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A group of nine, strangers except for their program-issued nametags, shuffles towards baggage claim. Two 6-foot-plus Marines stand waiting for them, equipped with a full documentary crew. Welcome to the United States Senate Youth Program.

My trip to Washington, D.C. was equal parts exciting and overwhelming, as indicated from the second I left the plane. Memories of meeting government stars like President Obama and eating a five star meal in the same room as the Constitution have no price tag. Receiving my own American flag flown over the Capitol filled me with patriotism and ambition. The lasting impact of this trip for me, however, will be the new picture of federal government I received.

Julie Adams, the Secretary of the Senate, said that the media portrays Washington as a place of negativity and drama, but Capitol Hill is really all about building relationships. This caught me a bit off guard, as I too believed that people scream at and backstab one another for corrupt purposes in Washington. But I noticed as the week went on that many of our esteemed speakers didn't refer to the government as 'government'—it was 'public service.' And this, of course, is what our government is truly about or, at least, should be. But many Americans feel this sentiment is lost today with the deep partisanship plaguing our nation.

When all of us delegates were interviewed by C-SPAN, Brian Lamb asked us where we got our news, and many answered, "The BBC." When asked why, many delegates replied BBC has less bias than the news we see when channel-flipping. Whether you watch MSNBC or Fox, most Americans would agree you would get a warped viewpoint. BBC covers American news more accurately because they can be objective and have no personal stake in our domestic policies. As delegates, many guests like Mr. Lamb reminded us to hang on to our objective view of politics—because keeping personal bias out of policy will ensure the next generation will have a more cooperative government.

Colorado Senator Cory Gardner, an alumni of Senate Youth, reminded us that "It's hard to hate up close." He acknowledged the deep thread of partisanship running through the government and constituents, but reminded us once again that building relationships is key. When working with his fellow senators, he can't hate someone for proposing a feasible idea just because it clashes with his personal philosophy. This, he reminded us, is where we come in as future leaders. Negating the hatred and political polarization present today requires that we inform ourselves and make sure we consider the humanity and rationale behind decisions made in Washington. Discussing issues from all angles creates an informed constituency that can influence their representatives in government.

Putting 104 politically-minded teenagers in a room together for hours on end results in exactly what Senator Gardner was talking about: in-depth, balanced political discussions. What shocked me was that despite the different regions of the nation and their varying degrees of blue and red, we as a class of delegates discussed the most controversial issues (death penalty, immigration, abortion, voting rights) with respect and open minds. We didn't even "agree to disagree" but had a genuine consideration of different points of view. In this religiously, racially, and economically diverse group of people, we were exposed to new angles of an issue we had never considered before. I can confidently say the 104 of us came up with plans to solve a slew of government problems just by respectfully considering each other's views and, ultimately, building relationships based on a person's desire to better our nation, not just on their political party.

I will always remember the electric silence in the room when Senator Joe Manchin told us, "Nobody cares how much you know until they know how much you care." Our government may be politically polarized, but ignoring our role in government or criticizing everything it does will not make the issues go away. What I learned in Washington was not just insider secrets from government VIPs but was advice that applies to all areas of life: open your mind and place the best interest of your fellow men at heart. With new friends from across the nation, I have confidence in the future of our government and confidence that the American flag now hanging on my wall will continue to inspire pride, freedom, and change for years to come.