

WHY THE VOICE OF AMERICA REMAINS A VITAL FORCE IN THE WORLD

By Geoffrey Cowan

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Why the Voice of America Remains a Vital Force in the World

This article is modified from a speech that Professor Geoffrey Cowan delivered to the World Affairs Council of the Desert in Indian Wells, CA, on December 13, 2015.

It's a delight to have a chance to speak to the World Affairs Council of the Desert. I have been a longtime admirer of the council's. It's also a delight to have a chance to talk about the Voice of America. VOA has been around for almost 75 years—and, amazing as it may seem, my family goes back almost to the beginning.

When it started in 1942, the first director was John Housman, a man some of you will remember as a great film director and actor. The second director, who started a year later, was my father, Louis G. Cowan. He ran VOA from 1943-45, until just after the war. When I was a child we had a summer home in Redding, Connecticut with a den or library that my parents called "the propaganda room." It was filled with books about persuasion and broadcasting. At the time, I thought that "propaganda room" was a synonym for library.

In those years it became desperately important to try to understand what had made Hitler's propaganda so effective, and to find ways to combat it. So the study of propaganda was very robust—and, in some respects, that work helped spawn the academic field of communications.

From its start, VOA was convinced that the only truly effective way to combat the lies of the Nazis was with truth—and that truth could be our strongest weapon. The first broadcast on February 24, 1942 said this: “The news may be good. The news may be bad. But we shall always tell you the truth.” Over the years, the need to tell the truth has remained a vital hallmark of VOA.

There was a small closet under our staircase in that summer home in Redding during those years of my childhood. In it was a movie projector, which was a rather rare possession in those years, and a few cans of movies. But there was nothing made for children.

All of those movies in our summer home were from the Office of War Information, films from World War II. There were films made by some of the country’s greatest directors, including a film called *The Autobiography of a Jeep* and the amazing *Why We Fight* series directed by Frank Capra.

There was also a wonderful documentary on the great conductor Arturo Toscanini, produced by the remarkable Robert Riskin. I will come back to the subject of those films later because they had a purpose—a propaganda-related purpose—and resonance that I only dimly understood at the time.

Somehow the VOA was in our family’s bloodstream. My sister, Holly Cowan Shulman, is now the leading expert on Dolly Madison at the University of Virginia, where her husband edits the James Madison papers. But when she set out to earn her PhD at Columbia in the 1970s, before turning to early American history, Holly chose the VOA’s formative years, the years during World War II, as her subject. Her book on the Voice of America remains a classic.

So when President Clinton asked me to become the 22nd Director of VOA in 1994, I was more or less returning to a family business. There were those at the time who felt that the agency had outlived its usefulness. The Cold War had ended, so why did we need a Voice of America? Some of you will recall a book called *The End of History*, which argued that Western liberal democracy was the endpoint of humanities political evolution. Moreover, technology seemed to have made VOA and other international broadcasters outdated.

I, of course, disagreed—partly out of institutional loyalty, but partly out of conviction. Many people assumed that VOA had been created to fight the Cold War—and in fact, Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty had been built for that purpose. But I knew—and even vaguely remembered—that it had started as part of our hottest war: as an effort to combat Nazi propaganda.

You can find a story from the era in the *New York Times* where I am asked why VOA was still needed in view of the advent of CNN and fax machines. At the time, VOA was reaching about 100 million regular listeners in 53 languages. So with what I considered a cute quip, I said that CNN was great for people who live in hotels and speak English, but that most people don't do either.

That was in 1995, when CNN still dominated international satellite news and before the advent of the World Wide Web, or what we now think of as the Internet.

In fact, I felt that VOA still had a vital mission everywhere in the world. The immediate importance of the mission would vary from country to country and from era to era, but I was convinced that it remained and would remain a vital part of what is now known as public diplomacy or soft power—our non-military arsenal of democracy.

Its goal, as I saw it then and still see it, is to provide the people of the world with the information they need in the languages they speak over transmissions systems that they can receive.

Part of the goal is to tell America's story—in an accurate and balanced way—that will help people understand us better and hopefully learn from our experiences, institutions and values. In the process, we hope that listeners will also gain a greater understanding and respect for our people, our country, and our way of life.

Who knows how much good we did by carrying shows about the Americans with Disabilities Act, which was championed by Senator Bob Dole and Justin Dart and signed into law by George H. W. Bush? Or by our call-in shows about health and finance?

