

Heritage Lectures

No. 1089

Delivered April 10, 2008



Published by The Heritage Foundation

June 13, 2008

Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty: An Effective Tool for Winning Hearts and Minds

Jeffrey Gedmin, Ph.D.

DR. KIM R. HOLMES: I have the particular privilege and pleasure to welcome an old friend of mine and an old friend of The Heritage Foundation's, Dr. Jeffrey Gedmin, President of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL).

I've had the opportunity over the years to work with Jeff when he was Director of the Aspen Institute in Germany and also when he was Director of the New Atlantic Initiative. I've often admired Jeff, both up close and from a distance. In the last few years when Jeff was in Germany, some of our public diplomacy and explanations of American policy in Europe were not really what they should have been. So the task often fell to Jeff to explain American policy—often in greater detail and with greater conviction and persuasiveness than even our diplomats could.

So, I commend the Administration, certainly, for selecting Jeff to lead Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty. Today, it broadcasts in 28 languages to 30 million people in Russia, Central Asia, and the Middle East, including Iraq, Iran, and Afghanistan.

RFE/RL continues to do what it did so well in the Cold War, defending our principles of freedom and disseminating our ideas of liberty and civil society. That's very likely why Russia (under President Vladimir Putin) and other leaders in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan have banned its broadcasts.

For many Americans, the value of RFE/RL is its institutional memory as much as its editorial independence. Under Dr. Gedmin, I am certain it will remain a beacon of freedom and liberty.

Talking Points

- Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) is a relative bargain for American taxpayers. It costs only \$80 million per year and has a vast reach in important areas of the world.
- It broadcasts in 28 languages to 30 million people in Russia, Central Asia, and the Middle East, including Iraq, Iran, and Afghanistan.
- RFE/RL has changed in terms of technology and medium. It still focuses on radio, but has introduced and adapted television, video, and the World Wide Web.
- Its core principles, philosophy, and guidelines remain the same as they were during the Cold War—providing news and information that people in these countries cannot otherwise access.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
www.heritage.org/Research/NationalSecurity/hl1089.cfm

Produced by the Douglas and Sarah Allison
Center for Foreign Policy Studies
of the
Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis
Institute for International Studies

Published by The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002-4999
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Before taking the helm of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Jeff directed the Aspen Institute in Berlin for six years. Prior to that, he was Executive Director of the New Atlantic Initiative at the American Enterprise Institute. He is a prolific advocate of America's principles and values, and his pieces have appeared in far too many newspapers and magazines for me to mention here. He holds a Ph.D. in German Area Studies from Georgetown University.

Ladies and gentlemen, it's an honor, a privilege, and a pleasure to welcome Dr. Jeffrey Gedmin here today at The Heritage Foundation.

—Kim R. Holmes, Ph.D., is Vice President for Foreign and Defense Policy Studies and Director of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for International Studies at The Heritage Foundation.

DR. JEFFREY GEDMIN: Kim, thank you very much. That was a very generous and kind introduction. I'm a great admirer of this institution and of you and your work, and it's a delight to be here, and it's a pleasure to see a number of friends in the audience. Congratulations, Kim, on your new book, *Liberty's Best Hope*.¹ We're going to have the honor of hosting you in Prague for a lecture, a dinner, and a series of interviews. The only thing I quibble with was the subtitle. You know, when I saw *Liberty's Best Hope*, I thought the subtitle would be "Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty," but you didn't ask, so I didn't have a chance to tell you that. I've read part of it, and it's absolutely terrific.

I've been on this job for one year and a week. When I started in Prague, working for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, I remember one of my first experiences was when the director of our Belarus Service came to me about a problem they had in Minsk. A young man, 18 years old, had been arrested on a street corner as he was passing out leaflets. The leaflets simply said, "Listen to Radio Liberty." Nothing more, nothing less. "Listen to Radio Liberty." He was arrested; he was put in jail.

