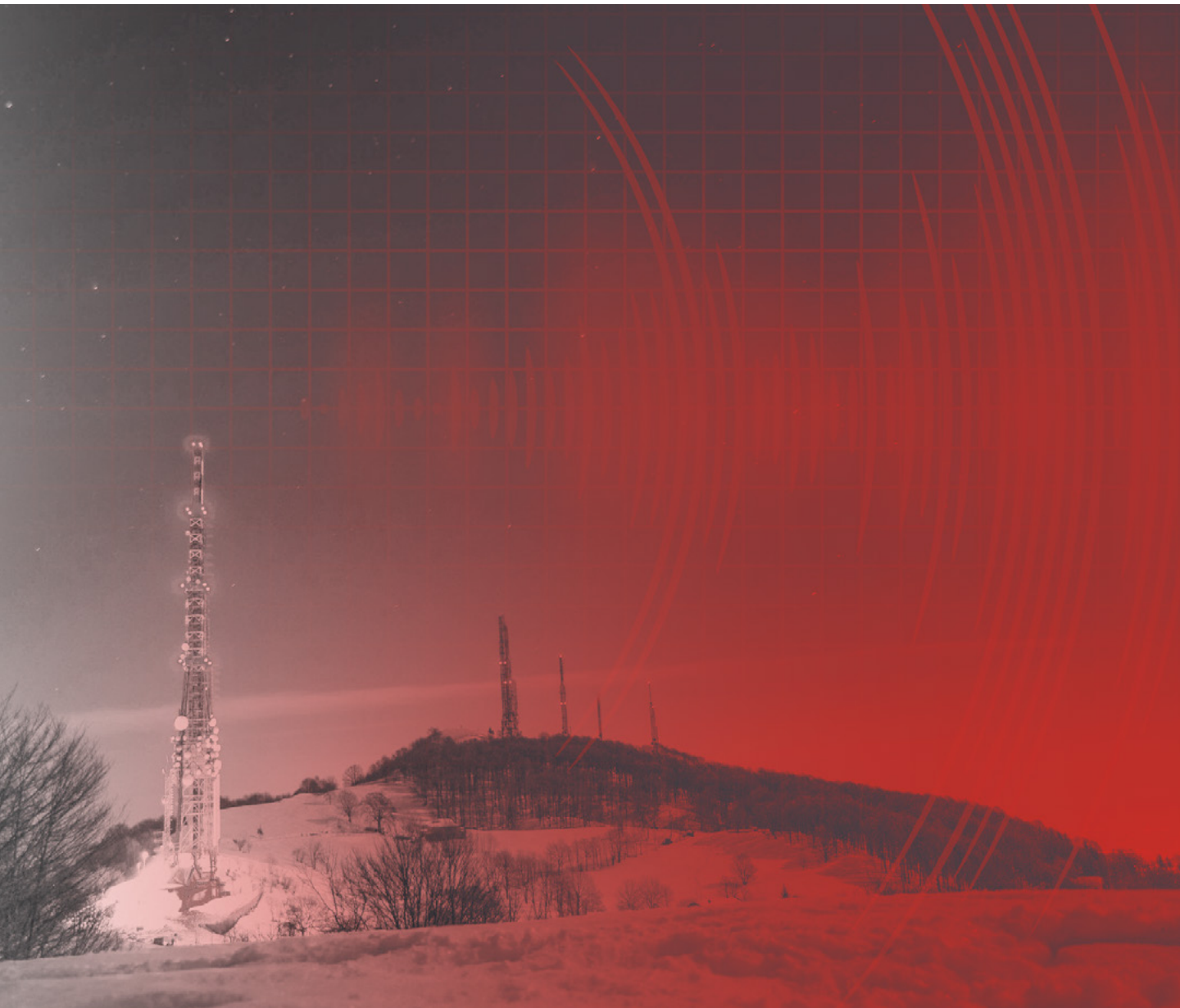




A U.S. MEDIA STRATEGY FOR THE 2020S: LESSONS FROM THE COLD WAR

Mark G. Pomar



The incoming Biden administration has an opportunity to strengthen U.S. national security by revitalizing U.S. international broadcasting, both in terms of organizational structure and overall strategy. In order to do so, it should look to the Cold War history of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty for some fundamental lessons in how to formulate and implement media strategies that ensure the credibility and independence of journalism and advance U.S. national security interests.

“A free press is the unsleeping guardian of all other rights that free men prize; it is the most dangerous foe of tyranny.”

—Winston Churchill

For over four decades, the Voice of America (VOA) and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) were on the front lines of the Cold War. Every day, the two radio stations broadcast news and feature programming about politics, economics, culture, and religion that pierced Soviet censorship and gave listeners a truthful and comprehensive picture of the world and a deeper understanding of Western values of freedom and democracy. U.S. policymakers, both Democrats and Republicans, acknowledged international broadcasting as one of America’s Cold War “success stories,” while democratically elected leaders in the former Eastern bloc, including Polish President Lech Walesa and Czech President Vaclav Havel, credited the radio broadcasts with bringing about a peaceful end to the Cold War and ushering in a new era of freedom. Although the United States faces new challenges today, Cold War broadcasting can offer important lessons in how to formulate and implement media strategies that ensure the credibility and independence of journalism and advance U.S. national security interests. The incoming Biden administration has an opportunity to strengthen U.S. national security by revitalizing U.S. international broadcasting, both in terms of organizational structure and overall strategy.

In the waning days of the Obama administration, in a misguided effort to strengthen the management of U.S. broadcasting, Congress inserted an ill-conceived and hastily drafted amendment to the Fiscal Year 2017 National Defense Authori-

zation Act that eliminated the bipartisan, part-time Broadcasting Board of Governors (renamed the U.S. Agency for Global Media in 2018), which had been governing all broadcasting entities since the early 1990s, including: VOA, RFE/RL, the Office of Cuba Broadcasting, Radio Free Asia, Middle East Broadcasting Networks, and the Open Technology Fund.¹ In its place, it created a powerful position of CEO who now had legal authority to eliminate bipartisan advisory boards, direct the work of journalists, reallocate funds among the separate broadcasting entities, and hire and fire the directors and officers of the six entities. Of critical significance was the status of the three grantee organizations — RFE/RL, Radio Free Asia, and Middle East Broadcasting Networks — which were private companies receiving U.S. government grants and operating at arm’s length from U.S. policymakers. By abolishing the bipartisan board, the 2017 amendment significantly weakened the firewall that protected independent journalism and blurred the vital distinctions between federal broadcasters, such as Voice of America, and private grantees, further eroding the overall impact of U.S. international broadcasting.

