

## **Elana Hadi, MO – 2024**

Though I packed for Washington Week at the last minute, I had been planning my itinerary and checklist carefully for the weeks leading up. Therefore, I considered myself rather prepared, but when I stepped off the airplane, I was not expecting such a warm and enthusiastic welcome from the Military Mentors that greeted me, even while waiting for my much-too-large checked bag. Every delegate I met was engaging, inviting, and easy to talk to. It barely even resonated that all of these teenagers were strangers.

When meeting delegate after delegate alongside every organizer and mentor, our defining characteristic was always our state. When Mayor Pete Buttigieg said the words, “the further I got from home, the more important it was that I was from somewhere,” I realized that defining myself by my home is what encouraged me to represent it well. I wanted people to remember me, and hence Missouri, in a positive way when reflecting on this week.

I liked the fact that delegates could introduce the speaker from their same state, further honing this idea. Not only did I love the sometimes intensely personal connections shared by the delegate with the speakers, but it made me realize how human each speaker was, despite their extraordinary titles or achievements. Furthermore, when talking to us, both individually and in groups, it was evident how much they *wanted* to make a positive, lasting difference. Every speech focused on the future, not only with their projects and careers, but in how we as delegates can carry this legacy.

Of course, highlighted moments such as hearing directly from Justice Kagan and the State of the Union Watch Party at the White House will be forever instilled in me, but in the end, I never could have predicted some of my favorite speakers. Brian Kamoie’s speech especially interested me, as it highlighted handling intense situations and crises, addressing polarization, and translating Washington Week from a week of experiences to a lifetime of change. These perspectives, whether through past delegates that pursued a career in politics, figures I was well or maybe lesser aware of, or even my Military Mentor (Major Tran), gave me an idea of the behind-the-scenes activities of our nation, giving a “why” to the actions of public service.

I expected to walk away from Washington Week with decisiveness, having resonated with one of our speakers or mentors and wanting to follow in their footsteps for my career. However, Washington Week gifted me with the opposite effect. I walked away having pictured myself in each and every role we heard from, and I loved almost all of them. I am so grateful for the lessons and perspectives Washington Week provided, from the delegates to mentors to speakers. The speaker from my state, Congressman Emanuel Cleaver, referred to public service as an opportunity in addition to being an obligation. He focused on his own experiences and forming them into proactive change for the nation. I feel like my vision of opportunity has expanded to a degree where now so many paths for such change have been illuminated, and I am excited to see which I pursue.