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## U.S. International Broadcasting on the Frontlines of Freedom

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In the days before the recent cyclone hit Burma, state-run newspapers continued to run their weather reports on their back pages. The usual photos of junta generals dominated the front pages. The Burmese meteorological service held a press conference 24 hours before the storm hit, saying that the winds were expected to be only about 35 miles per hour. Nothing to give its people reason for concern.

But Burmese who listened, in their native language, to shortwave radio broadcasts from Voice of America and Radio Free Asia, funded by U.S. taxpayers, got a different story. They were told, starting three days in advance of the storm, that the U.S. Navy's Typhoon Warning Center predicted the cyclone's winds would be in excess of 100 miles per hour.

As Laura Bush would later put it, "It's troubling that many of the Burmese people learned of this impending disaster only when foreign media outlets such as Radio Free Asia and Voice of America sounded the alarm."

Troubling, but not surprising. The world has changed since the Berlin Wall came down. Freedom, overall, has progressed in the past 20 years, and, as the *Heritage Index of Economic Freedom* shows, economic freedom has made significant strides. But there are still huge expanses of the planet where governments keep the truth from their citizens—even when the truth can save their lives. Basic freedoms—including free access to information—are being denied by authoritarian and totalitarian regimes like Syria, Venezuela, Zimbabwe, China, North Korea, Cuba, Iran, and Burma.

### Talking Points

- U.S. international broadcasting is by far the largest public diplomacy program, reaching the largest number of people—some 175 million per week.
- More and more countries are denying their citizens access to information through radio jamming and Internet blocking. Our language services are often among the very few credible sources of news and information to which the world's repressed peoples have access.
- Independent surveys done in Burmese cities show that nearly one-fourth of Burmese tune in to Radio Free Asia or Voice of America at least once a week.
- Some 28 percent of Iranian adults tune in to VOA Persian TV at least once a week.
- In Iraq, our broadcasts on TV, radio, and the Internet attract an unduplicated weekly audience of some 12,300,000 people, or 76 percent of all adults.
- In Afghanistan, our broadcasts have an impressive combined weekly reach of over 13 million people, or 76 percent of all adults.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:  
[www.heritage.org/Research/WorldwideFreedom/hl1086.cfm](http://www.heritage.org/Research/WorldwideFreedom/hl1086.cfm)

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Freedom House just two weeks ago issued a report on press freedom that called the past year one of “global decline.” A total of 64 countries, one-third of those studied, had a press that was “not free,” and for every advance up Freedom House’s press freedom scale, there were two declines. Speaking of political and civil rights more generally, Freedom House called 2007 a “year of a notable setback for global freedom.” This was the first time in 15 years that global freedom had declined in two successive years.

It is in these tough, inhospitable neighborhoods where the Broadcasting Board of Governors operates—on the frontlines of freedom. This is a dangerous business. In the past year, four BBG journalists have been killed, several were kidnapped, many arrested.

One of our Prague-based Iranian journalists returned home to see her mother and was detained for eight months. She is now out of Iran, but trumped-up charges have been brought and, if she does not return for trial, her 90-year-old mother’s home will be confiscated by the regime. It is commonplace for families of our foreign-born employees now living in Washington, Miami, and Prague to be threatened and harassed by regimes in the nations to which we broadcast.

## **An Information Lifeline**

Our correspondents are in danger because they reach over the heads of ruling juntas and similar regimes to large audiences. In fact, I can announce today that the total weekly audience for BBG programming has now exceeded 175 million—up from 100 million before 9/11. Thanks to support from Congress and the Administration, and thanks to the great work of our broadcasters, our audience has increased 75 percent in seven years.

But the main reason for that increase in audience, I would venture, is that what we do is needed more than ever. Our broadcasters provide provocative, accurate, supportive, high-quality content. The BBG finds a way to deliver that content to the audience. In older, simpler times, our distribution business throughout the world was fairly simple. We put up huge towers and broadcast shortwave radio signals thousands of miles. Those broadcasts were

often jammed, but our engineers figured out ways around the interference.

