

Alec “AJ” Wells, MT – 2023

As I reflect on the unique opportunity and phenomenal experience attending the United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP) Washington Week 2023, the words of British philosopher John Locke say it best, “No man’s knowledge can go beyond his experience.” Oh what an experience it was! I encourage other students to embrace risk and apply, seize the opportunity, and take names----no seriously, take names!

For as long as I can remember, I have had an interest in our government, how it operates, and who leads our nation. I was in the eighth grade when my family and I visited the United States Air Force Academy in Colorado. My cousin, Anna, was a junior in the Academy, and we attended their Friends and Family Weekend. Anna, the Academy, and its opportunities convinced me that I need to serve our country and start by attending a service academy. My week with USSYP in Washington, D.C., did more than inspire me, it fueled my desire to attend a service academy and serve our great nation as a military leader.

It was humbling to meet the great leaders during our jam-packed week in Washington, D.C. As I flew home, I was alone in my thoughts and wondered what my future will hold, and which of the delegates I met would eventually run our country, cure cancer, and invent something that changes the world. I was honored to be selected to join such an amazing group of young men and women.

Unfortunately, there is not enough room in this essay to discuss all the great leaders, speakers, people and places I experienced during Washington Week, but I will highlight a few that had profound impact on me.

Upon my arrival, I was admittedly consumed with anxiety, but that simply disappeared once I was able to meet one of the Military Mentors, U.S. Coast Guard Lieutenant James Eggers. After I collected my luggage, I began speaking with some of the delegates who arrived with me. I was pleasantly surprised by the openness of each delegate. I felt welcome in conversations and throughout the week it felt more and more like I was in a community of like-minded people interested in America’s future, which I am now forever grateful for. While waiting to get COVID tested when I first arrived at the beautiful Mayflower Hotel, I met an amazing delegate named Brady White from the state of Florida. While I met Brady out of mere coincidence, we immediately discovered similar interests, and our conversations bloomed into friendship. Throughout the week our friendship evolved into something I will cherish for life, and it will hopefully continue when we meet again through our intended careers in the armed forces.

I think one of the most impactful visits was to Mount Vernon. Visiting the home of our first president and his wife, looking across the Potomac River like George and Martha must have done and actually seeing inside their tomb was an experience I will hold in high regard forever. I took pause knowing that I was standing, walking, and experiencing the place our Founding Father designed and built. This was definitely an experience I would recommend to others.

Our time at the United States Supreme Court and rare opportunity to meet Associate Justice Sonia Sotomayor was a dream come true. Justice Sotomayor was extremely likeable, well-spoken, and gave true meaning to the famous words on the exterior of the building that state, “EQUAL JUSTICE UNDER LAW.” I was taken aback by the actual size of the courtroom where some of our nation's most important decisions are made.

Visiting the National Archives Exhibition Hall and being in the presence of the actual Declaration of Independence, the Constitution and the Bill of Rights sent chills up my spine. It's almost as if those documents radiate power and inspiration, empowering those around them to greatness.

Meeting my state's U.S. senators was also amazing. They were kind, gracious, and genuine. I couldn't believe Montana Senator Steve Daines kept telling me how proud he was of me! I intend to keep in touch with my Montana Senators throughout my life. I now understand how important actually meeting and hearing from their constituents is to them.

The bitter arrival of the final day was filled with disbelief. Once the day began, seeing the stellar schedule which I had been looking forward to all week was an instant highlight. Visiting Arlington National Cemetery was an experience I will never forget, with dark rain clouds surrounding Washington, seeing the endless rows of those who committed their lives to service, echoed through the mood of the day. As we arrived at the memorial, everyone became extremely respectful. After the wreath was laid, Taps played and, in the distance, a funeral for a Navy admiral was taking place. The cannon salute added even more depth and stark reality to the ceremony, as the sound echoed throughout the hills.

Following the ceremony, visiting the Pentagon was an experience I will remember forever, seeing the building that housed so much military leadership and intelligence left me in awe. The wise words of Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Mark Milley, only made the experience even more inspiring as he gave us an unfiltered look at current world tension, which was amazing to hear directly from him as I follow these topics in my free time. General Milley's presence revealed how respected he was amongst the Military Mentors, and how the General spoke was incredibly motivational. The words of Senior Enlisted Advisor to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Ramón Colón-López, told us that it is our generations' duty to bring justice to war criminals in Ukraine left not only me, but the entire group aching to do our part.

Upon careful review of the entire week, perhaps one of the most inspirational was my Military Mentor, U.S. Army 1st Lieutenant Ryan Boileau. Throughout the week he provided guidance, advice, encouragement, wisdom. This was very important to me since I am one of two individuals in our group who aspires to attend a service academy. Additionally, I was one of few who don't already have their next steps firmly in play as I was one of the small number of juniors to be selected for the USSYP. I also made friends with Dustin Hermansen, from South Dakota, who has already been accepted to the U.S. Air Force Academy. I am just starting this process for acceptance to all service academies. On our last night, 1st Lieutenant Boileau took Dustin and me aside. He placed his hand in his pocket and removed two lieutenant bars and handed one to each of us. He told Dustin and me, "The first one you have to earn, but the second one, that's on me." This moment was an extreme honor, something I will never forget and a gesture I hope to return to a future student delegate one day.

In conclusion, the sentimental journey from Montana to Washington, D.C., as a 2023 USSYP delegate was filled with excitement, discovery, intrinsic rewards, and countless new friendships. My remarkable experiences, lasting memories and lessons learned have inspired me to seek higher levels of personal achievement and a deep desire to leave footprints where no one has wandered.