PART I

The Rise and Fall of USIA

“America is a shining city upon a hill whose beacon light guides freedom-loving people everywhere.”

Ronald Reagan

America and its allies have been challenged in contemporary times by three dangerous “isms.” Fascism was bred and defeated in Europe. Communism, now a pale and shrinking force, was nurtured in the Soviet Union but confronted on a global platform. Islamism, or Islamic extremism, which exploded on American soil on September 11, 2001, is rooted in the Arab lands of the Middle East and has developed a clientele worldwide.

Each of these three pernicious ideologies has necessarily been confronted by military force. Most recently, the United States has found it necessary to wage a war on terrorism against Islamist extremists. The United States must remain engaged in this conflict as long as the practitioners...
of Islamic extremism continue to conduct a murderous jihad against Americans in particular, but many other nationalities as well.

America has mobilized much manpower and materiel to protect its homeland and carry the fight to the enemy’s remote lairs and hiding places. But it is the war of words and ideas that will ultimately determine whether moderate Islam, with which the United States has no quarrel, will prevail over Islamic extremism, whose perversion of Islamic faith is the problem.

It is a contest in which the extremists are proving adept. From the remote terrain of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border they project their anti-American propaganda on Al Jazeera, which is then picked up by CNN and other television networks and broadcast worldwide. Their production of material for television has become increasingly sophisticated. They have become adept at using the Internet to spread their doctrine. The now-famous letter from Osama bin Laden’s closest lieutenant, Ayman Al Zawahiri to Al Qaeda’s number one operative in Iraq, Abu Musab Al Zarqawi, who is now dead, made the strategy clear: “More than half the battle is taking place on the battlefield of the media. We are in a media race . . . for hearts and minds.”

Public diplomacy is the critical U.S. weapon in this battle, rebutting falsehoods, and projecting a truthful picture and explanation of American policies, culture, and freedoms. Traditional diplomacy is usually government-to-government, conducted by diplomats in confidence and behind closed doors. Public diplomacy is open and is usually
conducted through media in an attempt to persuade mass audiences, or elites who are influential with mass audiences.

Probably the best-known American instrument of public diplomacy has been the Voice of America (VOA), broadcasting by shortwave radio around the world. Launched in 1942, its first broadcasts were in German, its first director was John Houseman, its first message: “The news may be good or bad. We shall tell you the truth.” So it has over the years, while adapting itself to FM and medium-wave radio, television, the Internet, and new kinds of communication. Today it broadcasts in 45 languages to 134 million people.

After World War II, and with the advent of the Cold War, President Eisenhower in 1953 authorized a new entity, the United States Information Agency (USIA). It embraced various existing government information units (with the exception of educational and cultural exchanges, which remained under the State Department) and built a powerful organization to counter Soviet propaganda and to “tell America’s story to the world.”

The USIA, with VOA operating under its aegis, mounted a formidable, multifaceted public diplomacy operation to implement its mission. It launched a daily wireless file to every American embassy that clarified policy and contained information diplomats could use in engagement with local opinion-makers. It produced a serious publication, *Problems of Communism*, which reached scholars around the world.

From its printing plants in Manila and Mexico City came a succession of free colorful magazines about America in
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various languages. A Russian-language edition became so popular in Moscow that Soviet officials clamped down on it; they sent bundles back to the United States, claiming nobody wanted to read it. That made it a hot black market item for which ordinary Russians paid the equivalent of several dollars a copy.

On the cultural front, the USIA, in tandem with the State Department, sent dance and musical groups—musicians like Dizzy Gillespie and Benny Goodman—around the world, including tours to Russia and its satellite nations in Eastern Europe whenever feasible. Among various educational and exchange programs to Africa and the Middle East, the USIA promoted a notable 1953 colloquium featuring Islamic and American scholars at Princeton.

One of the most effective public diplomacy programs brought government officials and politicians, journalists and writers, and artists and opinion-makers from other countries for stays of varying length to observe America in all its strengths and weaknesses. USIA programmers targeted young politicians later to become leaders in their own countries. Such individuals included Anwar Sadat, Margaret Thatcher, Tony Blair, Hamid Karzai, and Gerhard Schröder. It is tempting to ponder what impact, if any, such a visit to the United States in earlier days might have made upon Saddam Hussein.

Operating abroad as the United States Information Service (USIS), the USIA screened and distributed American movies, as well as documentaries it commissioned itself, from leading American moviemakers. Wherever it could, it
opened U.S. libraries and reading rooms in major foreign cities. As a foreign correspondent in Africa and Asia, I found it moving to see these libraries crammed with students doing their homework and taking advantage of the large collections of American books, newspapers, and films.

The USIA also promoted big-ticket items like exhibits of American art and innovative pavilions displaying American products at international fairs. The famous “kitchen debate” between Richard Nixon and Nikita Khrushchev took place in 1959 at an American fair in Moscow. Almost three million Russians visited the American exhibits.

