

Andrew Figueiredo, KS – 2016

It has been over a month and I can still barely believe that I had the chance to experience Washington Week. The experience continues to sink in each time I revisit one of the fantastic memories I made in D.C. USSYP was surreal, magical, and transformative to say the least. Never did I expect to have such an incredible experience in my life, let alone as a politically active 18 year old. Washington Week was by far the best week of my life.

I could easily write page after page recounting all of the enjoyable experiences, important lessons, and hilarious inside jokes of Washington Week, but I find it perhaps most important to focus on a few particularly telling anecdotes. On the day we all arrived at The Mayflower Hotel, it was already obvious that this was going to be a fantastic week. Making the rounds from table to table and introducing myself, I got a feel for the sheer brilliance exuded by my fellow delegates. I was thoroughly impressed by each and every person I met at Washington Week. From leaders of nonprofits to star athletes to elected school board members, USSYP delegates are already leaders in their respective communities. I'm so excited to see where everybody ends up! Just by having introductory conversations with my fellow delegates, I was able to gain a greater appreciation for the immensely diverse backgrounds represented at Washington Week. We all grew up with different experiences, different opportunities, and frankly, different cultures. Our political beliefs were worlds apart in some cases, but this never hampered communication. Rather, our ideological differences drove engaging conversation. It became evident to me very early on that each of us was going to take from this experience a greater understanding of what America embodies.

Another moment that particularly stood out to me was when President Barack Obama walked into the room where we stood, waiting. We have all seen the president on TV, but I could not fathom the fact that he was confidently strutting down the hallway towards us. It was such an impressive, moving sight that I stood there, a huge smile plastered on my face, flanked by tears of joy. Here was the leader of the free world, right in front of us. His insights not just into politics, but life, will stay with me forever. One of my favorite lines was when the president told us, "Bipartisanship for the sake of bipartisanship is not often effective." This single line sums up the balance needed between principled leadership and compromise, which I think is critically important to good governance. This is a lesson I am sure to keep close as I continue to be politically involved. Moreover, President Obama also told us "Don't focus on what you want to be. Focus on what you want to do." Amidst the backdrop of our resume-driven world, where it seems titles gain more emphasis than true leadership, this quote resonated powerfully with me. These life-changing words left a mark on me, inspiring me to think more about my actions rather than what label they have fixated to them. The president's background as a community organizer added even more depth to his words, because it showed us that his path exemplifies this advice. President Obama told us that he never thought as a kid of being president, which stood to me as a testament of what hard work and a sustained focus on progress can do. President Obama's kind words created one of the most inspirational moments of my life. It is not often that one can say that they stood just a few rows in front of the president and heard his life advice. After hearing President Obama speak, I realized how much I would miss his presidency. I have an even deeper respect for the president thanks to his wisdom and advice, and I know that his words greatly impacted me.

Finally, listening to Ambassador Wittig speak left me with a stronger commitment to a career in international affairs. He provided us with insight into not just the U.S.-Germany relationship, but also into how the U.S. has a critical relationship with Europe to uphold, even as various threats affect the world, from climate change to ISIS. Hearing the ambassador speak taught me more about just how interconnected the world is and how much of a responsibility the U.S. has on the world stage. It is easy to advocate for isolationism and an 'America first' approach. However, after learning how the U.S. plays a key role in working with European allies, isolationism becomes an impossible, irresponsible goal to strive for.

One of my favorite aspects of Ambassador Wittig's presentation was how he emphasized that the U.S.-Germany relationship, while not perfect, is multifaceted and quite effective. His perspective as the ambassador of a foreign nation left me with a greater insight into how the world perceives American

leadership, and how the U.S. can reform its role to be more effective at promoting democracy, human rights, and global cooperation. His speech inspired me to commit fully to working in the field of international affairs. The study of international problem solving fascinates me, and hearing more about how international cooperation occurs convinced me that international relations is the field for me. Thus, USSYP took a key role in helping me make decisions pertaining to my own future.

These three anecdotes are simply the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the fantastic experiences I had during Washington Week. I made memories and learned lessons that will last a lifetime. This single week will forever be one of the most memorable ones of my life. I am immensely thankful to The Hearst Foundations not just for the opportunity to attend Washington Week, but also for their generosity in providing each of us with a \$10,000 scholarship. This will enable me to achieve my goals in college and beyond. I look forward to keeping in contact with all of my USSYP 2016 colleagues as they go forth in life to find solutions to the problems that plague our society. I know all of my fellow delegates go forth with Obama's words in mind, ready to do what it takes to ameliorate our world, and I am confident that the USSYP Class of 2016 will make this world a better place.