Then, in the summer of 2020, U.S. international broadcasting experienced another hit when the Trump administration appointed Michael Pack as the CEO of the U.S. Agency for Global Media. Rather than develop a comprehensive media strategy that advanced U.S. national security interests, Pack began his tenure by firing the heads of four of the entities — RFE/RL, Middle East Broadcasting Networks, Radio Free Asia, and the Office of Cuba Broadcasting — without offering any reasons for his actions. The top two editors of the Voice of America resigned before he even took office. Pack also ousted diplomats and professional journalists on oversight boards and refused to extend the

¹ See, “Public Law 114-328, National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2017,” 114th Congress, Dec. 23, 2016.

visas of more than 70 foreign journalists on dubious grounds of national security.² He rescinded the firewall rule that prohibited the CEO from engaging in editorial oversight of the broadcasters. As an essay in the *Washington Post* noted, Pack's "objection [was] to the rule's prohibition of attempts by USAGM [U.S. Agency for Global Media] executives to 'direct, pressure, coerce, threaten, interfere with, or otherwise impermissibly influence any of the USAGM networks ... in the performance of their journalistic and broadcasting duties.'"³ So egregious was Pack's frontal assault on the fundamental integrity of U.S. international broadcasting that at the height of his presidential campaign, Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden vowed to fire him on his first day in office, noting that Pack's actions "risk hijacking invaluable nonpartisan media institutions that stand up for fundamental American values like freedom and democracy in the world."⁴

Simply hiring a new head of the agency will not be enough. The Biden administration will need to begin the process of rebuilding U.S. international broadcasting first by repealing the amendment that created the CEO position and then by forging a new global media strategy that defines the role and functions of international broadcasting in the coming decade and explains how broadcasting contributes to broader U.S. national security interests. This two-step process will be a major undertaking, requiring public and bipartisan support, as well as, in some cases, legislative action. But revitalizing international broadcasting will be indispensable if America is to reassert its leadership role in the world and successfully fend off a dangerous China, a resurgent and highly aggressive Russia, a volatile North Korea, and a chaotic social media sphere that amplifies anti-American voices throughout the world.

Although the United States faces new dangers in the decade ahead, ranging from the proliferation of social media sites and the growth of nonstate news networks to rapidly evolving technological innovations, I believe that the Cold War years — the "golden age" of U.S. international broadcasting — can offer some valuable lessons in how best to ensure the credibility of American broadcasts, counter false

narratives, facilitate the democratization of closed (or semi-closed) societies, and project American values. While all U.S. international broadcasting during the Cold War merits close study, the experience of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, especially in the late 1980s and early 1990s, offers relevant examples of what worked well and why.

RFE/RL at the End of the Cold War

For decades, RFE/RL served as "surrogate" broadcasters, functioning as local media would have if Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union had enjoyed the rule of law and freedom of the press. The two broadcasters not only provided comprehensive and balanced news and current affairs, but they also aired programming about the culture, history, religion, and indigenous democratic movements in their target regions. They confronted communist governments in a struggle that George Urban, director of RFE in the 1980s, characterized as "unconventional warfare," fought not with tanks and artillery but with "words, ideas, perceptions, papal visits, arguments about 'shopping baskets' and other soft means."⁵ And these new means required new ways to circumvent the regime's total control of domestic media and address the population directly. "The intent of RFE and RL," Ross Johnson, former director of RFE, has noted, "was to provide listeners with an intellectual bridge to Western Europe and the United States and a factual basis for comprehending their own lives and the world around them, so as to preserve the independent thinking that the controlled domestic media sought to prevent or suppress."⁶ By broadcasting fact-based news about the world, and especially about the internal conditions in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, U.S. policymakers reasoned, RFE/RL could weaken and, over time, even defeat communism.

When the Cold War ended, there were calls in Congress for a "peace dividend" and RFE/RL's future became uncertain. Democratically elected leaders in Central and Eastern Europe expressed concern, convinced that U.S. broadcasts were

2 See, Jackson Diehl, "Trump's Continuing Vandalism of the Voice of America," *Washington Post*, Oct. 11, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/trumps-continuing-vandalism-of-the-voice-of-america/2020/10/11/82799d5a-0984-11eb-859b-f9c27abe638d_story.html.

3 Paul Farhi, "Trump Appointee Sweeps Aside Rule that Ensured 'Firewall' at Voice of America," *Washington Post*, Oct. 27, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/media/voice-of-america-firewall-michael-pack-trump/2020/10/27/02a4fbae-1854-11eb-befb-8864259bd2d8_story.html. For specific language of the firewall see, "Firewall and Highest Standards of Professional Journalism," A Rule by the Broadcasting Board of Governors, June 15, 2020, <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2020/06/15/2020-12696/firewall-and-highest-standards-of-professional-journalism>.

4 Alex Ward, "The Head of US Broadcasting Is Leaning Toward Pro-Trump Propaganda. Biden Would Fire Him," *Vox*, June 25, 2020, <https://www.vox.com/2020/6/25/21302625/joe-biden-president-voice-america-fire-michael-pack>.

5 George R. Urban, *Radio Free Europe and the Pursuit of Democracy: My War Within the Cold War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), 1.

6 A. Ross Johnson, *Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty: The CIA Years and Beyond* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), 6.

needed more than ever as the former communist countries were making the difficult transition to a market economy and a democratic system of government. In one of several telephone conversations with President George H.W. Bush in 1990–1991, Vaclav Havel, the revered dissident and playwright-turned-president of independent Czechoslovakia, raised the question of RFE’s future, asking the U.S. president to meet with his foreign minister, Jiri Dienstbier, to discuss this critical issue. “I understand the Congress may cut funding for RFE,” Havel told Bush, “but I hope it will be possible to give support to this institution. It is very important.”⁷ Bush welcomed Havel’s call and indicated he wanted to know more about how RFE was contributing to the development of democracy and a market economy, especially since he had been hearing the same messages from the newly elected democratic leaders in Poland and Hungary. “The reason why we want RFE open,” Havel noted, “is that although our radio is free, our journalists are not experienced enough. RFE is an educational institution for us. We need to learn from it.” Just three days after this telephone call, on April 15, 1991, Bush echoed Havel’s words in his address to the National Association of Broadcasters:

You know, last year when Vaclav Havel, the President of Czechoslovakia, came to the White House, he told me that he and others used to listen to Radio Free Europe and the Voice of America. And President Havel credited those broadcasts with helping to launch the Velvet Revolution and turn a totalitarian society into a democratic one. It’s clear, then, that free and accessible media strengthen and help to build democracy.⁸

The Bush-Havel conversation addressed several key issues facing RFE/RL (and, to a lesser degree, Voice of America) in the very early 1990s, as Central and Eastern European countries were gaining their full independence and the Soviet Union was hurtling toward its own demise. It raised the central issue bedeviling many policymakers in Washington: Did free media in the former Eastern bloc countries render RFE/RL obsolete? And if so, could the language services be closed (or, at least,

pared down) and the budget savings proclaimed a peace dividend? In the end, the Bush administration resisted efforts by Congress to make cuts in the budget of the Board for International Broadcasting, the federal agency that granted funds to RFE/RL, viewing the radio stations as integral parts of overall U.S. foreign policy strategy.

