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## THE VOICE OF AMERICA: DON'T SILENCE AMERICA'S VOICE IN THE GLOBAL MARKETPLACE OF IDEAS

### INTRODUCTION

"Ideas have consequences." This simple truism became the battle cry of the Reagan Revolution of the 1980s. But it was true long before Ronald Reagan's term in the White House, and it is no less true today. America still needs the ability to explain its policies and to educate people around the globe about American values and the principles of freedom. Because so many in the world yearn to enjoy the freedom which the United States represents, the world still needs desperately to hear America's voice.

Reconvening this week after the August recess, Members of Congress should remember that although ideas have consequences, they will be impotent and inconsequential if they cannot be heard in the global marketplace of ideas. Congress will soon complete work on appropriations bills that provide funds for foreign operations and international broadcasting. In its zeal to cut wasteful and unnecessary government spending, the Republican majority is poised to cripple the Voice of America, even though VOA is both America's primary means of conveying ideas and information overseas and a cost-effective and strategically effective component of U.S. foreign policy.

The congressional raid on U.S. government international broadcasting is an unfortunate convergence between Members who believe foreign affairs accounts are politically attractive targets for budget slashing and the Clinton Administration, whose lack of a coherent foreign policy means, among other deficiencies, inadequate support for international broadcasting. As a result, the 104th Congress is about to reduce the Voice of America's budget by as much as \$54 million, a small amount in terms of the federal budget, yet a cut which will have disproportionate, far-reaching consequences. It could silence America's most effective voice in the global marketplace of ideas, even though VOA's benefits—potential

and actual—far exceed the modest amount in the Administration's FY 1996 budget request (\$395 million).

Before embarking upon a budget-cutting course that is penny-wise but pound-foolish, Congress needs to take a closer look at the vital role VOA plays in foreign policy and public diplomacy. Instead of subjecting VOA to a false economy, Congress should provide enough funds to ensure that it remains the nation's international broadcasting flagship.

## IDEAS FUEL DEMOCRACY AND FREE-MARKET REFORM

Social scientists never tire of explaining that today is the Age of Information. Television is ubiquitous. The transistor has made cheap portable radios common even in the world's poorest nations. Multi-spectrum radio broadcasting, proliferating cable, satellite, and direct broadcast television, microwaves, computers and fax modems, and other means of high-speed transmission have linked the world as never before. In the modern world, information dissemination and content have become indispensable instruments of state power.

Information is no longer neutral; it has "strategic" value, as recent history demonstrates. In the victory of America and the West over Soviet Communism, military power kept the "Evil Empire" contained. But it was ideas and information, not bombs and bullets, that ultimately brought the Soviet edifice crumbling down.

However, if it is technologically the Age of Information, politically it is the Age of Chaos. The end of the superpower condominium has unleashed potent new forces kept contained by 45 years of Cold War. Today sub-national, tribal, ethnic, and religious conflict are battering peace and stability in the world as new nations and new ideologies struggle to be born. In this dangerous and uncertain world the interests of the United States will be challenged in ways Americans cannot now imagine. The ability to convey ideas and information will remain a necessary component of American foreign policy. America must be able to shape the course of the world through a voice that encourages the forces of freedom and discredits the forces of oppression.

Perhaps it is self-evident, but in this era of dramatic global change it bears repeating that human behavior is determined by what one believes. There is a flow to history and culture; and its wellspring is the inner life of the mind—thoughts, attitudes, and beliefs, and the passions they engender. This is especially true of the corporate actions of men and women, such as political decisions. The results of their thoughts flow through their hands or from their tongues and into the external world. Why else do dictators expend such immense efforts to control the content and flow of information? What is usually the first objective of a *coup d'etat*? The answer is obvious—radio and television stations.

