

Bridger Gordon, 2017 – SD

My hometown of Sturgis, South Dakota is just 51 miles from Mount Rushmore. My family and I have visited the monument, also called the Shrine of Democracy, numerous times. It's a reminder of the American spirit and our American history. Mount Rushmore has the faces of our four most influential presidents on it, with each face nearly 60 feet tall. As I think of my trip to Washington, D.C. (in my opinion the *second* most important patriotic place after Mount Rushmore) through the United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP), I think of Mount Rushmore and how it perfectly symbolizes that amazing experience.

First, I think of Calvin Coolidge, the 30th president. Coolidge was the president that approved the creation of Mount Rushmore. While President, Coolidge earned the nickname "Silent Cal" because he focused on listening and learning as much as he could. This reminds me of my experience at USSYP. The quantity, quality, and variety of the speakers amazed me. Judge Robert Henry, who served on the 10th Circuit Court of the Appeals with Supreme Court nominee Neil Gorsuch, discussed with us the topics of judicial activism, individual privacy rights, and the role of the judiciary in government. Award-winning journalist Bob Schieffer told us, "Don't be afraid to reach and give it a try." He actually started his journalism career that way by walking into CBS headquarters and (accidentally) stealing a job interview; only a short time later, he would be in Dallas for CBS News during the JFK shooting where he interviewed Lee Harvey Oswald's mother and "had the adventure of his life." Senator Heidi Heitkamp from North Dakota told us of her rough path to Washington, D.C., and said, "You are not always going to be successful, but each opportunity or bump changes your trajectory." While overlooking the Capitol Dome from the Hart Senate Office Building, Senator Cory Booker of New Jersey told us, "You cannot pay [the people before you] back, so you've got to pay it forward." As I opened up my ears during USSYP, information and motivation poured in.

Then, I think of Theodore Roosevelt, the youngest president on Mount Rushmore. Roosevelt served in the military and was one of the most patriotic presidents in our history. This reminds me of the sense of respect I acquired for our troops because of our group Military Mentors, in addition to the strong sense of American pride I developed. Each group small group of delegates was led by exceptional Military Mentors from across the nation. These mentors ate meals with us, participated in discussions with us, experienced D.C. with us, and above all grew together with us. They brought experience and knowledge to the table. Major Carlos Jayme of the U.S. Air Force led my group. He encouraged us to put ourselves out there and interact. He was fun, as he spoke about his Kickstarter investments; but he also was informative, as he spoke about everything from Middle Eastern telecommunications to cybersecurity efforts to Latin American drug policy. Major Jayme played a major role in making Washington Week as great as it was. And I gained respect for the service of our Military Mentors and their patriotic actions.

I next think of Thomas Jefferson, my personal favorite of the presidents on Mount Rushmore. Ever since I was a little kid, I looked up to Thomas Jefferson, one of America's Founding Fathers. Throughout the week of USSYP, I was constantly astonished by the role models and famous people we would meet. I had heard of these people on the news and seen them on TV, but never before had I gotten the chance to look our nation's leaders in the eye and truly listen to what they had to say. Being in the White House with President Donald J. Trump and Vice President Mike Pence took my breath away. I couldn't believe it when the 45th president of the United States looked at the delegates and told us he believed the next president would be one (or maybe two) of us. Chief Justice John Roberts, of the Supreme Court, one of the brightest legal minds of our time, spoke to us for over an hour and took numerous questions from the audience. And after quite a bit of clapping, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson appeared only a few feet away from me. He spoke to us honestly and delivered an important message about personal character. These were people I admire and looked up to; to be in their presence was an honor.

My thoughts then shift to George Washington. Washington, our nation's first president, has a prominent position on Mount Rushmore and in American history. Washington was a master of connections and bringing our nation together. During USSYP, I connected with each and every one of the 103 other delegates. We became friends and comrades (Wilfried Z) throughout the week. Every single USSYP delegate will blow your socks off. They are future Harvard students (Ryan Z) and soon-to-be comedians (Joey C.). They are Hawaiian bird researchers (Bobby B.) and Boy Scouts (Nicolas L.). They are conservative leaders (Erin S.) and liberal activists (Hannah Z.). They have sat next to Governor Jerry Brown on a Southwest Airlines flight (Sam G.) and mistakenly been put in Moroccan prison holding cells (John C.). They are sugar-aholics (David E.) and bow tie aficionados (David P.). They are academic

masterminds (Shawn P.) and social butterflies (Trey S.). They have hair that Cory Booker envies (Carter M.) and policy knowledge that is off the charts (Matt D.). They are future presidents and senators and business leaders and entertainers and professors and economists. They are the future of America, and I am proud to have known them. If there was one part of USSYP that impressed me the most, it was meeting my fellow delegates.

Finally, I think of Abraham Lincoln, the 16th president of the U.S. Lincoln's efforts had perhaps the most influential effect on America. Lincoln was a public servant who worked for the people. Public service and leadership were the two most important values discussed at USSYP. The program gave me a desire to make things better for the future. It lit a fire within me to get involved and make a difference. As Surgeon General VADM Vivek Murthy told us, "Big things start in small places."

Mount Rushmore and its presidents symbolize to me the week I spent in Washington, D.C. I can certainly say that USSYP was a life-changing program that made me a better person. USSYP promotes a culture of greatness and encourages all to get involved, make a difference, and help the world today.