What impact did it have when our Vietnamese Service carried stories about Vietnamese delegates at the national conventions—a story that reached people in a nation where there is no electoral political participation?

What was the impact when our Serbian and Croatian Services carried programs about American basketball heroes from those countries—the Lakers' Vlade Divac from Serbia and Tony Kukoc of the Chicago Bulls from Croatia? Though their nations were then at war and they were from rival teams, the men were friends off the court.

What was the impact when we broadcast and rebroadcast Hillary Clinton's speech in Beijing declaring that women's rights are human rights—at a time when her speech was blacked out in China?

Those and so many other accurate stories helped people understand American values and our institutions—

to understand more about our free markets, our system of democracy, and our commitment to diversity. Even if the men in the White House might not like it, we also carry stories that reflect poorly on our leaders —stories about Watergate during the Nixon presidency and about Whitewater during the years when I served President Clinton. We hope that listeners will learn that the press has the right and the responsibility to criticize its own government when the facts warrant it.

Our VOA programs in Special English taught people everywhere. Years later, I was having dinner in Beijing with the leader of a huge bank in China. I did not know how he would feel once he found out that I had headed the Voice of America. But his eyes welled up with tears. He told me that he had learned English from VOA and remembered listening to VOA in 1976 as we celebrated America's Independence Day.

Our music programs resonated everywhere. The great Willis Conover, who was still broadcasting during those years, brought jazz—and a sense of freedom—to the world. Our programs with country music were transformative. I remember the day when Garth Brooks released his album "Wild Horses." He started the morning on the *TODAY Show* in New York City and then flew down to DC where we carried a live broadcast to the world in multiple languages, where he played his music and took telephone calls from everywhere. When a caller from China asked when he would visit that country, Garth Brooks said, "When you stop pirating our music."

At the same time, VOA carried news about the countries of the world. Not just news about America. Just before I left VOA in 1996, for example, a BBC study found that the VOA Hausa service was rated the most important source of news about Nigeria—in Nigeria.

In some cases it is hard to measure your impact—at the time. But in 2001, just before American troops entered Afghanistan, a BBC survey found that some 70 percent of that country's male population (they could not measure women) were regular listeners to VOA in Dari and Pashtu. It seems more than likely that those listeners were more receptive to our messages and our troops when they entered the country.

Surprisingly, perhaps, we were able to be creative in those years despite the restrictions of a government bureaucracy and declining budgets. We started to air television shows to China and Iran by using direct broadcast satellites and we became a test bed for the then-new concept of streaming audio on the Internet.

Since it was becoming ever easier to make international phone calls, in 1995 we started call-in shows in dozens of languages, allowing experts to answer questions on issues ranging from health to music to the functioning of financial markets and democratic institutions. We said that VOA was moving from monologue to dialogue.

During the two decades since I left VOA, successive leaders under both Republican and Democratic administrations have found ways to use new media successfully. In Africa today, for example, more people listen to VOA on their phones than on the radio. Today, like all major media organizations, VOA operates on every media platform. While world events and technology have changed, in my view VOA—or if not *the* Voice of America, at least a robust American voice—remains as important as ever. Indeed, in new ways, it may be more important than ever.

When I left the Voice of America in late 1996, I became dean of the USC Annenberg School for Communication, a job that I held for 11 years. After 9/11, people around the

country asked, "Why do they hate us?" Of course that's far too simplistic—while some people hate us, others continue to admire and love us. But to me it was clear that 9/11 underlined the importance of having an academic institution involved in thinking about and teaching public diplomacy—a field that includes a great many sub-areas, including academic exchanges, cultural diplomacy and international broadcasting. So we created a Center on Public Diplomacy at the USC Annenberg School, and we created the first-ever Master's Degree in Public Diplomacy.

As we meet here at the end of 2015, almost 20 years after I left the VOA, I think it is fair to say that some of our adversaries have become enormously talented in using all of the tools of public diplomacy for their own ends—and their ends are often at odds with ours. Moreover, they are pouring resources into their operations.

The growth and effectiveness of those countries and movements is one of the many reasons that the United States cannot abandon the field and, indeed, should increase its commitment. We have the most powerful and best-funded military in the world. But we do not have the best-funded government international broadcasting operation. Far from it.

Those of you who follow the Russian propaganda machine know the power of RT, the television broadcaster formerly known as Russia Today. It is slickly produced and very effective. And Russia spends much more on RT than we do on all of our international broadcasting operations combined.

