

Foreign Policy In Focus



Volume 2, Number 40
August 1997

United States Information Agency

by Nancy E. Snow

The United States Information Agency (USIA) is a foreign affairs agency in the executive branch of the U.S. government. The agency is responsible for explaining and supporting U.S. foreign policy, interests, and values abroad through diplomatic posts known as the U.S. Information Service (USIS), exchange activities such as the Fulbright and International Visitor programs, information programs, and international broadcasting. In April 1997 the Clinton administration announced a plan to integrate the USIA into the State Department in response to congressional Republican pressure to streamline U.S. foreign policy bureaucracy. Under this plan the USIA is scheduled to be officially embodied with the State Department by October 1, 1999.

Key Points

- The USIA performs the public diplomacy function of U.S. foreign policy through its USIS posts, exchange activities, information programs, and international broadcasting.
- The agency's primary public diplomacy mission in the post-cold war world is to influence foreign audiences by promoting the private sector interests of U.S. corporations seeking increased market share overseas.

The agency's legislative mandates are delineated in the Smith-Mundt Act of 1948 and the Fulbright-Hays Act of 1961, which were enacted to promote mutual understanding between the people of the U.S. and other countries. In 1994 Congress enacted the International Broadcasting Act, which consolidated all nonmilitary U.S. government international broadcasting under the USIA. This includes the

Voice of America, Radio and TV Marti, Worldnet television, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, and Radio Free Asia. Most controversial among these is Radio Marti, which went on the air in 1985 and is considered to be completely under the influence of Mas Canosa and the ultra-conservative Cuban American National Foundation (CANF). TV Marti is effectively jammed by the Castro regime despite a U.S. taxpayer investment of more than \$100 million. Its transmission signal comes from a balloon above the Florida Keys that also operates radar to track U.S.-bound drugflights. When TV Marti's signal goes on, the drug smuggling radar goes off. Radio/TV Marti is scheduled to be moved to Miami in 1997, thereby allowing Mas Canosa and the CANF to increase their control over the broadcasting.

Until the 1990s the mission and function of the USIA was considered inseparable from cold war geopolitics,

whose main purpose was "to win the battle of men's minds" against Soviet propaganda. In a 1993 address former national security adviser Anthony Lake signaled the start of a new rationale. Lake announced that "the successor to a doctrine of containment must be a strategy of enlargement—enlargement of the world's free community of market democracies."

The USIA began its post-cold war free market mission in the mid-1980s by funding the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) and the Center for International Private Enterprise (CIPE). Since ratification of NAFTA in 1993 and with U.S.-Soviet tensions no longer a viable rationale for its continued existence, the agency has embraced trade and economics as its primary mission. The "Clinton doctrine" firmly established economic policy as the heart of U.S. foreign policy. Under USIA Director Joseph Duffey, the agency responsible for "telling America's story to the world" began a new post-cold war mission of commercial engagement. "One of the most important areas for enhanced agency activity is that of business, trade, and economics. More and more, we are teaching others not only about the principles of free markets but the very mechanisms that make free markets and open trade possible," Duffey told the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on Terrorism, Narcotics, and International Operations in 1993.

Agency objectives are increasingly linked to economic liberalization. For 1998, the USIA lists its foreign policy goals as: NATO expansion (which is expected to create a boom market for U.S. arms makers); the promotion of human rights and democracy through democratic and market reforms in the former Soviet Union and Eastern and Central Europe; anticrime and antiterrorism information along with advisory programs for radio broadcast in cooperation with the Department of Justice and the FBI; collaboration with the Drug Enforcement Administration to create public affairs programming; protection of intellectual property rights with a long-term goal targeting China; and trade and economics through a focus on trade liberalization and deregulation, economic cooperation, and building confidence in and support for NAFTA and the World Trade Organization (WTO).

The USIA's primary mandate is to influence foreign audiences about U.S.-style democracy and markets. Its lesser known second mandate, often downplayed if not ignored, is to explain what the rest of the world is about to the American public and "to increase mutual understanding between the people of the United States and the people of other countries." This secondary role is stipulated by Fulbright-Hays and Smith-Mundt legislation and is carried out through USIA's educational and cultural exchange programs. Under the principle of mutual understanding, post-World War II government-funded educational exchanges like the Fulbright program were designed, according to Senator J. William Fulbright, to provide "some hope that the human race wouldn't commit suicide."

President Carter attempted to highlight the second mandate by directing the USIA to "undertake no activities which are covert, manipulative, or propagandistic." Carter redesignated the USIA as the U.S. International Communications Agency (USICA) to signal something more than a one-way propaganda agency. Such efforts were short-lived. In 1981, former Reagan fundraiser (and later USIA Director) Charles Z. Wick reemphasized USIA's propaganda function but now labeled the agency's activities with the innocuous term "public diplomacy." Under Wick, the agency compiled a blacklist of U.S. citizens whose views diverged from Reagan's in order to purge such views from USIA publicity. Wick also launched the Project Truth campaign (authorized by the National Security Council) to refute Soviet disinformation. He also hired veteran CIA official Walter Raymond to coordinate democracy-building efforts in Eastern European countries. Under Wick, the agency's budget mushroomed by 42% in its first fiscal year, stabilizing by 1989 at approximately one billion dollars, where it remains. Except for a passing reference to mutual understanding, the Bush administration reinforced one-way information to assist other countries in understanding and supporting the American capitalist way of life.

