

Dylan Rhoton, LA – 2024

Pass the Baton

During the United States Senate Youth Program's luncheon at the Hart Senate Office Building, Bill Cassidy, one of Louisiana's senators, introduced an idea that perfectly encapsulates the Washington Week experience: *pass the baton*. He explained that when he was a young man, a contemporary political leader had spoken those very words to him. This tradition continued on that day, when he vowed to cultivate the next generation of leaders—the 104 United States Senate Youth delegates of 2024.

Throughout the week, we were given the unparalleled opportunities to speak to members of the highest ranks of our government. Their speeches and interactions were not overtly political; rather, they shared insights into their passion for public service and the role of the youth in our society. These conversations, paired with dialogue prompted by my passionate peer delegates, reshaped how I perceive our government. From an outsider's perspective, its bureaucratic expanse seems undeniably detached from the everyday life of citizens. However, these individuals put a face to the tradition of American democracy, humanizing the policies that affect the lives of millions every day.

Additionally, Military Mentor groups play an indispensable role throughout the week, representing a form of service to our country previously foreign to many delegates. My military mentor, Major Duarte, U.S. Army, shared his lived experience and wisdom with our group, spurring introspective realizations about many of our stories. On a personal level, I am most grateful for my interactions with Major Duarte during the week. My experience would have been incomplete without the motivating anecdotes and steady guidance he provided.

When arriving for our visit at Arlington National Cemetery, Captain McGurkin, U.S. Marine Corps, instructed us to write down a quote on the inside cover of our journals: *It's not about me*. These four words condense the breadth of wisdom I encountered during Washington Week, from individuals in every form of public service. He explained the reverence that millions of servicemembers, despite their vastly diverse backgrounds, live out daily as defenders of our country. I truly felt the deep respect that we owe those who came before us, and the responsibility that we have, as American citizens, to strive to lead with character and honor. I am immensely grateful for the opportunity to represent Brother Martin High School and the state of Louisiana in the 2024 United States Senate Youth Program, and Washington Week has left an indelible mark on my perception of public service.