

Bishishta Acharya, OH – 2025

On the second-to-last night of Washington Week, I had one of the most impactful dinners of my whole life.

That night, I was one of the last people to enter the Grand Ballroom, and so I sat at a table in the back, with only half the seats filled. I had lost something of mine beforehand, and I was a bit frazzled, not fully aware of my surroundings. I didn't know it at the time, but that half-decisive decision would lead to one of my most cherished core memories.

Beyond the excellent meal, our dynamic speaker Senator Thom Tillis, and the jokes cracked (because, boy, there were a lot of those), what has really stuck with me was a conversation with the Military Mentor, Lieutenant Denove, who sat at my table. We ended up talking about the agenda for the following day, specifically meeting the Secretary of Defense, Pete Hegseth. Lieutenant Denove asked for our opinion on Secretary Hegseth, and after explaining mine, I asked for his opinion. His response will stay with me forever.

Lieutenant Denove explained that one thing he truly admires about Secretary Hegseth is that he will go on work outs with other soldiers in the military. "It's not common," he said, "to see that kind of mutual respect being offered by someone with so much power."

Mutual respect. When he said that I kind of froze, and the past events of the week started replaying in my head.

The Military Mentors and program directors who welcomed us at the airport. The alumni who came back to speak with us, both casually and at the mentoring tables. My own military mentor, Captain Heaps, stating she's read about all of us, and that we are incredible young adults. The Secretary of the Senate, the Senate Parliamentarian, and the Senate Sergeant at Arms taking the time to tell us about their jobs. The Librarian of Congress explaining her role in public service, but also telling us about how she loves a good, cozy mystery novel. The Senate Historian imparting on us two lessons: first, individuals matter; and second, the Senate is a community. Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh comparing his job to that of a baseball umpire's and telling us about positivity: be the person who identifies the solution, not the problem. The Secretary of State describing his thought process when it comes to foreign policy (does it make America stronger, safer, or more prosperous?), but also telling us about how he loves studying history and human nature. Mexico's Ambassador to the United States defining the impact of federal layoffs. NASA astronauts showing us their expedition vlog. Meeting my own Ohio senator. Senator Klobuchar unfiltered thoughts on some current policies and reminding us to take our jobs seriously. The Chief Communications Officer of the World Central Kitchen visualizing what it's like to tangibly serve others in an active war zone. The Secretary of Defense professing how much he loves America and teaching us there's two important days in our life: the day you're born, and the day you figure out why.

That was a lot, and it doesn't even begin to encompass how many parts of this week have engraved themselves into both my mind and heart. The reason I outlined these events is because there's an underlying thread connecting them: mutual respect. On the basis of race, sex, identity, or simply our age, mutual respect from people in such high places of power, with such large experiences is not something easily shown.

Yet throughout the entirety of Washington Week, our speakers took the time to describe how they serve America, but also explained who they are. They reshaped how I think of public service. I felt as though I

belonged in every space I was privileged to step into, because I was there to learn, and all of these accomplished people recognized that we were needed. A burden as much as it is an opportunity, the future is our generation's duty to shape. I know my fellow delegates and I will take everything from Washington Week—from our speakers, from our military mentors, and from each other—and use it to lead with integrity, humility, and appreciation for those around us.

Because what I saw that week was the quiet, unwavering power of mutual respect. Not performative. Not conditional. It didn't disappear in the presence of disagreements or rank or differences. It was the kind of respect that compelled us to listen before we spoke, see the person behind the title, and value questions just as much as answers. Whether it was a Supreme Court Justice treating our questions with sincere thought, or a renowned astronaut asking us about what we dream of doing someday, or even one of my fellow delegates offering me their pen after I lost all six of mine—it was truly everywhere.

Mutual respect turned a room of 104 strangers into a community. It turned my lost item and a simple conversation into a defining moment. It turned what could've been any other student program into a week that I will never forget.

I hope to carry that respect forward; into every room I step into, every project I take on, and every person I meet. I believe respect is more than politeness, rather, it's the foundation for empathy, action, and real, meaningful change. Washington Week reminded me of that, and I will always be grateful.