Role of the Radios

Meanwhile, the VOA broadcast straight news bulletins around the clock in different languages to countries all over the world despite Soviet attempts to jam the signal. By law, the VOA was precluded from directing its programs internally, to an American audience. But Americans could pick them up on a shortwave radio. James (Scotty) Reston, the New York Times columnist, did just that, tuning in the VOA’s English language broadcast each evening. He told me that it was his favorite newscast.² In addition to news there was “back-of-the-book” programming, which included debates and discussions and features on American life and culture. Country music was a hit in many lands, but an enormous audience tuned in to VOA jazz programs. They were introduced with a recognizable “Yankee Doodle
Dandy” jingle and hosted by an eccentric but knowledgeable jazz buff, Willis Conover, who became a legend behind the Iron Curtain. When he was allowed to visit Poland, a crowd reputedly of thousands turned out to welcome him at the Warsaw airport.

Another intriguing program VOA developed was “Special English,” designed to teach English to foreign listeners. The program was written in a reduced English vocabulary, and narrated substantially slower than other VOA programs. When years later I visited China, I was fascinated to hear bellboys and other staff in my hotel learning English from the VOA.

While VOA broadcast world news to a world audience, Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty were broadcasting to East Europe and Russia, respectively. The mission of these radio networks was narrower. Staffed by many expatriates from their targeted countries, they were designed to gather factual information about what was happening in those countries and broadcast it back to peoples behind the Iron Curtain where censorship would otherwise bar them from hearing it. They were to be the radio stations that citizens would hear in those countries if they were free.

Originally financed by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), that link was later broken and they became financed by congressional budget and operated by radio professionals, responsible to a new oversight entity, the Board for International Broadcasting.

The evidence is overwhelming that the work of these radio stations and the VOA, broadcasting to captive peo-
ples, played a significant role in keeping the concept of freedom alive behind the Iron Curtain. When Lech Walesa was asked, after the events of 1989, if Radio Free Europe had played a role in the rebirth of freedom, he replied: “Would there be earth without the sun?” Czechoslovakia’s Vaclav Havel made his statement symbolically. The day he took office as his country’s new president he went to the offices of Voice of America and said simply: “Thank you.”

When I became director of the VOA during the Reagan administration, I was moved to receive messages, sometimes by circuitous routes, from listeners in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. Some would tell of creeping out into the birch forests in winter snow to listen to the VOA on a hidden shortwave radio. Wrote one man: “Your broadcasts from Voice of America keep the flame of liberty burning in our breasts.”

During the political upheaval in the Soviet Union, VOA reporters were trapped on the barricades of the Russian parliament. Using their cellular phones they gave the world the first news of the depth of the Russian resistance. Their reports went straight to the Moscow bureau of the VOA, which beamed them live to the VOA headquarters in Washington, which then broadcast them almost instantly back to millions of listeners across the Soviet Union, buoying their spirits and stiffening their resolve.

There was the extraordinary image of Boris Yeltsin rushing a crucial speech to an aide, who faxed it to America with the words: “The Russian government has no ways to address the people. All radio stations here are under control.
Following is Yeltsin’s address to the army. Submit it to USIA. Broadcast it over the country. Maybe ‘Voice of America.’ Do it. Urgent.” And finally, another extraordinary image of the isolated Gorbachev, searching for word of his and his country’s future by turning, as his countrymen long had, to Radio Liberty and the Voice of America.

With the end of the Cold War, it became logical to examine the continuing role of the government radio stations. In April of 1991, President George Bush announced an independent, bipartisan presidential task force to consider the facts and report back to him in six months. Chaired by me, it contained such prominent Americans as David Abshire, president of the Center for Strategic and International Studies; Richard Allen, assistant to the president for national security affairs in the Reagan administration; Stuart Eizenstat, a special White House adviser in the Carter administration; writer Peggy Noonan; syndicated columnist Ben Wattenberg; Abbott Washburn, a former deputy director of USIA; Richard Fairbanks, former special negotiator for the Middle East peace process; Rozanne Ridgway, president of the Atlantic Council; Viviane Warren, a prominent figure in public broadcasting; and Rita Clements, a former first lady of Texas.

The task force took testimony from many experts, pored over several hundred documents and reports, traveled to London to examine BBC international radio programming and to Munich to visit with Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty executives, and met with senior officials from a number of Eastern European countries.
The group quickly came to the view that the radio services, which had played such an important role in the Cold War, had a “crucial” role in the post–Cold War atmosphere. “Communist totalitarianism has been severely wounded but has not expired everywhere,” they wrote in their final report. “No one knows what comes next. It is important that America continue to lead a peaceful global effort to promote democratic values, particularly in large parts of Asia and Cuba, the last redoubts of a pernicious ideology. In this task, the role of American international broadcasting is crucial.”

The task force conceded that the “global contest of ideas” would likely move in some different directions in the years to come. It predicted that as the United States continued to promote democratic values, another important issue would surface, namely: “What kind of democracy?” The task force reminded readers of its report that “American-style democracy is not necessarily the same as European-style, or Scandinavian-style, or Japanese-style democracy. We should not dictate precise forms of democratic organization to the world. America itself is different; scholars call it ‘American Exceptionalism.’ . . . [W]hile far from perfect, under challenge in some respects, this way of life is seen as revolutionary and admirable by people all around the world, in the unfree states, in the emerging democracies, and in our sister democracies. . . . [M]ost Americans today properly feel that we have something useful to offer the world . . . it would be a shame if we did not offer what we have. Such a course is right morally, and right from a point of self-interest. Americans want a world that is user-friendly to our values.”

