

## **Gabriel Schuhl, NC – 2021**

It would be disingenuous to not admit my disappointment when I heard that Washington Week would be online. In a year filled with lackluster virtual substitutes for every momentous occasion possible, an online Washington Week did not seem nearly as exciting.

My assumptions could not have been more misplaced.

From 45-minute meetings with Senators Burr and Tillis to Zoom meetings with my fellow delegates that stretched late into the night, Washington Week was a virtual experience like no other. In fact, the pandemic's looming shadow only amplified many of the speakers' messages. NASA astronaut, Scott Kelly, casually told us how he struggled in school and failed his first flight test, yet ended up on the International Space Station. Justice Clarence Thomas reminisced on his initial ambitions of being a Catholic priest before he gave jurisprudence a shot. Dr. Francis Collins recounted his sporadic journey across the fields of science before he finally settled in genetics. Their paths were not carefully planned in accordance with one singular aspiration. They embraced disruption, and took it as an opportunity to discover something new. As I listened to their stories, I was inspired to think that, even in the midst of a pandemic, perhaps I have not given way to enough disruption.

Washington Week didn't just challenge me to open my mind, it also gave me incredible guidance along the way. My military mentor, Captain Teri Boivin, always made me look forward to our daily debriefs. She pressed us to find our most important takeaways from every event and listen earnestly to each other's perspectives. Our Zoom sessions starkly contrasted the formality of the day's activities, often leading us to forget the time as we shared our favorite moments. I can't begin to express my gratitude for Captain Boivin's constant efforts to make our group welcoming and engaging, and for how she encouraged me to find pride in my strengths.

If I was not inspired enough by the Military Mentors or Washington Week's grand list of speakers, I was inspired by my fellow delegates. Perhaps we were not in the same physical rooms as the speakers, but our Discord chats catalogued every jaw-dropping speech and controversial opinion. Maybe we weren't on the same bus rides, but the USSYP photography team put together a Roll Call Video that took me across the country nonetheless. We didn't get to stay in the same hotel, but our Zoom calls filled the nights of my Washington Week with unparalleled laughter and discussion. Despite the separation of the online world, there was nothing that could stop such a diverse, talented, and intelligent group of young leaders from engaging with one another. In countless debates and discussions, I found myself realizing that there was no place in my school, no place in Charlotte, no place in North Carolina where I could hear such a diverse assortment of perspectives. Their ideas filled my notebooks and made me question my assumptions. I have no doubt that I will see their names again, perhaps outside of the boxes of Zoom, filling the headlines of newspapers and covers of magazines.

As I consider my own path forward, I'm reminded of something Norah O'Donnell told us during Washington Week: "Survival is underrated. You don't need to be the boss. You need to outlast everyone else." In my mentors and acclaimed speakers and fellow delegates, there was little drive to reach fame, but rather the best of intentions on improving the world around them at every step. The Hearst Foundations has given me an unforgettable experience – one that will be sure to serve me well as I embark on my own future in public service.