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I consider myself very blessed to have been able to participate in the 53rd annual United States Senate Youth Program. It was an experience that changed my perspective on public service, career possibilities, government, issues, and policies. This essay is challenging to write because it is difficult to adequately describe how significant the experiences were and the affect they have had on me.

One important lesson I took away is that while it is always important to have goals, aspirations, and plans, we must be assertive and flexible: we have to be willing to take advantage of unexpected opportunities, and sometimes we need to be the ones to knock on the door of opportunity ourselves. It seems that every leader we met said that they had never envisioned themselves being exactly where they are today. They all expressed that they began their careers with a desire to serve America. As they took advantage of various opportunities to get involved with what they were passionate about and applied a diligent work ethic, while continually expanding their knowledge. These passionate people obtained prominent positions in public service and now have the ability to elicit positive change in the nation.

I believe that all of us, as participants in Washington Week, want to serve America in one way or another, whether that is through public service or developing medicinal breakthroughs or enlightening young minds as teachers. Many of us do not yet know how we want to serve America, but after Washington Week we can be confident that we will find positions and responsibilities which will allow us to have significant impact upon this great nation in which we live.

I was particularly touched when the speakers talked about their own personal failures and challenges. Major Garrett told us that he received 67 rejection letters from potential employers, and he was the only one in his class who walked across the stage at graduation without a job lined up. It was at this point in his life where he learned about overcoming challenges, preserving hope and faith in a bright future, and becoming adaptable to unexpected circumstances. His success today has proven to me that failure is neither fatal nor final if I choose to press forward, work hard, and adapt my goals and plans without becoming discouraged if I am not where I originally envisioned myself.

Another compelling speaker was Justice Breyer. He told us, "If you don't participate, then the Constitution won't work." How accurate this statement is. I have been concerned for quite some time with the apathy of youth, and even much of the adult population, concerning civic engagement. Since attending Washington Week and discussing the importance of civic engagement with 103 other youth who also feel passionate about this, I have improved my ability to advocate for and defend the importance of being civically engaged. I was grateful to meet other students who recognize the importance of America's youth in shaping the future of the United States.

There was a noticeable quality of affability and congeniality in Senators Susan Collins and Cory Gardner, graduates of the United States Senate Youth Program. Senator Collins called on us to elevate the civility and respect with which we treat each other. I believe that my experience at Washington Week has taught me these principles. Although I was with 103 other students whose backgrounds, beliefs, and ideals often varied widely from mine, I had a wonderful time getting to know the other delegates and drawing on common ground to develop sincere, lasting friendships. As members of the 53rd annual United States Senate Youth Program, we demonstrated that we *can* show civility, compromise (without compromising principle), and compassion towards each other, regardless of our differences, and that we can work together to achieve more thorough understanding. I believe that through this program we learned how to come together despite differences and avoid practices that lead to a constant discussion topic at USSYP: polarization.

My love for my country increased exponentially throughout the week. The continual interaction with the Military Mentors was one of the biggest highlights of the week, a highlight I had not necessarily anticipated prior to coming. The Military Mentors were some of the most impressive people I have met: not just in their devotion to the nation or to academic achievement, but in their character. They are caring, sincere, and self-disciplined, and these are traits which have enabled them to accomplish so much. I was inspired by each of them, and my gratitude and appreciation for the servicemen and servicewomen who devote their lives to the cause of America deepened.

As I thought about all the people who willingly devote their lives to a cause greater than themselves - the cause of America - I began to think more deeply about what the cause of America is, was, and will be. I was particularly moved while visiting the memorials and monuments. While in the Jefferson Memorial, I read the words of Jefferson:

*God who gave us life gave us liberty. Can the liberties of a nation be secure when we have removed a conviction that these liberties are the gift of God?... Nothing is more certainly written in the book of fate than that these people are to be free.*

I thought about this statement, about how Jefferson himself did not live to see all Americans be granted freedom in his lifetime. Yet, he and those who created the Constitution laid the groundwork for this ideal by creating a law of the land which could be modified to more fully secure freedoms for its future citizens. He promoted and defended his vision in word and pen so that one day it could be realized.

The next day, as we entered the Lincoln Memorial, I realized that Jefferson's vision, representative of many Americans in his time, had not been forgotten. As I looked at the statue of Abraham Lincoln and remembered his legacy - how he worked tirelessly to abolish slavery and unify the nation - I realized that each generation has contributed to the fulfillment of Jefferson's vision, and that each generation has a role to play in championing individual freedoms and rights. As I stood next to the famous site on the Lincoln Memorial where Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. offered his iconic speech, I saw further fulfillment of the vision of freedom for all Americans.

I pondered which visions are yet to be fulfilled in America, which visions we must work to further, the visions which are in jeopardy today, and those visions which we, as future leaders, will establish. The history of the United States is one of resilience. It is one which seeks to find truth, to find and to do right, and to do away with injustice. Past generations have committed themselves to defending and fighting for freedoms, and future generations will be expected to do the same. Generations of Americans have strived to make America a country where anyone can realize the "American Dream," where we can use our God-given talents and abilities and our knowledge to carve out for ourselves and our posterity a more glorious future. It will be up to us, as future leaders, to continue the fulfillment of this vision, and after attending Washington Week, I am confident that we will.