Under Clinton's tutelage, international exchange and public diplomacy have become useful tools to promote free-market economies, free trade, American competitiveness, and U.S.-style democratization. This mini-Commerce Department approach is in marked contrast to "warmer" cold war days under Carter when cultural affairs were designed to reflect the soft or nonadversarial dimension of international relations and foreign policy. Unfettered by bottom-line pressures, the interaction of individuals across cultures could stand on its own merits as a powerful educational tool. Now there is a hard sell behind America's storytelling.

Nowhere is the selling of America's story more prominently displayed than in USIA's assistance in the successful passage and continued promotion of NAFTA. In Mexico, the USIA proclaimed that it worked to show the most influential segments of Mexican society that U.S. interests in Mexico ran much deeper than mere profit margins. The USIA reasoned that "by nurturing American interest in and respect for Mexican intellectual and cultural values and accom-

plishments, we could build a social base for economic and political cooperation while disarming Mexico's greatest potential opposition to NAFTA." The USIA thus became an instrument to promote NAFTA both in Mexico and in the U.S. through targeted International Visitor Programs that brought key Mexicans to the U.S. and key U.S. citizens to Mexico to meet with pro-NAFTA sectors. In a six-week period during October and November 1993, USIS-Mexico received six congressional delegations.

As a propaganda organization for NAFTA, the agency may have benefited from efforts made by Director Duffey's superlobbyist wife, Anne Wexler. Her firm, the Wexler Group, spearheaded the U.S. Fortune 500 lobby called USA*NAFTA in its national campaign to convince the American people that NAFTA meant more American jobs and at higher wages. Voice of America (VOA) editorials extolled the job-creation magic of NAFTA, which has not lived up to its Cinderella predictions. All this intense lobbying relegated to footnote status the voices of other Americans with dissenting stories to tell about NAFTA.

From its inception, USIA's second mandate, to teach Americans about other countries, has been circumscribed by the Smith-Mundt prohibition, which bans USIA employees from targeting a U.S. audience through the VOA or other information and from broadcasting programs designed for an overseas audience.

While anyone with a modem can gain access to the USIA and its VOA website, this 1948 ban continues due to congressional pressure, particularly from Foreign Relations Committee chair Senator Jesse Helms (R-NC), who frets about propaganda being used for domestic purposes, and from the U.S. broadcast lobby, which wants

no competition from government-owned broadcasts like the BBC in Britain. Such a ban clearly violates the First Amendment rights of U.S. citizens and makes it impossible for the American public to express its opposition to or support for taxpayer-funded USIA programs.

Despite this domestic ban, the U.S. business community has been targeted during the Clinton years by USIA-sponsored conferences designed to build commercial ties between the U.S. and countries like South Africa and the former Soviet Union. Such conferences, which bring together USIA and Commerce Department officials, business investors, and members of Congress, call into question the agency's stated principle of mutual understanding. By overemphasizing U.S. business and commercial values instead of more broadly shared goals of cultural diversity and free expression, USIA's message comes across as narrow and exploitative to many people around the world whose aspirations are quite different.

Key Problems

- The USIA downplays, almost ignores, its critically important second mandate to explain the rest of the world to the American public
- The USIA acted as America's press agent for the Clinton administration's effort, in collusion with Fortune 500 companies, to urge NAFTA passage in Congress, disregarding the concerns raised by the anti-NAFTA coalition.
- The USIA has built ties to the U.S. business community through several deal-making conferences that link U.S. businesses to their overseas target markets.

The plan to collapse the USIA within the State Department does not solve the fundamental problems that mark this information agency. If the USIA is to survive reorganization into the State Department, it must rekindle its second mandate to increase mutual understanding and start to paint a picture of America with a broader brush. Agency documents link America's success to USIA's ability "to convince other peoples of the benefits of open markets...and the soundness of U.S. policies on other economic issues."

USIA's model of democracy and the free market is promoted as the superpower version of globalization, packaged and ready for shipping to the rest of the world. In this version, foreign capital flows freely while the movement of the world's poor is strictly monitored and controlled. But such a package projects an image of America which speaks first and foremost for the Fortune 500 corporations, its primary beneficiaries, with little interest or respect for workers and communities in other countries and cultures.

ket, shortwave radio is still the world's primary instrument of communication and education, particularly in the global South. An education-oriented VOA could help alleviate regional tensions in conflict areas like Bosnia and Central Africa. Solutions to global problems might also shift from competitive zero-sum game models to win-win options that include recognition and support for countries and cultures that seek independent models of democracy and development.