Today, shortwave is not nearly so widespread. We look at each target audience separately and decide the best way to reach it—given considerations of cost, geography, competition, viewing habits, and politics. The means now include shortwave, medium wave (AM), and FM radio, television beamed by satellite or terrestrially, and Internet.

In Burma, shortwave is effective. Independent surveys done in Burmese cities show a combined weekly BBG reach of 23 percent of adults. That means that nearly one-fourth of Burmese tune in to RFA or VOA at least once a week.

Last fall, with the regime’s crackdown on Buddhist monks and other peaceful demonstrators, RFA and VOA tripled their daily broadcast hours—a move that strategically positioned them to provide the expanded service the current crisis has required.

RFA and VOA, meanwhile, have extended an information lifeline to the suffering Burmese. They have provided a steady stream of in-depth reports on disaster relief efforts (including the junta’s ineptitude and avarice), health and safety issues, conditions in hospitals, power and water supplies, transportation breakdowns.

Just as important, our broadcasters told the Burmese that the world was waiting to provide help, but that the regime was denying entry to aid workers and supplies.

Our Burmese services illustrate what the BBG is all about. We are a professional press that promotes freedom and tells the world about American policy, principles, and society. We focus on countries where free flows of credible information are scarce or nonexistent. We broadcast in the vernacular—because the people we most need to reach do not speak English.

## **Supporting Freedom**

This speech is my first major address since becoming the BBG chairman. Next month will mark my first anniversary on the job. The gap is a bit embarrassing. I have been silent for the past five months because on December 11 President Bush nominated me as Under Secretary of State for Public

Diplomacy and Public Affairs, and I was advised to lay low. But I now think that is not a productive way to operate, and I am happy to be here, speaking and later, answering your questions.

In 2003, I served as a member of the Advisory Group on Public Diplomacy for the Arab and Muslim World, the Djerejian Commission, as it was called. I believe our report is among the best, perhaps *the* best, of the 30 or so that have been done in recent years. It was an education, but it did not prepare me for the breadth and depth of work that the BBG undertakes: 60 languages, targeting over 80 countries, 3,400 employees, another 3,000 correspondents, and an annual budget of \$700 million—unquestionably, one of the largest news-gathering enterprises in the world, and extremely important as for-profit media abandon their international bureaus and pare their coverage.

Yes, the BBG has a structure that can only be called challenging and a mandate that has ambiguities. But, in general, it is a focused and effective organization that plays a key role in the overall public diplomacy of this nation. Understand that it is a constrained role, which perhaps is why we are so effective.

Let me say a brief word about our organization.

The BBG has three basic components:

- The first is the broadcasters—the name brands you recognize—the Voice of America (VOA), Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), Radio and TV Martí, Radio Free Asia (RFA), and, our newest organizations, Alhurra TV and Radio Sawa.
- The second is the distribution and marketing arm, known as the International Broadcasting Bureau, which operates our network of radio transmitters and manages our relations with our affiliate partners around the world. One way to think of the BBG is as a platform—a magnificent collection of infrastructure that extends into critical regions of the world and can be used to promote freedom in inhospitable places.
- The third piece is the head of agency—the board that I chair—a nine-member, part-time, bipartisan body of eight private citizens (four

Democrats and four Republicans) and the Secretary of State (*ex officio*). Serving the Board is a small senior staff, led by an executive director. The Board sets priorities, allocates resources, manages relations within the government, reviews and evaluates the broadcasters, and safeguards journalistic integrity.

The Board is critical to bringing communications know-how, political savvy, and management wisdom to bear on the broadcasting enterprise. It is, in fact, an excellent example of leveraging the private sector to enhance U.S. government global outreach. In this unusual set-up, the part-time Board members, collectively, serve as CEO. As a result, these governors, and especially, the chairman, are much more active than the board members of most corporations or foundations.

Our purpose is to support freedom and enhance understanding of the United States. We are not a propaganda organization. Our job is to provide news and programming that meet high standards of professional journalism, with accuracy, objectivity, and balance.

