

## Introduction

Good morning, Chairman Mast, Ranking Member Meeks, and members of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs. My name is Kari Lake. I am the Trump Administration Senior Advisor to the U.S. Agency for Global Media (USAGM).

When President-Elect Trump reached out to me last fall about joining his administration, I was excited about helping him improve USAGM and the Voice of America (VOA) in order to help them better tell America's story around the world. I was sworn in at USAGM as Senior Advisor on March 3, and it became clear in the following weeks that reform was not possible. This agency and its outlets are largely incompetent, corrupt, biased, and a threat to America's national security and standing in the world.

I now understand why it has been said that "pound-for-pound[,] the U.S. Agency for Global Media is the most corrupt agency in all of Washington, D.C." President Trump recognizes that. On March 14, 2025, he issued an Executive Order titled *Continuing the Reduction of the Federal Bureaucracy*, which directed us to eliminate all non-statutory functions and to reduce the agency to its statutory minimum. I am working with speed and precision to execute that order and have already cut the agency workforce by 85%.

The title of this hearing – "Spies, Lies, and Mismanagement" – sums up what I have found in my time here. A lot of the information that we now have about the very broken USAGM, VOA, and various grantee organizations is the result of investigative work that began under the first Trump Administration, during the tenure of former chief executive officer (CEO) Michael Pack in 2020. But we have uncovered even more problems within USAGM, VOA, and the grantees. The American people deserve to know about everything we have found because they have paid for all of it.

### **Spies: USAGM's Poor Security Practices Rendered the Agency Vulnerable to Espionage and Other Damage**

- USAGM, which includes both VOA and the Office of Cuba Broadcasting (OCB), as well as taxpayer-funded grantee organizations, Radio Free Asia (RFA), Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), the Middle East Broadcasting Networks (MBN), and the Open Technology Fund (OTF), have become significant national security risks over the last 15-20 years. The main cause is multiple systemic failures in security vetting during the hiring process, and a lack of accountability in correcting security shortfalls and practices dangerous to security (PDS). This is particularly unsettling because USAGM hires a large number of foreign nationals, including from countries hostile to America.
- The Office of Personnel Management (OPM) and the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) flagged severe security failures at USAGM during four major investigations each between 2010-2020. Despite this, agency senior leadership ignored these persistent issues with such willful negligence that both OPM and ODNI revoked USAGM's delegated authorities to grant suitability determinations and security clearances, respectively. USAGM has been *actively* vulnerable and open to espionage and offensive information operations by hostile and major competing powers.

- Specifically, individuals working as journalists and technicians, many of them foreign nationals, were given high-level (Tier 3 and Tier 5) security access to government facilities and information technology (IT) systems, via inadequate and bogus suitability determinations. This access was based on falsified security documents, false or notional Social Security numbers (SSNs), and otherwise improperly processed fingerprints.
- Extensive corrective action was taken by Trump Administration officials who ran USAGM between June 2020 and January 2021, but the Biden Administration officials immediately reversed most, if not all, of these safeguards upon taking office.
- Under the Biden Administration, USAGM relapsed into past practices, including, but not limited to: Records, including SSNs, being falsified or replaced with notional placeholders; fingerprints and fingerprint forms not being submitted to the Federal Bureau of Investigation for basic background investigations; and incomplete or falsified SF-86's and other suitability determination documents used under delegated OPM authority to grant access to Tier 3 and Tier 5 level national security sensitive positions.
- Trump Administration appointees were not able to get into the agency until the last six months of the President Trump's first term, but they worked quickly to address the national security issues. They re-screened roughly 1,500 employees who were not properly vetted and were only able to track down 1,000 of them. In the years leading to the arrival of Trump Administration officials at USAGM, roughly 500 improperly cleared and credentialed employees had departed USAGM with reciprocal suitability determinations, finding their way into other parts of the federal government or society at large.