It is important to remember that the VOA did not begin as a weapon of the Cold War or in response to Soviet Communism. It was launched in 1942 at the beginning of World War II to counter Nazi propaganda, to reassure America's allies, and to give hope to people struggling against tyranny. Today the Voice of America is the nation's sole worldwide broadcasting service, reaching 100 million regular listeners over a network of shortwave, AM, and FM stations in English and 46 other languages. During the Persian Gulf War, VOA was America's only means of rebutting Saddam Hussein's propaganda aimed at the people of Iraq and was a key voice in reaching the nations of the Allied coalition.

VOA told the peoples of Nazi-occupied Europe during the darkest days of World War II: "The news may be good or bad. We will tell you the truth." Today VOA still follows this mandate, as required under its Charter (Public Laws 94-350 and 103-415), which obliges VOA to provide "a consistently reliable source of news and information" based on accuracy, balance, comprehensiveness, and objectivity.

The accuracy and objectivity of America's radio voice are having a profound impact on nations emerging from 45 years behind the Iron Curtain. The Open Media Research Institute surveyed 400 leaders in government and politics, the military, religion, higher education, media, and private enterprise in the former Soviet Union, including the Baltic States, and in Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Bulgaria, and Romania. According to this survey approximately 18 percent of the elites of these nations are regular listeners to VOA programming. In the Baltics, over 40 percent of decision-makers interviewed were regular listeners. Nearly three-quarters of the respondents felt strongly that Western radio broadcasts were still needed despite the new freedoms enjoyed by their own news media.<sup>1</sup>

The importance of getting America's message to the elites of emerging nations simply cannot be overstated. President Lech Walesa of Poland and President Vaclav Havel of the Czech Republic have publicly confirmed the role which America's international broadcasting, including the VOA, has played in building democracy in their countries. In Ukraine, VOA's "Window on America" is said to be the most popular radio program in the country.

VOA's example of free, uncensored news and objective, balanced features encourages the development of a free press among the listening nations, even when the Voice presents a less than flattering portrait of America. The example is strengthened by VOA's policy of maintaining a clear distinction between editorials, which speak in the name of the U.S. government, and news programming.

The Cold War with the Soviet Empire may be over, but a cold war of a global nature—the struggle over which ideas legitimize human governance—is not over. The ideals of representative and limited government, of free enterprise and free institutions, have prevailed for the time being over Marxism-Leninism in much of the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, but by no means have they been accepted everywhere in the world. Most of the world's people still live under some sort of despotism or suffer from revolution and civil war.

The VOA is America's force projection in this continuing global struggle between competing political principles and social values. The United States is under no obligation to convert the entire world to America's system of beliefs, but it is widely acknowledged that democratic nations are more peaceable and less likely to challenge U.S. interests than dictatorships. Both advocates of a foreign policy based on national self-interest and those who stress the moral component of foreign policy can support a vigorous, information-rich public diplomacy that makes the world friendlier and more compatible with American interests. As long as America can engage in this global cold war of ideas with information instead of military force, the struggle can remain "cold."

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<sup>1</sup> ---Report on "VOA Listenership Among Elites: Eastern Europe and the Former USSR," Audience and Opinion Research Department of the Open Media Research Institute, Washington, D.C., August 1995.

Even the Kurds—embattled on all sides and fighting among themselves—believe the broadcast word is mightier than the sword in building an independent nation. Instead of using scarce resources to buy arms, Kurds are creating a London-based television service to beam Kurdish-language programming to Europe and the Middle East as a “better weapon to win a homeland” for their people.<sup>2</sup>

## INFORMATION AS A TOOL OF U.S. GLOBAL STRATEGY

Today’s world contains rogue states and hostile nations whose main weapon is the well-disseminated lie—lies about America’s goals, interests, methods. To perpetuate themselves, these hostile regimes depend on propaganda, first to control their own populations and then to justify aggression abroad. It is an essential feature of modern dictatorships, one which they have in common despite differences in geography and culture, to consolidate power by controlling public opinion without having to answer to any traditional consensus or transcendent definition of right and wrong.