At USC—where I remain even while running The Annenberg Retreat at Sunnylands where we hosted the summit meeting between President Obama and China's President Xi Jinping—I continue to direct a Center on

Communication Leadership & Policy. Along with our USC Center on Public Diplomacy, we host monthly lunches in Washington, DC on public diplomacy. At one of those lunches, the very knowledgeable participants agreed that RT and the Russian propaganda operation are, in some respects, more effective than the U.S.' international broadcasting operations—and, to put this in context, also more effective than BBC, Radio France International, Deutsche Welle and our other friends and competitors.

Nor is China leaving the airways or Internet to the U.S. They are putting more resources into their international operations—and doing it effectively. China Radio International is a huge and growing enterprise. Last month Reuters ran a long expose of a chain of more than 30 radio stations that China Radio International secretly control, including one station in Washington, D.C.

“In some ways, the CRI-backed radio stations fulfill a similar advocacy role to that of the U.S.-run Voice of America,” Reuters said in a November 2, 2015 story called “Exposed: Beijing’s covert global radio network.” “But there is a fundamental difference,” the Reuters story noted: “VOA openly publishes the fact that it receives U.S. government funding. CRI is using front companies that cloak its role.”

Recently, a Chinese company announced that it is buying the venerable and heretofore very independent *South China Morning Post*, which is based in Hong Kong. Up to now, the *Post* has reported aggressively on such topics as political scandals and human rights abuses, topics that China’s media are forbidden to cover.

On December 11, 2015, *The New York Times* reported that “The Alibaba Group, the Chinese Internet giant, is making an ambitious play to reshape media coverage of its home country, taking aim at what company executives

call the 'negative' portrayal of China in the Western media... Alibaba said the deal was fueled by its desire to improve China's image and to offer an alternative to what it calls the biased lens of Western news outlets."

You all also know about Al Jazeera, of course, which is funded by Qatar. It has become a major force in the Middle East and elsewhere, including in the United States. And, tragically, there is the emerging media presence of ISIS, which I will return to later.

In part, we need to redouble our international broadcasting efforts in self-defense. But there are other reasons, too. My guess is that many if not all of you believe as I do that for all of our faults—and we have a great many—America and American ideals and institutions remain an indispensable force for good in the world. But without a robust voice of our own, we are not able to define ourselves, or explain what we stand for, or how our institutions work. Too often, America is being defined by others. And let's face it, our adversaries have plenty of ammunition. For that and may other reasons, America still needs a powerful voice in the world.

There is a debate raging in Congress about the best way to organize international broadcasting. The key issues are organizational and perhaps territorial—very important topics for those of us who care deeply about international broadcasting, but harder for others to follow.

As background, you should know—and many of you do know—that America finances and runs several international broadcasting services. VOA is the oldest and largest. But there are others, most famously Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty, which started broadcasts into Eastern Europe and Russia in 1949 and 1951 respectively. To a large extent, for the first 20 years their funding came secretly from the CIA.

Later, Congress created Radio Free Asia to carry programs into China and other closed societies in Asia.

Those outlets are called surrogate broadcasters. They act as though they are locally produced entities reporting about and from their part of the world. In that respect, they differ from VOA which has bureaus everywhere but clearly and proudly broadcasts from Washington, DC.

VOA and the surrogates are more or less friendly rivals. Since they have complementary and perhaps overlapping missions, they sometimes compete for assets and legitimacy.

There are two key questions. The first is about the mission of our international broadcasters: should VOA be a full service operation, carrying programs from and about the places to which it broadcasts, or should it confine itself to stories and programs about America and let the surrogate services—such as Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and Radio Free Asia—do all of the news reporting about the countries into which we are sending our programs? The second question is organizational, or bureaucratic: should one board control both VOA and the surrogate broadcasters, or should there be two boards? It may seem strange to outsiders, but in Washington you can debate those issues endlessly.

But as important as that organizational struggle is right now, there may be a more important question to ask. Do we need a more profound change in the way in which we send information to the world?

