

CHAIRMAN CORKER, RANKING MEMBER CARDIN AND MEMBERS OF THIS COMMITTEE:

I am honored to have this opportunity to speak candidly to you about the challenges to and opportunities for U.S. international broadcasting, issues with which I have been intimately involved for my entire professional life. My name is Enders Wimbush, and I have been associated with U.S. international broadcasting for more than 40 years. As a graduate student, I consumed the research products of U.S. international broadcasting's different networks. In the 1980s, I had the privilege of advising then Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty president James Buckley on strategies for broadcasting to Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. In 1987, I became Director of Radio Liberty, and I held that post during tumultuous years featuring the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the USSR. In 2010, I was nominated to the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG), where I served for two years. I believe that I am the only BBG governor ever to have actually directed the operations of a U.S. international broadcasting network.

I recount this brief biography to demonstrate that my perspective on the issues before you is long, detailed, and steeped in both US international broadcasting's operational details, in its history of successes and failures, and in strategies for connecting U.S. international broadcasting to the objectives of American foreign policy. In my short remarks today, I wish to focus on three key issues. First, I will address the new media environment and the challenges to US international broadcasting today. Second, I will discuss as briefly as possible the reasons the BBG cannot meet these challenges adequately, although this subject warrants a very long discussion. And third, I will address the proposed HR 2323 legislation before you, attempting to link its provisions to these other issues.

First, today's media environment.

Two facts are critical for understanding the shape and dynamics of this environment, while revealing the challenge to US international broadcasting in finding a niche within it. The first fact should be self-evident. In contrast to the period of the Cold War in which our adversaries for the most part successfully monopolized sources of information available to their populations, no such monopolization is possible today, except in a very few places. Very few countries such as North Korea exist in which governments control and approve all the information. To the contrary, a casual drive across Central Asia, Russia, the Middle East, Africa, and most of Asia reveals a sustained explosion of information sources available to these populations. Apartment balconies in cities routinely boast one satellite dish and often as many as three. Rural communities, likewise, are similarly empowered most places, and I have even seen satellite dishes on shepherds' huts in parts of the Middle East and in the Caucasus. It is no exaggeration to suggest that these people routinely receive several hundred channels of something.

The second fact is that our adversaries in have raised the quality of their media game significantly. For the most part, gone are the big lies; in are nuanced explanations for

why these actors have behaved as they have. Sometimes these actors attempt the big lie, but these usually fail precisely because so many other sources of information are available to contradict them. Instead, they try to control the information that matters to them; that is, less control over the visible facts, and more over the context. They seek to explain, to obfuscate, through filters of their own interests why these facts are important, what they mean in the context their own interests, how they contribute to historical justifications for particular actions, and why they are consistent with their identities, what they seek to achieve, and their visions of the future. Networks like Russia Today (RT), China's CCTV, and the Middle East's Al Jazeera have large followings, including increasingly in the United States where all broadcast. Their power is not that they can claim different sets of facts, but in their interpretation of facts in evidence. In a word, context. And their strategies for adjusting the context to resonate with different audiences shows growing sophistication. *The New York Times* claims to purvey "all the news that's fit to print," and Fox News bills itself as "fair and balanced." RT, CCTV, and Al Jazeera, among others, make similar claims for themselves, and many people believe them.

If most of the world is awash in information, and the competition is less over facts than over context, then the appropriate niche in this media landscape for U.S. international broadcasting should be to provide deep, well resourced, and factually accurate context. The "America" piece should be central to this context. Foreign audiences crave to know how Americans think about things, and the spectrum of different opinions that inform our worldview. In particular, they want to know how our policy is made, and how the policy process reflects our worldview and the different opinions comprised within it. And they seek to understand the impact of our values on our policies and our visions. They want to know who we are, what we believe, and how we are likely to behave, even when they dislike us.

If U.S. international broadcasting has only one reason to exist it should be to seize the strategic narrative about ourselves: to convey an unvarnished version of who Americans are, what we believe and why, and what we hope to accomplish with our policies. This task properly falls to the Voice of America. As an expert on the Middle East told me recently: "Tell our story!... We are not going to stop people from hating America if they choose to hate it, but let them hate what exists, not some figment of their imagination." If you wish to know about America, U.S. international broadcasting should be your first stop. This is fundamental, because our adversaries' propaganda centers on distorting America's story in ways that serve their interests.

The Voice of America Charter is explicit on this point. The network's product must be "a consistently reliable and authoritative source of news ... objective, accurate, and comprehensive." But it must also "represent America" by presenting "a balanced and comprehensive projection of significant American thought and institutions," while articulating its policies "clearly and effectively," as well as "responsible discussions and opinions on these policies." This is not to say that the VOA speaks for the U.S.

government. Indeed, it does not. But it should have a point of view that reflects our values. And this point of view is, or should be, its vital essence.

Some thoughts on the Broadcasting Board of Governors. In my view, the BBG was poorly conceived in the beginning, and, not surprisingly, it has performed poorly. One need not take my word for it; the frequent and on-going evaluations, Office of Inspector General (OIG) reports, independent audits, and informed analyses are unremittingly negative and critical. Criticisms fall into several categories:

- Dysfunction. This is well known and well documented in a host of reports from the OIG. A comprehensive report of January 2013, for example, highlights problems in individual board member conduct, nepotism, backsliding on strategy, ethics, and travel expenses, among other things.