The director of this service said, "Would you make a statement on the radio about his imprisonment and why it's important to have the free flow of

information and ideas and why we stand by him?" I said, of course I would. I was honored, and I went to the studio there in Prague and made my statement. This was maybe my second or third week on the job.

The gentleman who runs the Belarus Service pulled me aside afterward and diplomatically but directly said, "Mr. Gedmin, that was fine for a kind of Washington think tank statement"—I'm overstating for effect, he was probably gentler than this—"or a political statement inside the Beltway, but can I ask you to do that again? This 18-year-old kid who is in jail tonight, there's a good chance he's listening to this. A radio has been smuggled in, and for sure his family and for certain his friends are listening to this."

I was stunned. Of course he was right. And I thought about it. I mean, it sounds simple, maybe even trite. I hope it's not trite, but I thought about it, and gave another statement. I don't know if it was okay, but I thought about it in a completely different way.

I tell you that story because, with great sincerity, you cannot be anything but humble working for an organization like Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty.

Iraq and Afghanistan

Recently in Prague, we had two colleagues come up from our Baghdad Bureau, two young Iraqi gentlemen—I would say 30-something. We sat down, over coffee, and I asked, "Well, why do you do what you do?" They got big smiles, both of them, spontaneous big smiles, and the first thing they both said was, "We love it. It's our country; we love it." And then they paused, and said, "Inside Iraq, since the fall of Saddam Hussein, there's been a proliferation of media—150 newspapers, opportunity, landscape—but we believe that what we do through Radio Liberty there is the only source of reliable, quality, independent news and information."

They said to me, "Everything else is in some way beholden to a constituency, a party, a foreign government, an ethnic group, a tribal group, a religious group. We're the only thing that gives straight, direct, honest, fair-minded information, and we have an audience and a following and a constituency." It's moving, and I'm happy to say, by the way,

1. Kim R. Holmes, Ph.D., *Liberty's Best Hope: American Leadership for the 21st Century* (Washington, D.C.: The Heritage Foundation, 2008).

that these colleagues from the Iraqi Bureau just received a very prestigious award from our board. And they should, because they work under very difficult circumstances.

I've been in this job 12 months: In Iraq we've had two reporters killed; we've had one kidnapped; we've got one in Prague right now escaping—at this moment—death threats. So what they do is not light. It's really got gravitas. It's really got heft. It's impressive.

I could go on. We have a great market share in Afghanistan. We're a leader, we've got about 60 percent audience size in Afghanistan, and we've got all sorts of qualitative ways to know that we have impact. The Taliban in Afghanistan regularly threatens, harasses, and intimidates our journalists. A couple of months ago they kidnapped one outside of Kabul.

The Taliban don't want us off the air, actually. They want *equal time* on the air. Because we play, we reach people, not just in Kabul, but throughout the country, the villages. We have dozens and dozens of stringers from the country, working in the two languages, Dari and Pashto, with impact.

Our Capabilities

This is a great opportunity for me to talk about what we're doing today and tell you a little bit about what our strategy is. I think you find out very quickly, if you distill it, that what we're doing today is fundamentally, at its core, the same kind of things that we did during the Cold War when our greatest admirers were [former Czech President] Vaclav Havel, [Soviet dissident] Natan Sharansky, [former Polish President] Lech Walesa, and others. Now, it's true, we've changed. We've moved east, we've moved south. We still have Europe in the name, but Europe is free.

So we have Russia, we go down through Central Asia, we have the Middle East—or a good bit of the Middle East. We've got Afghanistan, we've got Iraq, we've got Iran. We've had to change in terms of technology, too, in medium. We still do radio, but we've introduced and adopted television, and we do video and we do the World Wide Web. We do lots on the Internet. But at the end of the day, the core principles, the philosophy, the guidelines we follow are the same.

What does that mean? Number one, we have to rely on colleagues and allies from the countries to which we're broadcasting. They are our heart and soul, whether they're in bureaus or whether they are in our operational headquarters in Prague. They *are* us. They come from these countries. Number two, they broadcast in the languages that the people need to get the information in—28 different languages, as Kim mentioned earlier.

