

THE VOICE OF AMERICA;
IT'S HISTORY AND IMPACT
AROUND THE WORLD

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Prologue

Before we begin, thanks for suggesting this topic has to be offered to the individual who suggested it. Back nine or ten months ago when the list of topics was compiled, the Voice of America was not a front-page issue as it has become in the new Federal Administration. Now eighty-three years after its inauguration, the Voice of America is front page news, engaged in the transition by leadership in the Federal Government giving America's relationship with the rest of the world a different priority and that resulting in the Agencies reduction in scope or shutting down.

Introduction

This story, could be characterized as the epitaph of the Voice of America, as it commenced operations February 1st, 1942 and ceased operations with its last broadcast June 30th, 2025. 21,170 broadcast days later we can only focus on the Voice of America in retrospective.

Those of us born in the 1940's, 50's or 60's will probably have a more personal reference with Voice of America. During our lives the United States passed through active wars, cold wars or just eras of competing ideologies which found the U.S. on one side and either Fascism, Communism or Religious ideology on the other side. We probably were aware that America was fighting a fight, and while not directly being in contact with V of A's media content output, knew that it was one part of waging those conflicts as it spoke out with truth, liberty and the attributes of democracy.

To begin, the Voice of America is the U.S. Governments official international broadcaster to the world. Since its inception in 1942 Voice of America has played a pivotal role in disseminating news, information and American values to audiences worldwide. Over the years it has evolved in response to global events, technological accomplishments and shifting U.S. policy priorities. This paper explores Voice of America's origins, historical milestones, operational evolution and its significant accomplishments.

The Early Years (1942 – 1945)

Let's imagine that we are now in a small Belgian village. It is 1940. The Nazi's have invaded our country, replaced our government with a military dictatorship and abolished all the local publishers of the news, whether in print or over the radio airwaves. It is now a crime, punishable by death, to have any print media from outside sources in our possession or to listen to any radio programs other than that put out by the Nazi's. The same is true all over Europe, the Middle East and Northern Africa. No real news, only the party line propaganda. One could surmise that the "Mothers" of the Voice of America were Joseph Goebbels and Adolph Hitler as they controlled all content of any media available to the populations of much of the world. Goebbels served the Third Reich as its Minister of Propaganda and approved the content of anything published or broadcast. He as well orchestrated the early Nazi book burnings.

If they were the "Mothers" then surely President Franklin Roosevelt should be considered the "Father" of the Voice of America. Authorized by President Roosevelt, the Voice of America was established during World War II as antidote to what the people captive in nations over run by the Nazi's in this period of global conflict and propaganda could hear, see or read. The U.S. Government recognized the need to counter the Axis powers of misinformation and to communicate directly with the populations in the occupied territories.

The first broadcast occurred February 1st, 1942, airing its first program in German. It promised its listeners that "The news may be good. The news may be bad. No matter, we shall tell you the truth". The initial Mission was to provide accurate, objective and comprehensive news coverage to counter Nazi propaganda and foster support for the Allied cause.

NEWS FLASH

We interrupt this program to bring you a news bulletin that Gen. Douglas MacArthur has just landed on the beach near Manila in the Philippines. He is addressing the local citizens now. "People of the Philippines: I have returned. By the Grace of Almighty God, our forces now stand again on Philippines soil. Soil consecrated in the blood of our two peoples. Rally to me. Let in the indomitable spirit of Bataan and Corregidor lead on. As the lines of battle roll forward, rise and strike!" We now return you to our regularly scheduled programming.

Wartime operations quickly expanded the Voice of America broadcasts to include French and English. Programming was now reaching millions of people in Europe and North Africa. The content included programs of news, commentary and cultural features always emphasizing creditability and transparency.

Post War Expansion and the Cold War (1945 – 1991)

After WW II Voice of America's role shifted from coping with wartime propaganda to peace time public diplomacy. The Smith – Mund Act (1948), still in effect today, established the legal framework for the role of U.S. international broadcasting, emphasizing truthful news and prohibited domestic dissemination. Under the law, transmissions of Voice of America could not be beamed into domestic households, only overseas. The Voice of America became a critical tool in the ideological struggle between the U.S. and the Soviet Union as the Soviets worked on all fronts to encourage the spread of communism across the globe. Hostile conflicts raged during these years in Africa, Southeast Asia, the Caribbean and South America. While America's military was deployed across the globe and engaged in the Korean and Viet Nam Wars, the Voice of America continued to use the media to fight for the truth and the American way.

