

Shubh Gupta, KY – 2021

Let's address the elephant in the room. The 59th United States Senate Youth Program was not a regular USSYP. The experience my 103 fellow delegates and I had seen in photos, videos, and pamphlets was replaced with discord, virtual hiccups, and occasional eye strain. Like most things in this era, Washington Week was at the mercy of COVID-19; but we didn't let it define our horizons. While it wasn't the event we had envisioned, it was a transformative, enriching, and phenomenal experience nonetheless.

The unprecedented virtual nature of Washington Week brought its own set of challenges. Yet, our shared love for government and commitment to public service allowed us to adapt and overcome those hurdles. Albeit virtually, we had the unique opportunity to look through a window into the inner workings of our democracy and the multitude of roles under the umbrella of public service. From Captain Scott Kelly to Ms. Norah O'Donnell to President Joe Biden to America's Sweetheart Dr. Anthony Fauci—engaging in intimate discussion with these prominent figures was a distinct privilege and incredibly insightful.

Particularly, I found our visit to the Supreme Court thought-provoking. Headlined by Justice Clarence Thomas and former Judge Robert Henry, my fellow peers and I were excited to gain insight into their two brilliant judicial minds. Despite holding different political beliefs, I was pleasantly surprised to discover that each held similar views on a multitude of topics. Both discussed the importance of honesty and sincerity, emphasized the necessity of dreaming big, and displayed unwavering respect for the enlightenment ideals behind the framing of the Constitution. These commonalities only cemented my faith in our democracy and belief that progress can occur amid a hyperpolarized political atmosphere.

But while the guest speakers may have taken the spotlight, the interactions and connections I made with my fellow delegates, mentors, and alumni will be my biggest takeaway. To know that I am part of a family of current and future leaders, public servants, and innovators is truly humbling. I can't wait to see the names of my fellow delegates in the news, on the ballots, and creating a better nation for all.

Thank you delegates and distinguished guests for making Washington Week the wonderful experience that it was. To thank every individual responsible for making it possible would be an impossible task. However, I'd like to extend my gratitude to Lt. Commander Gillis for facilitating rich and lively discussion in our small group (Go Hammerheads!), Ms. Rayne Guilford and the USSYP staff for pivoting and putting together a seamless virtual program, and the Hearst Foundations for graciously subsidizing our education and the program as a whole.

Our farewell guest speaker, Mr. Noah Harris, made a comment that radically shifted how I view public service. Specifically, he stated that his rationale for going into public service was simply that he enjoyed making people smile. This sentiment struck a special chord with me. I came into Washington Week as a 16-year-old with little certainty of the life ahead of him. Now I know, more than ever, that I want to serve others, better my community, and make people smile.