Last but not least, we are still in the business of “surrogate” broadcasting. What does that mean? Well, we're not Voice of America. I happen to love Voice of America. As an American, I think we need both. I think they're absolutely complementary and absolutely reinforcing. But Voice of America is chiefly about *us*, about explaining American foreign policies, American society, American culture, and so forth. We are mostly about *them*. It's mostly about the news and information that they in these countries do not have access to.

Now, there's a wrinkle to this. During the Cold War, maybe it was a little simpler and maybe it was in some ways easier. We are today working in some transitional countries, where, in fact, our job is always to put ourselves out of business. When a country becomes free, when it has fully established independent media, when it has an independent judiciary, when it has fair and free elections, there's no need for us. They generate this domestically, it's all indigenous.

But we've got countries that are transitional. Take one, Georgia. It's not an un-free country, it's not a dictatorship; it has a leadership that is pro-West, pro-NATO, pro-EU, pro-American. But it's not where it needs to be.

I was in Georgia last week, and I had a meeting with the President of Georgia, Mikheil Saakashvili. We talked a little bit about what happened in the fall. If you recall that, there was a crackdown. There were about two weeks when there was a blackout on media. We can argue why. Was it the right thing? Was it a misguided thing to do?

I think it was a misguided thing to do, by the way, and in a very immodest way told the President of Georgia that I thought that it was an unwise thing to do. But that's not my bailiwick. My bailiwick is that we were there, and when there is a blackout in

Georgia for about 13 days, the only source of genuinely independent news, information, and responsible discussion of the events of the day was Radio Liberty. Our folks on the ground and from Prague working in that language, who know the culture, provide what we think is not only useful, but indispensable in a free society—or a society that wants to be fully free and established as free.

In most cases, however, it's still a Cold War template, because we're working—and this is the idea of surrogate broadcasting, and it's hard—in places where governments deny their peoples information and free media. As a surrogate, we provide that function.

Iran and the Difficult Flow of Information

How does it work in practice? I'll give you some examples from our Persian Service. It's called Radio Farda. It is radio 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and it is a robust Web program.

Several instances have transpired in recent months. For example, when the Iranians do fuel rationing, there's a deficit of information inside the country about how it's working, and why an energy-rich country should have to lean on such devices. Well, we had reporters on the ground that would go into a gas line discreetly. (We don't have a bureau in Tehran; I don't want to shock you. Iranian reporters weren't doing this.) They'd stick a microphone, as one did, under someone's nose and say, "What are you doing here, sir?" He said, "Well, I've been waiting in line for gas for my car for five hours." And then he paused, and he said, "It does bother me. My government makes me wait for gas, and then they're giving my tax money to Hezbollah." That's an interesting comment. We put it on the Web; we put it on the radio. We got calls and we found out that he was not the only person in this country of 70 million who thought like that, who wanted a chance to vent, who wanted to make his opinion known or get it tested.

We also had a sad, bizarre story not so long ago, which is illustrative of a larger problem in Iran. The clerics directed police to crack down on pet owners with dogs. Some of you are nodding, you recall this story. The idea was that ownership of dogs is not consistent with a certain version of Islam. And so, among other things we reported on the social fis-

sure that occurred. Lo and behold, not surprisingly, we found out that some of the police didn't like this. Apparently some of the police in Tehran like catching criminals, but not teenage boys or girls walking their dogs in the park and then fining the boy or girl and taking away the dog to a kind of dog prison.

We reported on it. We got a very good response; it was picked up in a number of outlets in Europe. It bounced back to Tehran; they rescinded the order. Now, I'd like to argue it was all because of us. Maybe not, but I don't think it hurt, and it was a chance for people to hear about it, discuss it, be informed about it. It wouldn't have happened otherwise.