In March 1990, several months after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the proclamation of newly independent countries in Central and Eastern Europe, the National Security Council initiated a major reassessment of international broadcasting (*National Security Review 24*) that directed the key foreign policy agencies, including the Board for International Broadcasting, “to consider the future role of US government broadcasting at a time when many, but not all, parts of the world enjoy an increasingly free flow of information, including indigenous free media.” The National Security Council directive required the Board for International Broadcasting to address the role of surrogate radio broadcasting in areas increasingly open to media and the exchange of ideas, as well as to consider the “allocation of limited resources to various regions, countries, and languages.”⁹ At the time of the Havel-Bush telephone conversation, the National Security Council review was still underway, in large part because the political situation in Eastern Europe was changing so rapidly. The question of democracy in former communist countries was very much on Bush’s mind and he was keenly interested in hearing Havel’s and Dienstbier’s assessments of the two broadcasters.

The central point in the Havel-Bush conversation was Havel’s short but succinct description of RFE/RL’s new role: that it would become an educational institution that would share the knowledge, experience, and journalistic resources that it had accumulated and refined over decades with emerging free media organizations in the former communist countries. Havel understood that as democratic institutions gained strength and as domestic media became more professional, RFE/RL would no longer be needed. But that day was still far in the future. In the interim, the fledgling democracies of Central Europe were relying on U.S. international broadcasting.

Other newly elected democratic leaders in Cen-

7 “Telephone Conversation with President Vaclav Havel of Czechoslovakia,” Memorandum of Telephone Conversation, April 12, 1991, 9:13–9:40 a.m., George H.W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum, <https://bush41library.tamu.edu/files/memcons-telcons/1991-04-12--Havel.pdf>.

8 See, George H.W. Bush, “Remarks to the National Association of Broadcasters Convention,” George H.W. Presidential Library and Museum, April 15, 1991, <https://bush41library.tamu.edu/archives/public-papers/2873>.

9 *National Security Review 24: Review of U.S. Government International Broadcasting Activities*, George H.W. Presidential Library and Museum, March 28, 1990, <https://bush41library.tamu.edu/files/nsr/nsr24.pdf>.

tral and Eastern Europe echoed Havel's words, calling on RFE/RL to help explain the challenges of building stable democracies and a market economy on the ruins of communist rule. The most effective way to achieve this, in the words of Polish Prime Minister Tadeusz Mazowiecki, was for RFE "to continue to serve as a reliable source of information and discerning commentary."¹⁰ In a similar vein, Hungarian Prime Minister Jozsef Antall expressed gratitude for 40 years of RFE broadcasts but stressed that in the immediate future, RFE "can help the strengthening of democracy in Hungary in many ways. ... [A]lthough our press is freed from censorship, it still must learn how to live with this freedom. RFE can provide a standard for quality and balance, in healthy competition with our own journalists."¹¹ Antall's words were further echoed by one of the heroes of the Polish Solidarity movement. "In all the countries of Eastern Europe, dictatorship has lost and freedom has won," Adam Michnik stated, "but that does not mean that democracy has won. Democracy means the institutionalization of freedom. We don't have democratic order, and that is why our freedom is so fragile and so shaky."¹²

So successful was the role of RFE/RL in sustaining the national spirit of the people living under communism that the two broadcasters were formally nominated for the 1991 Nobel Peace Prize by Lennart Meri, the foreign minister of Estonia (and later, president) on behalf of the newly elected democratic leaders in Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Bulgaria, and Poland. In his nominating letter, Meri emphasized that Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty made a unique contribution to the rebirth of democracy in Central and Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union.¹³

Despite the fact that testimonials about, and accolades for, RFE/RL were welcomed in Washington and played well in the political arena, the Bush administration approached the future of international broadcasting in a strategic way, understanding that it was an important instrument of U.S. foreign policy. It established a high-level, bipartisan task force that required each government entity involved in broadcasting to justify its operations by explaining how its strategic aims con-

tributed to overall U.S. national security. At the Board for International Broadcasting, a bipartisan board of directors where I served as the executive director, we laid out three major goals for RFE/RL:

1. To contribute to social stability in democratizing societies by providing a moderate, alternative, non-partisan perspective on domestic affairs and a counterweight to voices of extremism.
2. To complement and amplify direct U.S. and Western European efforts to promote further peaceful evolution of democracy in the broadcast region by encouraging the understanding of Western democratic values and practices, helping emerging democracies to share information among themselves, and strengthening the flow of information between East and West.
3. To compensate for the continued weakness of domestic media organizations as they strive to achieve genuine independence, professionalism, and credibility, and to stimulate higher levels of professionalism through constructive competition.¹⁴

The plan acknowledged that the mission of these broadcasters could be completed at some point in the future. But rather than take peremptory action, we proposed a road map with specific tasks and milestones to measure progress. We stressed the very concept that Havel had raised with Bush in their telephone conversation, namely the educational role of RFE/RL. By example and through professional training opportunities, RFE/RL would work with journalists throughout the region to help establish a code of ethics and professional know-how that would allow the former communist countries to develop into thriving democratic states.

In December 1991, Bush accepted the findings of the task force that acknowledged that RFE/RL "has a continuing mission ... which will be very important for some years." "We believe," the task force reported, that "the new role of alternative and surrogate broadcasting is to assist newly democratic nations in establishing and developing democratic institutions, particularly free and unfettered me-

10 Quoted in, *1991 Annual Report*, Board for International Broadcasting, 2 (covering the period from Oct. 1, 1989 through Sept. 30, 1990).

11 Quoted in, *1991 Annual Report*, 2.

12 "Statement of Mark Pomar, Executive Director, Board for International Broadcasting," Testimony Before the House Subcommittee on International Operations of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, 102nd Congress, July 30, 1991.

