

**House Foreign Affairs Committee
Hearing on the Broadcasting Board of Governors
“Broadcasting Board of Governors: An Agency ‘Defunct’”
June 26, 2013
Testimony by S. Enders Wimbush**

Mr. Chairman, Mr. Engel, Members of the Committee, my name is Enders Wimbush. I am honored to be asked to testify before you today on this important issue. I wish to applaud the Committee for initiating this long overdue inquiry into the Broadcasting Board of Governors specifically and its relationship to U.S. international broadcasting more generally. I have served on the front lines of US international broadcasting as Director of Radio Liberty at the time the Berlin Wall came down and the Soviet Union dissolved. More recently, I was honored with a nomination to the BBG, on which I served as Governor from 2010-2012. This broad and deep experience has led me to a stark assessment of both the BBG and US international broadcasting, and the link between the two.

Allow me to state my assessment clearly. The BBG was a bad idea when it was initiated and it is dysfunctional today, with five of its eight governors—including three of its four Republican members and both its Chairman and his replacement as well as the alternate presiding governor—having resigned in frustration or disgust. The BBG cannot function legally as mandated—which may be a good thing—because it now lacks an operating quorum. Moreover, in my view the BBG’s prospects for acquiring new life simply by changing its board members is a losing proposition.

The BBG has failed to provide US international broadcasting with effective strategic guidance, good governance, economic efficiency, or any credible link to U.S. foreign policy goals and strategies. These failures are built into the BBG system. Most of the governors are fine, smart individuals who seek to serve their country in this demanding capacity. But their influence is limited because the BBG is a ship that cannot be turned more than a degree or two in any direction, let alone a full course correction. I believe that radical re-construction of U.S. international broadcasting is necessary, and I am heartened by this Committee’s willingness to entertain it. Some believe that the BBG can be fixed. I do not share that view. The BBG has survived against common sense, as assessments by government agencies and outside experts have documented repeatedly.

The BBG is rightfully called dysfunctional. And so it is. But it is dysfunctional in two different but related ways.

First, is dysfunctional organizationally, incorporating six different media enterprises. Three of these are public enterprises—the Voice of America, the Office of Cuba Broadcasting (Radio and TV Marti), and the International Broadcasting Bureau—meaning that they are part of a federal agency and subject to its special federal rules, guidelines and conventions. Three others—Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, the Middle East Broadcasting Network, and Radio Free Asia—are private, 501(c)3 organizations—

each with its own board of directors which have the same membership as the BBG thereby creating yet more confusion and incoherence—funded with grants from the federal government and subject largely to organizational norms, laws and conventions common to the private sector. These two distinct parts of the BBG have little common ground in law or practice. The BBG is tasked with balancing the many contradictory elements.

Second, it does so badly. The BBG's governance model could hardly be worse or more debilitating. It has no real leadership; the Chairman's role is more honorary than functional, and his powers are nowhere spelled out. Any single governor can dominate the board's discussions and paralyze action on any issue. In fact, we have seen individual governors stymie much needed strategic reforms advocated by the current board when it was at full strength. Below the BBG level, the heads of the media enterprises are consumed in competition for resources with the heads of the other media enterprises, thereby reducing necessary focus on what is important: namely the critical external mission of U.S. international broadcasting. Little cooperation takes place, and the BBG lacks the power to force it to take place. When individual governors align with heads of the broadcast enterprises to promote that network's special interests and goals—as frequently happens—dysfunction is multiplied.

On top of all this, the media enterprises themselves often lobby members of Congress to support their special interests as a way to head off BBG action that might interfere with their own objectives and strategies and indeed their own privileged positions. Thus BBG governance suffers a triple whammy: poor leadership that cannot control the competition between and among the media enterprises, who therefore take their issues to friends in Congress whom they hope will protect them from the BBG.

Congress originally intended the Governors of the BBG to oversee but not manage the VOA (then part of the U.S. Information Agency) and RFE/RL, a non-profit grantee. With the abolishment of USIA, the BBG became an operating agency incorporating the VOA, the Office of Cuba Broadcasting, with their support services grouped into the International Broadcasting Bureau, while providing grants to Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and Radio Free Asia (established in 1996). The agency had no head; the nine governors—four Democrats, four Republicans and the Secretary of State—have acted as “collective CEO”. The consequence has been confused lines of responsibility and authority and of oversight and management. Problems were compounded with the establishment of the Middle East Broadcasting Network as the third grantee under the BBG. The BBG as “collective head of agency” forces almost everything into the lowest common denominator. It also facilitates the promotion of personal agendas and conflict of interest both among BBG governors and network executives.