Another thing that we try, in Iran, is interactivity. It's not just about technology, it's about participation. We have a new program where we're sending and receiving SMS messages via cell phone to folks in the country. About three weeks ago, we received 500 overnight—one single day.

One of my Iranian colleagues said to me, "You have to understand, when someone sends an SMS, a) it costs money, and b) the security services are almost certainly monitoring it. There's some risk involved, but they're not just imparting information."

One of my Iranian colleagues—the director of the editorial side of our program there, is a terrific journalist named Golnaz Esfandiari. She said, "People are yearning for information, but they're also yearning for participation," and this is a way to help them participate. We think it works, by the way. The Iranians jam us, they block our Web site, and they harass our journalists. Now, we don't have a bureau in Iran, but we have 43 colleagues working for us in Prague because they harass our journalists. How do they do that? I'll give you one example.

They will summon one of our journalists to go home to Iran and face a court on anti-state propaganda or—I love this—slandering the supreme leader or something like this. And, of course, they don't go. Then the authorities will say, "That's okay. We need 50,000 U.S. dollars in bail." The journalist will respectfully decline, and then they'll say, "You know what, I think the deed to your mother's home would be about right."

So they have a whole menu of options to harass us. They jam our signals, they block our broad-

casts, they harass our journalists—all of which mean we do have an audience. We have imperfect ways of measuring that, but one is the market test of the regime trying to prevent this free flow of information.

Russia and the Illusion of Choice

I'll give you one more country example. In the case of Russia, we have had dwindling radio opportunities there the last three years, and there's no television opportunity. We're thinking and moving and intensifying our Web and our Internet operations. We have to, not by choice but by dictate. We're offering choice in a country that is increasingly infatuated with promoting "the illusion of choice."

Now, I'm borrowing an expression from my colleague, Daniel Kimmage, one of our top research scholars. He has this reference in particular to the Internet in Russia, where there's the "illusion of choice" because there is a menu of options. There's music and there's art and there's theater and there's business, there's this, that, and the other.

There's everything except democratic ideas, democratic philosophy, genuine discourse about political pluralism, how it works, why it works, and why freedom matters. Everything other than that, to distract you, to entertain you, to seduce you—but not when it comes to the core values and discussion of political freedom, of liberty, the subject of Kim's book.

I'm going to repeat this: We are not Voice of America, which is a great institution. I'm going to say this: We're not propaganda, we're not psychological operations—all this, I think, is revealing. You know, these governments that loathe us, that are hostile to us, that work against us, it sounds obvious and self-evident but it bears repeating, they are desperately concerned to block the access of their citizens to information and ideas, everything that we in Western society take entirely for granted—shamefully, in some cases. They're deeply concerned about that, so concerned that they will do everything they can to block that access.

The Hard Edge of Soft Power

Why is this important? I leave you with a few thoughts to drive the point home, why I think it's

important. We had a Belarusian come out of jail about two-and-a-half or three weeks ago, and he literally said, "Radio Liberty is like air. You have no idea. When you're behind bars and you're closed off and craving and yearning and needing information, it's like air." Well, I thought that was a brilliant thing to say, but I think it's also quite obvious.

If you care about democracy, if you care about civil society, you need lots of things. You need fair and free elections, you need an independent judiciary, you need trade unions. You need all sorts of institutions and habits and values and behaviors. But if you don't have information, if you don't have a free and independent media, I think you have nothing. It may be air to him as an individual, but I think for any country or state or nation, it is the oxygen of civil society. I can't think of any example in which you have any of this without a free and independent media and the free flow of information.

I think, from an American foreign policy point of view, the free flow of information is American soft power at its best. Now, Kim, I told you I haven't read your book entirely yet, but I've started reading it. And in this book, Kim Holmes has a critique of soft power. He offers a very thoughtful and compelling critique of those who want soft power either as a substitute to the real needs of hard power and projection of military force, and of those who, even more shrewdly, use it to emasculate hard power and military force.