<https://oig.state.gov/system/files/203193.pdf>

Lack of oversight. A June 2015 report from the OIG cites Radio Free Asia for dodgy expenditures, possible conflicts of interest and other matters.

<https://oig.state.gov/system/files/aud-fm-ib-15-24.pdf> The BBG is criticized for lacking “a well-defined structure to monitor grantee activities.” A November 2014 independent audit identifies BBG’s weak “control environment” that has led to its inability to effectively monitor its grantees.

<https://oig.state.gov/system/files/aud-fm-ib-15-10.pdf>

- Lack of strategy. A July 2015 OIG inspection of VOA and RFE/RL operations in Kabul noted that “specific strategies for harmonizing the operations in Afghanistan have lingered for 10 years without specific implementation actions.”

<https://oig.state.gov/system/files/isp-ib-15-32.pdf> A September 2013 inspection of BBG operations in Moscow called for “a comprehensive strategy for U.S. international broadcasting to Russia that includes all Broadcasting Board of Governors entities operating in or broadcasting to Russia.”

<https://oig.state.gov/system/files/217908.pdf>

A current on-going investigation of possible financial and oversight malfeasance at RFE/RL in Prague, occurring from at least 2013 to the present, which has gained the attention of the OIG, the FBI, and possibly other federal authorities, is probably a low-point in BBG oversight, given that the BBG board knew of the problem at least a year before it acted, and then only weakly. This is a pretty miserable record for such a small agency, which also consistently receives one of the worst rankings in surveys of federal employees’ satisfaction with their place of work.

The BBG suffers from serious structural deficiencies, many inherited from earlier times but still unaddressed, an unremarkable observation that the BBG apparently recognized in its own “Strategic Plan,” recently posted on its website, almost certainly in response to the proposed legislation. The BBG wildly duplicates capabilities across the five

networks at great expense to the taxpayer and to little effect. By my count, of the 61 language services hosted by the five BBG networks 22 are duplicated—that is, more than one third. In practical terms, this means that U.S. international broadcasting has two separate broadcast services in Albanian, Azerbaijani, Dari, Pashto, Armenian, Bosnian, Georgian, Persian, Macedonian, Russian, Serbian, Ukrainian, Uzbek, Burmese, Cantonese, Khmer, Korean, Lao, Mandarin, Tibetan, Vietnamese, and Spanish.

So many duplicate services spread across different networks creates a number of problems. Duplicating services and operational support systems costs lots of money, and it also has severe negative implications for mission effectiveness and oversight. Taxpayers deserve better stewardship of their money.

Next, the strategic problem. Funding duplication severely limits the ability of U.S. international broadcasting to fund new languages when it would benefit our foreign policy, or to double down on critical languages that might help us shape a rapidly changing environment. Spreading these surrogate broadcasters out across multiple network structures dilutes both their impact and any effort to develop a strategic critical mass.

Third, the operational problem. No one—and I mean literally no one—really knows how these services are duplicating, where they contradict one another (or U. S policy), and where their efforts might be made to converge to create something larger than the sum of their parts. Efforts over many years—indeed, over several decades—to force a modicum of common purpose between the duplicates at VOA, RFE/RL, and Radio Free Asia have been described by different BBGs as “complementary,” “cooperation,” “harmonization,” or—the most innovative effort to justify this waste as something useful—“parallax.” “Parallax” is described by one of my colleagues as choosing to own two leaking barns over one solid structure.

The BBG board has also failed to deal with chronic leadership issues. When the board I served on took office in 2010, we almost immediately voted to install a CEO to deal with issues that cross network boundaries. It took five full years for the board to appoint a true CEO, and he left after 42 days. A new CEO has now been appointed—and I wish him well—but it is unclear if he has the authority or support to make the tough decisions required to force asset sharing across networks, end duplication, replace poor leaders and hire new ones, create the processes to allow programming to respond rapidly to changing conditions in the broadcast environment, or harness the most effective technologies to the task.

The leadership issue goes top to bottom in U.S. international broadcasting. Kevin Klose, sitting next to me, was the last full-fledged president of RFE/RL. He left 19 months ago, on March 1, 2014, leaving that vital network—now in probably the most challenging environment since the end of the Cold War—under the control of two “acting interim co-managers”—one located in Washington, who has since departed. RFE/RL still has no

permanent president, even as its broadcast milieu churns. The VOA has had no director for nearly eight months. The management of the BBG itself, lacking a CEO or any other credible arrangement, was handed to the joint leadership of three executives, two of whom could be described as junior. The leadership problem is epidemic.

Most concerning, the BBG is allergic to strategy, which is another way of saying that it is mostly unhinged from the processes and practice of US foreign policy for which it was intended. This is the case because BBG's governance is weak. The board on which I served advanced a strong and comprehensive reform plan within weeks of taking office, most of whose key elements are now included in HR 2323. Our plan was voted into effect unanimously by that board. Then it was almost immediately sabotaged by two members of the board who adopted opposing agendas. In the end, virtually none of it was implemented. The debate over most of its elements continues with the current board, which is no closer than we were to bringing real change to U.S. international broadcasting.

