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I can say this honestly and unreservedly: Washington Week was the best week of my life. The esteemed speakers, rich cultural experiences, and unparalleled fellow delegates created a lasting impact on me and my perspective towards the world.

Washington Week started at The Mayflower Hotel, with its bright blue lights, luxurious decor, and the rich legacy, was a little intimidating at first. Over the course of the week, however, it changed from foreboding to familiar as we returned from our once-in-a-lifetime experiences each night.

It wouldn't do the program justice for me to try and list everything I enjoyed, so I'll stick to my highlights. I also apologize in advance for this essay's poor structure; thinking back on Washington Week releases a cascade of powerful memories I can't really organize, so please bear with me.

As a first-generation American citizen, Washington Week proved to me that anyone could come from any background and have a place in America. The dinner on the fourth night especially stood out to me: I, a random kid of Chinese descent, was able to have a three-course meal in the National Archives, a couple feet from the real Declaration of Independence, the real Constitution, and the real Bill of Rights! Sitting so close to the founding documents of our nation was the single most inspiring experience the whole week.

The Military Mentors completely changed my perspective towards the military. Going to school in an urban, Title-1 school meant the only service members with whom I interacted were recruiters, who I saw as predatory in their recruitment of low-income students. Washington Week, however, redefined to me what serving in the military meant, showing the personality behind the uniform. Each time I conversed with the Military Mentors and other peers at my table presented me with new, thoughtful perspectives. Washington Week was also the first time I met several Asian-American officers; their patriotism and service continually inspire me to better serve our country.

Each esteemed speaker, from Chief Justice Roberts to Secretary of State Pompeo, addressed a different aspect of our nation, motivating me to help the people around me in whatever scale I can. In addition to their incredible qualifications and life experiences, the Q&A opportunities provided a depth of understanding and guidance for my life. I also had the opportunity to give an appreciation speech for Martha Raddatz — she signed my notebook with a funny reference to the fact that we attended rival high schools that I will remember forever.

Just as impactful as the speakers and the venues were my fellow delegates from across the United States. I'd seen (and been intimidated by) their Facebook biographies; I knew they would academically outshine me, and I was worried I wouldn't fit in. Fortunately, I couldn't have been more wrong. Washington Week forged strong and unexpected friendships for me. Nearly every single delegate I met was kind, open-minded, supportive, and well-spoken. And while I was initially self-conscious of being underqualified, those feelings were quickly swept aside. I'd grown up feeling inadequate and wishing my competitors were worse than me, but I became proud of the accomplishments of my fellow delegates. I know the future of our country is in excellent hands, and I hope the relationships I made during Washington Week will continue into the rest of my life.

I am profoundly grateful for the Hearst Foundations for making the United States Senate Youth Program possible. I cannot imagine the effort, financially and logistically, that goes into planning such a monumental event. Every single speaker, venue, memorial, joke, and friend the U.S. Senate Youth Program provided has made a lasting memory in my mind. Beyond the extraordinary agenda, the unparalleled peers and mentors with whom I engaged and built connections with have inspired me to try my utmost to make a lasting, positive impact on the world. I hope I can make the program and our country proud.