I don't mean that at all. I think it's a fact that if you are a superpower with our interests and our global responsibilities, then there are certain instances where—What was it Al Capone apparently once said?—"You can get a lot more in this world with a gun and a smile than you can with a smile alone."

There's something to that. You don't deal with North Koreans with soft power in two pockets. We know that. But as a complement, as a reinforcing, additional, ancillary mechanism or instrument, you have to have other things. I think that this form of American soft power is real.

One of my colleagues calls it "the hard edge of soft power." Not diplomatic niceties, not communiqués, not signing documents, not false and phony multilateralism—the hard edge of soft power. It's

not military power, but it's meaningful. It's consistent with American values, and it actually has the chance to accomplish certain objectives. If I may say as President of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, it's soft power at a bargain price.

If you take all of American international broadcasting—and that's Radio and Television Martí that covers Cuba, the Middle East Broadcast Network that covers the Middle East, Radio Free Asia, the Voice of America, and us—it's all costing us less than \$1 billion, globally.

Our small piece of it is 500 people in Prague, our finance and legal experts and communications analysts in Washington, our 20 bureaus, and our 1,500 people in the field (if you include each and every stringer), with an audience size of 30 million. All of that costs the American taxpayers \$80 million a year.

Now, I like hard power. But \$80 million is the cost of roughly four Apache helicopters, or, for the locals here, one-third of the cost of rebuilding the Wilson Bridge—one bridge, in one city, Washington, D.C. Eighty million dollars is a bargain price for what you get, and it barely leaves a dent in the budget of a global superpower.

Conclusion

I started by telling you it is humbling working for this organization. Let me make two comments about that, and we'll close. It is humbling and it's inspiring to work for this organization for the dramatic reasons I gave you at the beginning, and we have lots of them, I'm sorry to say.

We had an ethnic Uzbek colleague who worked for Voice of America and did freelance for us. He was murdered several months ago in Kyrgyzstan. He was 26 years old. It was a political assassination; he was shot in the head, and he left a widow and baby behind. He was a human rights reporter, a 26-year-old human rights reporter. In Washington, D.C., or Paris or London, he would be someone just doing his job—just a normal, decent, honorable citizen.

We've brought a Croatian colleague out of the region to Prague because he was under death threats for reporting on war crimes. That's what reporters do; they report, and they report on things like war crimes. We've had Afghans kidnapped; we've had Turkmens go missing.

But I'll tell you what, RFE/RL is a deeply impressive organization and it is a deeply humbling experience to work for it and for these colleagues. The high drama is compelling, and kidnappings—while they are terrible—catch people's attention.

But what strikes me most of all is the following. We have these people working for us, hundreds of them, in 20 bureaus and in Prague and in Washington. Most of them are not under threat. Most of them are not in jeopardy, in truth.

I'll tell you what they all have in common, and I guarantee you wouldn't find one dissenting opinion in the whole organization. Number one, they all take their craft seriously. They are serious journalists who believe in their craft, and they believe in the importance and the responsibility of what they do. You wouldn't find one exception.

The second thing is that we have the whole political landscape represented. We've got monarchists and left-wing social democrats and those who love George W. Bush and those who hate George W. Bush. But they all believe in things like decent, accountable government; they believe in pluralism and tolerance; they believe in human rights and the rule of law; and the only reason why they do what they do is because they want a better shake for their country. I don't think any of them by choice would be living in Prague, for example. It's an accident of history. It's the invitation of Vaclav Havel.

Finally, I was in a café a couple of months ago, and sitting next to me were three American couples from Memphis. They overheard me speaking, and they asked me if I was American. They said "What do you do?" I told them, and—this is probably not uncommon—they said, "Well, Radio Free Europe, what is that again?" Which is a way of saying they didn't really know what it was, or they may have once known. I explained it a little bit (this is me idealizing a little bit), but all six of them said, "Wow, what a great thing! Worth every penny of taxpayer money!"

As we talked a little bit, they left me with two things, and I'll leave them with you. They said, "It seems completely part of American values," and they said, "And it sounds like it works."