

## Rushi Patel, IN – 2017

I am a product of my culture and my values. As an only child of Indian immigrants, I imbibed Gandhi's principles of *seva* (service) and *satya* (honesty), all while embracing beliefs of individuality and determination from the country that embraced my parents and me. An aspiring public servant, this program served as the perfect platform for me to share the confluence of my background, experiences, and values with students across the nation, while being exposed to those of my peers.

In my initial application essay about the fallibility of democracy, I had mentioned that "open, healthy discussion is a prerequisite for a long-lasting democracy." This is exactly what the United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP) nurtures. When individuals with completely different upbringings gather around the table for a conversation during dinner, it cultivates a very enlightening environment. When the views of a delegate from a white-majority rural town clash with those of another delegate who may be from an immigrant family that incessantly works to achieve their American Dream, it sparks a debate between the entire table and forces its participants to ponder the philosophical and delve deep into the underlying fundamental values of our nation. Undoubtedly, these conversations had the most indelible impact on students: Each delegate left Washington Week with a wider grasp of the world around them, more tolerant (or at least more exposed) to the beliefs of others.

Of course, the subject of the debates tended to be well-known speakers or the content of their talks during the week: from the president to the Israeli ambassador, from the chief justice to Senator Roger Wicker. Wanting to explore the intersection of policymaking and science during my undergraduate years, I found the speech of Surgeon General Vivek Murthy particularly interesting. Also, as an Indian-American, he was quick to talk about his heritage — something most others of similar background in politics fail to do. Former Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal went far enough to express his disgust at his heritage at a 2016 speech in Iowa when he said he was "tired of hyphenated-Americans." Such rhetoric is detrimental to the youth of America, who consequently reject their identities without any appreciation for their rich cultural history; such rhetoric fails to realize that America's biggest strength is its diversity, and the hyphens do not need to be a weak link but can be an indicator of strength. Seeing the surgeon general openly talk about his heritage was a source of inspiration for not only the Indian-American delegates but all delegates who understand the integral part cultural diversity plays in American identity.

Indisputably, Washington Week was the best week of my life, and I am forever grateful to The Hearst Foundations and U.S. Senate for organizing the week. I also cannot possibly express my endless gratitude to the Military Mentors who enhanced my experience and Mr. and Mrs. Jakub and Erin Mosur who carefully captured our priceless memories with their pictures.