We emphatically do not operate in a vacuum. No journalism does. We have a purpose. We are an instrument of U.S. foreign policy.

The conference report on the Foreign Affairs Reform and Restructuring Act, which set up the BBG 10 years ago, explains the need for a firewall between the State Department and BBG broadcasters. That firewall is the Board. But the report also clarifies that “establishing this structure is not to deny that the broadcast entities are funded by the United States government—quite obviously, they are.” Nor should the structure lessen the responsibility to “ensure that U.S. broadcasts are ‘consistent with the broad foreign policy objectives of the United States.’”

As Board members, we confer with the State Department and other parts of government in order to understand strategic priorities. We work closely with the U.S. Agency for International Development. We sit on interagency Principals and Deputies Committees. We are often asked by the State Department, as we have been lately in the cases of Somalia, Burma, Tibet, Kenya, Darfur, and others,

to increase or initiate programming. We pay close attention to the “foreign policy objectives of the United States,” as the law says we must.

But the programming remains the reserve of our journalists. We tell the truth, even if the truth might appear harmful to U.S. interests in the short run. Often, we hear from critics, “Why are U.S. taxpayers paying for reports of bad news about America?” Why report about Abu Ghraib, for example? There are two answers: First, Congress and the President have required us to work as an objective, balanced news organization, and, second, our audience is sophisticated, and we have nothing if we have no credibility.

John Houseman, the first VOA director (a former colleague of Orson Welles and later Professor Kingsfield in *The Paper Chase*), set the tone for the next 66 years: The news that the Voice of America would carry to the world in the first half of 1942, with war losses mounting, was almost all bad, recalled Houseman. “Only thus could we establish a reputation for honesty which we hoped would pay off on that distant but inevitable day when we would start reporting our own invasions and victories.”

## Objective Journalism Influences Audiences

VOA was founded to provide accurate and objective news to Europeans propagandized by Nazi Germany. RFE/RL followed at the onset of the Soviet conquest of Eastern Europe. Radio and TV Martí in the 1980s and Radio Free Asia in 1994 were responses, respectively, to Cuban and Chinese communism. Most recently, Alhurra TV and Radio Sawa have come on stream as violent extremism has intensified.

In each case, the historical impetus for our broadcasters has been a national security challenge, necessitating greater support for freedom and democracy overseas.

Our enabling legislation begins, “It is the policy of the United States to promote the right of freedom of opinion and expression; including the freedom ‘to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers,’ in accordance with Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.”

The National Security Strategy of the United States makes the promotion and securing of freedom internationally this country’s first priority. Why? “Free governments do not oppress their people or attack other free nations. Peace and international stability are most reliably built on a foundation of freedom.”

From our history and legislation, and our connection to national security, it follows that being a free, professional press to support freedom is our calling.

The standard definition of public diplomacy is “understanding, engaging, informing, and influencing foreign audiences.” The first three items are evident for a journalistic organization. But the fourth, in my view, is the reason we practice public diplomacy at all. We believe that, by sticking to objective journalism, we can, in fact, influence foreign audiences.

Consider BBG coverage of the recent uprising in Tibet. On March 10 and 11, when monks at monasteries near Lhasa began peaceful protest demonstrations, RFA had the news first. On March 13, when two monks attempted suicide at Deprung monastery on the outskirts of Lhasa, and a hunger strike occurred at another major monastery, RFA was again first with the news. Then, on March 14, when violence erupted and the government crackdown began, RFA broke the story of the first Tibetan protesters to be killed by police gunfire.

As *The Wall Street Journal* would document on April 29 in a feature story about RFA’s coverage, “The earliest reports of unrest in Tibet last month didn’t come from a major newspaper, wire service or TV station. They came from a U.S.-funded short-wave radio broadcaster....”

