

Ariel Fader, KY – 2024

“Welcome to the White House!”

I stepped forward, surrounded by gleaming ivory walls and poignant portraits of our nation’s trailblazers. Other delegates and I meandered down the halls before entering the verdant garden with the cool night air blanketing us. While we hurried up the staircase to catch the State of the Union watch party, I remembered our delegation’s first full encounter. Though it was only a few days prior, it felt like a year ago. Despite hailing from all corners of the United States and bringing distinct perspectives, we all shared the same breathless enthusiasm for immersing ourselves in the functions of our government here in the heart of our nation.

When opening this week of civic exploration, the program directors arranged for our first dinner keynote to highlight the polarized state of our country and our role in bridging the gaps as young citizens. That interactive speech by Bill Doherty, the co-founder of Braver Angels, set the tone for the rest of our experiences. Instead of jumping to conclusions about an agenda item based on the political figure assigned to speak, I reminded myself to enter the session without preconceptions. This led me to make conclusions and ask questions that I usually would not venture toward. The beauty of USSYP resides in how I did not progress through this personal political development alone. I was accompanied by 103 peers who readily discussed contentious issues over relaxed lunches. Whether it was deliberating over California’s housing crisis or reconsidering the international responsibility of the United States, I learned to see past labels and empathize with my new friends.

Now, in the White House, our camaraderie shone stronger than ever. We set loose, poring over the ornate East Room before settling into our seats to watch the president’s live address to the nation. For the next few hours, we reflected on the address, snacked on M&M’s branded with the presidential seal, and took lots and lots of pictures.

It was well past midnight when the enormous doors on the other side of the room swung open, and a wary hush settled over us. Our crew of 104 jittery teenagers running on adrenaline and copious amounts of White House soda suddenly stilled, stifling a collective gasp.

“How are we tonight?”

President Biden strode into the room, beaming with his hands outstretched. Immediately, our stunned silence erupted into a roar of cheers. There he was, the president of the United States, standing before us right after we watched him speak on national television. He stepped closer, returning our greetings. As our shock morphed into excitement, he remarked on the significance of our delegation’s time in D.C. before imparting advice on our future pursuits. He described the dichotomy between his early political career and his current civic role. He emphasized that it was not plain ambition that earned him success, but rather a commitment to living up to the responsibilities he gradually gained. He took his time, looking into each of our eyes as he reminded us of our civic power and duty. His words reaffirmed what our weeklong expeditions had hinted at; we, the youth, have the reins of our nation’s future, and it is up to us to steer toward an inclusive and optimistic reality. Finally, President Biden turned to shake my hand and then the hands of many others. It was only after we waved goodbye that the weight of the week’s adventures hit me.

From eating breakfast with Secretary of Transportation Pete Buttigieg to sitting five feet in front of Justice Elena Kagan in the Supreme Court to laughing with Senator Bill Cassidy about his rollercoaster career tales, I recognized just how human these figures are. Too often, the public is removed from governmental processes - whether it is through slanted media portrayals, algorithmic echo chambers, or lack of administrative transparency. Being present and absorbing the abundant knowledge from the people and places in America’s capital city opened my eyes to how much more there is to improve: intellectually, socially, and emotionally. Though I had this unique opportunity to immerse myself in a hands-on civic atmosphere, it is possible to broaden the horizons of anyone’s

outlook. People can start to overcome deep partisan divides by consuming media from different sources and reducing sudden judgments of others. Even in the face of seemingly irreconcilable disputes, there are moments of consensus. It is by using those agreements to build constructive compromises that people can reach their north stars - which are often the same.

Returning from Washington Week, I am compelled to envision a future where contribution is prioritized. Walking through the halls of dozens of specialized departments showed me that skills of all sorts have applications in our government. I discovered a myriad of opportunities during this visit which inspire me to journey toward new destinations ahead. USSYP has become another family for me, united by memories. These delegates will become my future college classmates and professional colleagues, and I cherish this extraordinary community that will continue to catalyze change.

To fellow aspiring public servants, future USSYP delegates, and everything in between and beyond, I'd like to share the words of Senator Catherine Cortez Masto, one of USSYP's Senate co-chairs: "There is incredible opportunity only if we have the courage to seek it." Now, more than ever, youth belong in the civic sphere, and it is time to realize our might.