

**Thumbnail Image:**



Nov 28, 2017 by [Dan Robinson](#)

## **Part II: Trump's Big Fail (So Far) at the BBG/VOA** <sup>[1]</sup>

In [Part I](#), I wrote about President Trump's representatives at the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG) and VOA and an ongoing controversy involving China.

In Part II, I examine seemingly intractable morale problems, news coverage and political bias issues. I question whether the White House will move anytime soon to put the “drain the swamp” president’s stamp on what has been called the most dysfunctional federal agency.

**Still a "Bottom Feeder"**

Coming on board in the wake of the embarrassingly brief presence of Andy Lack (who fled the BBG after only about a month, despite having been recruited by Jeff Shell, the NBC Universal executive who headed the BBG), John Lansing tried to paint a picture of a management structure eager to act on improving morale.

After years of being ranked at or near the bottom of annual federal employee opinion surveys, a 2016 Washington Post [article](#) famously labeled the agency "a regular bottom feeder."

The 2017 Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey results brought more bad news [as reported](#) by the independent watchdog website BBG Watch. The impact [was summarized](#) by the American Federation of Government Employees 1812 Union: "Low morale is an existential threat to this Agency, and [it's] about time leaders and managers acknowledge that and do something about it."

### **No Visible Movement on Obama-Approved Government Measures**

So, where do things stand when it comes to the steps taken by Barack Obama before he left the White House in 2016, steps that major media outlets said created the perfect conditions for a Donald Trump takeover of the BBG?

As I detailed [March 30 in the Columbia Journalism Review](#), the defense authorization legislation that Obama signed in late 2016 was supposed to have established a new International Broadcasting Advisory Board, and the BBG was to become an advisory body.

In conjunction with the new [Global Engagement Center](#), a clear signal was sent that future government efforts would be closely coordinated and focused on [countering foreign propaganda and disinformation](#) undermining United States national security interests.

I said at the time that it was hard to envision Donald Trump wanting to tamper with the kind of inter-agency approach that Obama signed off on. But as 2017 winds down, we basically have no idea what Trump thinks about the BBG.

There has been no indication, at least publicly, that the new advisory board is on its way to being formed. It's supposed to include U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, the CEO of international broadcasting and others chosen on a bipartisan basis in consultation with Congress.

Other than those hysterical reports warning of an oncoming Trump takeover of the BBG, neither the president nor any senior administration official has spoken publicly about how they view the BBG and the role they expect it to play in what has been called "the new information war."

### **Radio Silence on Troubling Issues at VOA**

The absence of any movement on the anticipated Trump nomination of Pack —or at least the perception of none —gives the impression that Obama-holdover Amanda Bennett is permanently entrenched at VOA.

Early in her tenure, she brought in a friend from The Washington Post, Sandy Sugawara (formerly associated with the Post-sponsored website Trove that closed in 2015), as deputy

director.

There's been general silence about what was supposed to be an intensive examination of journalism issues at VOA, conducted by a three-person team of experts brought in by Bennett.

Has this outside team produced a report? If so, what did it conclude about a range of issues of concern, including the problem of political bias in VOA reporting and social media channels of VOA staff?

There's also been no information about political bias training ordered by Bennett. (A former CNN producer responsible for monitoring adherence to standards was assigned to carry this out.)

How many training sessions were conducted? Are they being continued? What conclusions were reached about uncomfortable examples of bias seen in some VOA reporting and on some employees' social media accounts?

One of the three outside experts ended up with a permanent position heading a new "investigative" reporting unit.

On this, some obvious questions arise: what is a federal agency doing starting an investigative unit? What are the nature, scope and limitations of the effort? How many existing employees did it absorb? How many new jobs were created? All of this remains a mystery, at least outside the walls of 330 Independence Avenue, headquarters of the BBG and VOA.

Meanwhile, in October, VOA's management ordered all reporters, editors and supervisors to undergo...wait for it...mandatory journalism training.

An internal memo that appeared to acknowledge the aforementioned problem of political bias said the training would: "...use real stories from the news to help you detect words, images and sources that may be sending signals to your audience about your own opinions. We will touch on how a journalists' private life including private social media postings can influence public opinion about that person's journalism and about the news organization's reputation as well."

In October, VOA employees were surprised by an email from VOA's director announcing that former FOX/CNN/MSNBC TV personality Greta Van Susteren had suddenly come aboard to do "pro bono" work for VOA.

The email arrived only after one of Van Susteren's first interviews (with Republican Senator Lindsey Graham) appeared on the VOA internal newswire, prompting questions from employees.

The VOA director described the arrangement as a "legal way to volunteer for the federal government." Many VOA staff members portray it as an attempt to use someone with big name recognition to boost audience figures.

## **Toxic Atmosphere/Skepticism About Audience Claims**

As mentioned, the 2017 federal employee survey confirmed that there hasn't been much improvement in an agency consistently ranked at or near the bottom on morale.

Emails and other messages from reporters and other staff at VOA are filled with descriptions like "toxic" and "unhappy." Managers are described as "disrespectful" and "incompetent."