Can anyone on this Committee identify another three-quarter of a billion dollar activity trying to balance federal requirements and private sector conventions that is both overseen and operated by a board of part-time volunteers? Why would the U.S. government wish to treat an expensive activity of such strategic importance so cavalierly?

I stress the strategic importance. During the Cold War, America's international broadcasting was powerful and effective because it practiced an optimal formula for breaking authoritarian regimes' monopoly of information, not least about those societies' own realities. Where do such monopolies exist today? Indeed, they are rare. A few places like North Korea are still capable of controlling the flow of information to its inhabitants, but the larger part of global humanity has access to vast volumes of media outputs via TV, radio, the internet, and new social media. Drive through most parts of the Middle East or Asia, Latin America or Africa and the visual impact of satellite dishes—often two or three to a balcony—is staggering. Most are capable of bringing in several hundred channels of something. Cell phones and mobile devices are ubiquitous. Even Cuba has a growing internet culture.

Today's problem is not enough information but the opposite. Most places, even some enduring the repression of nasty regimes, get plenty, much of it junk. This is the new competitive landscape for US international broadcasting. The amount of time individual consumers spend watching or listening to something from any source is now measured in minutes and seconds rather than hours. TV is by far the medium of choice; old fashioned shortwave is all but obsolete except in a few places. Our competitors, too, have multiplied, while our allies have retreated. China now spends billions on its soft power public diplomacy, much of that devoted to media. Russia is back, has invested heavily in media and has upped its game. Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting has branches in 45 countries and broadcasts in 30 languages. Meanwhile Western broadcasters like the BBC, Deutsche Welle, Radio France Internationale, Radio Canada International, and Radio Netherlands Worldwide have all reduced service significantly to accommodate reduced spending.

One would think that American strategists would sharpen their spears to compete in this world. Yet the opposite seems to be happening, again due in large part to the incoherence of the BBG. It is incapable of articulating a set of media strategies, and it has no way to attach whatever measures it does adopt to larger U.S. national objectives.

How else can one explain the following? Nearly every year, the BBG receives requests from concerned Ibo-speaking Nigerians to inaugurate a broadcast service dedicated to their community and interests. Ibo is spoken by about 18-20 percent of the Nigerian population of 175 million. This translates into a media population of somewhere between 30-35 million in a demographically young, critical state. Energy rich Nigeria, of whom the US is a significant client, is one of the keys to sub-Saharan Africa stability. Broadcasting in Ibo would seem a no-brainer, given Nigeria's strategic importance.

Yet every year the request is refused. Why? Because the BBG's strategic priorities call for funding the broadcast services in its existing media enterprises first, a pattern largely fixed during the Cold War. Over time, this has resulted in rampant duplication of effort, as the broadcast services of the Radio Frees were introduced to buttress the work of the VOA. Thus, the VOA has a Russian broadcast service. So does

RFE/RL. The Voice has a Burmese broadcast service. So does Radio Free Asia. If this were the end of the list, we might find a reasonable explanation, but it is just the beginning. U.S. international broadcasting operates two language services in each of the following languages: Albanian, Bosnian, Macedonian, Serbian, Armenian, Azerbaijani, Georgian, Russian, Ukrainian, Uzbek, Arabic, Dari, Pashto, Persian, Burmese, Cantonese, Khmer, Korean, Lao, Mandarin, Tibetan, and Vietnamese. VOA and the Office of Cuba Broadcasting both broadcast in Spanish, too.

So the 35 million Ibo-speaking population will get no US broadcast service despite Nigeria's strategic importance because Armenia (population under 3 million) gets two services; Georgia (population 4.5 million) gets two services; Laos (population 6.5 million) gets two services; Macedonia (population 2 million) gets two services; and so forth. Moreover, Greek still gets its own broadcast service. Thankfully it is only one, but how can we justify wasting money broadcasting to a country enjoying every conceivable media advantage, in the heart of Europe no less? No justification is possible, but the explanation is simple. For example, every year the BBG zeros out Greek broadcasting, and every year someone up here on the Hill puts it back in.

Worse, when cuts are inevitable the targets are usually single service languages of great importance. Few on this Committee, I anticipate, will know much about broadcasting in Tatar and Bashkir. This small RFE/RL service is the only broadcaster to the significant Islamic population in the center of Russia that will have a strong voice in the future of that ailing state. Similarly, broadcasts to the North Caucasus—ancestral home of the Boston Marathon bombers—are constantly on the chopping block. Good strategy would double down on these unique assets. BBG strategy, or lack of, is to put them out of business.

