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An Interview with James K. Glassman, Chairman of the BBG ^[1]

As the new Chairman of the Broadcasting Board of Governors, James K. Glassman is the U.S. government's number one broadcaster. An accomplished journalist, Mr. Glassman oversees all U.S. government non-military international broadcast channels. The BBG Chairman provided his unvarnished observations to Worldcasting this week.

Q. As chairman of the BBG, a position which some refer to as "first among equals" on the Board, you have many of the same management obligations as the former directors of the old U.S. Information Agency. You have oversight of U.S. government non-military international broadcasters. Your responsibilities, and those of the Board, do in fact exceed those of the former USIA directors, as your charter also includes such broadcast channels as Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, and Radio Free Asia, that were not in the portfolios of the USIA directors. In addition, you have authority over America's Middle East TV and Radio channels, which didn't exist back then. What do you see as your calling as BBG chairman, and what are your goals?

A. Let me thank you, Mr. Snyder. I have long been a fan, both of your own work and that of the USC Center on Public Diplomacy. I am an avid reader of the Center's listserv. We are making a fresh start at the BBG, and I am grateful for this opportunity.

As for my goals at the BBG: the first was to get the board itself to work more collegially and efficiently. That's happened. We have an excellent board, and it functions in a bipartisan fashion.

The second goal is to define our mission more clearly and be sure we have the right structure to do our work. That is a task that we have started to tackle. It will be the focus of a board retreat in mid-September.

The third and most important goal involves the work itself -- we are engaged, as never before (and I include the Cold War period here) in a struggle for freedom around the world. We have to win that struggle, not just for the sake of the people of the world who live under repression but for our own security as well. So our goal is to spread freedom through practicing highly professional journalism and to build on that foundation. The result is what I call "journalism with a purpose."

It is clear that our opponents in this struggle -- including extremists in the Arab world and the governments of such countries as Iran and Venezuela -- understand the power of media. They are expanding the use of the very instruments of international broadcasting that the United States invented during World War II and the Cold War. Our opponents use these

instruments in a very different way from how we use them, but they are formidable.

At the same time, in places like Russia, China, and Vietnam (not to mention more obvious cases like Cuba and North Korea), governments are doing everything they can to stop our broadcasts and Internet transmissions from getting through. So we have to be smarter and tougher. My point is that this is a critical time for freedom, and our goal is to play a key role in expanding its reach.

Q. A follow up USIA-related question, if I may. I took an informal poll for an earlier article that rated the "Top Gun" former USIA directors, as expressed by USIA senior foreign service officers and others who had served in the agency. Most praise went to those directors who traveled the world a lot and got to know staff, and took a direct interest in them. Would it be your intention to travel the world and meet the American government's far-flung staff, to get to know them and solicit their input and support, perhaps fairly regularly? Secondly, what is Jim Glassman's management style, would you say?

A. I have been tremendously impressed with our entity heads: Dan Austin, Jeff Gedmin, Libby Liu, Brian Conniff, and Pedro Roig, as well as with the late George Moore, an invaluable member of the team who passed away on August 3. It is my aim to get to know the dedicated people who work for the BBG, wherever they are.

I was confirmed by the Senate on June 5 and sworn in on June 8. On June 10, I went to Prague and addressed the RFE/RL staff at a Town Hall meeting, with lots of Q and A. Since then, I have been to Alhurra in Springfield and will be back again this week. The board held a Town Hall meeting last month at VOA. I have been to RFA twice to meet with language-service chiefs and others. I also traveled to Miami and Key West to meet with managers and staff of the Office of Cuba Broadcasting and will be back in October. We have scheduled Town Hall meetings both at RFA and Middle East Broadcasting for September. I am planning trips over the next two months to the Middle East and Asia for on-site visits and will probably soon go back to Prague.

Sorry for the long-winded answer, but I see it as my job to meet with our staff to find out precisely what they do and what they need. A major responsibility, as I see it, is to help them do their work more effectively, and I believe that face-to-face meetings are the best way to get that message across. In addition, communications is an area that all governors want to improve.

My management style? I guess that most people who have worked for me will say that I believe in being frank and open. I don't micro-manage. I give people authority but also responsibility. I don't believe in dwelling on mistakes. I don't think I have all the answers. What I have tried to do so far is communicate, not just with managers and staff, but with our constituencies: I have spent a lot of time meeting with key members of Congress, people at State and the NSC, the press, and academia. I want to spread the net wide -- to tell people what we are doing, to get suggestions, and to ask for support. That is why I am so pleased to be answering your questions now.

As for the board: I am lucky to have governors who work hard and have a high level of expertise. Even though we are appointed according to party, we are non-partisan in our

outlook. We strive for consensus. We hash things out in meetings, we make decisions, and we speak with a united voice.

Q. In a recent interview on America's CSPAN channel, you referred to Al Jazeera's Arabic channel as "shrill" and "Jihadist." You said some things you have seen on this channel were "quite despicable," and that America's Middle East broadcasts are meant as an alternative for "people who don't buy into this extremism." Would you please elaborate?

A. Al Jazeera frequently provides a powerful platform for extremists. Another way of putting this is that Al Jazeera is their megaphone. Ultimately, I think this strategy will fail, especially as Alhurra gets over its growing pains and becomes more professional and, with greater resources, gains a large and loyal audience. Your own article on June 22 made the point that Al Jazeera's ratings are flat.