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Conceding that Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty might ultimately be phased out, the task force maintained that they should continue for some years in a somewhat modified role. Instead of operating as surrogate radio services to nations once under communist domination, they should offer alternative broadcasting to assist newly democratic nations to establish democratic institutions, particularly free and unfettered media.

The value of this proposal was made clear in Munich when a senior Czech official dealing with the media met with our task force. He explained that during the Cold War most Czech journalists had been communists used to writing and broadcasting under authoritarian diktat. When the Cold War came to an end, they had difficulty making the transition to a free press. At joint press conferences with American reporters, the Americans asked all the tough questions while the Czech reporters held back. Our Czech official told us that he summoned the Czech reporters to his office and said the Americans were making the reticent Czech reporters look bad. He urged them to be more questioning of authority. The next press conference was initially better. The Czechs and the Americans both pressed the Czech official conducting the conference. But after the conference was ended, the Czech reporters crowded into the official’s office. Still steeped in their old ways of being instructed what to report, they said: “OK, we’ve done what you wanted. Now what do you want us to write?”

Insofar as the flagship VOA was concerned, the task force recommended substantially increased funding and expand-
ing resources for more shortwave broadcasting as well as transmission with emerging technologies. The task force saw “an indefinite and expanding need” for the VOA to increase its coverage of Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America.

While change might have surged across Eastern and Central Europe and the then Soviet Union, the task force declared: “There remains a world that is fluid, and sometimes dangerous. The [first] Gulf war is a reminder of how conflicts can explode into international ones overnight. The Middle East remains riven with violence and extremism. . . . The West is still seen as the Great Satan to some of the people of Islam.”

Thus, the task force concluded: “This is no time to abandon or degrade America’s great international broadcasting endeavor . . . this is the time to enhance, redirect and revitalize the mission . . . for now as ever, these unique tools of public diplomacy can serve our nation.”

If the task force enthused over the VOA and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty continuing to carry out their separate missions, it had questions about the effectiveness of Radio Marti and TV Marti, created in 1983 and 1989, respectively, to continue broadcasting to Cuba. Cuba under Fidel Castro had been cast as a captive and unfree nation by the U.S. government. The Marti radio and TV operations were thus supposed to mirror the early roles of Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty—providing for Cubans the kind of information they would have had if living in a democracy. But the Castro regime went to extraordinary lengths to jam
Radio Marti and black out TV Marti. Over the years the size of the listening and viewing Cuban audience has continued to raise questions about the efficacy of the Marti operation. In 2010 a report to the U.S. Senate recommended subordinating the Marti operation under VOA.

Radio Free Asia

After the prodemocracy uprising in Beijing’s Tiananmen Square, there was a movement in both houses of Congress to launch a new surrogate U.S. broadcasting service predominantly to China but also to other countries in Asia living under totalitarian regimes. “Surrogate,” of course, meant that such broadcasting would be cast in the image of Radio Free Europe, attempting to offer the kind of internal news coverage that the populations of these countries would enjoy if they were free.

The State Department did not favor such a project, arguing that it would be harmful to U.S.-China relations. Surrogate radio for China would likely have an effect opposite to the one intended, said State in testimony before the task force. It would lead to less freedom for China because the Chinese government would “likely respond by increasing internal political repression.”

State also pointed out that VOA was already broadcasting to China in Mandarin, Cantonese, Tibetan, and English and that China would likely respond to the “provocation of a surrogate service to China” by increased jamming of VOA’s
services. While mindful of State’s viewpoint, the task force responded that the same arguments could have been made against Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty when they started in 1949 and 1951, respectively, but these radios helped move the world toward freedom. Said the task force: “Both diplomacy and communication are needed, are necessary and are appreciated. But the history of the past few decades suggests that diplomacy helped keep the world safe, ideas helped make the world free.”

All of the task force’s members agreed that VOA broadcasting into China had been of great value and should be strengthened.

The task force was split on the issue of a Radio Free Asia broadcasting to China and other unfree nations in Asia. The majority favored it; a minority was opposed, citing questions about cost and transmitter availability and urging instead strengthened VOA broadcasting to China, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, and North Korea.

However, even before the task force could present its findings on this issue to the president, there was a new development. In October of 1991, Congress passed a bill, introduced by Senator Joseph Biden, establishing a joint congressional/presidential commission. It was to “examine the feasibility, effect and implications” of instituting a radio broadcasting service to the People’s Republic of China and other Communist countries in Asia in order “to promote the dissemination of ideas, with particular emphasis on developments within each of these nations.” The president appointed me as chairman and two other members of the
commission. The Senate appointed two Republicans and two Democrats; the House of Representatives appointed two Republicans and two Democrats.

