

Nov 04, 2016 by [APDS Bloggers](#)

Can Public Diplomacy be Nonpartisan in Bipartisan Washington, D.C.? ^[1]

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Washington, D.C. is a city of politics, power, and ploy. As the first delegation of Public Diplomacy Masters students representing USC to visit D.C., 18 of us set out to navigate the role of PD and meet its practitioners in this influential city. Our excursion led us to three very significant U.S. bureaucracies: the Department of State, the Senate, and the House of Representatives.

At the moment these governing bodies are controlled by different parties, which makes for an interesting setting in our exploration of PD in Washington, D.C. Clearly one would assume the State Department plays the principal role in U.S. PD, yet we quickly learned the success of State is predominately determined by those in power in Congress.

The priority of PD is set by one's definition of it. Everyone seems to have his or her own meaning and connotation for PD. While discussing it with the Democratic controlled Senate, we found part of the solution to be in getting U.S. citizens out of the isolationist mentality. Similarly, when discussing it with the Republican controlled House, we found part of the solution to be in the role of the private sector as a forceful voice in bringing relevance to PD and making it more of a priority in Congress.

Whether we decide to advocate for PD within or outside the bureaucracies of the U.S. government, they will undeniably affect us in one way or another throughout our careers in PD. The key will be to understand the interagency relationships and strive to remain nonpartisan in our approach to PD. This nonpartisanship seems rather daunting in the polarized city of Washington, D.C., but it brings new relevance to the role of NGOs in bridging the party divide.

Traditionally, PD tends to be more of a priority for left-leaning politics. Interestingly, at the same time we were examining the role of PD in D.C., there was a rather large gathering of those who identify themselves on the right. On our free day I had the opportunity to be part of this gathering known as the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC). I made it just in time to hear Governor Sarah Palin ignite the crowd. As expected at a very domestic-themed conference, the only mention of international U.S. PD was as an inferior tool to the armed forces.

So maybe trying to remain nonpartisan in our approach to PD is unrealistic in the rhetoric of polarized Washington, D.C. Even so, I would argue there is a need for PD practitioners on both sides of the divide. By skillfully and cleverly communicating commonly shared goals using the rhetoric of the political ideology we identify most with, we can make a strong case

for the necessity of PD.

My brief encounter with CPAC made me realize how conservatives need to be made more aware of the role of PD in their everyday lives so that it is given greater precedence in their voting and policymaking. As a conservative, I was pleased to learn on this D.C. trip how crucial it is for non-governmental organizations and individuals to champion the cause of public diplomacy instead of leaving it entirely in the hands of the government.

Lisa Liberatore is a Master of Public Diplomacy candidate and current research intern at the USC Center on Public Diplomacy focusing on the role of the Millennial Generation. While an undergraduate student she had the opportunity to experience the field of PD on the domestic level as an intern on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C. where she quickly learned how party politics rule. She hopes to one day return to Washington, D.C. as a PD advocate.
