

## Robert Rasmussen, DoDEA – 2024

Washington Week started by receiving a simple program in the Mayflower Hotel of what we, as delegates, would do, see, and hear over the course of the next week. I was truly in awe every single minute of the 62<sup>nd</sup> Annual United States Senate Youth Program and am so glad I was able to take part in an absolutely unforgettable experience.

When I first received the list of confirmed speakers, some of them were unknown to me; this included Mr. Brian Kamoie. However, after his speech, I was profoundly changed by one quote that resonated with me, “What is that you plan to do with your one wild, precious life?” It was a simple yet moving quote that best summed up the program. Every single delegate, including myself, was there for a reason. The class of the 62<sup>nd</sup> annual U.S. Senate Youth Program can and will be successful in whatever we decide to do. Another man that I did not know beforehand was Bill Doherty, the co-founder of Braver Angels. A common theme addressed throughout the week, he illustrated the partisan divisions that have become all too common in today’s America, and he was trying to do something to change that partisanship. That is what makes us as delegates special. We don’t come from the same background. We’re coming from Sitka, Alaska, to Miami, Florida, from Hampden, Maine, to Tucson, Arizona, from Yomitan, Japan, to Grafenwoehr, Germany, and everywhere in between. We all have a unique story to tell. This week gave us the opportunity to talk with one another, and step outside of our comfort zones to meet new people that may have shared different views of the world. But no matter what, I am happy to say that we are all motivated and trying to make the world a little better every single day. General C.Q. Brown, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, offered another quote that defined the program: “It doesn’t matter if you see the glass as half full or half empty, but how did you fill up the glass?” His words also illustrate the need for meaningful service necessary to initiate change. This program, along with the sites we visited, set us all on the path for change.

All activities and places visited were extremely important to me, however, a few made a truly profound impact. The Senate Reception, the White House visit, Arlington National Cemetery, and the Pentagon moved me on a very personal level. The opportunity to meet one U.S. Senator is an honor, and I had the opportunity to meet both Senators from my home state of Kansas. More importantly, both gave me a nomination to the United States Air Force Academy, and I was glad I could meet them in person to say thank you for helping me go into a career where I can give back to our nation. The White House visit was something I have only dreamed about. Watching the State of the Union in the East Room was spectacular, but having an opportunity to meet the President was something unique and incredibly exciting. When Captain Puntoriero called Delaware, Pennsylvania, and DoDEA to the front row, I was shocked. My hands started to sweat out of sheer nervousness and excitement. I will always remember seeing President Biden’s face when he walked in the door and then him telling a humorous story after giving the most important speech of the year. When he stood directly in front of me, I realized I was only a mere two feet from the most powerful man in the world and my Commander-in-Chief once I begin at the U.S. Air Force Academy in June. I was truly honored to be in his presence. The next day at Arlington National Cemetery, I was afforded the opportunity to lay a wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. My family has a history of service, with my grandfather flying B-17’s during World War II and my father being in the Army for 23 years. As a future officer, I was humbled to be in the presence of so many men and women who paid the ultimate sacrifice for their country. It was an honor to step out to where only the Sentinels march to guard the Unknowns. Later that same day, I was offered the chance to give appreciation remarks for Air Force General Charles “CQ” Brown, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs. Once again this struck another chord deep within my heart. He will be in my chain of command next year as the Air Force’s representative to the Secretary of Defense and the President. I will never forget meeting these outstanding people at these hallowed institutions of our nation’s government and will treasure these moments for the rest of my life.

Washington Week has emboldened me on a path for public service. After my time in the Air Force is up, I want to continue my life as a public servant by working on behalf of others to represent them, fight for them, and strive to make the world a better place.