The commission sought testimony from experts political and technical in Washington, New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Boston, Munich, Honolulu, Seoul, Bangkok, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. It amassed volumes of detailed information on existing and possible transmitter sites. It acquired estimates of cost and staffing.

Without much hope of a constructive discussion, we sought permission from North Korea’s representative at the United Nations (UN) for the commission to visit his country. I tried to keep my end of the telephone conversation polite. I can only describe the reaction from the other end of the line—during which the North Korean diplomat suggested an intriguing number of nongeographic destinations the commission could go to—as sulfurous.

The reaction from the Chinese was much more sophisticated but equally negative. Their ambassador in Washington informed me that our commission could not be recognized but its members could visit China as individual guests of the U.S. embassy in Beijing. During the visit commission members must refrain from any actions “incompatible with their status.” They must refrain from any actions or remarks in the name of the commission. Individual members should abide by Chinese laws and regulations so that “nothing unpleasant” would occur. Requests for meetings with relevant departments would be made in advance through the U.S. embassy.¹¹
Finally, one of the commission’s members, Steven Mosher, director of the Asian Studies Center at the Claremont Institute in California, would “not be welcome.”

We surmised that this had something to do with Mr. Mosher’s writings on Chinese population control. The commission quickly caucused. It decided unanimously that even if we could have agreed—although unlikely—with the other requirements, we could not accept the blackballing of one of our members. The vote was unanimous and instant: either we all went, or none of us went. I replied to the Chinese ambassador accordingly.

In its report to Congress and the president the commission declared:

“The United States has a unique opportunity at this moment in history to assist the wave of democracy that already has touched such Asian lands as the Philippines, South Korea, and Taiwan.

The United States should do this because it is right.

The United States should do this because it is in its national interest.”

The commission recommended “home service” broadcasting to China, North Korea, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Burma (now Myanmar). It added Burma because, although not a Communist country, Burma’s ruling dictatorship “is one of the most repressive in the world.” It used the term “home service” as an alternative for “surrogate” to describe “broadcast information about events and developments within the country itself—that would be available if there were no government censorship, and no repressive control
of media.” In other words, it was drawing a distinction between VOA-type broadcasting and Radio Free Europe broadcasting.


**Korean Airliner 007**

During the darkest days of the Cold War, USIA was tasked to refute egregious examples of Soviet disinformation. These included clever forgeries of State Department and other official documents inventing bogus and damaging stories about U.S. activities. One fabricated story was that Americans were involved in an illegal Central American scheme to acquire children’s body parts for wealthy American recipients. Another fabrication was a news dispatch reporting that the American embassy in New Delhi housed a giant computer which had collected personal information about every citizen of India. Yet another was that the United States had created the AIDS virus for use as a biological weapon.

One of the most embarrassing public diplomacy setbacks for the Soviet Union occurred in 1983 when Soviet fighter pilots shot down a South Korean airliner, flight 007, which had strayed briefly off course, over Soviet territory, on a trans-Pacific flight. Two hundred and sixty-nine passengers
and crew, including an American congressman, were killed. I was serving as assistant secretary for public affairs and spokesman at the State Department at the time and was summoned early in the morning to join Secretary George Shultz and Undersecretary Lawrence Eagleburger in the secretary’s office. They were in animated talk over early reports of the shoot-down. The Soviets were keeping silent—as they were to do for several days, after which they initially denied involvement. Our discussion revolved around what we knew and how we were to present our version of what had happened. Eagleburger, a man of great passions, declared angrily: “They shot it down and we know they did.”

I caught a reference to “the tape.”

“What tape?” I asked.

He disclosed that a top secret monitoring unit, outside the United States, had recorded the Soviet pilots’ chatter as they locked on to the Korean airliner. “We have to play the tape,” I said. “Can’t do it,” said Eagleburger. Another government was involved, and, even if that problem could be overcome, if we played the tape, the Russians would learn that we were monitoring their frequencies. They would change all of them and an intelligence advantage would be lost. There followed a robust exchange between Eagleburger and myself as we debated the pros and cons in front of Secretary Shultz. Eagleburger was a great man at a great moment. In the end, he agreed that the sensational political import of the tapes outweighed the loss of intelligence advantage. Within a day or so, we had the tape. We heard the Russian pilots communicating with their base,
saying that they had sighted the airliner, seen its flashing lights, locked on, fired, and “destroyed” the “target.”

USIA was called in to translate from the Russian, imprint English-language subtitles, and prepare it for presentation at a meeting of the UN Security Council. Huge monitoring screens were set up around the chamber. The world was stunned as U.S. ambassador to the UN Jeane Kirkpatrick played the dramatic tape in Russian, the words in English flashing across the screens. USIA, VOA, and the other government radios went on overtime, saturating the world’s airwaves and media with the dramatic story. Nicholas Cull, a professor of public diplomacy at the University of Southern California, cited Izvestia’s Alexander Shalnev as privately calling it “America’s most devastating propaganda blow of the entire Cold War.”13 USIA officers in countries around the world made sure that the story was relayed to millions of readers, listeners, and viewers.

