

Kyle Chan, NY – 2024

2 from each of the 50 states. 2 from DC. 2 from DODEA.

104 different political ideologies. 104 different walks of life. 104 different opinions.

But what unites these 104 students is their heart. 104 passionate, driven changemakers. 104 of the nation's brightest young minds.

104 United States Senate Youth Program delegates of its 62nd annual class.

This unlikely grouping of students proved to form the strongest bonds of all. Everyone was so different, yet we were all so alike, ready to embark on the adventure of our lives. No second was wasted as we navigated a packed schedule of speakers from the topmost positions of our federal government, chanted coach bus spirit songs (USS ONE! USS ONE!! USS WON!!!) and picked the brains of our Military Mentors in awe of their service to our country.

One of the first speeches we heard, Mr. Bill Doherty of Braver Angels, spoke to us on a most appropriate topic: political polarization. I still remember the day I was interviewed as a finalist in New York for this program. I recall sharing with my interviewers an article I read the night before about how now is the most polarized time in American history. Americans are getting pulled to more extreme sides of our political spectrum, and in an era where compromise is of paramount importance, the split of the people, and by extension government, translates into an inability to create such compromise.

As we sat nervously in the Grand Ballroom, shoulder-to-shoulder with delegates we'd never met before from all corners of our Earth, we knew that we would have differing opinions. But Mr. Doherty taught us to listen with your heart and lead with empathy. This speech was most profound and important because it set the tone for the rest of our week together. He opened our minds to opposing views, and in fact, told us to seek them out. Hear them out and see what you can learn. How can they challenge your views? Will that lead to a strengthening of your own views or perhaps a change in your perspective? As we began talking to other delegates and hearing speakers from both sides of the aisle, we took each point with dignity, whether we agreed or not. Along with hearing from speakers with all different ideologies, we could bridge our previously polarized gap. We can still hold our values dear, but by understanding opposing perspectives (something we don't get to do much at home), we learn to treasure the value of our differences.

All of the other speakers also left indelible marks on me. From Associate Justice Elena Kagan to NOAA Administrator Dr. Richard Spinrad to President Joe Biden, each figure I was used to seeing on TV proved to be down-to-earth, humble, and genuine individuals. There was nothing conceited about them and their position as they graciously donated their time to meet with a hundred high schoolers. They were funny, told us childhood stories, and showed us completely different sides of themselves. These politicians are people too, just like you and me. They follow their heart. They follow their passion. They do what they think is right and ethical, and strive for positive change in our world. No matter what the media says about them, our government is trying its best to serve the people. The flaws always get the most attention, but this week showed me how passionate every single staffer, security guard, and speechwriter has to be to continue building our democracy.

No USSYP reflection would be complete without a proper thank you to the Military Mentors. A special shoutout is due to Captain Andrew Carroll of the United States Air Force. From letting me borrow your belt for the whole week to teaching us about the work you do with ICBMs, you never failed to impress or satiate the curiosities of me or the other "Rocket Men." You have imbued us with a burning desire to continue serving our communities and country. All other military mentors have been nothing but kind, respectful, and awe-inspiring in their own rights. As someone with limited interaction with the military previously, this week opened my eyes to the sacrifice that gets put into protecting our nation. Our Military Mentors brought to light the importance of honor and service, but most importantly, of growth as individuals.

On our never-ending journeys of growth to become public servants, I reminisce on the memories I've gotten to make during this week. While we still talk online, I look forward to the day I get to see the delegates —now friends— in person once again. I would like to say a thank you to the staff of the USSYP, from the organizers to the security guards and bus drivers. Another heartfelt thank you goes to the Hearst Foundations for creating a program so beyond extraordinary and fueling 104 burning flames into their dreams of public service. I will forever cherish these memories and the bonds I've created, and I have renewed hope for the future of our nation. I'm so grateful for the opportunity to have been a part of this program, and I await next year's alumni reception to relive my Mayflower dreams.

Thank you. To everyone who made this possible.