NEWS FLASH: Dateline Fulton Missouri, March 5, 1946

British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, engaged in his first post WW II visit across the seas to America, is addressing a student and faculty assembly today at Westminster College in Fulton Missouri. Let's listen in now. "From Stettin in the Baltics to Trieste in the Adriatic an Iron Curtain has descended across the Continent. The safety of the World requires a new unity in Europe, from which no nation should be permanently outcast." Churchill warns the United States and

Great Britain about the growing influence and control by the Soviet Union in Eastern Europe after WW II. It also presupposes a new attitude toward post war Germany as a member of the European community, unlike how Germany was treated as an outcast after WW I. Interestingly enough, NATO was chartered just one year later, including Germany as a member. Radio Free Europe also began at this time transmitting to each nation in the Soviet Bloc.

After the Iron Curtain fell over dozens of countries occupied by Soviet forces from the war, Voice of America broadcasts penetrated Soviet controlled Eastern Europe providing uncensored news and information. The USSR and its Allies attempted to jam Voice of America signals but technological innovations such as satellite relays, bigger transmitters and more transmission sites enabled Voice of America to continue to reach its audiences. Elements of American culture started to be woven into programs with music and dramatic performance added to the programming format.

Many key accomplishments were recognized over this period. An outstanding image of creditability continued to hallmark the work of Voice of America, whether the news made America look good or bad. Its commitment to accuracy earned it a reputation as a solid reliable source, even among its advisories. The Voice of America played a role in shaping public opinion during such significant events as the Hungarian Revolution (1956), the American Civil Right Riots (1965-1970), the Prague Uprising (1968) and the Solidarity Movement in Poland (1980).

NEWS FLASH: Dateline Washington D.C. January 20th, 1961

Today newly inaugurated President John F. Kennedy is addressing the Nation with his first speech as President. Let's join the broadcast. "Let the word go forth, from this time and place, to friend and foe alike, that the torch has passed to a new generation of Americans. Born in this century, tempered by war, disciplined by a hard and bitter peace, proud of our ancient heritage and unwilling to witness or permit the slow undoing of those human rights to which this nation has always been

committed and to which we commit today at home and around the world. Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and the success of liberty.” Today the young President has set America and its resources on a new course to enable all peoples of the world to enjoy Life, Liberty and Happiness as we here in America do.

Modernization and Global Reach (1991 – 2024)

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, Voice of America adapted to a new global realization of modern realities. Some could say that America had won the Cold War. New audiences shifted its focus to other regions experiencing conflict, democratization or lacking freedom of the press such as in the Middle East, Africa and Asia. Technology was changing and so with it the Voice of America embraced FM radio, television, satellite and digital platforms to share its message with an even wider and more youthful audiences.

The 21st Century brought new challenges in the form of terrorism and anarchy. After 9/11 Voice of America expanded programming greatly to the Middle East and South Asia striving to counter extremist narratives. Voice of America also launched web sites, social media channels and mobile apps making content accessible worldwide. In the new era of misinformation Voice of America's role as a fact-based new source became even more vital.

Leadership of the Directors

During the eighty-three years of operation the Voice of America some forty individuals led the Agency. Each typically had a three-to-four-year stint in the Directors role. John Housemen led the Agency for two years (1942 – 1943) during the war. He established the initial mission of providing accurate, objective and comprehensive news, coining the phrase “The news, whether good or bad, the news”. Each new Director added to the expansion of programming, the addition of cultural and entertainment options. Its language options were expanded to over 40

choices. John Chancellor, later a News Desk host for NBC Broadcasting was the most notable among the many to hold this responsibility. Michael Abramowitz is the last legally appointed Director, appointed in June 2024. Legal challenges to his termination continue to work their way through Federal Court as the Directors removal is not a power of the President under the Smith – Mund Act enabling legislation.