Innovative and inspiring as all the USIA and VOA programs were, much of the strength of U.S. public diplomacy lay in the talent of USIA public affairs officers stationed in the capitals and major cities of the world. Most were fluent in the languages of the countries they worked in. They were experienced practitioners of public diplomacy, well versed in the policies of their own nation, and adept at communicating and explaining them. They had generally, over time, developed extensive contacts in media and politics in the lands they served in. If a visiting American VIP was in town, they could generally introduce him, or her, to leading news-
paper editors and TV directors or arrange dinners with officials and thought-leaders.

In the cities in which they were stationed, they ran American libraries and cultural centers, frequented by hundreds of students. They facilitated visits to the United States by prominent politicians, journalists, writers, and artists from the countries they were assigned to. They masterminded return visits to those countries by American musicians, dance groups, and other performers.

They were professional communicators with a passion for telling the American story. They were not hobbled by the bureaucracies of their embassies because they reported not to the State Department in Washington but to area directors of their own agency, USIA, who shared and understood the overall mission.

The Final Act

If USIA enjoyed its heyday during the Cold War, it ended that war, and its own existence, with a flourish.

When Ronald Reagan, who understood the power of communication, became president, he brought with him to Washington a number of friends who were members of his California “kitchen cabinet.” Among them was a businessman and Hollywood aficionado called Charles Wick. While Wick and Reagan were good friends, their respective wives were even closer, having carpooled their children and so-
cialized in the Los Angeles area. Every Christmas Eve, the Wicks and the Reagans enjoyed a private dinner together.

Reagan made Wick director of USIA. The skeptical Washington community pondered what skills Wick had for the job.

I did not know Charles Wick when he called me in Massachusetts. I had left the editorship of the Christian Science Monitor and was happily running a chain of small newspapers I owned on Cape Cod. “It’s time for you to come and serve your country,” Wick boomed. “Come down and let’s talk.” He wanted me to serve as associate director of USIA. I went to Washington on a reconnaissance. I was bemused when he said, “I don’t know anything about journalism or anything about foreign affairs.” But, he said, “I can make things happen.” And he could.

As I found out when I began working for him, he could come up with a dozen new ideas in a few minutes. Seven or eight of them would be impossible. Wick would noisily berate anybody within hearing for their inability to capture his vision. Then he would break out into a grin and declare: “They were pretty lousy, weren’t they?” But the two or three that would be really good, but that would be difficult, one would think, to implement in bureaucratic Washington, he would carry forward with great success. Wick could pick up the phone and call his friend, the president. He could call corporate chieftains and Hollywood stars and recruit them for his latest project—to appear in USIA films, or raise money for benefits, or go abroad as cultural ambassadors, or donate plane seats for exchange programs.
President Carter had changed the USIA brand name to USICA—the United States International Communication Agency. Agency personnel hated it. Some people overseas thought it had something to do with the CIA. Wick got Reagan to change it back to USIA, an immensely popular move with his staff.

Wick launched WORLDNET, linking USIA headquarters in Washington with U.S. embassies around the world, for live, interactive video discussions between foreign journalists and senior Washington officials.

I had an anxious moment when orchestrating one of them. The Washington guest in the studio was then secretary of state Alexander Haig. He was being interviewed live by Japanese correspondents in Tokyo. There had been a fair amount of reportage about bad blood between Secretary Haig and Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger. With about 20 seconds left to go, a Japanese reporter asked Haig about it. “Nothing to it,” responded Haig. “Why,” he said, “Weinberger and I have breakfast together every week and there’s nobody else there—except our food tasters.” At that moment our line went dead, and I long wondered what the Japanese newsmen had made of Haig’s intended humor.

Wick lobbied President Reagan to support new resources and major budget increases for USIA. The president came through. Wick got a new headquarters building for USIA. Wick launched “Project Truth,” a sophisticated operation for countering Soviet disinformation.

When Poland feared Soviet military invasion, Wick raised half a million dollars from corporate chieftains and
produced “Let Poland Be Poland,” aired by satellite TV to some 184 million viewers around the world. Charlton Heston narrated. Frank Sinatra sang. Bob Hope and Orson Welles participated.

But as the Cold War, in which public diplomacy had clearly played a significant role, drew to a close, so too did the life of USIA as an independent agency. Congress, in its wisdom, sought ways to pare the budget, as did the new Clinton administration. Perhaps they thought that the U.S. was no longer confronted by unfriendly regimes or entities that wished it harm. As has proved to be the case, that was a dreadfully mistaken view.

The Demise of USIA

There was much Washington maneuvering in 1997 involving the foreign affairs agencies of the government and their future as Republican senator Jesse Helms sought to cut their cost and the Clinton administration similarly looked for efficiencies. On the Democrats’ side, James Rubin, at the State Department, floated a plan which would integrate USIA, the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, and AID (Agency for International Development) into the State Department. Rubin had been a staffer for Senator Joe Biden and press spokesman for Madeleine Albright when she was U.S. ambassador to the UN, and he had worked on the Clinton-Gore campaign. When Albright became secretary of state, Rubin became her assistant secretary for public affairs and department spokesman.
Although President Clinton protested there was no quid pro quo, Senator Helms met the Democrats’ desire for passage of the Chemical Weapons Convention, and Albright offered up the folding of USIA favored by Senator Helms. A transitional period of two years was set for the fusion of USIA with State, and in 1999 USIA became extinct as such.

