

Paul Elish – ME

I think what I found most inspiring about my experience during Washington Week was the sense of opportunity that pervaded the program. As delegates to the United States Senate Youth Program, we were exposed to countless unique experiences that each promised a different form of inspiration. We experienced the extensive political heritage of Washington, from reading President Lincoln's second inaugural address inscribed on the wall of the Lincoln Memorial to sitting in the gallery of the Supreme Court and standing in the Capitol's Rotunda. We were immersed in Washington D.C.'s rich artistic spirit, from viewing Albert Bierstadt's awe-inspiring paintings of the West at the Smithsonian Museum of American Art to the astounding performance of Verdi's "Requiem" at the Kennedy Center. But I think what most enriched our Washington Week experience was the tremendous diversity of the people we met while in the nation's capital.

Even in themselves, the prominent figures in American public service that came to speak during Washington Week made the experience unforgettable. Each speaker contributed a different sense of what it means to be a public servant in the United States. Among my favorite speakers were Judge Robert Henry, with his thoughtful commentary on American law, and Senator Byron Dorgan, with his candid answers to questions. I also found Ambassador Meera Shankar's hope for the future of Indian democracy to be very uplifting, and I will always remember the down-to-earth wisdom Justice Sonia Sotomayor expressed when speaking to us. Of course, one of the most amazing experiences of the week was undoubtedly meeting President Obama; I'm still having difficulty believing we were greeted by the President of the United States in the White House!

Still, in spite of all these incredible experiences, I cannot help but feel that the best part of Washington Week was actually the 103 other delegates. It was incidents like talking to New Mexico delegates about the Kokopelli, discussing art with my roommate from Montana, debating controversial issues outside the White House with delegates from Minnesota and Maine, and just listening to another delegate talk about their life experiences while walking in the rain at Arlington National Cemetery that truly made Washington Week unforgettable. I can honestly say that I've never met such a fascinating and genuinely nice group of people as I did while in Washington. I hope never to lose touch with the other delegates to USSYP 2010, and I'll forever be grateful to the William Randolph Hearst Foundation for providing me with the opportunity to have what will always be considered one of the best weeks of my life.

- Paul Elish, Maine USSYP 2010 Delegate