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The New BBG Can Expect Occasional Poor Reception ^[1]

On November 18, President Obama announced his nomination of former CNN chairman Walter Isaacson as chairman of the Broadcasting Board of Governors. He will also submit nominations for the full complement of seven members of the bipartisan board, including Bush Administration spokesperson Dana Perino as one of the Republicans.

The BBG oversees all of U.S. government funded international broadcasting. This includes Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, inc., Radio Free Asia, Inc., Middle East Broadcasting Networks, Inc., which consists of Arabic-language broadcasters Radio Sawa and Alhurra, and the International Broadcasting Bureau, under which is the Voice of America and the Office of Cuba Broadcasting, whose elements are Radio and TV Martí. The new BBG members will need a good diagram.

With the present Board, through attrition, down to four members (plus the ex officio Secretary of State), many employees at VOA were hoping the Obama Administration would dissolve the BBG. They are annoyed at the BBG because it has eliminated several VOA language services, mostly to East European countries, and has cut back on shortwave radio in favor of television and the internet.

The new members of the Board will not only have unhappiness from the ranks to look forward to. As part of their firewall function, they will also have to fend off, and thus incur the animosity of, members of Congress and administration officials, who might want the elements of US international broadcasting to emphasize this, or to downplay that, or not to interview some insalubrious character. Furthermore, assorted dictators will be irked by the news coverage of the BBG's entities. All told, given the likelihood of antipathy from above, below, and abroad, membership in the BBG is not for those who crave affection.

There is, nevertheless, no substitute for a bipartisan board, with fixed and staggered terms, to protect the independence and thus the credibility of the entities as news organizations. Public broadcasters abroad, including the BBC, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, Australian Broadcasting Corporation, etc., are statutory independent corporations, with similar boards, and news output that is respected.

The staggered terms of BBG members mean that no one president, at one instance, can change the entire board, which could in turn change the managements of the entities, thus creating a credibility-jarring change of tone with each new administration. That, however, is what just happened, with President Obama nominating all eight members in one fell swoop. This was due to deferred action at the end of the previous administration and the beginning of the present, as well as Senate politics involved with nominations to a bipartisan board.

Why go to such lengths to provide this protection for a news operation that will, from time to time, have to transmit news unfavorable to the United States, or not in sync with US policy objectives? Three main reasons. First, it's necessary to attract an audience, which is seeking reliable news as an antidote to state controlled news in their own countries. Second, comprehensive news is the antidote to disinformation spread by dictators, terrorists, and other global miscreants. Third, providing such a useful news service speaks well for the United States. Inflicting propaganda would do the opposite.

There certainly is a place for advocacy on behalf of U.S. foreign policy. It's the job of the public diplomacy offices of the State Department, including the America.gov website, now in seven languages. International broadcasting and public diplomacy are necessarily conducted by separate agencies, in separate buildings, in different parts of town. The BBG should maintain that distance.

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