VOA was integrated into a new institution for U.S. government broadcasting, the Broadcasting Board of Governors, which already monitored Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty, Radio and TV Marti, and Radio Free Asia.

If there was apprehension about the wisdom of collapsing USIA into the State Department, it has proved well justified. Many veteran public affairs officers elected to retire, taking their years of expertise with them. Others who made the transfer found themselves assigned to State Department regional bureaus, reporting not to practitioners of public diplomacy but to foreign service officers with little interest in, or patience with, public diplomacy. While foreign service officers were on fast tracks for promotion, the reassigned USIA officers were not. Overall, the USIA veterans found a prevalent State Department culture of disdain for public diplomacy. The budget for it was shredded.

In foreign posts, USIA officers were no longer running their own information centers and libraries, carrying out USIA policies and practices established in Washington, or reporting to their own USIA regional bureaus. Often they were inundated with regular embassy matters and bureaucratic rules and protocols unrelated to public diplomacy.
Meanwhile, a new post of undersecretary for public diplomacy and public affairs had been established at the State Department, but this officer did not manage public diplomacy funds or personnel that had been transferred to the regular State Department regional bureaus. Nor did any incumbent in this position have the status and heft that an agency director, namely director of USIA, had had in previous administrations. Small wonder that appointees to this new position did not linger long.

The Shock of 9/11

With the terrorist attack on the United States of September 2001, America was suddenly confronted by the new and dangerous ideology of Islamic extremism. U.S. public diplomacy was ill prepared to confront it, with inadequate resources, poor leadership, and organizational ineffectiveness.

As the initial response revolved around military defense and reaction, various entities and individuals marshaled the case for the renaissance of public diplomacy. It was sorely needed. The official 9/11 commission reported that after strong initial international support for the United States immediately following the initial terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, by 2003 “the bottom had fallen out of support for America in most of the Muslim world.” Favorable ratings for the United States had fallen from 61 percent to 15 percent in Indonesia and from 71 percent to 38 percent among Muslims in Nigeria.
The commission reasoned that the small numbers of Muslims committed to Osama bin Laden were “impervious to persuasion.” But “it is among the large majority of Arabs and Muslims that we must encourage reform, freedom, democracy, and opportunity, even though our own promotion of these messages is limited in its effectiveness simply because we are its carriers.” The commission argued that “Muslims themselves will have to reflect upon such basic issues as the concept of jihad, the position of women, and the place of non-Muslim minorities. The United States can promote moderation, but cannot ensure its ascendancy. Only Muslims can do this.”

The Council on Foreign Relations, in a fast reaction, warned within a month of the 9/11 attack that “the federal bureaucracy is not configured to handle the demands of a major public diplomacy campaign. Public diplomacy is a low bureaucratic priority, as reflected by . . . the meager resources normally allocated to it.”

An independent task force the Council set up for deeper investigation found little improvement by 2003. It concluded: “The U.S. has significantly underperformed in its efforts to capture the hearts and minds of foreign publics. The marginalization of public diplomacy has left a legacy of underfunded and uncoordinated efforts. Lack of political will and the absence of an overall strategy has rendered past public diplomacy programs virtually impotent in today’s crowded communications world. While sound public diplomacy is not a silver bullet for America’s image problem, making it a serious composite of the foreign policymaking
process is a vital step toward ensuring the nation’s security.”

Specific task force recommendations urged training of U.S. ambassadors and diplomats in public diplomacy techniques; recruitment of “young and moderate Arabs and Muslims, mullahs, journalists and talk-show personalities” to criticize flaws within their own regimes; U.S. cultivation of foreign journalists; less “push-down” in communicating U.S. policies and more listening; better use of new digital technologies; more cultural and educational exchanges; more congressional support for public diplomacy.

There followed a steady stream of reports from institutions worried about the government’s run-down public diplomacy apparatus and recommending change.

Congress instructed the State Department to set up an advisory group for the Arab and Muslim world to recommend new public diplomacy approaches. Chaired by Edward Djerjian, a former diplomat and White House press aide, it urged “an immediate end to the absurd and dangerous underfunding of public diplomacy in time of peril” and warned starkly: “If America does not define itself, the extremists will do it for us.”

The Djerjian report believed that the State Department should remain the government’s lead public diplomacy agency but should be overseen by a cabinet-level special counselor for public diplomacy in the White House. Like almost all other reports, it recommended more money and staff for public diplomacy, more exchanges and scholarships, more use of the Internet and new technology. It sug-
gested creating an independent Corporation for Public Diplomacy for private and nonprofit broadcasting and a program to translate thousands of the best American books in local languages for placement in libraries and universities and “American Corners” overseas.

