

Nov 04, 2016 by *Alvin Snyder*

The Changing Voice of America ^[1]

Events moved rapidly this week at Voice of America. VOA director David Jackson decided to give his managers a heads up, shocking them with the news that he was planning to move on soon. That's exactly what happened. Within days the entire VOA staff saw the announcement that Jackson was indeed leaving. The supervisory Broadcasting Board of Governors accepted Jackson's resignation and approved a successor, who would arrive on the job a couple of days after that.

The BBG acted faster and more efficiently than it had in years.

David Jackson, previously a 23-year career senior journalist with Time magazine, ran VOA for the past four years.

He made progress but was not a happy camper. Said an authoritative source preferring not to be named: "It's clear that this has not been a lot of fun for David. Things are not done the way they used to be at the old VOA, with a director and an assistant who used to run everything. The board (Broadcasting Board of Governors) has authority over everything. Over the years the relationship with David got chilly."

The broadcasting board was put in charge when the U.S. Information Agency was dismantled during the 1990s. It had been created in 1953 by President Dwight D. Eisenhower, who felt many in Europe were too young to realize how much the U.S. helped to re-build and re-vitalize the continent following its devastation in World War II. Through President Eisenhower's vision of "people to people" communication, the USIA accomplished its mission and went forward to do its part in helping to win the Cold War with the Soviet "evil empire."

But now there is a part-time private-sector Broadcasting Board of Governors overseeing America's non-military broadcasts abroad. Worldcasting was told that the board was peeved with VOA Director David Jackson for not disclosing in advance that he intended to fire (or re-assign, in government) a veteran VOA news editor. Jackson reportedly wanted to keep this under wraps, fearing a leak to the press if he let the board in on it.

Sources also told Worldcasting that Jackson was a "hands-on" news manager bent on editing and re-writing copy himself before being broadcast on VOA, or put up on the VOA Web site. He often wanted to be certain that the U.S. position on a given story was elaborated where pertinent, and a VOA staffer said on background that this often frustrated VOA writers and editors.

Conversely, Jackson is said to have felt that working under the "reinvented" American government broadcast organization following the USIA's dissolution, was stifling. But Jackson and the board put up with one another for four years, with the board eventually winning out.

When I was director of the now-defunct US Information Agency's TV and Film Service, life was a lot simpler. I reported to the director of the USIA, Charles Z. Wick, and he reported to

his long-time friend, President Ronald Reagan. That was it. And we set up the world's first interactive TV system all over the place abroad. But now with the nine member BBG, things are done by committee, divided evenly between democrats and republicans, the ninth member being the undersecretary of state for public diplomacy, Karen Hughes. Most members of the board work outside Washington, DC, where they come once a month for their BBG meeting. The board chairman, however, does not have another job, and lives nearby, and comes to the office almost daily.

Because a VOA director doesn't report to the BBG anyway, there is need to wait a month for a decision. Under the reorganization plan that did away with the USIA, since the VOA director reports only indirectly to the BBG via the International Broadcasting Bureau (IBB). Worse, the IBB's director's job hasn't been filled for more than two years. VOA used to supervise some of what the IBB now oversees, such as engineering, marketing, and program placement, and it worked well when VOA did all this with just a director and an assistant. So go figure.

The new VOA director, Danforth W. Austin, comes from the Wall Street Journal, where he held senior editorial positions. In a newly created position, TV producer Russell Hodge was appointed Director of VOA television, under Austin. Another source found the wording of the BBG announcement of all this to be interesting. The BBG chose the new VOA director, not the White House, so that the "firewall" of the BBG, to separate VOA from politics, seems to be working. But how can this be since the board is appointed based on political party affiliation?

When America's foreign broadcast operation was re-configured, although the old one worked just fine, there was too much emphasis on form (organization boxes) and not enough on substance (programs). Jackson was a hands-on program guy, with a heady editorial background, and the two didn't mix well. Aside from their organizational woes, VOA veterans are concerned about whether they will have the funding to keep up with the "Big Boys," the BBC, the French, the Germans, the Chinese, the Russians. It's not just a matter of listening (and now watching) VOA or no one. There's now a lot more competition out there on satellite and the Internet, VOA staffers point out.

Rather than re-establishing a new USIA, which would take at least as long as the decade it took to blow it away, better to appoint a full-time BBG chairman, someone with a vision to take the BBG to places "where no man has gone before," at least since USIA days. And, of course, the new BBG chairman should know the way.