I do not hesitate to use the word "despicable" for some of Al Jazeera's broadcasts. Daniel Kimmage and Kathleen Ridolfo, in the excellent RFE/FL report on Iraqi insurgent media, write that Al Jazeera is often used to "amplify" the "insurgent message." Here is one example they cite: On April 2007, Al Jazeera ran a lengthy interview with Ibrahim al-Shammari, spokesman for the so-called Islamic Army in Iraq. Al Jazeera took the opportunity, both in the lead-in to the interview and before and after commercial breaks, to run extensive clips from the "Sniper of Baghdad" -- a vicious video that has been circulated by insurgents on the Internet. With martial music in the background, this video shows what appear to be American soldiers being shot, in scene after scene, by a sniper or snipers. The video can only be described as the most vile kind of propaganda. Now, Al Jazeera, as you know, has launched an English-language network which it claims is the third-largest in the world after CNN and BBC. Press reports say that it has hired 700 employees, including 125 in the Washington bureau alone. Perhaps even more ominously, Al Jazeera has announced plans to broadcast in Urdu, seeking 110 million viewers in Pakistan and India.

Q. Some believe America's Alhurra Arabic Channel made an attempt to boost its audience ratings when it broadcast a long unedited speech by a Hezbollah leader, which in part led to the resignation of Alhurra's news chief. In head-to-head ratings competition in 'day after' polling of actual viewing, as opposed to two-week cumulative viewing numbers, Alhurra has only a trace audience in Saudi Arabia compared to Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya, and In Iraq Alhurra is not in the top 50-rated channels. Those ratings are also consistent in other Middle East countries within Alhurra's reach. To connect with the maximum number of hearts and minds in the Middle East, is boosting Alhurra's mass audience numbers a BBG priority?

A. First, the broadcast of a long speech by a Hezbollah leader was a gross violation of Alhurra's standards. We do not provide a platform for terrorists, period. Since June 8, we have had an excellent news director, an Arabic speaker named Danny Nassif, who has a PhD from the University of Michigan and has been news director of Radio Sawa.

Danny is upgrading the professionalism of the operation and has clarified and reinforced controls. We are hiring new people and increasing training. The changes are already

noticeable (for the first time ever, the Secretary of State last month sat down for an interview with both Radio Sawa and Alhurra) and will become more evident in the months ahead.

Alhurra's function is NOT to try to grab that share of Al Jazeera's audience that is attracted to videos like "The Sniper of Baghdad." In fact, we exist in large part because we cover what Al Jazeera and other Arabic networks do not. Just as an example, when President Bush spoke at the National Islamic Center in Washington, Alhurra covered his speech live. Al Jazeera covered it not at all. When I was visiting the Alhurra control room a month ago, our network was covering, live, the European Union response to the split between Hamas and Fatah. Arabic networks that I could view in the control room were covering other events, including a soccer game.

Also unique to Alhurra were: coverage of the interfaith conference held in Bali, including live opening statements and interviews; an interview with the president of Iraq; an examination of child labor in Morocco; a report on the Wilson Center conference on involving American Muslims in making foreign policy; a feature on the rising number of Americans learning Arabic; reaction from Egypt to congressional criticism over human rights abuses; and a piece on women in Kurdistan speaking out against violence against women.

At Alhurra, we have a comparative advantage over other Arabic networks in two ways: first, we can explain the United States better, and the Arab world truly wants to understand America; second, despite the fact that Alhurra is funded by the U.S. government, it has an independence that other Arabic networks lack (see Mamoun Fandy's new book, which expands on this thesis). Alhurra, in its fair and accurate broadcasting, is free to be critical, when necessary, of corruption and repression by governments in the region and free as well to show the true face of extremism.

Most of all, Alhurra can be a home on the dial for moderate, thoughtful, freedom-loving Arabic speakers who are tired of the hateful din that often surrounds them. And, quite frankly, I believe that, by presenting news and public affairs and features with accuracy and fairness, Alhurra not only can be a refuge from the extremist storms but also can change minds.

Q. Do you consider the radios under BBG to be part of the US Government's public diplomacy operations? Some previous members of the BBG did not consider the radios as part of public diplomacy, to emphasize their independence from the State Department and overall USG foreign policy operations.

A. USIA defined public diplomacy as "promoting the national interest and the national security of the United States through understanding, informing, and influencing foreign publics and broadening dialog between American citizens and institutions and their counterparts abroad." By that definition, BBG's entities are clearly part of the public diplomacy effort. By law, the BBG, in all of its manifestations, is an essential instrument of U.S. foreign policy and thus promotes "the national interest and national security of the United States" in the best tradition of public diplomacy, which has become more and more important in recent years.

Also, by law, the BBG serves as a firewall between the State Department and the journalists who do the broadcasting. This arrangement can at times be confusing and complex, but I am dedicated to making it work. We work well with the State Department -- Karen Hughes, the Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs is an active, helpful, and imaginative

member of our board -- but the BBG is an independent agency.

Q: Would you like to add any further thoughts?

A. I once read a book by Peter Drucker, the management expert, who wrote that CEOs and other leaders of organizations need to ask this question: "What can I contribute?"

I am, first and foremost, a journalist. I have worked in newspapers, magazines, Internet, and television for nearly 40 years. The BBG's entities cannot perform their functions unless they are rock-solid, hard-core journalistic organizations. So, one way I can contribute is to help build and enforce high journalistic standards. As I told the VOA Town Meeting, credibility is everything at the BBG, and we will not hesitate to take any action we need to take to guard our credibility.

I can also contribute by telling the BBG's story to the world. We need to communicate better – both internally and externally.

Finally, I hope I can contribute by bringing people together and getting them to pull in the same direction. There is too much at stake here to do otherwise.

We are, as I said, making a fresh start at the BBG. As someone who believes in open communications and in free markets, I can do my job best when I hear a wide variety of ideas and suggestions. In this important struggle, the BBG needs both the intellectual capital and the moral support that your readers can provide. Thank you for this opportunity.

Thank you, Chairman Glassman.