The severity of the situation has been nearly impossible to measure, with numerous Federal Departments, Agencies, Bureaus, and Offices admitting they've never seen security failures, breaches, violations, and practices like those that occurred at US Agency for Global Media--and have never seen anything close to the dangerous level of malfeasance that left such damage in its wake. One Trump Administration official who was largely tasked with expediting corrective measures and has over 40 years' national security experience, (including as a Security Manager and a Special Security Officer) stated that he could have never even *imagined* that such an array of security malpractices could exist.

Our Director of Security is working diligently to reduce the unusually high number of security clearances granted at our agency and is reshaping the agency's security practices back into compliance. Security issues include, but are not limited to, the following:

- An excessive number of security clearances have been issued, including to non-government employees, without establishing adequate need-to-know. He has been pulling clearances from non-government employees at grantee organizations. He also previously turned down a concerning and insufficiently justified request from RFA to have a SCIF built in their Washington, D.C., building.
- RFE/RL, which is a grantee headquartered in Prague, Czech Republic, hired an employee who was later identified as a foreign spy. RFE/RL leadership eventually fired that employee, but they actively concealed this information from USAGM leadership in the first Trump Administration.
- USAGM political leadership only discovered the incident, above, later that same year, when RFE/RL was discovered to have had 20+ known hostile foreign intelligence assets from a

known U.S. adversary in their hiring pipeline. (I would be happy to provide additional information about this situation with you later in a secure setting). Obfuscating their culpability in mishandling this event, RFE/RL leadership actually countered that our initial inquiries into the incident represented violations of European Union privacy laws. They would repeat this claim when we told them we would be reprocessing SF-86 forms to initiate reinvestigations on cleared U.S. citizen employees.

- VOA hired a freelance news reporter who was later discovered to be a Russian spy. In a separate instance, VOA hired a Russian national who had formerly worked for a Russian state-run news agency writing anti-American content.
- A naturalized Cuban immigrant employed at OCB was revealed to be a significant national security threat during his security clearance background investigation. His denials and appeals revealed even deeper concerns, and his employment was terminated.
- In 2023, USAGM's Director of Security alerted leadership at both RFA and RFE/RL that they needed to fire two employees who were determined to be insider threats. The grantees' initial reaction was not "thank you for alerting us," but was instead to push back against these flags. Eventually, RFA and RFE/RL did terminate those employees.

Time and again, USAGM has unconscionably opted to hire individuals who are foreign nationals from countries that are hostile to America, without appropriate screening. One of the tools USAGM used to this end was the J-1 visa program. To be clear, USAGM's past usage of the J-1 visa program to hire foreign nationals is a blatant and unlawful use of that visa program.

The J-1 visa program is a cultural exchange visa program. It is not a shadow guest worker visa program and should not be used as such, much less by the federal government agency that purports to want to tell America's story. And yet USAGM did in fact use J-1 visas as a shadow jobs and back-door immigration program. Not only did this create a massive national security vulnerability due to the less thorough vetting procedures used for J-1 visa applicants, but it also boxed out American citizens from access to these jobs. Many of these positions could have and should have been filled by native-level foreign language speakers who are American citizens or legal permanent residents that possess deep cultural understandings of their home countries, as well as a keenly developed American perspective.

Rather than producing content that tells America's story, or as the VOA charter signed by President Gerald R. Ford in July 1976 states, provides "a consistently reliable authoritative source of news" and presents "the policies of the United States clearly and effectively," content at USAGM's news agencies, both federal and grantee, is regularly politically biased and does not align with the U.S. national interest — and the system of editorial restrictions in place makes it impossible for politically elected leadership and its designees to make necessary corrective changes.

The system I refer to is the so-called firewall language that Congress was unfortunately convinced to slip into the 2021 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA). So, while the dubiously published firewall regulation was rescinded by USAGM officials during the last Trump Administration, with the concurrence of the Biden Administration's Department of Justice and the Office of Management and Budget's general counsel, USAGM holdovers and senior career officials were able to enshrine firewall provisions in legislation that would bind future USAGM CEOs.

