

Kerry Ao, IN – 2023

“You either get on board the bus or you get hit by the bus.”

- Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor

When I boarded the plane on a cloudy Saturday morning, leaving behind the state of Indiana, I couldn't help but feel a sense of excitement and anticipation. For only the second time of my life, I was headed to our nation's capital, Washington, DC—the first of which I don't count because the only proof is a picture of 2-year-old me sleeping in a stroller in front of the White House. As the plane ascended into the sky, I thought about the incredible opportunity that lay ahead of me—a chance to meet some of the most influential people in our government, to learn from them, and to be inspired by them. The week passed quickly, filled with new experiences and memorable moments, and before I knew it, I was once again boarding a plane on an early Saturday morning, feeling overwhelmed by all that had happened in such a short time.

Over the course of the week, I felt inspired by my co-delegates, each of us coming from every corner of the country with unique backgrounds and experiences. From engaging in lively debates with my co-delegates to hearing from officials such as General Mark Milley, National Intelligence Director Avril Haines, and Education Secretary Miguel Cardona, I was constantly amazed by the insights that they shared with us. Additionally, as we shared our own stories and learned from each other, I felt a sense of camaraderie and connection that I had never experienced before. We all shared a passion for leadership and a belief in our own ability to create change, and I left Washington Week feeling energized and empowered to continue pursuing my own goals and initiatives. As Justice Sotomayor alluded to us in her speech, we are all on board that bus, both figuratively and literally throughout the week.

Senator John Hickenlooper's keynote over dinner was the highlight of the week for me. As an aspiring businessman, I was particularly drawn to his experiences as a startup owner and his track record of bringing members of the community together. From starting a business to Mayor of Denver to Governor of Colorado, and more recently a Senator, I can only hope to take a similar track to public service. His dedication and commitment to making a positive impact in the lives of those around him have inspired me to pursue my own goals, both business- and politics-related, and to strive towards becoming a leader like him.

As the week came to a close, I was filled with a sense of pride and gratitude. I had connected with impressive students and government officials in our country, learning from their insight and experience. I left Washington, DC feeling empowered and inspired, knowing that I now had the tools and knowledge to help make a difference in the world. Washington, DC had left an indelible mark on my heart and mind, and I will cherish the memories of my time there for years to come. Just to make it fitting, I took a bus home from the airport.