

## **Brianna Schmitz, ND – 2024**

I would be lying if I said, “The United States Senate Youth Program was the experience of a lifetime.” I would be lying because Washington Week was more than seven days of events and fun experiences. Washington Week showed every delegate, including myself, that by participating in America’s democracy as public servants we can shape our country’s future. Every distinguished speaker at Washington Week was educational, inspirational, and impactful. I am extremely grateful to the Hearst Foundations for allowing me to listen to each speaker, as I was able to learn new information each day. Although each speaker was incredible, certain speakers left me feeling empowered to create change in a divided America. These speakers included Secretary of the Senate, Ann Berry; Senator of Louisiana, Bill Cassidy; and USSYP Alum, Aaron Weber.

In my opinion, the witnessing United States Senate in session is extremely intimidating, yet beautiful at the same time. The Senate is one of the oldest and most sacred institutions in America, so it is understandable to feel so small while learning and witnessing it in action. This is why I found the presentation from Secretary Berry so empowering. Secretary Berry, herself, is a perfect example of a public servant. Despite serving in an important role in the Senate, Secretary Berry demonstrates humility and selflessness through her actions and poise. Secretary Berry spoke about her journey to become the Secretary of the Senate and how she uses her position for good. Secretary Berry is a bright light in the dim political climate of modern-day America, and I hope that one day I may learn to lead with her grace and poise.

The next speaker who left a positive impression on my Washington week was Senator Bill Cassidy of Louisiana. Senator Cassidy’s friendly personality showed all delegates that elected officials are humans too, which may be lost through their titles and accomplishments. The part of Senator Cassidy’s speech that resonated with me was when he said, “Our challenges in life are what make us unique.” He later stated, “Let one of your flaws be something you create with, not something you are a martyr for.” Both of these quotes spoke volumes to the 104 delegates of the USSYP, as everyone has unique personalities, backgrounds, and adversities they face. I will never forget these two quotes, and still think about them every day. I am grateful for the insight Senator Cassidy provided into legislation, but I believe the life lessons he taught us made him stand out amongst the speakers at Washington Week.

The last speaker who made a positive impact on my USSYP experience was Aaron Weber, a legislative aide for Senator John Hoeven. I may be biased, as I was able to meet Mr. Weber and provide thank you remarks after his speech, but Mr. Weber provided valuable insight into the opportunities on Capitol Hill. He showed how we can act as positive public servants, without being in the spotlight. I am grateful to have met and listened to Mr. Weber as he provided information for delegates hoping to work on Capitol Hill in the future.

Overall, Washington Week was phenomenal in every way. I want to extend my gratitude to the Hearst Foundations, Ms. DeSmet, Ms. Guilford, and everyone who helped with the program. I also want to extend my deepest gratitude to the Military Mentors at Washington Week 2024. Each mentor was remarkable and provided advice that has positively impacted my mindset, attitude, and patriotism every day. As I stated earlier, this week was more than seven days of experience. Washington Week helped shape me, and the other 104 delegates, which will positively change the future of the United States of America.