As USIS centers and libraries abroad had become targets for rioters, they had been downsized and placed as “American Corners” in local libraries or more secure buildings. In my own experience in Africa and Asia, I had been saddened to see how remote and barricaded they had often become. It took a hardy visitor to produce acceptable identification, then negotiate bulletproof vestibules, frisking machines, armed guards, and surrender any packages or backpacks before gaining entry, sometimes in high-rise buildings with minimum sign-posting of their presence.

The U.S. government’s own independent watchdog agency, the Government Accountability Office, raised major questions about public diplomacy performance in a series of reports over the years.

In 2005: “Prior reports by GAO and a number of other groups suggest that U.S. public diplomacy efforts over the past several years have generally not been successful. . . . The government does not yet have a national communication strategy.”18

In 2006: “State has initiated three public diplomacy activities focused on the Muslim world—a media campaign, a youth-oriented magazine, and a group of youth-focused exchange programs—but these have been largely terminated or suspended.”19
And: “30 percent of language-designated public diplomacy positions in the Muslim world were filled without the requisite language skills.”

In 2007: “Key problems . . . include a general lack of strategic planning, inadequate coordination, and problems measuring performance and results. Beginning in 2003 we reported that the government lacked an interagency communications strategy. Four years later, a strategy still has not been released.”

In 2009: “Since the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, the U.S. government has spent at least $10 billion on communication efforts. . . . However negative views towards the U.S. persist.”

The GAO (Government Accounting Office) was concerned about lack of coordination between the State Department and the Pentagon on public diplomacy.

It was concerned about leadership at the State Department. “The position of Under-Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs has been vacant about 40 per cent of the time since 2001.”

It was concerned about staff shortages in public diplomacy positions. The U.S. embassy in Nigeria, with 800 employees, had only three senior officers and public affairs were handled entirely by first-tour junior officers.

It was concerned about language capability. Twenty-five percent of public diplomacy officers in language-designated positions did not meet the language requirements. In Arabic language posts, 36 percent of the public diplomacy posi-
tions were filled by staff unable to speak Arabic at the designated level.

There is no question that the establishment of the position of undersecretary for public diplomacy and public affairs at the State Department without status and without direct control of public diplomacy officers and budget was highly questionable. To leave the position unfilled for substantial periods of time was incomprehensible.

First appointee to this position was Charlotte Beers, an advertising executive, who left after criticism of the techniques she applied. Next was Margaret Tutwiler, a well-respected former media expert in government, who left soon for a position in corporate life.

Then, with high expectation from many of us, came Karen Hughes, President Bush’s much-valued former media adviser. I did not think Hughes would labor long under the frustrations of the role. But I had hope that her influence with the president would have enabled her to make to him the recommendation I believed necessary, namely to scrap the ill-conceived and poorly performing structure of the day and restore USIA to an independent role. If that were not politically feasible, then the old USIA’s functions and budget and personnel should have been replicated, with considerable autonomy, under the State Department’s mantle.

Hughes elected not to make that recommendation. She did some traveling to Muslim countries. She talked to Muslim women. She got some additional exchange programs
under way. But within the confines of the department, she was only able to shift chairs around on deck rather than launch a new ship. Either the frustrations of the system, or the call of family in Texas, led her as well to move on.

Then came James Glassman, a media professional who foresaw the need for a more ambitious embrace of new Internet and other technology in communicating around the world. But Glassman came at the end of President Bush’s term in office and was obligated to resign after less than a year.

During the presidential election campaign of 2008, both Senator John McCain and Senator Barack Obama pledged support of public diplomacy.

McCain said he thought the Clinton administration and Congress had made a mistake in abolishing USIA and moving its public diplomacy functions to the State Department. The Senator went on: “This amounted to unilateral disarmament in the war of ideas.” He vowed, if elected, to work with Congress to create a new independent agency with the sole purpose of getting America’s message to the world. This, he believed, was a “critical element in combating Islamic extremism and restoring the image of our country abroad.”\(^\text{22}\) Hillary Clinton testified at her confirmation hearing as President Obama’s secretary of state that Obama would launch a “coordinated, multi-agency program of public diplomacy,” but she did not foresee a return of the independent USIA. “It is more practical at this time,” she said, to “improve the functioning of public diplomacy in the [State] department.”\(^\text{23}\)
Secretary Clinton filled the undersecretary of public diplomacy and public affairs slot with Judith McHale, a former television executive.

**Radios and TV**

If the integration of USIA’s remnants into the State Department was dysfunctional, the transfer of the government’s radio and TV operations to the direction of the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG), an independent federal agency, has not been without challenges. Though the broadcasters have been freed of traditional government bureaucracy, they have encountered a different set of controls and policy input from the independent but government-funded agency.

The BBG oversees all nonmilitary U.S. public diplomacy broadcasting. It is supposed to consist of nine members—four Republicans and four Democrats chosen by the president and confirmed by the Senate and the current secretary of state ex officio. But members from both left- and right-wing political persuasions have been accused of trying to exert political pressure at times, and the secretary of state has rarely attended its sessions. In 2009, it was down to four members, barely enough for a quorum with the undersecretary for public diplomacy and public affairs sitting in for the secretary of state.

