

Jonathan Menzel, OK – 2022

Washington Week is **not** a mere date in time, a simple networking opportunity, or a pesky means of collecting a college scholarship: it **is** a highly honored journey of political discovery and challenging thought. Existing in both the physical and virtual world, Washington Week has no limits on the influence of its attendees, either delegate or distinguished guest. Washington Week is an enigma.

I am incredibly honored to have represented the State of Oklahoma during the United States Senate Youth Program's 60th Anniversary year and further honored to have been amongst a group of 103 fellow delegates who I often shared many interests and candid conversations with. Though varied in political ideology, background, and opportunity, our life paths all crossed in one week of March 2022, and most, if not all, were left with a grander support system for years to come. With Washington Week in its second virtual year, the Senate Youth Program's staff and especially Tech Admin #2 produced an online immersive experience like no other. Whether it was Mr. Jakub Mosur's thousands of delegate and speaker screenshots, Ms. Rayne Guilford's frequent Slack updates, or Major Steve Cox's infamous taglines and technical difficulty announcements, the online format proved highly successful in delegate experience. While not the stars of the show, the USSYP staff were the unsung heroes of Washington Week 2022.

With an array of speakers including former and current senators, a former Supreme Court Justice, a Cabinet Secretary, a UN Ambassador, and a high-ranking NATO official, it is hard to pick a single favorite moment in my week with USSYP. However, the first defining moment solidified in my memory of Washington Week was an excerpt from our meeting with Senate Historian Dr. Betty Koed. After opening with three anecdotes of the United States Senate's past failures on the people of our country and fielding several questions on governmental accountability, Dr. Koed asserted, "It's not the rules of the Senate that really cause problems; it's the people." Bearing witness to the current 50-50 partisan divide in our Congress's upper body, I found this to be truer than ever. With bipartisanship being a key pillar of Washington Week, it was quite the breath of fresh air to hear a government official validate our government as an institution but civilly recognize the flaws posed by the differences of its inhabitants. Less than a day later, during an honest discussion over American foreign affairs and diplomatic relations, US Ambassador to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield explained, "Everyone should see for themselves that there are people in places not like the ones you know." Again, hearing this from a highly respected public official was another step in reaffirming both my faith in American diplomacy and respect for the knowledge and dedication of our nation's civil servants. Though a simple four days in duration, my notes and memories of Washington Week's many speakers exceed anything properly written in essay format.

To future USSYP applicants and delegate cohorts: embrace this program with an open mind and a willingness to learn. Isolation only drags down its perpetrators. Always seek to reform your opinions and listen with the genuine intent of gaining knowledge.

Lastly, thank you to Senators Inhofe and Lankford, my fantastic co-delegate Aishwarya Swamidurai, Oklahoma State Superintendent of Public Instruction Joy Hofmeister, USSYP Oklahoma Selection Administrator Brenda Beymer-Chapman, Liz Rogers, Pam Merrill, Eugene Earsom, and my many teachers, family members, and friends who instilled my love for government and politics in me at a young age. Without any of them, this possibility would have likely never become a reality. The United States Senate Youth Program is forever in my heart.