13 Quoted in *1992 Annual Report*, Board for International Broadcasting, 4.

14 Mark Pomar, personal papers.

dia. This role of the radios should be affirmed by the Administration.”¹⁵ The task force also made two specific recommendations: (a) that the Board for International Broadcasting should continue to oversee all U.S. government-sponsored grantee broadcasters, and (b) that the continuing need for RFE/RL broadcasts should be evaluated periodically according to such metrics as the proliferation of independent, professional media, free and fair elections, and the regular and peaceful transfer of political power. The Bush administration assumed that RFE/RL would continue to broadcast through the end of the century, but in reality, relying on the metrics set out by the Board for International Broadcasting, the broadcasters for the three most advanced countries in terms of media development and democracy ended much earlier: Czechoslovakia on Jan. 1, 1993; Hungary on Dec. 31, 1993; and Poland on Dec. 31, 1994.¹⁶

The Board for International Broadcasting’s strategic plan for international broadcasting, approved in the last year of the Bush administration, hit a major roadblock in early 1993. Since Bill Clinton campaigned on a platform that promised a peace dividend, in his first budget, he simply zeroed out funding for RFE/RL. With the Cold War over, the new administration reasoned, who needed these “relics”? This line of thinking was picked up by a newly elected senator, Russ Feingold, who became the main advocate for closing RFE/RL. Alarmed by these rash actions and mindful of the continuing need for RFE/RL broadcasts, the Board for International Broadcasting sprang into action. The chair of the board, Steve Forbes, and I set out to visit all the key members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and to make our pitch that RFE/RL was needed more than ever in this dangerous period of transition from communist rule to a democratic market economy. Moreover, we pointed out that a bipartisan task force had endorsed specific metrics to determine when individual language services should be closed and argued that it would be in America’s national interest to adhere to that plan.

With the exception of Feingold, the senators pro-

fessed varying levels of support, but only one senator took the time to learn about the broadcasters in detail and told us that he “got it.” Sen. Joseph Biden listened to us as we explained how RFE/RL functioned during the Cold War, why we believed it was still needed, and why its credibility and effectiveness depended on its independent status. Eager to learn more about RFE/RL broadcasts, Biden accepted our invitation to attend the next Board for International Broadcasting board meeting in February 1993. After a lengthy discussion with the directors and senior RFE/RL management, Biden concluded that

it is beyond dispute that Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty contribute immeasurably to developing democratic institutions in the former Soviet bloc. As a model of how independent media should function in a free society, and in keeping honest those who yearn to silence the press, Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty remain central actors in the drama unfolding across the region. ... [T]o shut down RFE/RL at this critical juncture in history would be absurd.¹⁷

No less important was Biden’s understanding that the unique administrative structure of RFE/RL was fundamental to its independence and credibility.

Biden then told us to work closely with his senior aides and assured us that he would take on the challenge of saving the two broadcasters.

On Jan. 25, 1994, nearly one year after our initial meeting with Biden, Sen. Claiborne Pell introduced Senate Bill 1281, authorizing appropriations for the Department of State, the United States Information Agency, and the Board for International Broadcast-

15 See, *Report of the President’s Task Force on U.S. Government International Broadcasting*, Hearing Before the Subcommittee on International Operations of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives, 102nd Congress, Feb. 4, 1992, 2.

16 In view of the backsliding of democracy in Hungary, RFE reintroduced Hungarian-language broadcasts in 2020.

17 See, *Shortwaves*, February 1993, 3. *Shortwaves* was a newsletter published by RFE/RL. See also, *1994 Annual Report*, Board for International Broadcasting, 5.

ing.¹⁸ Pell admitted that the bill was contentious — it consolidated management of U.S. international broadcasting and made major cuts in the overall budget — but noted that he would recognize Biden for a very important amendment that would preserve the radio stations. “The amendment I sent to the desk is a compromise,” Biden began,

a genuine hard-fought compromise, after months of deliberation and debate, not only in the Foreign Relations Committee, but also within the executive branches. ... The debate has been arduous. It has not always been harmonious. But we have found a way forward that I believe all interested parties can agree on.¹⁹

Biden then went on to speak about the work of the radio stations, the accolades they had received from democratic leaders in Eastern Europe, and the important role they would continue to play in the 1990s. What stands out in Biden’s remarks was his generous acknowledgement of the work of others, from Clinton to Sen. Jesse Helms and even Feingold. By bringing together all the key parties, he was able to prevail on them to sign on to the core mission of RFE/RL: “to provide a firm foundation for the long-term post-cold-war effort to promote democracy and US interests around the world.” No less important was Biden’s understanding that the unique administrative structure of RFE/RL was fundamental to its independence and credibility.²⁰

The International Broadcasting Act of 1994 consolidated the different broadcasters under one Broadcasting Board of Governors, which over the years had a rocky administrative history, but managed to preserve RFE/RL’s grantee status and thus its credibility and effectiveness. In a fitting coda to the 1991 Havel-Bush conversations, in 1995 Havel invited RFE/RL to relocate its broadcasting center from Munich to Prague, a public testament to the fundamental role the broadcasters had played in the liberation of Central and Eastern Europe. By 2020, RFE/RL was broadcasting to 23 countries in 27 languages, having added new services for Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, North Caucasus, and the Balkans.

By forging a global media strategy and eliminat-

ing the 2017 amendment that weakened journalistic credibility, the United States can employ these major assets to communicate directly with countries that are politically unstable and represent a threat to the national security of the United States.

What Made RFE/RL Broadcasting Successful

To develop a media strategy for U.S. broadcasting for the coming decade, it would be useful to identify the key elements of RFE/RL programming that led to its success during the Cold War. Although the broadcasts of all RFE/RL language services deserve thorough examination and careful analysis, I will draw on examples from the RL Russian Service, the largest and arguably the most consequential of the services given that it was directed at America’s main adversary during the Cold War.²¹ Broadcasting 24 hours a day, seven days a week, the Russian programming spanned a wide range of subjects, from news and current affairs to human rights, literature, the arts, history, and religion. The aim was to provide Soviet listeners with news and information about their country and the world that they would not receive from their state-controlled media. Subjects that Soviet media distorted or avoided were especially prominent on RL broadcasts. The rationale for the RL Russian Service was that truthful news and information would support inchoate democratic forces in the Soviet Union and help bring about a peaceful end to the Cold War.

Based on my work in the RL Russian Service (1982–83) and at the Board for International Broadcasting (1986–93), I would suggest that the effectiveness and ultimate success of the programming was the result of two fundamental elements: (1) highly professional standards of news reporting, and (2) well-researched, fact-based, and strategically focused feature programming.

News and current affairs programming — the very core of the radio mission — relied on readily available open sources in the West and scrupulously avoided any one-sourced story or popular rumor. This was not always an easy task as émigré broadcasters were eager to go on air with a breaking story or a news scoop. But the tight discipline exerted by senior ra-

18 Foreign Relations Authorization Act, Fiscal Years 1994 and 1995, S.B. 1281, 103rd Congress (1993–1994), <https://www.congress.gov/bill/103rd-congress/senate-bill/1281/all-info>.

19 Amendment No. 1296. “Proceedings and Debates of the 103rd Congress, Second Session,” *The Congressional Record*, Senate, Jan. 25, 1994, 16, <https://www.congress.gov/bound-congressional-record/1994/01/25/senate-section?q=%7B%22search%3A%5B%22Foreign+Relations+Authorization+Act+1281%22%5D%7D&s=9&r=173>.