But this was only half the story. As RFA and VOA increased their combined radio broadcasting to Tibet from 12 to 16 hours per day, and VOA doubled its satellite television coverage from one to two hours daily, the broadcasters became a de facto Tibetan-language news agency for the world. China jams radio signals and blocks Internet access in Tibet. But it couldn’t stop the news about its repression from coursing through the viral networks of the Internet.



Suddenly, major international media—including *The Washington Post*, *New York Times*, AP, and Reuters—were picking up RFA and VOA accounts and using them to drive their own reporting. Scores of times this occurred. Pro-democracy NGOs were also ready consumers and added to the secondary and tertiary distribution of RFA and VOA news.

The crackdown contradicted China's pledges to respect human rights and freedom in exchange for being awarded the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing. There were demands for China to be held accountable, for its officials to sit down with representatives of the Dalai Lama. That's exactly what China did earlier this month in Shenzhen.

Can the BBG lay claim for China's outreach to the Dalai Lama? Well, we can claim that we reported the news that drove the coverage that generated the international pressure on China. And if we are looking for the impact of objective journalism on world affairs in ways that advance the interests of the United States, Tibet is an appropriate case study.

In recent years, there's been a good deal of focus on our Arabic services, started only five years ago. After growing pains, we think they are performing well. That's my judgment after two trips to the Middle East late last year. Evidence comes from research too. In Syria, a key target of ours, Alhurra TV and Radio Sawa together reach 5.8 million weekly (61 percent of all adults).

But we have huge audiences as well in Africa, where a good deal of our coverage focuses on health. In Nigeria, VOA Hausa and targeted English draw some 21 million listeners weekly. And the list goes on and on: Cambodia, Egypt, Ethiopia, Venezuela, Morocco, Somalia, Ukraine, Zimbabwe—all places where U.S. international broadcasting is delivering the news to large, information-deprived audiences.

## Measures of Influence

Like you, I've heard that nothing is working in public diplomacy. That is not true. A great deal is working, at State, at the Defense Department, and elsewhere. And U.S. international broadcasting is absolutely working. Why? In large part because we have been doing it for a long time, and we know how to do it well. We are blessed with superb man-

agers. We stick to the mission, and we adjust our tactics to meet the immediate challenges.

It is no wonder that we have an abundance of imitators—many of them exceptionally well funded. As a research project, I hope that Heritage can take a close look at some of these international broadcasters, such as China International Broadcasting and Russia Today, and terrorist media such as Al Manar, the Arabic language Hezbollah network, supported by Iran.

When I talk about success, I don't mean just audience size. Our research probes questions such as whether our audiences trust our news and whether our broadcasts are helping to improve their understanding of their world and America. On those two counts—and on less tangible measures—the BBG is performing well.

Again, we know it's not just about the numbers. We have to get into the content and circumstances of our broadcasting. So, let me close by describing our work in three countries of critical importance to U.S. national security: Iran, Iraq, and Afghanistan.

**Iran.** Within a few months of becoming chairman, I had a remarkable experience. I was asked to be a guest on a program called "Roundtable With You," a call-in show on Voice of America's Persian News Network (PNN). Sitting in a studio in Washington, I was interviewed by a VOA host and then took calls, live, from viewers in Iran. About two dozen calls over the course of an hour, unscripted.

The callers, of course, were speaking Farsi, which was translated for me. They talked about how grateful they were for VOA's broadcasts, gave advice on how to improve them, praised President Bush, discussed the conditions in Iran. "Roundtable With You" is a regular feature on a network that beams seven hours of daily programming into Iran—up from just two hours a couple years ago. The latest program on PNN is called "Today's Woman." Last week, the show's featured guest was one of Iran's top women activists, while "Roundtable With You" interviewed an immigrant from Iran who has become one of America's most successful insurance agents, and "News and Views," PNN's flagship news program, provided extensive coverage of the U.S. presidential election campaign.

