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TIME TO TURN UP UP THE VOICE OF AMERICA

The Voice of America recently received a letter from a frustrated listener in Ghana, who asked, "Sometimes, listening to the news, the signal disappears altogether. Have your transmitters started to wear out?"

The answer, regrettably, is yes--and it is not only VOA's transmitters that are wearing out. Yet in the competition of ideas with the communist world, the West's most direct and often most effective tool is international radio. The impact of such broadcasts as the Voice of America can be measured not only by the communists' continuous and costly efforts to jam them, but also by official reactions to the broadcasts. Only recently, the Polish regime filed a protest with the U.S. claiming that VOA broadcasts have served to "destabilize" that regime by encouraging "destructive elements working within Poland's constitutional order." In other words, the Voice is a continuing source of information, if not inspiration, to Polish listeners.

Ironically, this protest was filed the same week that funds to modernize the seriously understaffed and technically deteriorating Voice were effectively slashed from the budget by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. The House of Representatives already had approved the 1984 budget request of the U.S. Information Agency, of which VOA is a part, which would allow the Voice to begin implementing modernization. The Senate Foreign Relations Committee, however, cut the total budgetary request of \$701 million by \$65 million and shifted \$64 million from Administration requests. Without restoration of these funds, VOA modernization will have to be scrapped. Thus, just when the U.S. must be better prepared to join in the competition of ideas, the Voice is being allowed to deteriorate.

VOA's broadcasting and transmitting equipment is aging and, in many cases, is obsolete. Its technical staff woefully lacks qualified engineers. The news and editorial staff is seriously shorthanded. Neither the number of hours broadcast per week, nor the number of languages broadcast, adequately reflect the position of the United States, nor do they adequately serve the estimated 100 million listeners world wide who regularly turn to VOA for its news reports and its mix of informational and cultural program. The proposed VOA modernization plan addresses these shortcomings.

Of 107 VOA transmitters, more than 90 percent are 15 or more years old; more than one-third are twice that age. Some transmitters broadcasting to Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union actually date from World

War II. VOA has only six 500-kilowatt superpower transmitters, all of them patched together from smaller units. The U.K. has eight such transmitters, West Germany nine, France eleven. The Soviet Union, the most prevalent voice on the international dial, has 37.

VOA's equipment is so old that its technicians constantly have to cope with burned-out generators and antennae that will not transmit a full signal. Spare parts for some equipment are no longer available; VOA must manufacture them. Even VOA's headquarters studios in Washington are antiquated and under increasing strain, as the Voice struggles to increase its number of hours of weekly broadcasts. These facilities regularly shock visiting foreign broadcasters, some of whom recently termed them "the world's most backward equipment."

VOA is currently on the air 956 hours per week, less than half of Radio Moscow's 2,158, less than either Taiwan or the People's Republic of China, and barely more than West Germany, Egypt, or the U.K. VOA is fifth in number of hours broadcast to Africa, sixth to the Caribbean, Eastern Europe, and East Asia, and tenth to Western Europe.

VOA currently broadcasts in 42 languages, compared to the USSR's 82, Peking's 43, and Egypt's 30. In the Middle East alone, VOA broadcasts in eight languages, the USSR in 20. When the USSR marched into Afghanistan, VOA had no one on its staff able to speak the official Pashto language. For every hour VOA broadcasts in that tongue, the USSR offers five. Of the 42 language services, 38 are understaffed. There is no correspondent in Pakistan to cover events in Afghanistan, nor a correspondent in Geneva to cover arms control matters.

VOA's modernization plan would replace the old equipment, strengthen the signal, fill 140 engineering positions and 141 language service positions (including a 25 percent increase in the Polish and Baltic staffs), and create 68 new positions to improve the quality of VOA news, features, and other programs. Construction of new transmitting sites would begin and the antiquated distribution system would be computerized.

VOA modernization is essential. As matters now stand, the Soviets spend more to jam Western broadcasts than the U.S. spends to reach the entire world. The battle for the loyalty of the uncommitted, as well as the necessity of giving information to those in closed societies, requires that the Voice of America be given high priority in the allocation of federal resources.

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For further information:

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