

Charles Uffelman - TN - 2011

On March 4th, the day before I departed from Nashville for Washington D.C., I thought myself to be well versed on all things politics. Little did I know the next seven days would teach me more about current issues from a national perspective than I had learned in a lifetime. I was granted a view of our nation's government that few people get to experience. I heard speeches from Senators, Justices, Secretaries, and the President. Though the most intriguing conversations came not from Washington's elite, but from my 103 fellow delegates from each state and abroad. From the moment I arrived at the airport I began forming friendships with the other delegates and the wonderful Military Mentors. This was the precursor to a week of bonding that will undoubtedly have a lasting effect on me as I keep in touch with my new friends on a daily basis.

Though I had been excited from the moment I received word that I was attending the United States Senate Youth program I didn't fully realize the importance of the opportunity until I was sitting with my friend and roommate Austin Hagwood of CA waiting for Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas to speak to us. Meeting a man so skilled and knowledgeable in all things law, yet humble and self-deprecating, set a very good example for leadership. He gave us a unique perspective from growing up in segregated Georgia to an optimistic view of America in the future. Of all the speakers that week Justice Thomas gave us the most of his time, answering questions for over an hour.

The headlining speaker, President Obama, had all us of abuzz throughout the week. The trip from the bus to the East Room started as a brisk walk and sped to an all out run as each delegate grew more excited with every step. After roughly half an hour of positioning for photos the President himself comes sauntering down the hall in his general laid back fashion. His speech did not disappoint as he complimented us on our accomplishments and made the occasional joke. Speeches aside, coming from a middle class family in rural Tennessee, simply being in the room with the President of the United States was a moment I'll cherish as long as I live.

Despite such distinguished speakers, the most amazing experience by far was meeting the top political minds of each state, district and the Military Education Activity. Yes, the delegates provided endless discussion on anything from policy debates with Robert Locke and Elise Lecrone of Massachusetts to FFA with Victoria Maloch of Arkansas. The seven days in D.C. and the experiences we shared helped forge relationships that will benefit me as I and my new found friends begin our careers of public service.

Looking back on this program and all I have learned through it I still have trouble comprehending all that happened that week. The knowledge I walk away with and perspective I've gained is priceless and has inspired me in new way to work for my community. I have to thank the wonderful Hearst Foundations staff that made it all possible as well as my fellow delegates whom made it all memorable.