There are strong arguments that the USIA is an ineffective, obsolete organization that should be abolished not reformed. The arguments for abolishing USIA include the following:

- The USIA has no legitimate post-cold war function. Under Clinton it predominantly serves the interests of U.S. corporations by touting to foreign audiences the superiority of U.S. commercial values and the soundness of U.S. economic policies.
- The USIA is neglecting its second mandate, citing Smith-Mundt restraints that prohibit dissemination of USIA material in the United States.
- USIA operation as a mini-Commerce Department makes for duplication of government services in a post-big government era of downsizing and budget cuts.
- Private hucksterism for U.S. business interests under the guise of public diplomacy makes a mockery of USIA mandates for mutual understanding between the people of the U.S. and the people of other countries.

Its proposed merger with the State Department will reduce what little independence the USIA has as a foreign affairs agency. As the U.S. government agency responsible for distributing America's story, the USIA should find the political courage to establish a vision for improving the human condition through two-way personal contacts and cultural exchanges that stand on their own merits without needing validation by linkage to U.S. business objectives overseas. The story of America that the USIA currently shares assumes that the rest of the world wants to be just like us. The greater story that USIA has yet to tell the world is that America can also listen and learn.

Nancy E. Snow was a Fulbright scholar and was Presidential Management Intern at the USIA from 1992-94. She is an assistant professor of politics and international relations at New England College.

Key Recommendations

- The USIA should work with its supporters to raise the profile of its second mandate by overturning the obsolete Smith-Mundt ban on domestic dissemination of agency materials.
- If the agency continues to function as a cultural Commerce Department, it should be abolished.
- When the USIA is reorganized into the State Department, it should develop programs to promote true mutual understanding among the world's peoples rather than narrowly cast its energies on U.S. business interests overseas.

It is the Commerce Department's role, not USIA's function, to sell America to the rest of the world. America is, after all, not just for the selling. Millions of private citizens, both here and abroad, are using their collective vision to promote a one-world community—not a one-world market—where diverse cultures are united in efforts to combat poverty, oppression, pollution, and collective violence. In contrast to USIA's boardroom-style globalization, many of these citizen activists favor more freedom of movement for people and greater regulation on the movement of capital. This global grassroots vision is not based on classical economic theory and its orthodox devotion to limitless growth. Instead, it takes into account people, their cultural and natural environments, and local economies where traditional nonmarket values like reciprocity, mutual aid, and self-reliance build community bonds.

Such global visions, if they were distributed as part of USIA's second mandate to tell the rest of the world's story both here and abroad, would more truly reflect the core principle of mutual understanding. One solution is to campaign for reform of USIA broadcasting so that the VOA is truly educational, similar in style to the BBC at its best. Despite the rise in the television mar-

ket, shortwave radio is still the world's primary instrument of communication and education, particularly in the global South. An education-oriented VOA could help alleviate regional tensions in conflict areas like Bosnia and Central Africa. Solutions to global problems might also shift from competitive zero-sum game models to win-win options that include recognition and support for countries and cultures that seek independent models of democracy and development.

Foreign Policy in Focus is a joint project of the Interhemispheric Resource Center (IRC) and the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS). It is supported by subscriptions, by financial support from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, and by various church organizations. *In Focus* internships are available.

Orders and subscription information:

Mail: PO Box 4506
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Phone: (505) 842-8288
Fax: (505) 246-1601
Email: resourcectr@igc.apc.org

Editorial inquiries and information:

IRC Editor	IPS Editor
Phone: (505) 388-0208	Phone: (202) 234-9382/3 ext. 232
Fax: (505) 388-0619	Fax: (202) 387-7915
Email: resourcectr@igc.apc.org	Email: ipsps@igc.apc.org
Website: http://www.zianet.com/infocus	

Editors
Martha Honey (IPS)
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Production
Grant Moser

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Sources for More Information

Organizations

United States Information Agency
301 4th St. SW
Washington, DC 20547
Voice: (202) 619-4700
Website: <http://www.usia.gov>

Global Exchange
2017 Mission St., Ste. 303
San Francisco, CA 94110
Voice: (415) 255-7296
Fax: (415) 255-7498
Website: <http://www.globalexchange.org>
Contact: Kevin Danaher

Institute for Food and Development Policy
398 60th St.
Oakland, CA 94618
Voice: (510) 654-4400
Fax: (510) 654-4551
Email: foodfirst@igc.apc.org
Website: <http://www.foodfirst.org>
Contact: Deborah Toler

Center for Public Integrity
1634 I St. NW, Ste. 902
Washington, DC 20006
Voice: (202) 783-3900
Fax: (202) 783-3906
Website: <http://www.essential.org/cpi>
Contact: Charles Lewis

Public Citizen Global Trade Watch
215 Pennsylvania Ave. SE
Washington, DC 20003
Voice: (202) 546-4996
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Website: <http://www.citizen.org>
Contact: Lori Wallach

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