

Sarah Fleming, WI – 2018

The night before I left for Washington Week, I cried. I cried a lot. I cried the same way I always do before a new experience. I am always convinced that I will not get along with the people I meet, and usually it takes me a few days to shake this insecure feeling. With the United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP), it was different. Within hours, I felt at home at the Mayflower Hotel. The other delegates filled every hall and corner and I suddenly felt like I was surrounded by people like me: young people who actually care about politics.

This passion for politics became a common theme throughout Washington Week, but my understanding of what exactly constitutes politics shifted a great deal. To me, politics has always been about service. Ultimately, a politician's job is to serve his or her constituents. What I never really realized, however, was how many people really work in "politics." Throughout Washington Week, we heard from key individuals who work to maintain the government of these United States in ways I certainly had never really thought about. Among the most notable speakers were Linus Barloon, Marty Baron, and Congressman John Lewis. At first glance, it may seem like these men are very different, when in reality they are very similar. Linus Barloon, Director of Senate Cybersecurity, protects our nation everyday by constantly updating the Senate's defenses against cyberthreats. Marty Baron, Executive Editor of *The Washington Post*, protects our nation everyday by preserving truth and contributing to the fourth estate's power to check the power of the government. Congressman John Lewis protects our nation everyday by creating laws, but he has been protecting us since the Civil Rights Movement when he protected our nation by challenging inequality. Each of these individuals plays an integral role in our nation that completely changed my understanding of service in politics.

Unfortunately, not every encounter I had at USSYP reinforced a passion for politics. All too often I found myself faced with officials who skewed the truth to their agendas or casually avoided questions from other delegates. Washington Week was incredibly hard for me. As someone who grew up in the Midwest, truth has always been a central part of my values, so seeing many officials whose job it is to serve the people, serving their interests disappointed me to my core. I questioned my place in politics. I questioned if D.C. was the right place for me after all.

Despite these challenges, my faith in the United States government was restored by the 103 delegates who joined me during Washington Week. The delegates I met are the most passionate people I have ever had the pleasure of knowing. From D.C. Statehood, to the return of *de jure* segregation in public schools, each of my peers shared with me the important issues that face their communities and our nation as a whole. Perhaps the most impactful moment that I was able to experience during my time in Washington came from one of my co-delegates: Cassidy Sadonis. During the Senate Reception, Cassidy sobbed when he met Senator Bernie Sanders. It does not matter why Senator Sanders is so important to Cassidy, what mattered to me was the deep impact the senator was able to have on a young person who did not even live in his state. This encounter to me is the perfect example of what politics can and should be. I know that each and every one of the delegates I met during Washington Week is working toward a world in which that kind of impact, not lies or self-interest, is the norm in Washington D.C. and I am happy to be joining them in building up that world.

I will remember my time at the Mayflower Hotel for the rest of my life. I have friends from USSYP that I will keep in touch with for the rest of my life. I have never felt such a strong connection to a group of people ever before in my life.

The morning I left Washington Week, I cried. I cried a lot. I cried the same way I always do when I leave a new experience. I am always convinced that when I get home I will not be able to get along with my regular friends, and it usually takes me a few days to readjust. With USSYP, it was different. I still have not shaken the feeling I got every morning when I walked downstairs to see everyone in their business best. I don't think I ever will.