Many Russians now freed from the yoke of Communism have remarked that the most hated feature of the Soviet regime was not the possibility of arrest and imprisonment in the Gulag, but the pervasive falsehoods that touched every aspect of life and tainted everything they touched. This kind of morally inverted society built on propaganda can be altered only through rebuttal by trustworthy, countervailing information over time. The only antidote to falsehood is truth, but truth is impotent unless America has the means to convey it into the domain of the lie.

Today the threat of Soviet Communism has receded, only to be replaced by a new threat. By now it is universally acknowledged that revolutionary Islam represents one of the main challenges to democracy and American interests in the world—not Islam *per se*, but the revolutionary movement which draws legitimacy from a militant and politicized interpretation of Islamic theology.

The vast majority of the world’s Muslims are not part of radical movements. Indeed, the governments of moderate and friendly Muslim countries are the primary targets of Islamic radicals. Today revolutionary Islamic regimes have ample money and access to the latest information technology. In this global contest for hearts and minds, VOA is the most potent means America has to combat the rising tide of a revolutionary ideology in which Mohammed has replaced Marx.

Muslim revolutionaries realize the value of information as a tool of their strategy. Radio Tehran broadcasts daily in 23 languages, in English and European languages as well as languages native to the Middle East and the Muslim regions of the former Soviet Union. Significantly, Radio Tehran broadcasts in Serbo-Croatian to Bosnia, constantly reinforcing the theme throughout all of its coverage area that the United States is the faithless enemy of Islam and that America has imperialist designs on the Persian Gulf and the oil-rich Middle East. Though these charges are false, there are enough points of reference in the message to make it plausible to Tehran’s audience and give the falsehood a political impact.

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2 Edith M. Lederer, “Freedom Dreams Lifted by Trading Guns for TV Time; Kurds Bounce Broadcasts Off Satellite,” *The Washington Times*, September 2, 1995.

VOA's daily presence through its Arabic and Farsi services is balancing the picture and countering Iran's daily radio diet of anti-Western propaganda. VOA's 100-kilowatt AM transmitter in Kuwait will be upgraded to begin transmitting next year at 600 kilowatts and will reach all of Iraq and most of Iran, where the Voice already has an 11 percent listenership. America's message to Iran also sustains hope among those who suffer persecution at the hands of the mullahs, like members of the Baha'i and Christian faiths. In this part of the world where America has had to fight to defend its vital interests, VOA gives an accurate picture of a free society which respects all religions and treats Islam respectfully, reporting, for example, that Islam is the fastest-growing religion in the United States.

In the Balkans, VOA's shortwave and medium-wave AM stations around the periphery of the zone of conflict provide a thorough blanket of coverage. Broadcasting three hours a day in Serbian and one hour daily in Croatian, VOA is the largest international broadcaster in the region and enjoys a 32 percent listenership in Sarajevo. It also broadcasts in Albanian to Kosovo, another potential flashpoint in the Balkans.

The recent NATO air strikes against Serbs in Bosnia provoked bitter denunciations in Belgrade and in Serb-controlled Bosnia. In Moscow the NATO air campaign against Russia's traditional allies also prompted vocal condemnation. With their tight control of news media, Yugoslav and Bosnian Serb leaders stir up ethnic hatred and keep violent passions high. They black out all information about Serb atrocities and war crimes charges in the West. Disinformation and falsehoods are a major part of their overall strategy. Without the VOA there would be no voice explaining U.S. and Allied actions to the people most involved or rebutting the false charges the Serbs use to legitimize their aggression.

VOA recently began a refugee hotline as part of the Serbo-Croatian service. It offers broadcast facilities to reach separated family members in the Balkans, who can call a VOA telephone number and leave a message on the Serbo-Croatian line. VOA then broadcasts the message to reach separated family members. Numerous families have been reunited through this service.

This is more than a humanitarian gesture, one whose exact value is impossible to quantify. If American soldiers ever have to enter Bosnia, for example, as part of a NATO operation to cover the withdrawal of the U.N. Protection Force, America may find out how much it is worth. It is conceivable that the goodwill engendered by this service will save American lives if that day does come.