20 “Proceedings and Debates of the 103rd Congress, Second Session,” 16.

21 The general approach taken by the RL Russian Service was similar to the one taken by the Polish, Czechoslovak, Hungarian, and other large language services, but each language service could shape its broadcasts according to the specific needs of its broadcast region. The broadcasts can still be listened to online at the Open Society Archives, <https://www.osaarchivum.org/>.

dio management and the central news desk kept mistakes to a minimum. Since the Soviet government controlled all domestic media and exerted tight censorship, many listeners tuned in to RFE/RL (and other international broadcasters) to find out about the state of affairs in the world and at home.

During the Cold War, news and current affairs programming added up to roughly 30 to 40 percent of the total airtime of the larger language services. The remainder of the airtime was devoted to feature programming, and that required a strategic approach to the selection of topics and issues. For example, should RL devote most of its airtime to the Soviet dissident movement of the 1970s and '80s or should reporting on human rights violations be carefully balanced by extensive broadcasts about the arts, culture, and even apolitical topics? What was the right mix of politically charged programs? Should Stalinism and the gulag be the central focus of the history programs or should RL explore different political philosophies and various reform movements of the 19th century? How important was religious programming? At a time when the Soviet Union was militantly atheistic, should the RL Russian Service broadcast weekly liturgies and sermons, as well as specific programs addressing Judaism and Islam? These debates, and many others, raged daily at the radio stations as we sought to build an engaged audience.

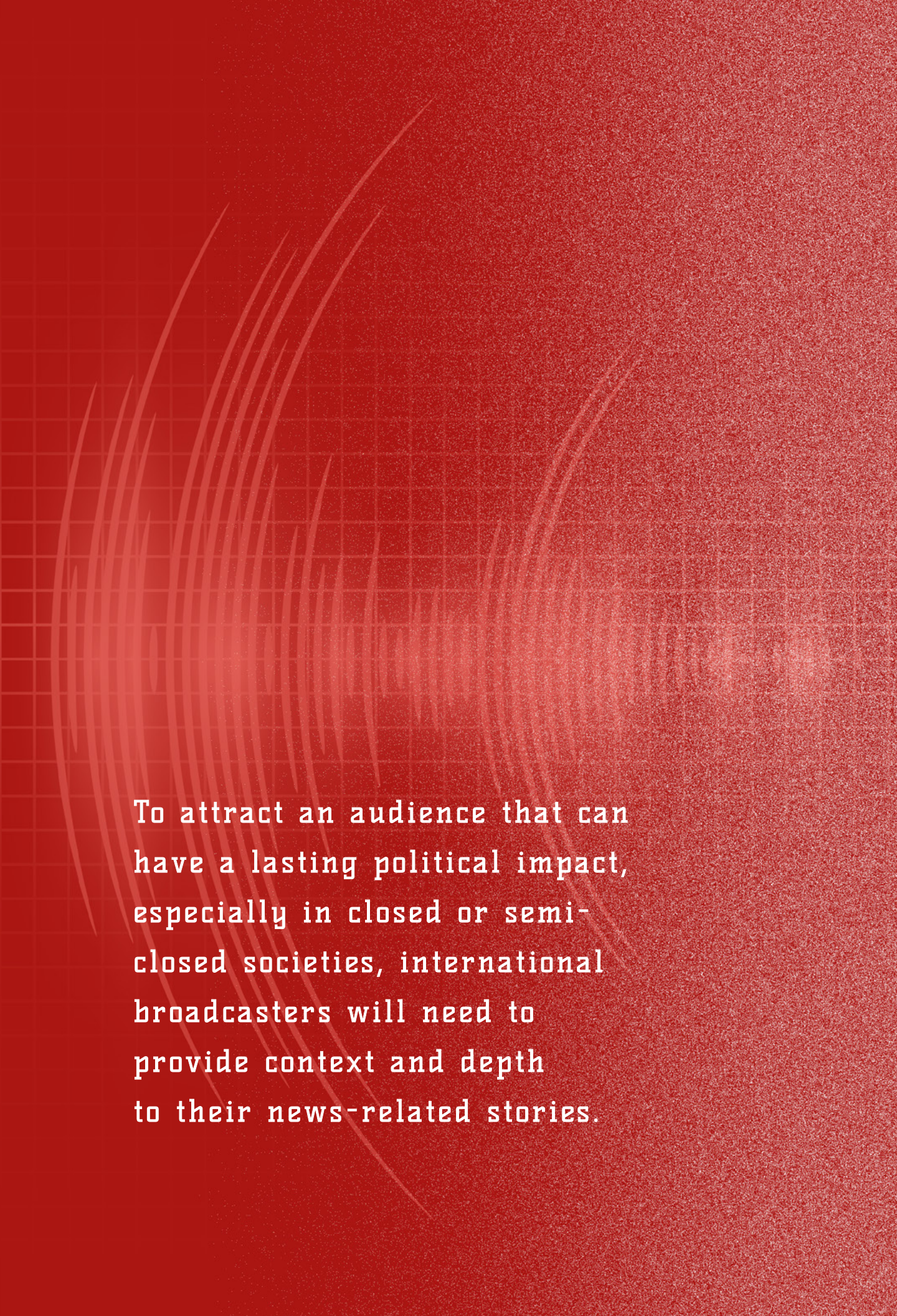
Three overriding strategic goals governed which main subjects we selected and informed the feature programming of the Russian Service: presenting Russian life, culture, and politics that Soviet authorities had “canceled”; portraying American and Western life in a truthful and balanced way; and challenging Soviet disinformation. Together, these goals resulted in credible and trustworthy broadcasts.

The first goal exemplified the fundamental American value of free speech and individual liberty. It sought to overcome draconian Soviet censorship by giving a voice to Russians who were arbitrarily cut off from their own country and people and, in effect, rendered mute. Once artists, writers, philosophers, historians, human rights activists, or even ordinary citizens ran afoul of the Soviet authorities or emigrated, they became non-persons whose names could not be mentioned — favorably or neutrally — in the Soviet press, what in today's slang we call being “canceled.” For example, such major celebrities as Mstislav “Slava” Rostropovich and his wife, Galina Vishnevskaya, were literally erased from the Soviet musical world, their names no longer part of the history of the Bolshoi Theater, simply because these two world famous artists had stood up for human rights and defended and protected Alexander Solzhenitsyn when he was hounded by the Soviet authorities. Examples like this run into the thousands.

