

Nicole Fintel, NE -- 2018

As I took my first step into the Grand Ballroom of the Mayflower, I nearly burst from the excitement of the commencement of what would, as I had been assured and reassured by past delegates, be the best week of my life. Going into Washington Week, my expectations were high, but never in my wildest imagination could I have anticipated what would unfold in the coming week. No words I can conjure are adequate in capturing the United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP), and nothing short of experiencing it firsthand could ever come close.

Quickly emerging as an overarching theme in the discussions and speeches of nearly every speaker -- ranging from Congressman John Lewis to Justice Neil Gorsuch -- was the value of civility in government and politics. I had the opportunity to ask Senator Tim Scott to speak to the importance of pluralism and bipartisanship while working in the Senate, to which he responded, "We all agree on 95% of things, but just have different ways of getting there. We fixate too much on our disagreements, rather than our agreements." The rest of the week, in my conversations with both government officials and other delegates, I was pleased to find Senator Scott's statement shockingly accurate. Few people go into government and public service with the intention of hurting others. Variance in environment, culture, and upbringing lead politicians down different paths, but usually towards converging solutions. Too often, we mistakenly believe such dichotomies arise from malice, when, in actuality, these differences are indicative of the strength of our democracy.

The wisdom and inspiration imparted on me by the speakers was punctuated by my conversations with my 103 co-delegates. Everybody's willingness to engage in genuine, constructive conversation of contentious issues left each delegate with a more open mind and a greater ability to recognize the merit in the viewpoints of those with whom we may disagree. Whether our discussions took the form of debates on education policy, stories about maple syrup, or rants about ranch dressing, I have, at no other time, been surrounded by such a brilliant and engaging group of thinkers and speakers.

During Washington week, it quickly became apparent that with each once-in-a-lifetime experience, another of equal or greater grandeur would soon follow. Posing a question to the former Chief Judge of the Tenth Circuit Court of Appeals was followed by an hour and a half discussion with Supreme Court Justice Neil Gorsuch. Watching the Senate in session preceded eating dinner next to the original Constitution. A meeting with the president in the East Room of the White House succeeded a luncheon with one of my favorite senators (Amy Klobuchar). Meeting the executive editor of the *Washington Post* was followed by a handshake with Congressman John Lewis. At every corner, USSYP managed to outdo itself.

The final night of Washington Week, I once again found myself seated beneath the gilded chandeliers of the Mayflower Grand Ballroom. To an outsider, the difference between the arrival and farewell dinners may seem nominal, but to each of the 104 delegates, no words could ever do justice to the paradigm-shift that had taken place during our seven days in Washington. Our final endeavor as USSYP delegates was witnessing a flag-folding ceremony performed by our beloved military mentors. As the last fold of the flag brought Washington Week to a close, a final tear rolled down my cheek, as I was acutely aware such a life-changing experience could never be replicated. In the end, however, I knew my final step out of the Mayflower Ballroom was not truly an end, but rather the beginning of a journey through which USSYP would forever remain with me. A sentiment echoed by each notable USSYP alumnus we encountered was that Washington Week will never wane from our memories, and whether we find ourselves working in the State Department, a federal court, or even in the White House, no day will pass where USSYP ceases to exist as a guiding and driving force.

As one month has passed since Washington Week, I can only begin to express my resounding gratitude. To the Hearst Foundations and the USSYP selection committee, thank you for taking a chance with me. To my 103 wonderful co-delegates, thank you for the conversations, memories, and continued inspiration. To my Military Mentor, Major Vernita Corbett, thank you for your invaluable wisdom, kindness, and guidance. To Jakub & Erin, thank you for going out of your way to ensure our memories will never fade. And finally, to the speakers, thank you for instilling within me a renewed sense of hope and patriotism. To everyone who had even the smallest part in making USSYP possible, thank you for affording me the best and most transformative week of my life.