

USSYP Delegate Essay
Austin Hagwood CA -- 2011

A cool Potomac wind blows across my face, buffeting my tie but leaving me cool and refreshed. On the horizon, the United States Capitol dome gleams as I attempt to fully realize the profound profiles of the Washington Monument, the Lincoln and Jefferson Memorials, the Supreme Court, Smithsonian Castle, and all of the icons that define Washington, D.C., our nation's capital. At this time last year, I could not imagine that I would have the opportunity to meet Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, Director of the CIA Leon Panetta, Senator John Kerry, President Barack Obama, and 103 of the United States' top student leaders, all while experiencing a full immersion in national politics through direct access to departments of government. The United States Senate Youth Program, sponsored by the William Randolph Hearst Foundation, introduced me to the federal political process while simultaneously equipping me to succeed in the contemporary world of globalization and political turbulence.

What sets USSYP apart from other national leadership programs? No other initiative in the world can offer such an in-depth exposure to the national government, all at no cost to delegates while providing unparalleled opportunities not only to watch government and tour sites, but to become a part of the U.S. political process. As a delegate from California, I gained a holistic perspective on government, a broadened scope of the United States borne of friendships made with students from all fifty states, the District of Columbia, and the Department of Defense Education Activity. As one of my best friends and roommate, Chas Uffelman of Tennessee, stated, I found myself immersed in "... the most dynamic political think tank imaginable...", as delegates from a myriad of backgrounds, geographic regions, and ideological viewpoints came together to engage in the spirit of mutual respect, friendship, and discussion. While I arrived at USSYP as a Californian, I left with a profound sense of what it means to be an American.

Asking Steven Chu, Secretary of Energy, a question, shaking hands with Supreme Court Associate Justice Clarence Thomas, feeling the solemnity of Arlington National Cemetery, dining in the grandeur of the Benjamin Franklin State Dining Room, living in the presence of contemporary American history – these are memories that I will remember forever. But perhaps the most important message that my experience in Washington imparted on my being remains the imperative significance of public service. From judges, to senators, to Leon Panetta, Director of the CIA, I witnessed the passion that the men and women serving in Washington bring to the government every day, a passion I possess and hope to utilize for the benefit of others.

Since arriving home, it seems as though the predominant question about my experience remains, "What was Obama like?" While meeting the President of the United States was certainly a highlight of my life, my favorite facet of USSYP was the opportunity to meet and connect with 103 brilliant leaders from across the nation and world. The one factor that truly *defines* the USSYP experience is the people. My fellow delegates became my best friends within the course of a week, a transformation that enriched both my mind and heart. Delegates to Washington Week are just as comfortable debating the definition and subjectivity of morality as they are discussing the stimulus package or the NBA Playoffs. The fact that, as a delegate from California, my best friends come from states ranging from Tennessee, to Illinois, to Massachusetts stands as a testament to the bond we formed over the course of one week. Moreover, the dedication I witnessed among the outstanding military mentors present throughout the week allowed me to appreciate the sacrifices these men and women make for our nation on a daily basis. I fully expect to see my fellow delegates at the top levels of government someday, and I hope to enter public service to serve society as a result of this program; I am deeply indebted to the Hearst Foundation and the entire program staff for changing my life in such a profound manner. Thank you.