

Ishaan Modi, IN – 2019

How can I begin to describe Washington Week? My fellow delegates put it best. It was riveting, inspiring, a dialogue, empowering, intense, *and* of course – a nut-free zone. I was beyond excited for Washington Week, after hearing how transformative it was for so many people.

I *still* wasn't prepared for how amazing the experience would be. After I landed in Dulles and was greeted by three Military Mentors, I spent the next hour meeting five other delegates. We all clicked instantly. It was refreshing to hear so many bright voices, making jokes, debating politics, talking about the great things they were doing for their communities.

Then, we reached the Mayflower. It was there where I began to feel the magnitude of this experience. Everything just seemed grand, in a way which one could feel its greatness. Immediately as I walked into the ballroom and checked in, I was greeted by my fellow delegates. Their kindness, warmth, and intelligence astounded me. Those initial few hours set the tone for what the week would be, in terms of interactions with the speakers and in terms of interactions with one another. Along with my fellow delegates, the Military Mentors were crucial in ensuring an unforgettable experience. They truly fulfilled their role as mentors. Their approachability and desire to talk about their experiences in serving our country resonated with me. I still can recall multiple conversations I had with Captain Lin (leader of the Lin-guines!) regarding his favorite experiences in the Air Force, podcast recommendations, policy discussions, and so much more.

For each day of Washington Week, I can recall at least one moment for which I was paralyzed with awe. Shaking hands with Chief Justice Roberts. Eating dinner feet away from the Constitution. Walking into a hall of the State Department to eat lunch in the vicinity of the secretary of State. Looking at a section of the Berlin Wall in the Newseum. These moments cultivate a deeper-rooted respect for the American experiment. These moments further fuel my desire to serve the public.

As I previously alluded, many of the awe-inspiring moments of Washington Week came during speakers' remarks and question and answer sessions. Giving youth a platform to engage so critically and eloquently with the high-profile figures of our nation is something commendable the Hearst Foundations has annually succeeded in doing. Chief Justice Roberts simply gave brief opening remarks, then opened up to questioning. With every question, he treated us like equals – treated us like legal minds presenting in front of him. Senator Michael Bennet almost had to be dragged out of the session by his staff because of how many questions he was eager to answer. Principal Deputy Director Susan Gordon told us in response to us asking for her autograph, "I should be asking YOU all for autographs." Back home, while public officials treat us with respect, they do not necessarily display the eagerness to engage in (sometimes difficult) dialogue with us youth leaders. The attitudes, tones, and words of Washington Week's speakers were so different. They were refreshing, challenging, and motivating.

The words that are still the most potent in my mind, nevertheless, are those of my fellow delegates. Friday morning, Brian Lamb, the founder of C-SPAN, moderated our annual delegate town hall. The diversity in political ideologies was apparent. Our worldviews were, oftentimes, starkly contrasting. Yet, the way my fellow delegates

explicated their points of view was respectful and quite admirable. It was those couple of hours that truly cemented to me the power of this program in fostering civil discourse. It was those couple of hours that truly manifested to me what is missing in many facets of our society. It was those couple of hours that catapulted me towards a future of respect, dignity, debate, love, and listening.

All 104 of us are still considerably close, even almost six weeks after the program. It is a testament to how well the program forges bonds between student leaders. In fact, since Washington Week, there are many delegates with whom I haven't gone a day without speaking.

My fellow delegates became my people, my supporters, my advocates. And I became theirs.

Thank you to the Hearst Foundations for putting together this unparalleled experience. It has changed my life, and I know it will continue to change the lives of high schoolers throughout the nation.

Fondly,
Ishaan Modi