

## **Kasim Khapra, VA – 2025**

The 63<sup>rd</sup> annual United States Senate Youth Program began at a moment of intense polarization, deep distrust in government, and significant changes to US foreign and domestic policy. I started Washington Week excited to learn, but uneasy about the political climate in DC. While some skepticism about the future remains, the experience offered me invaluable context into how decisions are made and how I can navigate information in order to make more informed judgements.

Our first speaker, Dr. Bill Doherty, provided a framework to engage in more productive discourse. He stressed the importance of allowing others to use their preferred terminology instead of rushing to correct their political correctness in a conversation. We often get so bogged down trying to convince others that their style is wrong – even if it is – that we reduce space to engage in substance. His remarks set the tone for the week and helped me engage in more meaningful discussions.

The next morning, Mr. Brian Kamoie encouraged us to “know what is important to people and why they make decisions.” I tried to apply this ethos both while listening to speakers and when engaging with peers and mentors. The unique geographic perspectives of other delegates shared insights I would have never considered from my life in Virginia: the impacts of tariffs on South Dakota’s agriculture industry, the necessity of the coal industry for West Virginia’s economy, or the best place to host a wedding in Rhode Island. From our Military Mentors, I developed a deeper appreciation for the service, sacrifice, and discipline and our service members offer to the country. I also learned that climate change is not just a scientific challenge, but a national security threat; agencies such as USAID play an essential role in mitigating foreign terrorism; and deciding whether to offer foreign military aid is a more nuanced decision than a choice between black and white.

Yet, internal open-mindedness and intellectual curiosity are not enough. When we heard from Justice Brett Kavanaugh, he explained how he uses questioning periods to demonstrate preparedness and fairness to both the plaintiff and the defendant. The institutional integrity of the Supreme Court is dependent on the general public’s belief that the Justices are fair, regardless of their judicial philosophy. Communicating open-mindedness is just as important as actually being open-minded.

This same principle can be applied to discourse. A conversation is only informative if both parties perceive that the other is actively trying to understand their perspectives. Throughout the week, we inevitably heard from speakers that some of us disagreed with. We could ask about issues of concern during Q&A sessions, but questions that had no opinion attached to them elicited the most substantive responses. The speaker trusted that we were genuinely curious to hear their perspective.

Above all, Washington Week taught me that we don’t necessarily need to constantly seek “common ground” in order for our democracy to flourish. Diversity of thought can be an asset to thoughtful policy, not an obstacle to progress. The week challenged me to revel in that diversity of thought, to critically question my own opinions, and to look past the headlines in the quest for truth. While uncertainty looms over our future, I left Washington Week satisfied that most people have a rational, if not reasonable, “why” behind their decisions. While I’m still deciding what to do with my “one, wild, and precious life,” I’m grateful that the United States Senate Youth Program has empowered me with some of the tools I need to try and find an answer.

Many thanks,  
Kasim Khapra