Ukraine posed a particularly tough test for the BBG. The BBG's response to Ukraine has been neither robust nor quick, despite an influx of new taxpayer funds for the purpose. Nearly a year and a half after Russia invaded the Crimea thereby touching off today's crisis in Ukraine, the BBG was able to produce a single half-hour of new daily programming for placement on local networks in Central Europe, and then only by mostly working around the existing capabilities in the two Russian broadcast services in RFE/RL and the VOA and with an infusion of an additional million dollars from the State Department. Is the BBG telling us this is the best we can do? Clearly it is a feeble response. I am told that the quality of the product is quite good, though it often airs late at night on local networks, and that new programs are now being added. But the BBG's response to Ukraine leaves much to be desired.

Strategy at the BBG tends to be driven by the budget. For example, every year I spent on the board I had to defend the tiny expenditure for Tatar-Bashkir broadcasts. The cost of Tatar-Bashkir broadcasts is not much more than a rounding error in the overall BBG budget, but this is exactly what makes it vulnerable to cutting when budgets get tight and economies are necessary. The Tatar-Bashkir regions of Russia sit at the epicenter of its historic Islamic populations, which are in danger of radicalization like other parts of the Islamic world. When Russia's spiral of instability accelerates, as it will, America will eventually wish to communicate to Tatars and Bashkirs as a strategic imperative. The same fate nearly claimed the North Caucasus service, which broadcasts to an area of growing radicalization, for the same reason. Meanwhile, the VOA's impressive English language broadcasts have repeatedly faced severe cuts or elimination, despite being a principal language of young elites around the globe. The budget should not drive these important strategic decisions.

It is worrisome that any discussion of strategy nearly always defaults to questions of technology, the operative question being: Which technologies allow us to deliver our

broadcasts effectively to our audiences? This is easy, because one can bring in experts from Silicon Valley and elsewhere to discuss new social media and digital communications more generally without really having to get into the weeds about what it is strategically we seek to accomplish or local limitations to particular technologies. Technology should be part of strategy, but it is not strategy by itself. Largely absent are serious discussions by experts about content, audience, and impact: What should we be broadcasting, to whom, and to what end? What audiences do we seek to influence? How should we measure impact? Do numbers matter? And how does all of this contribute to advancing our foreign policy objectives? These are difficult issues for any BBG, whose members often lack strong foreign policy experience and dynamics in the broadcast environment. Almost none have had much experience with international broadcasting of this kind.

Adding a new CEO to this mix—and investing him or her with authority to determine “strategy”—will not begin to answer this problem. Strategy is a key responsibility of the board, not the CEO. Yet we have already been alerted that the BBG’s new CEO will address a meeting of the U.S. Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy on December 2<sup>nd</sup> to discuss “The BBG’s New Strategic Direction.” What is this new strategy and how was it arrived at? This seems somewhat premature for someone holding this post for a only few weeks.

Finally, a few words on the proposed HR 2323. Former BBG Governor Dennis Mulhaupt and I in July of last year addressed the state of U.S. international broadcasting and the need to reform it radically. Little has changed since then in either its condition or the urgency to reform it. in. [http://www.weeklystandard.com/blogs/fixing-us-international-broadcasting-last\\_796034.html?page=2](http://www.weeklystandard.com/blogs/fixing-us-international-broadcasting-last_796034.html?page=2)

I am a strong proponent of this legislation. It needs a few adjustments, in my view, that will make it even stronger and more effective. In my discussions with the SFRC staff, I know they are aware of most of my concerns and those of my colleagues who also support reform. But I urge the committee to move rapidly on this legislation, and to be bold. The reform that created the BBG and the current structure failed early and, I would argue, quite spectacularly. This should not be repeated.

The proposed legislation accomplishes a number of essential things, as

First, it “reaffirms the important safeguards enshrined in the VOA charter,” but insists that the VOA serve as America’s voice. The “America piece,” so vital to our strategic narrative and for making our values, visions, and policies understood around the globe, will no longer be discounted or ignored.

Second, the surrogate networks—Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Radio Free Asia, the Middle East Broadcast Networks, and, one hopes, the Office of Cuban Broadcasting—will enjoy priority and urgency in implementing a historic mission that requires

comprehensive strategy to support America's interests in a vastly more complex political environment. They will benefit specifically from being liberated from the BBG structure and the provision of their own private and dedicated board. This independence is essential for the surrogates to meet new challenges squarely and expertly.

Third, creating what amounts to two companies from five should engender significant savings and asset sharing, while encouraging more mission-centric strategic focus.

Fourth, the proposed oversight structures will be more specialized and defined, closer to the audiences they seek to influence, and management will be more accountable to them. Board members with expert knowledge of our broadcast regions—especially with respect to the proposed Consolidated Grantees—should promote a much closer connection between U.S. international broadcasting and our foreign policy objectives.