At RL, we would begin our regular strategy sessions by analyzing the latest Soviet attacks on individual Russians and explore how we could best showcase their plight. Whenever possible, we tried to get their own voices on air so they could speak directly to their compatriots. During the Cold War, RL interviewed virtually every major Russian writer and cultural figure, as well as many lesser known ones. Our programming examined literature, music, arts, and historical writings that were banned in the Soviet Union. As a result, at a time when the Soviet Union actively suppressed any manifestation of independent Russian culture, RL nurtured its full blossoming. Someday, when anti-American hysteria dies down, post-communist Russia will acknowledge the enormous contribution RFE/RL made to Russian life and culture during the dark days of the Cold War by giving voice to the voiceless.

The second major strategic goal of RFE/RL was to present an honest, truthful, and balanced picture of American and Western life, but in a way that our Soviet listeners could understand and appreciate. While we were committed to discussing Western democracy, U.S. policies, and domestic social issues — “warts and all” — we were acutely aware that Soviet media subjected our listeners to virulent anti-American propaganda and a highly distorted analysis of the capitalist system on a daily basis. Moreover, straightforward translation or even adaptation of an article from the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the European press, or the RFE/RL Central News Desk would not necessarily convey the texture and nuances of Western life that would make these stories readily understandable and relevant to our listeners. Whenever possible, we sought out Russians (or Westerners deeply steeped in Russian culture) to be “translators,” providing the needed context for the major stories. This did not mean that we avoided discussing the ills of Western society. Quite to the contrary. Voice of America and RFE/RL reporting on the Watergate scandal, the race riots of the 1960s, and the Vietnam antiwar protests, for example, were viewed by our listeners as examples of credible and honest journalism. Moreover, this straightforward presentation of problems in the West, including the plusses and minuses of different policies, set us apart from Soviet media, something that was not lost on our audience.

The third strategic aim was to confront Soviet authorities on their own turf by directly challenging their narrative of their own history as well as the state of the world. Our programming questioned communist ideology; examined Soviet distortions of Russian history and culture; spoke openly about the gulag, the Ukrainian famine, and Stalinist terror; focused on the subjugation of Ukraine, Georgia,



To attract an audience that can have a lasting political impact, especially in closed or semi-closed societies, international broadcasters will need to provide context and depth to their news-related stories.

and other nations within the Russian/Soviet empire; and exposed worldwide Soviet disinformation campaigns. This was the Cold War and we were ready to exploit the vulnerabilities of the Soviet Union. We worked hard to produce programs that were fair in judgment and scrupulously researched, but that, at the same time, reminded our listeners of the wide chasm between Soviet propaganda and Soviet reality. RFE/RL did not broadcast appeals for “regime change” or indulge in gratuitous criticism of the Soviet leadership, but we were tough in confronting Soviet crimes and disinformation. We wanted to help our listeners to see their own country and its political system for what they were.

Strategic Principles

Nearly 30 years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, abetted in considerable measure by U.S. international broadcasting, one could ask whether the success of RFE/RL during this particular period of history offers any useful lessons for today’s media challenges that are different, but no less dangerous, to the national security of the United States. After all, so much has changed in the post-Cold War years. Communism is no longer an ideology on the march. The Middle East and terrorist threats now head the list of major national security concerns, while North Korea and Iran are emerging as hostile nuclear powers. China has replaced the Soviet Union as the “other” major world power and a globalized world is awash in social media that freely mixes fact and fiction and serves as a conduit for anti-American vitriol. In addition, Russia has infiltrated American social media with the intention of exacerbating domestic conflicts and interfering in U.S. elections. To meet these and other challenges of the next decade is a tall order. But if the incoming Biden administration is to do so, it ought to draw on three fundamental lessons from Cold War broadcasting that contributed to the defeat of communism, the growth of democratic countries, and the strengthening of U.S. national security: (a) investment in research and knowledge of the broadcast area, (b) analysis of the audience, and (c) commitment to journalistic credibility.

The first lesson is the strategic, long-term decision to devote significant resources to research about the politics, economics, history, and culture of the countries to which the United States broadcasts. RFE/RL was an exemplar in managing to combine a fast-paced news operation with a highly sophisticated research institute, employing an international staff with advanced degrees from leading American and European universities. On a daily basis, RFE/RL researchers would produce cutting-edge reports on political,

economic, and cultural developments in Central and Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union that informed the programming and allowed broadcasters to prepare not only timely and in-depth analyses of current issues but also original historical documentaries. By sharing its research reports with the wider academic community in the United States and Europe, RFE/RL also forged close working relationships with major universities and think tanks, which, in turn, raised the overall quality of the broadcasts. Significantly, many of the most effective managers of RFE/RL were historians, political scientists, and area-studies experts, often with Ph.D.s, who did not come from a commercial media background.

The work of RFE/RL researchers was supplemented by an army of archivists who monitored all Eastern European and Soviet media, created unique holdings of press articles, and served as invaluable resources for broadcasters who often needed detailed background information at a moment’s notice. In addition, beginning in the late 1960s, RFE/RL began collecting *samizdat* materials (self-published works in the Soviet Union that were not sanctioned by the state) and quickly became the largest repository of these materials in the world. *Samizdat* works were used extensively in RFE/RL programming in the 1970s and 1980s to bear witness to the growing repression of dissidents, human rights activists, Jewish refuseniks, and religious believers. These programs brought together rigorous intellectual inquiry with the immediacy of radio broadcasting — a unique synthesis that was one of the reasons that the emerging democratic leaders in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union saw RFE/RL as an educational tool and a potent force for change.

Given the online resources available today, there may not be a need to re-create the RFE/RL research operations of the Cold War era in full, but a new media strategy for the 2020s should acknowledge that successful international broadcasting is more than just daily journalism. Relying on news wire services, adaptations of news articles from major U.S. and European newspapers, or even direct reportage is not enough. To attract an audience that can have a lasting political impact, especially in closed or semi-closed societies, international broadcasters will need to provide context and depth to their news-related stories. This is best done by hiring area experts and working closely with appropriate university centers and think tanks.

The second lesson that RFE/RL can offer is the importance of conducting comprehensive and well-funded analyses of the worldwide listenership of U.S. international broadcasting. Serious audience research was always part of successful programming. As early as 1953, the radio stations set up a

small section to study Eastern European and Soviet media, as well as reports by defectors, travelers, journalists, and businessmen. By the late 1950s, a formal Audience Research Department was established, which analyzed Soviet media attacks on RFE/RL, encouraged listeners to send letters to “accommodation addresses” — post office boxes in various European cities — and discreetly interviewed Soviet visitors to Western Europe. Although the samples were small and the letters infrequent, anecdotal evidence indicated that RL was having an impact on more critically minded Soviet citizens.

Audience research was indispensable for shaping programs and identifying emerging social trends that merited special attention in the feature programming. By the mid-1960s, RFE/RL was working with Western specialists in communications theory, including Ithiel de Sola Pool, who directed the Project on Communist Communications at MIT’s Center for International Studies. Based on an analysis of interviews with over 2,000 Soviet citizens, Pool and his colleagues recommended that RL avoid making long-term projections of how Soviet society would evolve and, to maintain credibility, occasionally take a stand different from that of the U.S. government.²² RL’s strategic aim, the report concluded, was to be a “welcomed guest in the living room.”

