

Augusts Fadden, DE - 2021

The United States Senate Youth Program was an incredible, authentic, and life-changing experience. When reflecting on Washington Week, it boils down to one overarching theme: the humanization of my political adversaries. Allow me to clarify. I'm a Republican, which both as a young person and a resident of Delaware, President Biden's home state, is a very rare find. In complete honesty, I went into this program thinking I would only care about conservative/Republican speakers, and largely want to ignore those who didn't agree with me. I also dreaded meeting my Senators, both of whom I had campaigned against in 2018 and 2020, and still remain friends of their electoral opponents.

However, everything changed when I met with Senator Carper in late February. Now, I don't hate the man, and I wouldn't use the word hate to describe my emotions towards almost anyone. I didn't expect much more than a 20-25 minute meeting where we exchanged names, got a pat on the back, and went our separate ways. What I got instead was a 50 minute conversation about not just my resume and plans, but our love of music (both my co-delegate and I are musicians), our passion when it comes to public service, and how my plans for my future align in a similar way to the path my senator took to success.

Skipping ahead to late March, after Washington Week, I got the chance to meet with Senator Coons. I also got a 45-minute conversation about music (Senator Coons was a trumpet player, which I didn't know), bipartisan support for legislation, our faith, and even some candid words about former President Trump. Senator Coons also spoke kindly of some of his current and former Republican colleagues, such as Senators Cruz, Lankford, McCain, Sessions, and others. Both of these one-on-one conversations completely destroyed the caricature of the 'Democrat Senator' I had manifested in my mind over years of political activity and analysis.

In many ways, that was the best part of the USSYP. Senator Lankford, who spoke to us during Washington Week, summed it up very well in that most of the work that gets done in the United States Senate isn't covered by the media, since it involves everyone usually working closely together and not bickering over minute details. It's only the 4-5 bills every month that really get fought over, and are then exploited by those with unethical motives to dehumanize our fellow Americans. This sentiment was reflected in both my conversations with my senators, proving Lankford's comments true.

Truth be told, USSYP provides an outlet to escape personal bias, echo chambers, and partisan bubbles in order to have your beliefs pondered, challenged, or maybe even reaffirmed. Never in a million years did I think as a Republican I would want to hear Democratic senators give their thoughts about H.R. 1, the Affordable Care Act, climate change, etc. But, something about this setting was different. Perhaps it was removing the filters and hearing directly from our public servants with their own voice. This was the platform I believe I needed to better understand where my ideological opponents are coming from. Why do they believe what they do?

Let's not forget about my conservative heroes. One magnificent experience was getting to hear from and ask a question of Justice Clarence Thomas. Hearing about his ideological journey and philosophy surrounding a staff and judicial action was a real treat. I've already spoken of my enjoyment hearing from Senator Lankford, especially when it comes to discussing personal faith and the role it can play in one's dedication to public service. Washington Week definitely had some wonderful speakers that highlighted my own personal beliefs.

In closing, I'll end where I began. The USSYP provided me a place to not only share my beliefs with those in power, but also my fellow delegates, who were people from all different kinds of political, social, economic, and religious backgrounds. I enjoyed getting to hear from both like-minded individuals and other dissenting ones in order to better understand the world around me. This is a big country, with many different factors that go into one's ideology, and even this program didn't cover everything, but it covered plenty and was more productive than any online message board, social media platform, or television program ever could be. If any high schooler wants to really take their understanding of their government, leadership, and diverse perspectives to a new level, the USSYP is the #1 spot to find fulfillment.

P.S. If you and the President share a home state, you'll enjoy a nice little shoutout.