

Heng Yang, KY – 2023

"Delegates and Distinguished Guest, Dinner is Served"

Welcome to the Grand Ballroom of the Mayflower Hotel in Washington, DC! Would you like lemonade or iced tea?

The United States Senate Youth Program's (USSYP) activities were the equivalent of a kid wandering a candy shop. There are many monuments to be awed by, distinguished speakers to listen to, and inspiring peers to bond with. There were no dull moments in Washington, DC. Everything everywhere, all at once, is a phrase to describe the structuring of the programming. The sheer enthusiasm of the atmosphere was so thrilling. Whether it's the Military Mentors' kindness, fellow delegates' willingness, or The Hearst Foundations' hard work, I had the most exhilarating week yet!

Before my week in Washington, DC, I had an outsider's perspective on the government run. I had a pessimistic view of politics. The only sources of information I could rely on were polarized media sources attempting to gain views for ad revenue. As a result, I viewed politics as an endless series of deadlocks from polarization between the right and the left.

However, the common theme I learned from USSYP is compromise and cooperation. From how the visit to Mount Vernon taught me how founding fathers like George Washington oversaw how the Constitution was written based on compromises between 13 former colonies to replace the failing Articles of Confederation. Washington's precedent in the modern world can be seen in examples such as Senator Hickenlooper of Colorado with his work with background checks on guns or Senator Capito of West Virginia with her infrastructure bill. The need to be considerate of diverse stakeholders and teamwork are vital ingredients for a functional democratic system that the United States is founded upon. The freedom of expressing dissenting opinions has set our nation as leaders in republican forms of government since 1776. I admire how resilient our values resonating with the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence are in everyday life as I observe these documents at the National Archives. As exemplified from experience at the U.S. Institute of Peace, democracy is a delicate system that requires "a perfect union" from every individual that can easily collapse with a bad actor. Through peaceful and logical conversations, stakeholders can have a medium of expression without resorting to violence.

Beyond the Greco-Roman architecture, elaborate murals, and excellent speakers, the Military Mentors of the program and fellow delegates taught me many lessons. Two Military Mentors inspired me the most. Lt. Eggers headed my mentor group. Every morning, he read a quote from George Washington to ensure we had what we needed. I love to listen to his adventures in the Coast Guard catching narco-sub, his education company ventures, and his time teaching at a fancy boarding school in Europe. Lt. Eggers was always well-mannered and was a great person who listened to my insecurities and provided me with helpful advice. I could not ask for a better friend and role model. Other Military Mentors also instill a positive impression on me. For example, Lt. Boileau's compassionate leadership on my bus as we toured DC was admirable. He cheered us up when we missed out on the opportunity to meet President Biden when we were at the White House, had a great sense of humor paired with a healthy dose of wisdom, and made sure everyone was provided with snacks and water (The sentence, "I am severely concerned with the hydration level of this bus" gives me nostalgia.).

Lastly, I want to leave a message of hope. The future will be in good hands. Despite the constant news of the pandemic, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and climate change, there are so much to fight for in the world. Robert H. Henry, former chief justice of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the 10th circuit and an USSYP alumnus for Oklahoma in 1971 spoke about how we live in the most peaceful era in history with billions pulled from poverty in recent decades. The delegates of USSYP certainly reflect a continuity of Henry's claims. Whether through scientific research, leadership in activism, or community service, the future generation has a solid cohort to look up to. I am thankful to be part of this group, learn from their accomplishments, and provide my unique insights as I head to college, graduate school, and the professional field. I am empowered to be a voice for myself and others, willing to unite our collective talents and labor together to solve the world's most pressing challenges in the decades to come because we certainly have our work cut out for us!

Thank you for reading about my delightful experience. Now dinner is served.