

## Alexander Drahos, IA - 2021

It's difficult to imagine how powerful the click of a single button can be. A click of a button can submit an application. It can enter a Zoom room. And in my case, one click can lead to life-changing interactions. Although it was an unconventional year at best, the United States Senate Youth Program was by far one of the most consequential "clicks" I have ever made.

Upon my acceptance, I was undoubtedly excited for the program, yet the previous year — the infamous 2020 — had set my expectations low. I downloaded the necessary applications, joined the group messaging systems, and prepared myself for a week of Zoom. I quickly realized that was not going to be the case, much to the dismay of my sleep schedule.

The truth is that there wasn't a Washington Week in 2021. There was a Washington Month. Practically every night I found myself sitting on a Zoom with an array of other delegates, projecting the legacies of politicians, debating the intricacies of Senate rules, or questioning the effectiveness of milk and the dairy industry — you know, as one does. From the Peach State to the Badger State, I found myself immersed in an environment of brilliant, passionate young people. As I write this reflection weeks after "Washington Month," my connection to my fellow delegates has not lapsed, and that is truly the magic of this program.

While my interactions with delegates from around the nation were invaluable, it's hard to beat learning from the nation's most revered public servants. Asking America's doctor, Dr. Fauci, a question about his decision-making process was surreal. Inquiring about cybersecurity to the Deputy Secretary of Defense was equally stunning. Listening to Clarence Thomas, a Supreme Court Justice known for his brevity, was a rare gift. Hearing from trailblazer Senator Tammy Baldwin was transformative, as were the words of Senate Historian Betty Koed. Lastly, my meeting with Senators Grassley and Ernst was unequivocally inspiring. Because of these interactions, I find myself more passionate about public service than ever before.

I am eternally grateful to all the guest speakers, Military Mentors, Senators Grassley and Ernst, and the Hearst Foundations for all their efforts to ensure that the 2021 United States Senate Youth Program was successful, despite the unique circumstances. Trust me, it will be difficult to find a more skilled moderator than Mr. Steve Cox, or a photographer as calming as Mr. Jakub Mosur.

From that first click of the button to submit my application to the click of my mouse to leave the final day of the 2021 Senate Youth Program, this program has changed my ambitions and passions. Although Washington Week has concluded, the 2021 United States Senate Youth Program is just beginning. I look forward to my fellow delegates becoming the distinguished guests at future Washington Weeks and I am excited for the positive change we will create in the years to come — a positive change that all stemmed from a few Discord messages and Zoom rooms.