The BBG's inexplicable failure to rationalize this nonsensical strategic soup by eliminating unnecessary duplicate services in order to sharpen its strategic focus on areas of important U.S. strategic interest provides more than enough justification to reorganize US international broadcasting. But if more proof of strategic mismanagement is wanted consider that each of the networks supports management and administrative services—human resources and communications, for example—that cry out to be consolidated yet never have been.

But Wait! Wait! advocates for keeping all these duplicates scream. They are necessary because they do different things. I have been hearing this canard since I ran Radio Liberty in the 1980s and '90s. And I repeated it shamelessly because Radio Liberty and Radio Free Europe were the only "surrogate" broadcasters. Surrogate meant that we attempted to provide the kind of local radio services that countries to which we broadcast might expect if their own media had been free. In contrast, the Voice of America was supposed to be America's official voice, which "told America's story."

During the Cold War while there were only two U.S. international broadcasters, this distinction had some validity. But it was never definite or clear cut. One of Radio Liberty's most popular programs was called "Broadway 1776", which was broadcast

from our New York studio. It was created, over my objections, because a member of the Board for International Broadcasting, our oversight body at that time, insisted on, in his words, “a program on the United States” to be broadcast over Radio Liberty. I explained that RL did “surrogate” broadcasting, that we concentrated on what was going on in the Soviet Union. He won. “Broadway 1776” followed new Russia émigrés around New York as they managed their transitions through typical American institutions and activities like the PTA, stores and shopping, intellectual life, and so on. Its powerful underlying message was all about America’s uniqueness, its honesty, and freedom. The program thus was totally “surrogate”, as it was all about them, and it told America’s story wonderfully.

I was reminded of this recently when I received a notice that the Voice of America’s English to Africa service was creating a special focus on South Sudan. Here is how the services chief editor describes this offering on the BBG website: “With South Sudan in Focus as its flagship program, the English language service will offer news ‘for South Sudan, about South Sudan and by South Sudan reporters’...Listeners are hungry for breaking news and cultural information that VOA is well-placed to provide because we have a team of South Sudanese reporters around the country, a bureau in Juba, and an editorial staff in Washington D.C., where we also cover U.S. foreign policy and diaspora angles to the South Sudan story.”

For the country, about the country, by country people. It’s hard to get more “surrogate” than that.

These examples could be multiplied many times. My point is simply this. The Cold War division of labor between VOA telling America’s story abroad and RFE/RL or any of the other grantees as surrogate domestic media no longer holds. All the networks cover both developments in the countries to which they broadcast and help tell America’s story to the world. Creating media organizations defined by these narrow missions is to permanently constrain U.S. international broadcasting’s flexibility and synergistic power. This is not to say that surrogate broadcasting is unnecessary or no longer needed. It is indeed, in places like Cuba, China, Iran, North Korea and elsewhere. We can and must continue to supply it. But we can supply it from anywhere, as we have been doing for a very long time. Once one rejects this largely artificial distinction, reorganizing U.S. international broadcasting will be more rational, more efficient, and more strategic.

Allow me to summarize my main points:

1. Get rid of the BBG as the guiding organization for U.S. international broadcasting.
2. Separate oversight from management, -- that is, keep the board and perhaps more importantly, individual board members out of operations by creating and enforcing a strong firewall between them.
3. Put one professional management in place with jurisdiction over all U.S. international media enterprises.
4. Create conditions for strategic decision making with regard to what we broadcast, to whom, and on what media platforms.

5. Abandon the simplistic and inaccurate “tell America’s story” vs. “surrogate” dichotomy.

I believe that the Committee might entertain a number of different pathways to accomplish these goals. For me, one stands out as far and away the most logical, and coincidentally the pathway that is likely to avoid recreating the dilemmas associated with the BBG system. This is to create a single stand-alone media organization incorporating all of the existing media enterprises. This would require de-federalizing the Voice of America and the Office of Cuba Broadcasting. The different brands have value, at least for the short term, so they could be continued as needed, even within a single organization. The objective is a single organization, with professional leadership and management, and strong connective tissue to America’s strategic center—logically the National Security Council with strong input from Congress. The new organization could eliminate duplication and competition for resources, choose targets and methods strategically, establish moving and creative balances of surrogate and non-surrogate approaches, and become nimble in responding to new challenges.

I fear that measures short of this radical change—e.g., tinkering with the existing structure to see if can be made to work—ultimately risk another BBG fiasco. I urge the Committee to swing for the fence.

Meanwhile, to generate a sense of urgency to fix this very sick organization I urge all members of the Committee to watch reruns of BBG meetings for the last few years. It won’t take you long to see what’s wrong.