

Jayanti Gupta, MI — 2022

Though I was initially skeptical on how truly “life-changing” an experience such as The United States Senate Youth Program could be in an online format, the experiences that such a program provided me, coupled with the incredible network of talented and brilliant change-makers I met as a result of this program truly exceeded expectation, providing me with the experience of a lifetime. As an organizer both locally and nationally I have often found myself falling prey to the increasingly polarized environment that is the United States’ current political system. Therefore, having the opportunity to listen to speakers who have excelled in their respective fields, ranging from Deputy National Climate Advisor, Ali Zaidi, to General Mark A. Milley, was a truly humbling experience.

As someone who has spent hundreds of hours on implementing institutional change through grassroots legislative work, hearing Senator Cory Gardner's speech was inspiring, a testament to the importance of vocal advocacy and social activism, exemplified through the walk-out turned rally which he organized in his high school. Furthermore, I greatly appreciated his emphasis on the need for a political system that doesn't rely on partisanship, but rather unites to reach its common goal: the betterment of society through "being firm in your principles but flexible in the details."

It was also both a pleasure and an honor to both hear from, and provide a quote for, Secretary Pete Buttigieg. As both a United States Senate Youth Program alumnus and the first openly gay Cabinet secretary in the United States, his political journey is inspiring and humbling, a testament to both the possibility and importance of representation. As someone who hopes to one day serve the community I've always called home, I especially appreciated his emphasis on actively engaging in local politics, exemplified through his tenure as the mayor of South Bend, Indiana. Furthermore, I admired his intersectional focus on transportation, one where issues like climate justice and inequity are recognized.

My favorite experience throughout Washington Week, however, was getting to hear from Deputy Assistant Secretary General for Public Diplomacy, Carmen Romero. Hearing about NATO's stance and internal workings, especially during such an internationally volatile time, amid the Russia Ukraine conflict, while simultaneously getting to ask Ms. Romero how NATO navigates conflict within the alliance and makes unified decisions on the actions it takes, while still respecting the differing values and belief systems of the 30 countries, was such an enriching experience, one which would not have been possible without The United States Senate Youth Program.

Though it is apparent that I thoroughly enjoyed our numerous guest speakers and official program, the most intellectually enriching part of the program for me was, in fact, not a part of our official agenda at all. Rather, it was during my time with fellow delegates. Whether it be having passionate debates about the standardized testing system during our military mentor groups, staying up for hours late into the night with fellow sleep-deprived delegates as we convinced ourselves we were going to spend this time doing our homework (but instead spent it

on hilarious, yet surprisingly challenging, online drawing games), or scrolling through our appropriately named group chat where delegates were having debates about politically significant social issues while simultaneously cracking jokes, having the opportunity to interact with so many individually smart and passionate students, some of whom I have already met in-person after the program, once again exemplifies the importance and power of a program like The United States Senate Youth Program.

With that being said, I can confidently state that Washington Week Online has been an unforgettable experience, one which has allowed me to learn from the current leaders of the United States while simultaneously meeting the leaders of tomorrow, found amongst my fellow 103 other delegates.