Independent research shows that 28 percent of Iranian adults tune in to VOA Persian TV at least once a week. They get our programs by satellite receiver, even though, in most cases, just owning such a receiver is against the law in Iran and respondents are reluctant to give frank answers. In their native Farsi, Iranians are learning—from VOA TV, VOA radio, and another popular stream, combining music and public affairs from Radio Free Europe called Radio Farda—about how their government is supplying arms and training in Iraq (including Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Admiral Mike Mullen's recent warning about the consequences of such provocations), about the true state of their economy, about their regime's nuclear program, about political prisoners. Just recently, President Bush went on VOA TV and Farda to address the Iranian people directly.

How much does it mean to have a video link to the Iranian people when there is a confrontation between East and West?

When five boats operated by Iran's Revolutionary Guard confronted three American naval vessels near the Persian Gulf earlier this year, VOA's Persian TV was on the air with film coverage of the incident and commentary by U.S. officials and other experts. VOA was able to illustrate the aggressive actions and tell the Iranian people about the unnecessary provocation.

How important is U.S. international broadcasting to U.S. policy in Iran? Listen to a leading State Department official:

Just one out of many examples of the extraordinary usefulness and effectiveness of VOA Persian TV to the U.S. Government came during the release of the recent National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) on Iranian nuclear activities. I can recall that within minutes of the release of the NIE text I was on the air on the set of VOA Persian TV as the first U.S. official to comment publicly about the NIE. I was able to provide a scathing, detailed and complete denunciation of the actions of the Iranian regime as reflected in the admittedly extremely poorly written NIE. My interview ran at considerable length (frankly as long as I wanted). Excerpts ran in news bulletins on VOA Persian TV and my

immediate access to VOA Persian TV set the tone for the coverage of the NIE for the rest of the day. Afterwards I came on the program live almost every day during that period.... VOA Persian TV is the only direct access I, the State Department, or the USG in general, have to the Iranian audience.

**Iraq.** Since Saddam Hussein fell from power, media outlets have proliferated in Iraq, but most are affiliated with political parties and personalities. Iraqis turn to international media for accurate, balanced, and credible information. At this point, in its history, Iraq needs the services that the BBG provides.

Television is the main news source for Iraqis. That's why the BBG has a 24/7 TV stream just for Iraq—Alhurra/Iraq—in addition to Alhurra's pan-Arab stream that reaches 22 countries. The channel provides targeted, in-depth news coverage that Iraqis want and need. Its success is seen in steadily growing audiences, from 42 percent weekly reach in 2005 to 56 percent today. In fact, Alhurra/Iraq now eclipses Al Jazeera in weekly audience. Also, Alhurra is relatively unique in that it attracts substantial audiences among Sunni, Shiites, and Kurds.

But Alhurra/Iraq does more than cover Iraq. It also covers the U.S. And during this election season, it is important to share the U.S. electoral experience—its unpredictability, its openness, its grassroots nature.

Let me share with you some words (translated from the Arabic) written by Sherzad Adil Yezidi in the *Al Hayat* newspaper recently:

With the heated elections race in the United States, Alhurra distinguished itself as the most professional and active satellite TV channel among all the Arabic-speaking satellite channels in covering the U.S. presidential primaries.

No wonder. It is a U.S. channel broadcast from Washington, D.C. Regardless, it is doing very well and is adopting a striking professional and objective methodology in its intensive, detailed coverage of the progress of the elections, and its internal and external interactions.

BBG's Iraq strategy has a strong radio component as well. Radio Sawa broadcasts on local FM across

the country and targets Iraqi youth 18 to 30, with a mix of music and news. Radio Free Iraq, a service of RFE/RL, focuses on an older demographic of information-seekers. Radio Sawa has a weekly reach of 26 percent of adults; RFE/RL, 17

All told, BBG broadcasts on TV, radio, and the Internet attract an unduplicated weekly audience of some 12,300,000 people, or 76 percent of all adults.

**Afghanistan.** Here, the U.S. and NATO are increasing efforts to help the Karzai government as it faces a resurgent Taliban, runaway opium trafficking, and massive economic and infrastructure challenges. The Afghan people are pessimistic about the country's direction. Support for the Taliban is growing. Confidence in the U.S. and NATO has dropped. Security, jobs, and electricity are leading concerns for all Afghans.