Pause and Reflect

The Voice of America operates under the auspices of the U.S. Agency for Global Media. The USAGM is an independent Federal Agency overseeing all U.S. international broadcasting. The Voice of America Charter, approved in 1976 under the Reagan presidency guarantees editorial independence, mandating accurate, objective and comprehensive news coverage.

Recognizing its accomplishments and impact, the Voice of America has been a lifeline for the people of the world living under censorship, tyranny and dictatorships. In many areas of the globe, Voice of America is the only reliable source for factual news and commentary. Voice of America's reporters have supported democratic movements in Eastern Europe, the Middle East and Africa. Voice of America has trained journalists in developing countries around the globe promoting professional standards and freedom of the press.

The Voice of America has introduced multiple generations of global citizens to American culture. In music and the arts audiences have responded positively to programs such as "Jazz Hour" and "American Mosaic". This has fostered valuable cross-cultural understanding and acceptance. The Voice of America's English teaching programs have helped millions of people learn English to make it the world-wide common language of business, education and diplomacy.

During international crisis the Voice of America has provided critical information during these difficult times including wars, natural disasters and pandemics. During the Covid – 19 pandemic, Voice of America delivered accurate health

information in multiple languages, many times in direct contradiction to what the Administration was putting out to the public. Voice of America correspondents continued to report from conflict zones at great personal risk to themselves.

From a pre-2025 perspective, political pressures have posed periodic challenges to Voice of America editorial independence, particularly during times of political conflict and tension. The presence of the USAGM as the enabling agency, a branch of the State Department has helped the Voice of America buffer these external threats. Even competition has to be coped with. Other international news agencies such as the BBC, RT, and Al Jazeera are consistent alternative sources of facts, news or commentary. The Voice of America continues to be regarded as the Gold Standard for truth and transparency.

Conclusion

Since 1942 Voice of America has been a beacon of reliable news, a champion of press freedom and acts as a cultural bridge between the United States and the world. Its history reflects the evolution of global communication, the challenges of public diplomacy and the enduring importance of truthful journalism. As the Voice of America continued to adapt to these global challenges its mission remained as vital as ever: to provide accurate, objective and comprehensive news to a worldwide daily audience of over 300 million people in 40 different languages.

In terms of bottom-line results, we won WW II, won the Cold War, Southeast Asia did not turn into “Dominoes” after the fall of Viet Nam, Fascism and Communism has not spread throughout the world. Each of these American accomplishments can be partially attributed, in some small way, to the local people getting the facts without propaganda and making their choice for Freedom and Liberty. The Voice of America played some small part in building that foundation for Democracy.

But a new conclusion has recently been reached and unfortunately it is an epitaph. Following President Trump’s executive order cutting funding to the US Agency for Global Media, the Voice of America was forced to significantly reduce its staff and

operations. News reporting largely ceased on March 25th, 2025 and most language broadcasts were replaced by recorded music. The Voice of America's web site stopped being updated at about the same time.

As of June 20, 2025 layoff notices were sent to 639 VOA staff members completing an 85% reduction in employees since the January start of Trump's second term. Keri Lake, a close political ally of Trump, announced in July that a far-right network, One America News would provide news coverage for Voice of America. A Federal judge has issued a ruling that Trump's action against Voice of America to be largely illegal and unconstitutional. Following the US bombing air strikes on Iran all the Farsi speaking VOA employees have been called back to work. All layoff notices to VOA staff have been rescinded according to Ms. Lake. Given that the independent Board of the Voice of America was disbanded it is unclear what Ms. Lake's status is as acting director as she has never been ratified by the Board as is required by the law.

The Voice of America has taught us one last lesson on its way to oblivion:

- In America 2025, the Rule of Law is irrelevant.
- In America the Constitution is an inconvenience.
- That Freedom of the Press only applies if it agrees with the priorities of the day.
- That Truth, Transparency and Candor are not important.
- That to keep your job you need to agree with the Boss.
- That the Branches of Government that are supposed to be the Checks and Balances have been bought and sold, largely abandoning their Constitutional duties in deference to the Executive Branch.

Sources

The content of this paper is a compilation drawn from Artificial Intelligence inquiries to multiple search engines that were then compared and fact checked with further inquiry searches. These included ChatGPT, OzWell, Microsoft Bing, Google Gemini and Brave Search.