

Maxton Torres, FL – 2023

If I entered the U.S. Senate Youth Program (USSYP) with one impression of American government, it would have an impersonal one. Lessons told by textbooks in eighth grade Civics and eleventh grade American government established the titles and positions of the wide-ranging Washington bureaucracy. Limited engagement with elected officials and political activism groups amidst the COVID-19 pandemic meant fewer in-person, face-to-face interactions. As interpreted through media, most politicians seemed more focused on advancing party lines and gaining notoriety on platforms like Twitter rather than connecting with their constituents.

The U.S. Senate Youth Program fundamentally changed my conception of America's leadership. Starting off with a firm handshake exchanged at the baggage claim of Reagan International, I was greeted by the boots-on-the-ground directors of Washington Week: our Military Mentors. I would consistently be wowed by these individuals' service, bravery, and accomplishments, among them: a Space Force JAG, a Rhodes Scholar, and a twenty-plus year Homeland Security specialist in the Coast Guard. Their presence in morning briefings, meals, and bus trips kept delegates consistently informed and involved. Maintaining a sense of propriety, our Mentors always made sure we looked sharp and were on time, but most importantly, I will cherish their unending care for our well-being throughout the program.

I would be remiss not to mention the true highlight of USSYP: my fellow delegates. I can confidently say that no other high school experience will bring together such an accomplished group of students passionate about making a difference for the United States. I had the privilege of meeting a diverse cast from previously-unknown parts of the country, with each of my peers already enacting groundbreaking change in their respective niches, from cancer research and fundraising to student walkouts for gun safety. I highly anticipate our paths crossing in the future, whether in college, the professional world, (and potentially) the same halls of Washington, D.C. that we explored throughout our stay.

I greatly enjoyed hearing the experiences and advice of the unsung heroes in American government, people who have served in relatively unknown yet integral roles for the function of our democracy. Judge Robert Henry's claim that "public service is the rent we pay for the space we occupy" caused me to reflect on conceptions of territory, indebtedness, and reparation throughout American history, from the Trail of Tears to Japanese internment. Senate Secretary Sonceria Berry's insight into how television coverage has changed the conduct within the Senate floor gave me first-hand insight as to how media can prompt politicians to act performatively. Senate Historian Dr. Betty Koed's willingness to explain the value of analyzing past events using both chronology and themes was valuable given the attacks that history has been placed under across our nation. Debra Wall, Acting Archivist of the United States, explained the critical role that primary sources play in seeing previous narratives in their present moments.

There was also a great deal learned from some of the more recognizable names and faces from our nation's capital. At a dinner in the stunning National Archives, Senator Shelley Capito shared the value of bipartisanship using her experience in West Virginia's House of Delegates and in the U.S. Congress. Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona proudly represented his synthesis of American and Puerto Rican cultures, also speaking on the potential value for hybrid learning models in the future. Senator John Hickenlooper spoke on his entrepreneurial spirit, going from founding a brewpub in Denver to advancing among different offices at the local, state, and national levels. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mark Milley analyzed the ethical decision-making process that all military leaders must consider in the heat of battle and global tensions. Of course, it was a true honor to sit in the Supreme Court and hear the impactful, inspiring words of Justice Sonia Sotomayor, who reminded delegates to reject complacency and embrace positive stubbornness.

My favorite moment, however, was a breakfast speech presented by Dr. Vivek Murthy, Surgeon General of the United States. After sharing a brief conversation with him about our common upbringings in Miami and interests in fitness, Dr. Murthy delivered a captivating address. Touching on his family's upward mobility from India, his own strenuous nomination process in the U.S. Senate, and the importance of human interaction and mental health to national prosperity, Dr. Murthy left us with a striking quote: "Persistence is not a solo journey." Whether dealing with the pressures of any role as a public servant or attempting to find solutions to imminent, nation-wide threats, I have emerged from the U.S. Senate Youth Program with a newfound appreciation for determination and teamwork. Wherever my future may take me, I aspire to share the commitment to grit, cooperation, and selflessness constantly espoused by my Military Mentors, fellow delegates and government officials alike throughout Washington Week.