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Groucho Marx once defined politics as "the art of looking for trouble, finding it everywhere, diagnosing it incorrectly, and applying the wrong remedy". In an age where Congress is hyperpartisan, dysfunctional, and less popular than head lice, colonoscopies, and the music of Nickelback, the divide between the people and the government has perhaps never been greater. From big money in politics to stalled immigration reform and ever-escalating political polarization, it seems as though Marx's words still ring resoundingly true today. For a long time I, like many of my fellow Americans, have thought of Congress as a grandstanding, bought-and-sold, and gridlocked national embarrassment - that is, until I had the chance to be a delegate for my state for a life-changing week in Washington, D.C. The rare, once-in-a-lifetime opportunity granted to me and 103 of my newest friends by the Hearst Foundation will change one's views on the legislative branch and turn the harshest of political cynics into a sunny-eyed optimist intent on serving this country.

After being selected as one of the two delegates for Wisconsin (the other being the amazingly fantastic Mara Matovich), I traveled to D.C. on March 7th not knowing what to expect from the program. Often underestimating - or as President Bush would say, "misunderestimating"- the quality of speakers and sightseeing locales, I was constantly surprised by the "wow factor" of my USSYP experiences. From Court of Appeals Judge Robert Henry reflecting on the importance of wolf preservation to Senator Joe Manchin making an impassioned call to action for bipartisanship, every speaker intrigued, captivated, and motivated me to be more than a passive observer of politics - rather, to be a dutiful and engaged citizen. As Senator Manchin more eloquently put it, "people won't care how much you know until they know how much you care." In the comprehensive experience provided by the Hearst Foundations, the USSYP Class of 2015 got to see in one week what many will never see in a lifetime - from dinner with the Declaration of Independence to the political nerd's version of a red carpet at the Kennedy Caucus room Senate reception (I have the paparazzi-esque pictures of Elizabeth Warren and Rand Paul to prove it). Yet nothing, of course, can prepare you for meeting the big man himself: President Obama. The unparalleled highlight of the week was seeing the president stride down the East Wing's hallway with his trademark smooth confidence - into a room of 104 awestruck juniors and seniors and crack a joke about Congress. Sometimes, even the Leader of the Free World calls them like he sees them.

Surprisingly, my best memories from the program have nothing to do with the sightseeing but more to do with cavalcade of characters I met. From the first day onward, I was amazed by the diversity of life experiences and personalities of the other delegates. To my surprise, talking about politics was an icebreaker for conversation, while heated debate would erupt over whether "The Colbert Report" trumped "The Nightly Show." From high-stakes games of Uno and Cards Against Humanity to a no-holds-barred dance-off in the Mayflower's Ballroom, seemingly mundane experiences transcended our political differences and brought us closer as a group (note to self: take Harry Reid and Mitch McConnell to a rave). Whether it was the 1 AM debates with roommates or the million-and-one selfies at D.C.'s most famous monuments (Colorado's Brandon Lee has now taken up the majority of my phone's photo storage), the friendships I've made at USSYP will last longer than a bipartisan coalition in Congress.

What will stick most with me the most about Washington Week is how my experience with the Military Mentors gave me greater perspective and appreciation for those who serve in the armed forces. My group's Military Mentor, Captain MacDougall (or "Captain Mac"- his officially-sanctioned nickname), was an endearing blend of expected strictness and unexpectedly wry wit. Throughout the week, he'd fulfill a variety of roles to broaden our USSYP experience - from coach bus tour guide to etiquette instructor to wisecracking jokester. Among his many memorable tidbits of wisdom were a resounding no to the possibility of a "Presidential Space Shuttle" and a gentle reminder that getting too close to President Obama during the White House visit would not only be a forfeiture of the scholarship, but also a "likely

forfeiture of your life." Captain MacDougall inspired us not only through his down-to-earth nature, but also through his captivating depth. Whenever our group would inquire about his military service, he was happy to share his accounts of his tours of duty in Iraq and Afghanistan, explaining his role as part of a greater struggle to bring stability to war-torn nations. Most poignantly, Captain Mac reminded us of the importance of service to one's country and the fragility of life when, at the end of the week, he shared that he had lost some good friends in a recent Army helicopter crash. Through Captain Mac, I gained a greater appreciation for the brave men and women who fearlessly serve our country around the globe. This appreciation truly affected me when our group visited Arlington National Cemetery on the Friday of Washington Week. While I had often glanced over pictures of Arlington in history textbooks, pictures paled in comparison to the magnitude of the cemetery in person. From President Kennedy's final resting place to the scores of graves for fallen service members from our nation's wars to the changing of the guard at the Tomb of the Unknowns, Arlington National Cemetery made the sacrifice of duty all the more striking and clear to me. Perhaps that is the most valuable part of my experience in USSYP - a chance to see Arlington National Cemetery and understand the sacrifices made by those who have served in uniform. That chance and drive to serve - whether in uniform or in public service - is stronger within me now.

Former Vice President Dan Quayle was once quoted as saying, "If we don't succeed, we run the risk of failure". While Mr. Quayle's words may seem like your better-than-average gaffe, his foot-in-mouth moment underlies a serious point about politics - today's system is broken and falling apart. The rise of partisanship, lobbying, and discord threatens to tear our nation apart. Luckily, if the future of public service is anything like the USSYP Class of 2015, America is in good hands. Should you happen to be a prospective USSYP applicant (or perhaps, a future delegate yourself) and are reading this essay to gain insight into how to prepare for the program, I can only offer one piece of advice - don't. You can research, cram-file, and non-creepily stalk information on the speakers and delegates at Washington Week, but in the end, USSYP is more seared into your brain than it is seared in your delegate notebook (and I should know- I lost mine!). Treasure each moment, whether you're in the Supreme Court's chambers or on the 6th floor of Mayflower Hotel playing Uno with friends far beyond the lights-out time (always use the buddy system!). While an unspoken aspect of the people you meet may be their imposingly incredible academic achievements (a particular delegate, I'm certain, averaged 2 Ivy League acceptances per week), take the words of President Obama to heart: "Focus not on who you want to be, but what you want to do". The aspirations of the delegates I met ranged from public school teacher to medical researcher, but all had a common desire to serve their communities and make their country better. I was fortunate enough to be elected as one of two closing delegate speakers for the program by my amazingly talented peers, and created a collaborative presentation featuring Elijah Lutz's dead-on impersonation of Major Cox, Brandon Lee's tongue-in-cheek references, Justin Shapiro's golden voice, Will DiGravio's deadpan humor, and my personal lord and savior, Trevor Owens. Without a doubt, the friends you will make at Washington Week will make the USSYP experience unforgettable. '

I cannot thank the Hearst Foundations enough for this amazing opportunity. By the week's closing ceremonies, as 104 delegates treasure the last time they will eat the Mayflower's delicious cornbread and decadent deserts, USSYP will have instilled within you a greater appreciation and desire for public service. And in an era of polarization and partisanship, that may be the greatest unifying cause for optimism.

Or, to quote Dan Quayle, "the future will be better tomorrow".