a bickering legislative body is remarkable and exemplary of selfless politics. Another speaker who helped me and other delegates to dispel some concerns of infighting was Senate Historian Donald Ritchie. I was completely in-the-dark about the history of Presidential-Congressional relationships until his fascinating dissection of several decades of leadership. These contemporary and historical examples of bipartisanship and service were unique insights into American government that could only be furnished by the U.S. Senate Youth Program.

In addition to interaction with current leaders in government, optimism was constructed through dialogue amongst delegates. No other program could offer such a diverse array of views on American society, all backed-up with youthful passion and amateur experience. I was thrilled to be able to share my views with other delegates, especially in regards to major issues close to my home. I found motivation to drive social progress similar to my own in a staggering number of delegates, in stark contrast to many interactions in my hometown. More importantly, however, I was challenged to listen to the views of others. With each conversation, I found more and more reason to appreciate the “other side” of the political spectrum. I left Washington Week with more confidence in many of my own core beliefs, and with a newfound understanding of opposing viewpoints.

The aforementioned reasons for delegates like me to have confidence in government are powerful, but words cannot describe the general atmosphere of USSYP. The electric feeling of being in the most powerful places on Earth, amongst leaders of the present and future, is unlike any I have experienced in my life. When I looked around me I simply *knew* that the places and people I saw would be instrumental in the future progress of American society. The concrete faith in my generation that I established during Washington Week will never fade from my worldview.

At the forefront of our political landscape is the idea that animosity between ideological camps has brought government progress to a grinding halt. I can now say with certainty that this notion is largely untrue, and undermines public opinion. The truth is that every single day public servants go to work in Washington, D.C. to try to make the country a better place. It was only through behind-the-scenes conversations, and backstage access that I was able to grasp this idea. Sharing these once-in-a-lifetime moments with young leaders full of talent and determination only served to make my own passion for public service grow exponentially. I am forever indebted to The Hearst Foundations for renewing my optimism and trust in the stability of the United States and our government.