By the mid-1980s, RL was analyzing over 50,000 interviews with Soviet travelers. Since these travelers were highly trusted members of society and mostly members of the Communist Party, RL relied on MIT’s simulation model to adjust for the skewed demographic group.²³ In addition, RL interviewed legal émigrés from the Soviet Union who provided in-depth responses to programming and were useful for cross-checking data from other sources. RFE/RL researchers tried to construct the most accurate picture they could of audience size and composition but they never claimed that their work produced results that would have been as accurate as surveys conducted within the Soviet Union using state-of-the-art methodology. But when the Cold War ended and Western-style research could be conducted in Russia and the successor states, RL discovered that its earlier measurements and assessment of the audience had been largely on target. As Gene Parta, the

director of RFE/RL audience research, noted, “Subsequent surveys conducted inside Russia after the fall of the USSR bore out the finding of widespread listening to foreign radio stations during the Cold War period and the importance of Western broadcasts to the Soviet people.”²⁴

One of the reasons that Havel, Polish President Lech Walesa, Boris Yeltsin, and other post-communist leaders acknowledged RFE/RL’s major impact on political change was its fine-tuned understanding of its audience, which helped to produce relevant programming. Today’s world, of course, offers many more sophisticated techniques for analyzing listenership that were unavailable to us during the Cold War. But that makes it even more critical for a new media strategy to allocate significant resources to monitoring audiences, providing listener feedback to improve programming, and devising metrics to show the impact of the broadcasts.

The third and most important lesson that RFE/RL can offer is in how it aligned its broadcasting strategy with overall U.S. national security interests while at the same time retaining journalistic independence. Unlike Voice of America, which was set up as a federal agency principally to explain U.S. policy and present American life, RFE and RL were created as “private companies” overseeing the voices of “free Poland,” “free Russia,” “free Bulgaria,” etc.²⁵ To be credible, the radio stations had to maintain their distance from the U.S. government and empower émigré broadcasters with the editorial authority to determine what stories would go on air and what tone to adopt. While senior American managers assumed overall responsibility for the operations and ensured that professional journalistic standards were enforced, they worked in close partnership with these émigré broadcasters. As an early memo from the U.S. Office of Policy Coordination noted, RL would be “a program of Russians speaking to Russians, not the U.S. government speaking to Russians and other nationalities of the Soviet Union.”²⁶ The goal of this unique network of national broadcast services was to challenge communist control of all media by offering listeners unbiased and comprehensive news and information — in short, an alternative vision of the future.²⁷

To operate as a surrogate broadcaster, RFE/RL

22 A. Ross Johnson and R. Eugene Parta, eds., *Cold War Broadcasting: Impact on the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe* (Budapest-New York: Central European University Press, 2010), 67–69. Also, Gene Sosin, *Sparks of Liberty: An Insider’s Memoir of Radio Liberty* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), 112.

23 See, Johnson and Parta, *Cold War Broadcasting*, 68.

24 Johnson and Parta, *Cold War Broadcasting*, 70.

25 According to the U.S. Diplomatic Mission in Moscow, Voice of America and RL each had an important role to play and the two voices were complementary, not competitive. This was the standard line throughout the Cold War.

26 Quoted in Johnson, *Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty*, 39.

27 See, A. Ross Johnson, “Managing Media Influence Operations: Lessons from Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty,” *International Journal of Intelligence and Counter Intelligence* 31, no. 4 (2018), 689, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08850607.2018.1488498>.



needed an intermediary between its national language services and the U.S. government, which funded the operations. That intermediary would assume responsibility for all governmental issues, from negotiating the rights to transmit broadcasts from facilities in foreign countries to ensuring that U.S. national interests were not being jeopardized. For the first 20 years of their existence, RFE and RL were covert operations of the CIA and governed by American corporate boards of directors that provided that needed firewall. In the early 1970s, with détente becoming the dominant U.S. foreign policy toward the Soviet Union, Sens. Clifford Case and J. William Fulbright, joined by Sens. Stuart Symington and Frank Church, advocated closing the radio stations.²⁸ That led to a protracted bureaucratic struggle in Washington. Case finally relented and favored placing the stations under the State Department, but senior officials in the department were wary of assuming responsibility for radio broadcasts that could run counter to short-term diplomatic goals. Congress was equally hesitant to approve open-ended authorization and expenditures for the radio stations — which were grantees of the government — without clearly defined lines of accountability. This

bureaucratic dilemma resulted in endless maneuvering in Congress until a compromise was found: A small federal agency, the Board for International Broadcasting, was created in 1973, headed by a bipartisan board of directors and a senior professional staff of career federal employees.

As could be expected in the political hothouse of Washington, it was not all smooth sailing. During the 1970s, there was considerable friction between the Board for International Broadcasting and the RFE/RL, primarily regarding the oversight and evaluation of the programs. By the mid-1980s, however, the board established itself as an effective firewall and a model of oversight and advocacy. Headed by Forbes, the bipartisan board of directors included prominent journalists and public figures, among them Lane Kirkland, Michael Novak, Ben Wattenberg, and James Michener. Although the directors may have differed on domestic policies, they shared President Ronald Reagan's fundamental national security priorities. "Wattenberg was a champion of the American system," Arch Puddington noted in his history of RFE/RL, "and unabashed in his contempt for those who contended that American capitalism and Soviet communism were equally flawed. Novak was prominent

28 See Arch Puddington, "Senator Fulbright's Crusade," in *Broadcasting Freedom: The Cold War Triumph of Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2000), 187–213.

among a small group of writers who identified capitalism as not only more efficient than other arrangements but also as virtuous.”²⁹ Kirkland, as the head of the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations, provided material support for Poland’s Solidarity movement and was adamant in his anti-communist views. When Walesa hosted the Board for International Broadcasting for a formal dinner at the Belvedere Palace in Warsaw, he greeted Kirkland as an old friend, exclaiming, “It’s thanks to you that I am here.” Michener, a proud Democrat, was especially interested in RFE programming in Central Europe and offered sage advice on how to reach a broad audience. As a group, the board worked tirelessly to support the two stations, maintain a firewall that protected the broadcasters from unsolicited advice and direction from the State Department and the White House, and make the case to Congress about the importance of journalistic independence, the very point that Biden underscored in his critical amendment to the International Broadcasting Act of 1994.