As Deputy Secretary of State John Negroponte has said, "Our counter-insurgency strategy rests on the belief that by transforming the environment—helping to improve Afghanistan's governance, transportation, and commercial networks—we can drive a wedge between the people and the enemy and at the same time reconnect the people to their government."

The role of U.S. international broadcasting is to keep the Afghan people well informed of what is happening in their country—both the successes they enjoy and the challenges they face. We focus on the economic, political, and social issues of national reconstruction—issues that matter to Afghans and the U.S. and NATO alike.

Our programming reflects both U.S. strategic concerns and Afghan interests. For example, RFE/RL's radio schedule includes a program on women's concerns; "In Search of the Missing," which tries to reconnect families divided by war; a program promoting religious tolerance; as well as traditional music, health, youth, and roundtable discussions of political and economic issues.

VOA and RFE/RL broadcast nationwide 24/7 on shortwave, AM, and FM in both the Dari and Pashto languages. In addition, VOA airs a nightly hour-long TV program on state media, and it operates a Pashto-only language service, called Deewa Radio, specifically for the border region with Pakistan.

RFE/RL and VOA together are the foreign media leaders with an impressive combined weekly reach of over 13 million people, or 76 percent of all adults.

## Against Serious Setbacks

Freedom and democracy were on the march around the world after the end of the Cold War, throughout the 1990s and into the start of this century. But they are suffering serious setbacks now. Larry Diamond of the Hoover Institution, writing recently in *Foreign Affairs*, has described "democracy in retreat" around the world.

More and more countries into which we broadcast are denying their citizens access to information through radio jamming and Internet blocking. This group includes Belarus, China, Iran, Cuba, and Ethiopia, among others. Under Raul Castro, the Cuban regime has trumpeted such changes as allowing citizens buy computers. How serious are these gestures? At this point, I am skeptical. A government genuinely interested in its citizens' freedom and welfare would let them hook those computers up to the Internet; to let them own satellite dishes; and to stop jamming broadcasts by Radio and TV Martí.

Some nations are projecting the image of allowing greater access as their domestic media proliferate, but these are media outlets whose content the regimes ultimately control. Russia and China are primary examples. In Russia, we have lost more than three-quarters of our radio outlets in the past two years because of government pressure on private companies that partner with BBG broadcasters. China continues to jam our radio broadcasts and to try—though not successfully—to deny its citizens access to our Mandarin and Cantonese Web sites.

We at the BBG see the retreat of freedom and democracy firsthand everyday. Our language services are often among the very few credible sources of news and information to which the world's repressed peoples have access.

## Conclusion

U.S. international broadcasting is one program—only one—in a system of public diplomacy that tries to facilitate the achievement of American interests through interaction with foreign publics. We are by

far the largest public diplomacy program, reaching the largest number of people. We are venerable and consistent, and, in my opinion, we do a very good job.

We present not just U.S. policies but, as the law requires, “responsible discussion and opinion on those policies.” The term in the law over and over is “objective and comprehensive.” Our broadcasters “will present the policies of the United States clearly and effectively and will also present responsible discussions and opinion on those policies.”

The BBG’s entities are media with a mission. But, first and foremost, they are journalistic institutions. They must be. Otherwise, people won’t believe them.

Otherwise, we would be unable, with credibility, to describe to the people of Iran how their govern-

ment is providing weapons and training in Iraq and spending billions on a nuclear program to the detriment of domestic economic stability; we would be unable, with credibility, to tell the people of Tibet the course of the uprising in their own country; we would be unable, with credibility, to tell the people of Cuba who it is that the Castro regime has imprisoned for advocating democracy.

And we would be unable, with credibility, to warn the people of Burma of an impending cyclone, or to warn people throughout the world of the cyclone—the figurative but hugely destructive one—that strips them of their God-given liberties.

—James K. Glassman is Chairman of the Broadcasting Board of Governors.