

# WebMemo



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## Congress Should Overhaul BBG Management

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Congress should undertake much overdue oversight of the management practices and structures of the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG). U.S. international broadcasting needs professional management and a transparent structure and does not have it at the moment.

- **Consistently Inconsistent.** As a part-time, rotating nine-member board that makes executive decisions once a month affecting the roughly \$750 million U.S. government broadcasting enterprise, the BBG management structure is unique within the U.S. government—and not one that most people, even sitting board members, would advocate as a model. Momentous decisions affecting millions of listeners at times appear entirely unconnected to the rest of U.S. foreign policy and are often made by board members who are on expired terms but have not been replaced by the White House. Right now, five members—a majority—are on expired terms, and there is no sign that the White House is looking for replacements.

For instance, the board's decision earlier this year to shut down Voice of America's Mandarin and Cantonese services (and other questionable management decisions) created serious distrust on Capitol Hill. Thus, in its fiscal year 2012 State Department appropriations bill, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee reversed the decision and directed the BBG not to make any programming changes without notifying Congress.

The new strategic five-year plan (2012–2016), as

presented by BBG chairman Walter Isaacson at the board's meeting on October 13, aims ambitiously to make the BBG the "world's premier news agency by 2016." The press release talks about creating a global news network, consolidation of networks, and defederalization of various BBG broadcasting entities, which means giving them greater autonomy as well as eliminating the role of the government unions.

However, despite having adopted a new strategic plan, the board then spent a good 10 minutes of its October 13 meeting discussing contracting an independent firm to perform a feasibility study of consolidation. If consolidation of services is part of a plan already adopted—and to some degree already underway—why does it now need to be studied? The initial cost of such an independent study by Deloitte Consulting to be delivered on November 10 (an amazingly short timeframe) is \$275,000. The same firm would subsequently be responsible for an implementation plan to the tune of \$1.3 million. The whole scenario suggests that the study will serve as justification and cover for decisions that have already been made.

**Low Morale.** Furthermore, this is not the first time an external review of the agency's functions has

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been undertaken. Booz Allen Hamilton conducted a strategic review in July 2006 at the BBG's request. It was titled "Review of the Voice of America [VOA] and the International Broadcasting Bureau [IBB]," two of the organizations under the BBG umbrella. It is fair to say that the problems identified by Booz Allen are still in evidence and its conclusions still relevant.

The Booz Allen review was based on input from BBG members, top VOA directors, congressional staff, and other major stakeholders throughout the U.S. government. Its findings pointed to serious management deficiencies:

- "Stakeholders at all levels of the IBB/VOA are eager to see major improvements in its processes and effectiveness; there is little agreement as how best to achieve the needed improvements";
- "Key operating and management processes are not well-documented";
- "Information is fragmented within the IBB/VOA organization";
- "Many managers and employees do not fully understand the end-to-end process in which they participate, nor what others on related parts of the organization do";
- "Although IBB/VOA has numerous measures of performance, the types of data needed for high-level assessment, robust operational performance management, and comparisons across units and organizations is limited and/or not widely shared."

All of the above contribute to U.S. international broadcasting's dubious distinction as the U.S. government's most dysfunctional agency. The Office of Personnel Management consistently rates the BBG broadcasters close to the bottom in employee satisfaction year after year among U.S. government agencies. For a communications agency, internal communication is deplorably deficient, which is one reason for the poor ratings.

In fact, at the BBG's October 13 meeting, board member Victor Ashe raised the issue of the job satisfaction figures. He noted that the surveys do not even include the 45 percent of VOA staff that are contract employees and a particularly unhappy group of people.

Another reason for the deep morale crisis is extraordinary levels of distrust between management and employees. Employees sometimes find Web sites blocked that contain content critical of the BBG. Management is so fearful of leaks to the Hill and the media that employees have occasionally been directed not to bring notepads or pencils to staff meetings. In the case of VOA's China service, producers were warned by management against covering any congressional hearings relating to the decision to close down the China service. VOA personnel have also been warned against contacting the State Department despite the fact that State is actually a stakeholder in international broadcasting, as the Secretary of State sits on the BBG itself.

**What Should Be Done.** Options for Congress at this point include:

- Undertake much overdue oversight of the management practices and structures of the BBG with a view to rewriting the legislation that created the BBG. The U.S. international broadcasting desperately needs professional management and a transparent structure.
- Include an independent strategic overview of the entirety of the broadcasting entities of the U.S. government. This can factor in the BBG's own strategic review but should also draw on outside media experts and audience research.
- Repeal the Smith–Mundt Act, which prevents international broadcasters from showing their products domestically here in the United States. Not only would foreign communities find much of interest and relevance; so would Americans interested in foreign affairs—and in how their taxpayer dollars are spent.

**Global Competition.** Many countries are today competing for a share of the global airwaves. The United States has to retool and reinvigorate its most important communications tools—its international broadcasters—in order to compete.

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