

## Sung Keun (Shawn) Park, IL – 2017

Wow.

As I'm typing this essay, memories are flooding out. I remember hugging my parents goodbye at the airport, unsure of what was to come but excited to begin my journey. I remember meeting the Military Mentors at the airport and eagerly introducing myself to the group of delegates there. As all of us sat in the Grand Ballroom for our first dinner, we were promised that this was going to be one of the greatest weeks of our lives. And was it ever.

While every speaker was engaging and offered valuable and insightful advice, there were a few who especially resonated with me. One such speaker was Chief Justice John Roberts, who we had the privilege of hearing inside the hallowed courtroom of the Supreme Court. What surprised me most about Chief Justice Roberts was his warm, friendly demeanor; here was a man who held the highest authority possible in the judicial branch, yet he has a sense of ease and comfort that allowed for our time together to seem like an intimate and passionate discussion about government instead of a boring cold lecture. Another such speaker was Senator Heidi Heitkamp; as we ate only a few feet away from some of the most important documents in American history, such as the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, she spoke with such intensity and drive. Senator Heitkamp (and many other speakers throughout the week) assured the delegates that even in our tumultuous and controversial time where partisan politics dominate and the American people have little faith in their government, our nation remains rooted in the fundamental ideal of democracy and will always serve the people first.

However, I will not only remember our eloquent speakers and the numerous sites of monumental historical value that we visited throughout the week. Yes, it is time for clichés: I will remember the people. I will remember having deep political and personal conversations with my friends on the coach bus heading to venues and after hours while we're playing a game of Silent Football. I will remember our Military Mentor group's nightly leadership lessons. I will remember taking stupid photos with my friends that I will laugh at for years to come. It's just a shame that this program couldn't be longer, but you can be sure that I'll be meeting up with my new friends even after the program is over.

I'm sure that many will say that this program is life-changing, but I must disagree. After all, each and every delegate was a part of this experience because he or she was a leader in their community and deserved this honor. No, suffice it to say that this program is "life-affirming". Our time in Washington, D.C. together proved that our faith in government and leadership is not wasted. We will tackle our nation's issues as both present day and future leaders. As Senator Cory Booker stated in his speech to us, the 55th annual United States Senate Youth Program, "If you want to go fast, go alone, but if you want to go far, go together." We are forever bonded by this program, and I'm sure we will go on to do great things in life.