

James Meng, IA – 2019

The moment I was notified of my invitation to Washington Week as a United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP) delegate was a moment of pure joy. As that week neared, however, a flood of new emotions—ranging from excitement and relief to nervousness and even fear—consumed me. On one hand, I was prepared for one of the craziest weeks of my life; previous delegates from my state had reached out to me recounting their amazing experiences and offering any advice they could provide. On the other hand, I was unsure what to expect from the other delegates. Knowing well that each of my fellow delegates was incredibly accomplished in his or her own respect, I wondered if I would be able to fit in.

In the opening days, however, my fears were quickly quelled while my excitement was only amplified. What made the United States Senate Youth Program delegation so unique was not our individual achievements, but rather our shared interest in the world and its politics. I remember arriving at the Mayflower and breaking off to meet with my Military Mentor group. Captain Iida surveyed our group and asked us one question that left an impression on my entire week, “What is civility, and is it demonstrated in our current government?”

While civility may not always be demonstrated in U.S. politics, as delegates we all held shared respect for each other’s background, perspective, and desire to spur generational change. With each passing day, we all were able to grow more comfortable with one another, and we opened up about our varying political opinions and backgrounds. We challenged one another, asking questions and engaging in deep conversation ranging from gun control to national debt. Regardless of whether or not we came to a conclusion, it was valuable to be present and to share those moments with my fellow delegates, who I know will go on to become future leaders of this nation.

I learned much about public service and the complexities of our government over my week in Washington. From Judge Henry’s belief in the necessity to check the government to FEMA executive Brian Kamoie’s principle that everyone should commit to serve, I realized how interconnected our governmental structures are and how important it was to get involved.

Thus, as I departed one particular quote stood above the rest in my memory. Ms. Gordon, the Principal Deputy Director of National Intelligence, told us that we must “act before events dictate.” She claimed that waiting for things to happen would not allow the world to advance. The entire week, we had been exposed to the importance of public service and grew excited about what our future careers had in store. However, her words reminded me that the issues of today are ones that we cannot set aside, and I leave encouraged to make my voice heard.