

## **Vaibhavi Mahajan, MS – 2022**

Scrolling on the Mississippi Department of Education's website as a freshman in high school, I came across a page detailing the United States Senate Youth Program. I read about delegates with incredible achievements spending a week in Washington D.C. learning about our government and meeting with federal officials, and knew I had to apply when I was a junior. When the time finally came, I applied and got 2nd alternate to the program; I was utterly dejected, but I didn't quit my passion for politics. This year, now a senior, I applied and was accepted. To say that I was excited when I received the congratulations email is an understatement.

Washington Week 2022 was everything I had hoped it would be and more; although it wasn't like how freshman year-me thought it would be in person, the online platform provided for so many new opportunities that we would not have been able to have otherwise. For example, the chance for delegates to meet with Senators for 15-20 minutes over Zoom during their busy schedules was something that only we would be able to experience. Senator Hyde-Smith's words about how proud she was that my co-delegate Emily and I were both female representatives for the state of Mississippi will always stay with me.

Meetings with our home state senators occurred before the "real" Washington Week even began, and already had set a high standard for the week. It is safe to say that with meetings from Secretary of Transportation Pete Buttigieg to Senate Historian Dr. Betty Koed, delegates got to see all parts of Washington whether that be political or historical. Among the historical aspects of Washington Week, the tour of Arlington National Cemetery along with the Q&A session with a serving Sentinel was my favorite. I've had the privilege to see the changing of the guard in person, but to see someone who has gone through the rigorous but rewarding process of becoming a sentinel and explaining what every day is like has deepened my respect for their work even more.

Delegates didn't just get to learn about domestic issues either; diving into an interactive diplomacy situation on the Suez Canal Crisis of 1956, we got to roleplay countries and see firsthand just how hard it was to negotiate a solution. Although I'd say it was the most stressful part of Washington Week, it was also one of my favorite parts for the same reason. I loved having to find a solution with so many disagreeing parties, and with my group being Egypt, we were bombarded with questions for negotiation.

More than the speakers or simulations though, something that Washington Week gave me that nothing else has is the connection that I've made with my fellow delegates. Not only did I get to reconnect with some girls from Girls Nation who I had met this past summer, but I was also able to make new friends within my military mentor group and with my co-delegate. It is those connections that I will carry with me for the rest of my life, regardless of what career I step into. Washington Week 2022 was truly an unforgettable experience, and I am eternally grateful that I applied for it. It has confirmed my desire to pursue a career in public service and introduced me to a variety of avenues to do so.