

House Committee on Foreign Affairs
Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations

“Is America’s Overseas Broadcasting Undermining our National Interest and the Fight against Tyrannical Regimes?”

Robert R. Reilly, 25th VOA Director
April 6, 2011

Indulge me in an imaginative exercise: if we were setting up a broadcasting service for the US Government from scratch today, we would probably want to focus on the 10 most important countries and languages groups in the world: in our own southern hemisphere Brazil; in Eurasia, certainly Russia, and then China to the south, India to the southwest, and then swinging around to the Middle East, certainly the Arab world with its 300 million people.

Our mission would be to tell these countries and audiences who we are, what we are doing, and why – say, out of a decent respect for the opinions of mankind, as the Declaration puts it. If we want the world to be reasonable, we had better give it our reasons. We might, in other words, create the Voice of America, whose purpose, by government charter, is to do these very things.

Now, if an outside observer looked at what has happened to the VOA over the past 10 years, he might notice a pattern – that broadcasting to these largest, most important countries of the world has been eliminated—Portuguese to Brazil gone, Hindi to India eliminated, Arabic to the Arab world ended, and replaced by a pop music station; Russian gone; and the Chinese service is now on the block for extinction in all but its internet presence (which is blocked).

The pattern is clear but the purpose is not. Why have we done this to ourselves? The excuse 10 years ago, or more, was that history had ended in the sense that the model of a democratic, constitutional, free market political order stood undisputed in its moral authority. But 10 years ago, at the expense of 3000 American lives, we found out that was not true. Why, then, are we continuing the pattern?

Economic considerations might be one explanation but they cannot account for 10 years of this behavior, or for the enormous amount of money that has been poured into Radio Sawa, the pop music station to the Arab world. The elimination of Chinese VOA radio and TV, broadcasting in Mandarin, will save \$8 million but lose an audience of at least 6 million.

Do we no longer need to explain ourselves to the world? Do we no longer need to give it our reasons? Be sure that others are willing to give reasons for us, as the China is doing now with its biting criticism of US policy regarding Libya.

The Broadcasting Board of Governor's rebuttal might be that it is keeping Radio Free Asia, a Chinese surrogate service, albeit with diminished hours, and the VOA web site. However, the internet is highly vulnerable and surrogate radio broadcasting, as very valuable as it is in itself, does not have the mission of explaining who we are, what we are doing, and why. One of my predecessors as VOA director, Geoffrey Cowan, told me that Chinese foreign ministry officials said that they began the mornings by listening to the Voice of America, because they needed to know what the United States was thinking. They would not tune in RFA to learn that for the very good reason that its mission is to tell the Chinese about China – not about us.

This brings me to the most likely explanation for the elimination of VOA's services to the most important countries in the world: a loss of the sense of mission. This loss began with the end of USIA, when US government broadcasting was placed under the BBG.

As the BBG consists of 8 CEOs, it is not wonder that confusion ensued. Ancient Rome had trouble with 2 proconsuls. Imagine if it had 8. Very importantly, most BBG members have been highly accomplished individuals who made their fortunes in private sector media. They, therefore, sought to replicate this success according to commercial criteria – this meant large youth audiences, and abandoning markets in which such audiences could not be attracted. Who listens became less important than how many listened, or to what.

The new diminished mission became news – not the full service radio that VOA offered, which also presented and explained US policies – but news. Play music for 40 minutes an hour on radio Sawa if you must, so long as they listen to the news. After all, said the BBG chief of staff in 2008, "it is not in our mandate to influence." (Don't other people offer the news?)

The new BBG chairman, Walter Issacson, said in a recent Al-Hurra broadcast that, "we just want to get good news, reliable news, and credible information out." Reliable news was always a part of US broadcasting, but the mission has never been reduced to just that. When the Dalai Lama called the VOA Tibet service "the bread of the Tibetan people," and when Aun San Suu Kyi called the Burmese service "the hope of the Burmese people," do you think they were just talking about the "news"?

Hope is a theological virtue; it is not engendered by news. The Declaration of Independence was not a news report.

I think the US has enduring interests in the world. I think we need to explain ourselves in the most persuasive way we can, and by the most effective means, particularly to those peoples and countries whose future is going to most affect our future.

I think we need to begin again to think through to whom we should be broadcasting, about what, and with what. I think this needs to be done within the US government in a command structure related to our national security – and not by an independent, part-time board.

Failure to do this will be paid, I'm afraid, in American lives. Better to win the war of ideas, than have to win a war. That's simple economics.