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USSYP Essay

There are certain moments in every person's life that have a big impact on their character. These moments can challenge preconceived notions, alter opinions, or open one's eyes to world around him. We often refer to these moments as defining moments because it is these moments that ultimately define who we are. My week in Washington was without question a series of defining moments in my life. Whether it was through the speeches I heard or discussions I had with military mentors or other students, I was constantly learning. The week went by a little too fast for my liking, but I'm so grateful to have been a part of such an enriching experience.

In my opinion, Senator Byron Dorgan was the best speaker of the week. He was funny, personable, and incredibly inspiring. Most of all, I was able to see a little of myself in him. One of things he said was "I went from sitting in a desk with nine graduating classmates, of which I finished top five, to sitting in Harry Truman's former desk." Senator Dorgan then went on to encourage us to stay involved with politics and continue to work hard so that we, too, may be able to one day sit in the senate chambers. I found this message incredibly inspiring. Though Senator Dorgan and I are from opposite ends of the country, we both come from places with limited resources. I live in rural Alabama and my opportunities to become heavily involved in politics are much less than those who live near bigger cities. Standing in front of me was a man that grew up in a similar environment and was now one of the most influential senators in Washington. For me, his presence served as a symbol of what hard work, determination, and resiliency can accomplish. Though we are on opposite ends of the political spectrum, Senator Dorgan is without a doubt one of my idols in the senate.

He came walking down the long, red carpet with huge marble pillars on both sides into the white house press room. I've seen him make this walk at least 100 times. However, this time the President of The United States was not walking toward my television screen, he was walking toward me and 103 other students. Next, he began speaking to all of us; he gave us words of advice and unprecedented insight to the world of politics. When asked what advice he would give to us students who aspired to perhaps one day hold the presidency, President Obama went into a long eloquent answer that can be exemplified by his statement "it's not what you are, it's what you do." The message was clear. He advised us not be concerned with the position we hold, but to be concerned with people we help. He explained that many people were under the misconception that they must be a senator or a congressman to help people. However, that was not the case. The goal of public service is to help people, and the most

powerful man in the world explained to some of the brightest students in our nation that you do not have to be an elected official to accomplish this goal. All you need is a strong work ethic and a passion for righteousness.

Sonya Sotomayor is the first Hispanic person to ever serve as a Supreme Court Justice. Her nomination and confirmation as a Supreme Court Justice sent the message to Hispanics all across America that anything is possible through diligence. Everyone was extremely excited to have the honor of hearing her speak. However, she was not what anyone expected. We were not taken aback by her presence, and she did not deliver an inspiring speech filled with encouragement and words of advice. Instead she just casually strolled into the room where we were seated, sat down, and said "I doubt that all of you would like for me to talk at you, so I'd really like the chance to talk with you." She then took her seat and allowed many people to ask her questions for about 45 minutes. I was, however, taken aback by this. One of the most powerful people in our nation was standing in front of us leading a discussion. It was as if she were not a Supreme Court Justice at all, it was as if she were just a regular person. I think we need more leaders in our nation with her attitude. She did not feel that she was better than us because of the position she held, and she recognized that many of the students were more interested in Sonya Sotomayor the person, as oppose to Sonya Sotomayor the justice. Her attitude reminded me that our leaders, no matter their position, are still just regular people and they were at one time a high school senior with aspirations as high as the sky, just like me.

My week in Washington was incredible. The things I saw, the people I met and the things I heard greatly influenced my character. I now have friends at almost every prestigious college across America, a broadened perspective on many of today's most challenging issues, and a more extensive knowledge of our government and how it works. All this was possible through the Hearst Foundation. Clarence Day once said "Information's pretty thin stuff unless mixed with experience." That quote exemplifies my time in Washington. I've read about our government and the people that serve us, but the opportunity to experience it first hand was truly a life changing experienced.