Many employees say the only thing separating them from insanity is expanded telework that allows more separation from the unhealthiness of the physical Washington headquarters and morale-crushing, corrosive internal politics.

When they do occur, town hall meetings are platforms for management to downplay the seriousness of the morale crisis. Heads of BBG broadcast entities talk up claimed successes. Management hands out awards that have little if any weight outside the agency.

In private communications, many VOA employees express deep skepticism about audience figures, including one claim of a sudden 50 million increase globally.

BBG Watch raised numerous questions about this and what employees call "the shell game" the agency plays with statistics.

The average outside observer would have no awareness of this issue. BBG and VOA officials proudly proclaim that the agency "reaches" as many as 275 million people weekly, but the figure varies according to which VOA email or Facebook page one reads.

As one VOA broadcaster commented to me, referring to internal figures regarding numbers for VOA English online material, "These are numbers that a small-market newspaper would be ashamed of."

### **Improved—But Still a Struggling, Mixed Bag—on Breaking News**

After intensive reporting by BBG Watch brought to light numerous failures by VOA to react quickly to breaking news and poor decisions on live coverage of major events, there has been some improvement.

Now, VOA goes live far more frequently with presidential and other high-level statements and events. The BBC did this routinely for years, often embarrassing VOA by carrying live White House, State Department and CIA events while VOA stayed with regular programming.

VOA also now puts more "BREAKING" items on its front page (again, something the BBC has excelled at). However, too often VOA still lags behind its main global competitor in this regard, a competitor who routinely beats VOA in getting breaking stories about the United States to the front page—indicative of a well-oiled, organized and professional BBC news operation.

Bizarrely, VOA relies on a few of its reporters (for example, the White House correspondent) to put out initial breaking news tweets, while readers wait and wait for any sign of the main story to appear on the front page.

VOA occasionally breaks stories in areas where it has a strong language broadcast presence: an interview with a town official from Niger where four U.S. special forces soldiers were killed was prominently featured by MSNBC. Video of a confrontation outside of Turkey's embassy between demonstrators and security officials was picked up by non-government media.

But for the most part, the BBG and its entities are not viewed as significant, continuous breakers of major news—notwithstanding efforts by management to portray the agency as a "media company" (an expression used by David Ensor, former VOA director).

VOA reporters are largely invisible—they do not appear as commentators or pundits on network and cable news programs (the BBC's Katty Kay is a regular on several).

Rarely, if ever, are VOA Capitol Hill correspondents heard pressing members of Congress on major domestic U.S. legislative issues. A major part of VOA's role is said to be "telling America's story," but one is more likely to hear in-depth, incisive reporting about America from the BBC.

One elephant in the room has become more visible—a shockingly large number of users of VOA content online are actually in the United States. That says a lot about VOA's "throw weight" in countries it's actually supposed to be targeting.

Even a decline in quality of VOA's newscasts, for which it was once proud, has been noted overseas. A broadcaster in New Zealand whose station makes use of VOA feeds, said in a comment: "The quality and skill of the VOM [sic] news readers are without authority and [they] read the news like bedtime stories. The recording technical requirements are of very low standard. ... sad that a news gathering and news presenting organisation such a[s] Voice of America has trouble achieving a high standard of authoritative voice presentation."

### **Nearly One Year Later, Trump's Plans Remain Unknown**

Whether the Trump White House will move soon to actually put the "drain the swamp" president's stamp on a BBG still plagued by so many dysfunctions remains an open question.

In the highly-charged media environment in Washington, the BBG continues to wave its arms attempting to be noticed and makes a case that its continued existence is somehow a vital tool against Russian and ISIS disinformation.

But, the agency showed during eight years of the Obama administration that it actually wasn't performing in a way that would convince many people of this—to the point where the Obama White House turned to the private sector for help in the new information war.

Certain members of Congress (several appeared in VOA promotional videos) continue to swallow hokum from the BBG that it is impactful in a way the agency used to be during the Cold War or that its programming can help reduce the threat of attacks by lone wolf Islamic terrorists.

Lawmakers may be fully aware of the ongoing dysfunction but all too often seem not to ask tougher questions about its actual effectiveness and reach, continuing to give the place a pass and sinking more money into the agency year after year.

I'm not a Trump supporter. But I am also not among what I call the "preserve the BBG at any cost" crowd.

By this, I mean a collection of current and former employees who do everything they can to boost the image of a place whose global image has been battered, largely by its own internal bungling and mismanagement.

I continue to make the case that American taxpayers would welcome not necessarily draining the BBG swamp and filling its bloated bureaucracy up again, but slimming it down to what could be a far more efficient operation.

...Or, shutting the agency down altogether. But in a Washington where federal agencies are rarely closed, the odds of that happening are virtually non-existent—especially in Trump's first term.

**Note from the CPD Blog Manager:** This article is Part II of a two-part essay regarding recent events involving the Broadcasting Board of Governors' oversight of Voice of America. Read Part I [here](#).

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