At times the BBG has exhibited high energy, as for example when it included successful commercial broadcasters...
such as Democrat Norm Pattiz. A billionaire entrepreneur, he pressed for new services to the Muslim world such as Radio Sawa, an Arabic-language service heavy on popular music, Radio Farda, a similar station beamed at Iran, and Alhurra, an Arabic-language TV station. A strong supporter of government broadcasting has been former senator Joseph Biden, who championed Radio Farda. When the senator became vice president, his Senate seat was taken by Edward Kaufman, a former senior aide, who had held one of the Democratic seats on the Broadcasting Board of Governors. At a congressional hearing, Senator Kaufman termed the role of broadcasting to war zones like Afghanistan and Iraq “particularly critical” in winning hearts and minds. In many places in the world, he said, “if it wasn’t for U.S. and international broadcasting the people would never hear what any of our public officials have to say on absolutely anything.”

But the BBG has imposed budget and programming decisions that have roused the ire of broadcasters in its various divisions. In 2008 its employees rated the board the worst ever for good management, placing it at the very bottom of federal agencies.

VOA has long been the flagship of U.S. government broadcasting, its brand name widely recognized throughout the world and its journalists proud of their reputation for producing quality international news. VOA has itself been torn at times between its charter obligation to “serve as a consistently reliable and authoritative source of news” that
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will be “accurate, objective, and comprehensive,” and its other charter obligation “to present the policies of the United States clearly and effectively.” This apparent dichotomy of mission has at times set it apart from other government radios with the “surrogate” mission of broadcasters like Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty, and Radio Free Asia, to unfree nations, and latterly the new commercial-style broadcasting to the Muslim world.

As USIA officers being integrated into the State Department in 1999 had to deal with a different culture long in history, so is there a longstanding VOA culture which has sometimes set VOA apart from the other, newer, government radios.

VOA employees have smarted under BBG decisions to cease or cut back programming in some of their 45 languages to 134 million listeners in order to fund new programs to the Muslim world. They found the cutback in English-language broadcasting particularly grievous.

All U.S. government broadcasters have had to adapt to the new technologies for communicating with target audiences.

They have had to face the reality of new competition from other international broadcasters like China and Russia and France and Germany, as well as a competing slew of radio and TV broadcasting from commercial Arab broadcasters, particularly Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya. When President Obama made the first broadcast in his presidency to the Arab world, he chose not the U.S. government’s Alhurra TV station but the Saudi-owned Al Arabiya.
Islamic Extremism and the War of Ideas

There is even competition and overlap from other government departments. The Pentagon has large funds for “strategic communication,” which sometimes involves radio broadcasting. Even the State Department set up a program in 2009 to spend up to $150 million on local FM radio stations and cellphone service in Afghanistan and Pakistan to refute militant Taliban propaganda.


The traditional rival for U.S. government broadcasters throughout the world is the BBC, which is now particularly competitive with radio and TV broadcasting to the Muslim world. Congressional and other critics of VOA sometimes hold up the BBC as an example, querying why the British broadcaster can sometimes claim more credibility with foreign listeners than the VOA.

While the BBC is funded by the British government with taxpayers’ money, it protests vehemently that it is independent and does not echo the views of the British government. Its independent prospective has sometimes angered the British government, for example with the BBC’s coverage of the Falklands war and reporting on affairs in Northern Ireland.

In response to its sometime critics, the VOA points to its bifurcated charter requirement of producing objective,
authoritative news while simultaneously projecting government policy, a balancing act which the BBC avoids.

Two of the weakest BBG charges are Radio and TV Marti, broadcasting to Cuba, and Alhurra TV, broadcasting to Muslim countries.

In a 2009 assessment of Marti problems, the GAO reported poor management communication, low employee morale, and allegations of fraud and abuse since 1999 in the Miami-based operation.26

Despite expenditure of more than $500 million over two decades and annual costs of about $34 million, only 2 percent of respondents in Cuba surveyed by telephone reported having listened to Radio Marti or viewed TV Marti.

Alhurra TV has had a difficult history since its inception in 2004. Two years later the GAO accused it of poor management and weak performance. Its journalistic quality was questioned and its top management faulted for its inability to speak Arabic. After it was again criticized for covering a Holocaust denial conference in Tehran, and airing an hour-long speech by Hezbollah chief Hassan Nasrallah, it was the subject of congressional hearings and pressure. In 2008 it came under extensive criticism from media watchdog ProPublica, and CBS’s 60 Minutes for alleged anti-United States content. Its Baghdad bureau was charged with a pro-Iranian bias. A 2008 University of Southern California study commissioned by the BBG found that Alhurra’s broadcasts to the Middle East failed to meet journalistic standards and were seen by few viewers.27
The BBG said it benefited from the critical findings but cited other views that Alhurra had put in place “more vigorous policies, procedures, training, and tools for transparency in order to preserve its credibility.” It claimed Alhurra was “drawing the largest audience U.S. international broadcasting has ever attracted in the Middle East” and its stature and audience would grow.28