

Anika Larson, WI – 2021

This year, there was no plane to catch. No Mayflower Hotel to arrive at, no hands to shake, and no delegates to hug. My heart twinged watching videos of past delegates dancing, touring DC, and meeting political icons. But even in a virtual setting, I found myself having impactful conversations and making lifelong friends.

In the month leading up to Washington Week, I spent countless nights on delegate Zoom calls, laughing and discussing politics, theology, the milk industry, and the owner of the formerly anonymous USSYP meme account (me). Looking back at my experience, it is conversations with fellow delegates that I will remember most. They have challenged me to think in new ways and ponder questions I never before paused to consider.

When the schedule was released, I found myself thrilled by the list of speakers that were scheduled to meet with us. I was thrilled with the opportunity to hear from some of the nation's top officials in law, health, history, and more. One particularly impactful session during Washington Week was with Gina McCarthy, White House Climate Advisor. She talked about reframing climate change to be an opportunity rather than a drawback. I had previously only viewed it as a massive threat to humanity, but Mrs. McCarthy explained that climate change has created a need for new industries, for new jobs, and for international cooperation. Her commitment to forging innovative solutions was truly inspiring. Another reframing that stood out to me was one of American history. I was fascinated by Senate Historian Betty Koed's reinterpretation of history through previously unexamined lenses. She explained that Senate history is not just "white male history," but also encompasses the experiences of diverse staffers, lobbyists, reporters, and protestors.

On the third day, I had the great honor of introducing my home state senator Tammy Baldwin. Her enthusiasm for young people in politics was felt by all in the meeting, and I was proud to represent Wisconsin alongside such an admirable woman. Senator Baldwin spoke passionately about "Baby Bond" legislation that would close the racial wealth gap and left me with newfound hope in our future.

I would be remiss to write this reflection and not touch on my Military Mentor group. Under the wing of Major McClain, I found myself having intense, productive discussions with delegates from across the political spectrum. Together we laughed, shared personal experiences, and asked difficult, honest questions.

As our moderator Mr. Cox regaled us with one final "delegates and distinguished guests," Washington Week came to a close (although I found myself wishing it wouldn't.) Part of me wanted to stay in my swivel chair in my basement forever, to hear the political drama-esque theme song again, and to click the "raise hand" button and impatiently wait to be called on. Even online, Washington Week was an experience I will never forget. I am ever grateful to the Hearst Foundations for the opportunity not only to learn from some of the country's brightest minds, but also to meet my best friends.