In retrospect, it’s clear that much of the success of RFE and RL in the 1980s was due to their journalistic independence as well as to the alignment of their core mission with Reagan’s national security objectives. National Security Decision Directive 11-82 encapsulated the very essence of Reagan’s approach to the Soviet Union:

Communist ideology is the main source of the regime’s legitimacy. It explains why there is only one political party, which controls the state administration and all spheres of society, why the media are subject to censorship, and why the party Politburo dominates political life. ... U.S. policy toward the Soviet Union must have an ideological thrust which clearly demonstrates the superiority of U.S. and Western values of individual dignity and freedom, a free press, free trade unions, free enterprise, and political democracy over the repressive character of Soviet communism. We should state openly our belief that people in Communist countries have the right to democratic systems. ... To break the mental habits these ideas have fostered, it is essential that the United States take the offensive in exposing the bankruptcy of the Communist system, its failure to provide adequately for the basic needs of its peoples. ... [T]he Soviet regime continues to deny its people fundamental human rights. ... [T]he U.S. must

make clear to the world that democracy, not Communism, is mankind’s future.”³⁰

From their earliest days, RFE and RL had been making these same points in their broadcasts.

Significantly, this national security directive explicitly named U.S. international broadcasters as a highly effective means of challenging the Soviet Union, thus underscoring that the core mission of the radio broadcasters was aligned with the broader goals of the Reagan administration. This led to major increases in the budgets of Voice of America and RFE/RL, a more prominent voice for senior radio management in the formulation and execution of U.S. foreign policy, and greater freedom to broadcast bold and innovative programs. In the administration’s view, Russians (and other nationalities in the Soviet Union) could understand Western values and intentions better if they were presented in their own language and in the context of their own culture. Implicit in this strategy was that RFE and RL were unique independent resources that could communicate the fundamental message of freedom and democracy in ways that were culturally understandable to their audience. While acknowledging RFE/RL’s contribution to U.S. national security, the Reagan administration respected the status of the radios as independent journalistic organizations that were not part of the federal bureaucracy. This balance not only ensured healthy budgets, but also provided the stations with a heightened sense of relevance since they were central to overall U.S. national security. In its assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the current U.S. Agency for Global Media, the Biden administration should seek to strike that balance between America’s foreign policy objectives and the necessary journalistic independence of U.S. international broadcasting.

The Task Ahead

The specific challenges facing the United States in the coming decade are different than during the Cold War. But the need for vibrant American voices in the global arena is no less vital today than it was then.

In terms of national security, the Biden administration will need to determine how U.S. broadcasters should deal with America’s principal adversaries. For example, should the United States challenge China, the world’s largest global broadcaster, in a confrontational manner, similar to the way in which it challenged the Soviet Union during the Cold War? Or should the

29 Puddington, *Broadcasting Freedom*, 262.

30 “Memorandum for Mr. William P. Clark, The White House: NSSD 11-82 — Draft NSDD and IG Study,” Department of State, Dec. 6, 1982, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP84B00049R001202870018-8.pdf>.

United States focus strictly on the projection of American values? Should U.S. broadcasters directly counter Russia's RT and Sputnik networks and their deliberate use of counternarratives and fake news? Or should Russian disinformation be handled by a separate government operation? In what ways should the United States respond to the proliferation of global news networks that are controlled not just by state organizations, but increasingly by nonstate actors?

In terms of national interest, the Biden administration will need to determine how U.S. broadcasters respond to a host of worldwide challenges, including today's increasingly global spread of disinformation, extremism, pandemics, global warming, nuclear proliferation, armed conflict, famine, immigration, trade disputes, ethnic and religious strife, racial tension, and terrorism, as well as the alarming worldwide decline of democracy and a free press.³¹

These vital questions and issues need to be incorporated in a new national security directive — not unlike Reagan's — that articulates a bold vision for U.S. broadcasters and provides the leadership, resources, and capabilities to meet those challenges.

To revitalize international broadcasting, it will be critical to correct the 2017 amendment that created the position of a powerful CEO and to preserve the independent status of surrogate broadcasters, something that was fundamental to their success during the Cold War. As Ross Johnson has wisely noted,

independent journalism attuned to local audiences and utilizing information from local sources challenges authoritarian regimes that manipulate nationalist passions, disregard the rule of law and violate human rights. It counters the extensive media influence operations conducted by Russia and China. But the power of U.S. Global Media depends entirely on its credibility, which rests in turn on its journalistic professionalism, editorial independence and clear separation from government.³²

Nearly 30 years ago, Joe Biden defended RFE/RL's arm's length relationship with the federal government, noting that the firewall established by a bipartisan board of directors "had operational meaning: ensuring that the US government would

not interfere with the content of the broadcasts, and that the broadcasts would be perceived not as statements of American foreign policy, but as the product of independent journalists."³³ In the fall of 2020, in a case brought by broadcast executives fired by Pack, Chief U.S. District Court Judge Beryl A. Howell in Washington, D.C., ruled against the Trump administration and confirmed the legal independence of the U.S. international broadcasters, noting that they "are not intended to promote uncritically the political views and aspirations of a single US official, even if that official is the US President. ... [T]heir mission [is] pursuing and producing objective journalism."³⁴

Now, Biden's administration has the opportunity to help secure America's national interests. It can do this by developing a comprehensive global media strategy, hiring leaders who have both journalistic and area-studies expertise, and introducing and passing legislation that protects the journalistic independence of U.S. broadcasters. 🇺🇸

Mark G. Pomar is currently a senior fellow at the Clements Center for National Security at the University of Texas. From 1975 to 1982, Pomar taught Russian Studies at the University of Vermont. From 1982 to 1993, he worked as assistant director of the Russian Service at Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (Munich), director of the U.S.S.R. Division at the Voice of America, and executive director of the Board for International Broadcasting, a federal agency that oversaw Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. From 1994 to 2008, Pomar was a senior executive and president of IREX, a large U.S. international nonprofit organization. From 2008 to 2017, he was the founding CEO and president of the U.S.-Russia Foundation, a private American foundation based in Moscow. Mark has a Ph.D. in Russian Studies from Columbia University and a B.A. from Tufts University.

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31 I want to thank John Lindburg, a veteran of the United States Information Agency, the Board for International Broadcasting, the Broadcasting Board of Governors, and RFE/RL, for helping me gather information for this article and for suggesting the list of tasks for U.S. broadcasters.

32 Pomar-Johnson, personal correspondence.

33 See, "Senate Reports Nos. 103-107 (to accompany S. 1281)," 103rd Congress, 1st Session, July 23, 1993, 75. I am thankful to John Lindburg, former general counsel of the Board for International Broadcasting (1988–95), legal counsel of the Broadcast Board of Governors (1995–2000), and general counsel of RFE/RL (2003–12), for bringing these remarks to my attention.

34 Editorial Board, "Voice of America Saved from Wrecking Crew," *Boston Globe*, Dec. 1, 2020, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/2020/12/01/opinion/voice-america-saved-wrecking-crew/>.