In another volatile region of the world, VOA is broadcasting in Korean to counter the propaganda of the Stalinist North on the Korean Peninsula. In China, VOA is America's link to the most populous nation in the world. China's emergence as a global power and America's relations with the Chinese will be among the defining issues in the 21st century and will affect the future structure of world politics. It is absolutely essential for the U.S. to maintain an active presence there. The audience for VOA's Mandarin service has grown to include 70 percent of China's college students since the 1989 massacre in Tiananmen Square. Such programs as the "Harry Wu Watch," after the arrest of the human rights activist, and "China Forum" generate more than 4,000 faxes and letters to VOA per month from Chinese listeners.

VOA's Tibetan service recently expanded its broadcasts from a half hour to two hours a day. It is the only independent news source for the Tibetan-speaking areas of the world. In fact, the communist regime in Beijing devotes considerable efforts to jamming the VOA's

Chinese and Tibetan broadcasts. Devoting scarce resources to jamming attests eloquently to VOA's effectiveness.

In Myanmar, better known as Burma, the democratic opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi recently was freed by the ruling military junta after nearly six years of house arrest. The only reliable sources of this news were the VOA's Burmese language service and the BBC.

### **Surrogate Radios**

In evaluating the role of broadcasting in global strategy, it is important to distinguish between the VOA and the so-called surrogate radios—Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), Radio Free Asia, and Radio Martí, which broadcasts to Cuba. The mission of the surrogate radio services is to tell listeners what is happening in their own country, to provide information which their own radios would provide if their countries were free. This difference in missions is a matter of U.S. law. The surrogates also have a vital mission, but they do not explain or defend U.S. government policy; nor do they present U.S. values and institutions. That mission is unique to VOA.

Under the International Broadcasting Act of 1994, federal funding for RFE/RL will end after 1999. And when Fidel Castro's grip on his island prison ends, as it inevitably must, federal funding for the Office of Cuban Broadcasting and Radio Martí probably will end. But there still will be a need for VOA to perform its role as America's voice to the world.

Ultimately, no information strategy can be a substitute for adequate military power. Force of arms will always be the final argument when nothing else suffices. But it is far better to shape the world's events in advance, if possible, through "soft" means like information. Using broadcasting successfully as a tool of global strategy can create conditions of friendship and convergence of interests that make conflict unnecessary and give America options other than the last resort of armed force.

## **MYTHS ABOUT THE VOA AND U.S. GOVERNMENT BROADCASTING**

Critics of the U.S. government's international broadcasting programs propagate five myths to justify public neglect of the VOA or reduction of its resources.

### **Myth #1: The VOA can be privatized.**

The VOA provides both a means of public diplomacy to promote America's values to the rest of the world and an official voice for the U.S. government to explain and defend its policies. In other words, VOA is an instrument of policy, not just a source of entertainment. Private entities simply cannot carry out this function. Moreover, the VOA's network of facilities is extensive, operating in many remote corners of the world. It is inconceivable that private operations would have the inclination, resources, expertise, or profit-making incentive to take over such an extensive network. In the 1980s the U.S. government invested heavily to upgrade the facilities for international broadcasting. It would be a waste of that investment to curtail VOA's scope just when the return on that investment is beginning to be realized.

### **Myth #2: We have CNN and do not need the VOA.**

CNN does not reach an audience as wide, diverse, and strategically targeted as VOA's—in their own languages. CNN does not provide the same content or policy-significant information; nor does it adequately explain or defend the positions of the United States. In fact, CNN's popular "World Report" program actually does the reverse. Its correspondents feed policy-significant information from foreign governments to the U.S. and other audiences.

### **Myth #3: The Cold War is over, so the VOA is unnecessary.**

Those who make this assertion have a fundamental misunderstanding of the difference between VOA and the surrogate radios like Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and Radio Martí, which are products of the Cold War. VOA is more necessary than ever to give America a voice in the highly competitive global marketplace where the struggle for democracy and freedom is still being waged. Other nations, many unfriendly to America, are speaking effectively into this marketplace. The revolutionary regime of Iran is a notable example. Why should America now choose not to engage in this vital war of ideas?