Recently, former House Speaker Newt Gingrich delivered very thoughtful remarks to the National Defense University. As quoted in the *U. S. News and World Report* on December 4, 2015, he said: “We are living in a world rapidly evolving away from the mental constructs and language of the last 375 years ever since the Treaty of Westphalia ended the 30

Years War in 1648. This intellectual framework was applied and reapplied through two World Wars and the Cold War. It is the framework within which academic and bureaucratic careers were made and are still being made. It is now a framework which distorts reality, hides from uncomfortable facts, and cripples our ability to develop an effective national security and foreign policy. The gap between the old world in our heads and the new world we now find ourselves in is so large that the very language of the past blocks us from coming to grips with an emerging future that will be radically different." And he concluded by saying: "Rethinking national strategy on this scale takes time and inevitably involves very intense arguments. The emergence of the American response to the Soviet challenge after World War Two is a good example...we shouldn't be surprised if it takes us a lot of argument, thinking and innovation to develop a grand strategy for the 21st century. It has to be done but it won't be done easily."

Our first assignment, Gingrich said, is to look at facts and develop new words and new constructs to accurately describe what we are facing. Until we have done that, we will be crippled by the very words we use and the obsolete ideas we are trapped in.

There is much merit in that perspective and I think that it applies to international broadcasting. In my view, the VOA of old remains a vital instrument in the toolbox of public diplomacy. We need to continue to reach the people of the world with the information that they need in the languages that they understand using transmission systems they can receive. But in the era of ISIS, maybe we need to do something more.

During the past several months, I have been a part of a number of very high-level conversations about ways to confront ISIS. The meetings have involved people from the

highest levels of government, academia, and the private sector. They have involved people from the United States, European Allies, and moderate leaders from the Middle East, as well as the Hollywood creative community and the tech community of the Silicon Valley.

We all know that we are confronting a new phenomenon—or a very old one using new techniques and new technologies. As Speaker Gingrich said, it will take some time to find a new path. And we should look for that path with a degree of humility, in bi-partisan and non-partisan conversations that are profoundly serious and civil.

It maybe that to confront ISIS, we need a new broadcasting or new media instrument, one that uses different tactics and plays by different rules. Such a new enterprise, in my view, would not supplant VOA or the other existing broadcasters. But I can't describe it yet, because it will take a lot of thought to create it.

There are, however, some enduring truths that go back to the original role of the VOA, to the books in our propaganda room in Connecticut, and to the films stowed away under the staircase.

In World War II, there was a fear of a fifth column: enemies among us. There were those who feared Germans and Italians, including our friends and neighbors. Even after the war, my mother warned me not to go to the Yorkville section of New York City, which was less than ten blocks from our home on Park Avenue, because it was, or had been, the home of the pro-Nazi German American Bund.

Although we all know about the shameful example of the Japanese internment camps here in California, the Office of War Information knew that it was much better—and much more in keeping with America's values—to celebrate the

achievements of Germans and Italians. The *Why We Fight* movies spoke to those values and to the contributions that men and women from those countries had made to America. The movie about Arturo Toscanini was designed to celebrate the achievements of a great American of Italian decent.

While we should all be modest about saying what we do and don't know about ISIS, here are some things we think we know: ISIS claims that it is in a cosmic war with the West and Western values, and that those of us in the West hate Islam. That claim is one of their most successful ways of recruiting people from every region. When we vilify Islam, rather than the extremists who act in its name, or when we deliberately try to humiliate those who believe in the teachings of Mohammed, we play into their hands.

Unless it amounts to a deliberate incitement to imminent lawless action, the First Amendment protects people such as Pamela Geller, who sponsored a contest in a public school near Dallas, Texas where people were invited to submit cartoons of Prophet Mohammad, a man who is revered by more than 1.5 billion people around the world. Two gunmen who opened fire at the event were killed, as you will recall, and the first responders were put at great risk. Those who support civil liberties should defend the rights of people like Pamela Geller—unless she intended to provoke violence.

But at the same time, we should candidly admit that their actions are helping ISIS. They are giving material to ISIS and others who then use them in videos and other programs to show that America hates all Muslims and defaces and defames their religion.

For that reason, Ms. Geller and others have been widely condemned by people on both sides of the political aisle. As

Laura Ingraham and other conservatives have said, “Geller has done more for jihadis than any American I can think of.”

Interestingly, at the time, one of Pamela Geller’s harshest critics was Donald Trump. In May, he said this to Inside Edition: “What is she doing? She’s taunting people. I have absolutely no respect for her. She is putting people at great danger.”

But now it is Trump himself who is fanning the flames. His suggestion that all Muslims be banned by the United States until “we know what is going on” has been condemned in the same way, including by most of the other Republican candidates and by House Speaker Paul Ryan. A great many experts are convinced that his words—while certainly entitled to full legal protection—are being and will be used as an effective recruiting tool by ISIS.

