

Matthew Flanagan, NH – 2021

Washington Week ONLINE, and the accompanying speakers and events, were nothing short of incredible, inspirational, and awe inspiring. The scope of this reflection will focus on two speakers, Justice Clarence Thomas and Deputy Secretary Kathleen Hicks, however I believe it is important to emphasize the profound effect listening to every speaker had on my attitude and goals. Many times, it can be difficult to recognize famous politicians, astronauts, or scientists as human beings due to the lack of personability often shown in the media. That being said, Washington Week ONLINE made it clear that all of these incredible leaders have personalities and were once in similar positions to myself and the other delegates. Their advice and insight into the function of American Politics was incredibly appreciated and this entire experience as a whole was eye opening into my strengthened desire to enter a career in public service.

Deputy Secretary of Defense Kathleen Hicks was extremely personable and an incredible speaker to listen to. She commented on how her “position in public service has meant working with some of the best colleagues in the world.” While most student delegates are already set on a career of public service, this is an extremely reassuring statement to hear from an individual with the experience and position of Deputy Secretary Hicks. Deputy Secretary Hicks grew up in a military family and further emphasized the importance of defending Americans at home and abroad, as well as the role of our armed forces in protecting our national security. As a member of a gold star family and a student planning to attend the United States Military Academy, it was very powerful to hear the Deputy Secretary of Defense comment on the trust she places in our military's contribution to national safety. She emphasized how it is the responsibility of the Department of Defense (DoD) to turn the capability of the DoD into new strategies, from which are transformed into new policies that represent the will of the American people. This is a lesson that I hope none of the USSYP student delegates forget moving forward; that our roles in public service, in the DoD or elsewhere, revolve around representing the American will. Deputy Secretary Hick's insight into issues surrounding national security and the up and coming threat of cyber attacks coupled with her advice surrounding leadership and the keys to a successful career made for an exceptional speaker session for the last day of the United States Senate Youth Program.

Listening to Justice Clarence Thomas felt like an experience directly out of a dream. It is not everyday seniors in high school are provided with the opportunity to listen to a Supreme Court justice discuss his career, life, and advice. Another aspect of Washington Week ONLINE that I found extremely interesting was the type of questions that the speakers, including Justice Thomas, seemed most excited to answer. They were not questions regarding policy or the current affairs of their political position, the speakers were most excited to offer life advice and discuss their similarities to the delegates in the program. Justice Thomas offered a few pieces of advice that really stuck in my mind. The most important however was the importance of pursuing your dreams, not what you believe will earn the most respect or money, but what you believe is the right path for your life. He mentioned how early in his life his dream was to enter the seminary and become a Catholic priest! That original dream may not have worked out but he pursued it to the point where he understood his purpose was elsewhere. When that dream did not work out, he entered law school and began pursuing a new dream in the courtroom. I suppose he is attracted to careers with robes! As I mentioned earlier in this reflection, I will be pursuing my dream and attending the United States Military Academy at West Point as a part of the class of 2025 and it is extremely reassuring to hear a Supreme Court justice discuss the importance of dreams and the profound impact they have had on our society and country. Both Justice Thomas and Deputy Secretary Hick's advice and insight, along with the other speakers, helped me in confirming my interest in a career in public service and my plans to pursue my dream of attending the United States Military Academy to later serve as an officer in the United States Army.