### **Myth #4: Government broadcasting has plenty of fat; all government broadcasting should be cut.**

Since 1992 VOA has reduced its broadcast staff by 25 percent, cut direct broadcast hours from 1,080 to 850 hours weekly, abolished or converted numerous language services, eliminated 14 senior management positions, and cut 170 other line positions to meet mandated budget reductions. VOA is now at a core operating level. Any further cuts will force VOA to eliminate entire language services to critical world regions.

It can be argued that the need for surrogate radios will diminish over time if and when democracy, accompanied by freedom of information, takes hold in existing dictatorships and formerly totalitarian countries. But VOA needs to stabilize at a funding level commensurate with its vital mission, and not be subjected to further cuts. As stated in a recent *Wall Street Journal* editorial, "If Congress wants to cut federal broadcasting, the better target is domestic public TV, for which a multitude of commercial alternatives do exist."<sup>3</sup>

## **EFFECTIVE BROADCASTING REQUIRES ADEQUATE FUNDS**

The Administration's FY 1996 budget request for VOA is \$395 million. But VOA faces a \$10 million reduction from the 1996 request mandated by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in the State Department authorization bill.

The Foreign Relations Committee report accompanying the authorization bill acknowledges that budget authority for international broadcasting (not counting the separate radio facilities construction account) in the Foreign Relations Revitalization Act of 1995 is 21 percent below the operating level in 1994 (\$487 million). In other words, VOA already is operating at the margins because the agency chose to absorb past funding cuts by reducing

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3 "Projecting America," *The Wall Street Journal*, July 17, 1995.

staff and broadcast hours across the board in order to keep critical language services on the air.

If Senate appropriators agree to the \$385 million recommended by the Foreign Relations Committee, VOA will have to reduce direct broadcasting from 850 to 715 hours per week, eliminate another four language services, and end all shortwave transmissions to Latin America.

The situation on the House side is even more bleak. The House Appropriations Committee marked up its State Department appropriations bill before the August recess, providing \$341 million, or \$54 million below the FY 1996 budget request. The committee's report acknowledges that a cut of this magnitude "could mean a reduction of at least 400 personnel, and the possible cessation of broadcasting in as many as 20 languages. These reductions come on top of the major reorganization/downsizing that occurred because of the 1994 Act (the International Broadcasting Act of 1994), which has resulted in staffing reductions of 900 at RFE/RL and 350 at VOA."

If outlays fall to this level, the VOA in effect will cease to be a global broadcaster. America's voice will fall silent in vital corners of the globe as VOA scales down to a narrow regional focus, like Radio Australia or Radio Netherlands.

A cut of this magnitude will allow only 535 hours of weekly broadcasting in about 20 languages, with greatly diminished English transmissions in three of six key global regions. VOA would lose about half of its estimated direct broadcast global audience.

As it completes work on the State Department appropriations bill, Congress should keep in mind that the Clinton Administration's FY 1996 budget request for international broadcasting was inadequate from the start and represents a substantial cut from prior year operating levels. At a bare minimum, House and Senate appropriators should fund the VOA at the \$385 million recommended by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

## CONCLUSION

VOA embodies the importance of democratic culture and shared values, not just raw economic interests or military power, as a basis for international relations. America has a natural advantage in promoting U.S. interests and values in the world, unlike dictatorships which have to lie, since most people aspire to the values America represents.

The importance of moral leadership in the world by precept, by reasoning, and by sharing information is vital. It enables America to shape the world without having to use heavy-handed, intrusive means. Broadcasting America's values and views to 100 million people in critical areas of the globe for \$395 million per year is money well spent, and a bargain at the price. To cut VOA further is indeed, in the words of VOA Director Geoffrey Cowan, the unilateral disarmament of the Information Age.

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