

Aditi Shankar, MA – 2022

In the midst of a war, 103 delegates and I watch the nation's highest ranking military officer in the United States, Mark Milley, speak to us remotely through our computers - a side effect of our ongoing pandemic. My fellow delegates are brimming at the seams with questions about the future of the United States, about the current devastating events going on in Ukraine, and about the state of world affairs in general.

It is a strange time in this country indeed. The last few years, years of grief, shock, and outrage, have changed the course of American Democracy. It feels almost dystopian, being a teenager at this time. Americans' trust in their government has fluctuated and dwindled with the emergence of social media sites that almost every young person uses - sites that place them in filter bubbles which surround them with like-minded individuals and which cloud their logical minds with bias. I worry about this country sometimes. I worry about the direction of our Democracy. And mostly, I worry about the people leading it.

But after meeting 103 young people, most of whom want to go into public service and all of whom want to better the place they live in, I have faith. Not just faith, but pride. I am so proud of the young people in this country, who create revolutions in their bedrooms, who are activists in their schools, states, and even nationwide, who work to create a better future for all of us.

When I look through the over 30 pages of notes I've written throughout this program, I still am unable to fully process my experience. I wrote about my nervousness when asking speakers questions, about the outfits my fellow delegates were wearing, and drew detailed portraits of almost every speaker. I still vividly remember drawing a portrait of Secretary Pete Buttigieg and being called on to ask him a question. Every part of my body was shaking with excitement, and I found it difficult to conceal the wide grin on my face. This is how I felt throughout the four incredible, transformative, and truly inspiring days of Washington Week. I learned about the value of local government, intersectionality, the ethical implications of politics, foreign policy, international relations, and war. And, more importantly, I felt part of a group of incredible peers who working together can (and will) have a positive impact on the world.

I write this as I gnaw on the last bit of my complimentary white chocolate capitol, which I'm shocked (and slightly concerned) has lasted this long. The capitol, riddled with bite marks, has been used in cookies, on top of my morning oatmeal, and as a garnish for almost every desert I've made in the past couple weeks. I look through pictures online of beaming delegates, engaged in thoughtful conversations with some of our nation's top leaders, and speaking to each other. Something Senator Chris Coons of Delaware said that stuck with me was: "A life of service should not be a solitary journey." And being surrounded by so many passionate, kind, and intelligent delegates, I know that I will never be alone in any public service career that I decide to pursue in the future.