In the world of public diplomacy, words have consequences. During a political campaign, candidates will often make statements that are intended to appeal to their base or win hearts and minds of potential voters. We all know that political rhetoric is often grossly inflated for effect. Certainly Senator Ted Cruz did not actually mean it literally when, speaking of ISIS, he told a crowd at a campaign speech in Iowa that “we will carpet bomb them into oblivion.”

In every campaign, candidates try to reach voters with powerful, exaggerated rhetoric. But people in this country and around the world can’t be expected to take all such comments with a grain of salt. At the minimum, they can be frightening. But they are even more likely to be incendiary, especially when repeated and explained by those who want to use them for their own purposes.

This is not the first time that actions by Americans have been used by our adversaries to undermine the best interests

of the nation as a whole. During World War II, the U.S. government changed some so-called Jim Crow policies that discriminated against African-Americans because those laws were being used by Nazi propagandists to call into question the sincerity of America's opposition to the treatment of Jews in Nazi Germany, and because Communist organizers were having some success in African-American communities.

In the 1950s, Soviet media used stories about segregation in America to win the hearts and minds of people around the world. My former colleague Mary Dudziac wrote a fascinating book called *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy*. She showed that American leaders backed civil rights laws partly due to concerns about the effective way that the Soviet Union was using stories about racial segregation and the murders of African-Americans.

Under President Eisenhower, the government deployed jazz performers such as Dizzy Gillespie and Louis Armstrong as "cultural ambassadors"—with the not-so-subtle goal of combatting the images being spread by our enemies.

Since the VOA has the responsibility to cover all of the news, it has a responsibility to carry stories about Pamela Geller's activities and Donald Trump's statements, even though we know that those stories could inflame passions and perhaps play into the hands of our enemies. Unlike many other sources of news, however, VOA also tries to put such comments into a broader context.

VOA stories, therefore, have quoted important and courageous people across the political spectrum who denounced what Ms. Geller did and what Mr. Trump has said. And VOA has carried stories about Muslims who are making a huge contribution to our country.

In that way, and in many others, VOA remains a vital instrument in combatting ISIS. But it also may be that Speaker Gingrich is right. It may be that it is time to reexamine our international broadcasting operations in the face of a changing world. It may be that we need a new entity, one that complements the work of VOA and our surrogate broadcasters. Those engaged in this reexamination should include people with a profound understanding of social media, people from the creative community, and people from the regions and groups most clearly impacted.

The discussion should be bi-partisan, as support for international broadcasting always has been. When I ran the VOA and our budget was in jeopardy, we found allies across the spectrum. Even though I was an appointee of President Clinton, the *Wall Street Journal* editorial page championed our efforts and we worked closely with the Heritage Foundation. On September 7, 1995, for example, Ed Feulner, the President of Heritage, issued a report called "The Voice of America: Don't Silence America's Voice in the Global Marketplace of Ideas." We had both Democrats and Republicans on our side. They, too, were convinced that American needs a strong and clear voice in the world.

And in whatever form it takes, the need for a strong, clear and honest American voice is as great today as it was when my father helped to found VOA in 1942.

Author Biography

From 2010-2016, Geoffrey Cowan was president of the Annenberg Foundation Trust at Sunnylands. From 1996-2007, he served as dean of the University of Southern California's Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism. In 2007, he was named a University Professor (one of 21 at the university), the inaugural holder of the Annenberg Family Chair in Communication Leadership and director of USC Annenberg's Center on Communication Leadership and Policy. At USC Annenberg, Cowan launched and remains involved with major USC Annenberg centers and projects, including the USC Center on Public Diplomacy, The Norman Lear Center, Charles Annenberg Weingarten Program on Online Communities, Knight Digital Media Center and the USC Annenberg School Center for the Digital Future. He holds a joint appointment in the USC Gould School of Law and teaches courses in communication and journalism.

Prior to becoming dean, President Clinton appointed Cowan to serve the nation as the 22nd director of the Voice of America (VOA), the international broadcasting service of the U.S. Information Agency (USIA). An award-winning author, Cowan's books include: *See No Evil: The Backstage Battle Over Sex and Violence on Television*, *The People v. Clarence Darrow: The Bribery Trial of America's Greatest Lawyer*, and *Let the People Rule: Theodore Roosevelt and the Birth of the Presidential Primary*.

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