It is fair to say that the USAGM provisions in the 2021 NDAA have nothing to do with the nation's defense. Worse yet, they weaken it. The so-called firewall makes it impossible for agency management to prevent biased, anti-American, or rogue reporting. It even prevents agency leadership from intervening when derogatory information about the U.S. government and its officials, including the sitting President, is posted on USAGM federal and grantee journalist's *personal* social media pages. This is an anomaly in professional journalism. Just recently, an ABC journalist was disciplined for compromising the network's integrity by posting derogatory commentary about the President on a personal social media site. This has also long been a violation of VOA and grantee standards. However, under current conditions, agency management is virtually powerless to prevent such abuses.

Below are representative examples of USAGM news organizations' biased coverage that is neither aligned with American values nor supportive of the U.S. national interest:

- VOA's immigration reporters' priority has been to cover the challenges that illegal aliens faced here in America, rather than report on the challenges that the American people have faced due to Joe Biden's failed border policies or the presence of millions of illegal aliens on U.S. soil.
- VOA both refused to identify Hamas's attacks on Israel on October 7, 2023, as terrorist attacks, and also refused to identify Hamas terrorists as terrorists in the wake of the attacks.
- VOA ran a story glamorizing Che Guevara.
- VOA ran a story smearing other journalists at a specific outlet by labeling them a "hate group" for writing about the atrocities of Oct 7, 2023.
- Past leadership of the VOA Mandarin language service conducted annual meetings with Chinese Embassy in Washington, D.C., allowing Chinese embassy officials to opine and make suggestions on VOA Mandarin language service content. Chinese Communist Party (CCP) officials have also reached out to VOA hosts to convince them to be more supportive of the communist regime, and the outcomes have rewarded the CCP's efforts.
- VOA's Mandarin language service personalities have hosted events at the Chinese Embassy, and one of VOA's television editors even publicly pledged his allegiance to the People's Republic of China at a Chinese Embassy event.
- VOA allowed the Communist Vietnamese and Chinese embassies in Washington D.C., to pressure them into removing videos, cutting short live interviews, or changing story angles so that coverage was more supportive of the Communist governments of Hanoi and Beijing.
- Urdu language service ran a video that was nothing more than a Biden campaign advertisement intended to be seen by Urdu-speaking voters in Michigan (who are known to watch VOA Urdu online) during the 2020 Presidential Campaign. The video featured Biden asking for Muslim American's votes. This raised serious discussion about writing new legislation to effectively eliminate the Smith-Mundt Modernization Act of 2012, which softened the Smith-Mundt Act of 1948 preventing USAGM's predecessor, the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG), from disseminating content to domestic U.S. audiences.
- VOA's Ukrainian language service ran Robert DeNiro's unhinged video calling President Trump a punk, a dog and a pig, and saying that he would like to punch President Trump in the face.
- VOA produced a documentary on an American volunteering in Ukraine who wished for the assassination of President Trump on social media.

- Two days after President Trump's inauguration, VOA's Spanish language service aired a story on President Trump's policy on the Panama Canal using a graphic showing the President's face covered with a swastika.

Those are just some disturbing examples of biased news that is not aligned with America's national interests, but the statutory firewall rule prevents the CEO of the agency or any other agency leadership from getting involved in content at the outlet they manage. This is another way this agency is backwards. There is little to no oversight when it comes to the news content and what is being put out on the airwaves around the world about our beloved country, America.

### **Mismanagement: USAGM's Gross Mismanagement Has Wasted Millions, If Not Billions, of American Taxpayer Dollars**

It would be an understatement to say that USAGM, and BBG before it, was poorly managed, but poor management is probably the most polite way to explain why the agency and its grantees are as broken as they are. We have found abuse of the federal contracting system that likely violates federal law. We have also found examples of off-mission spending, inappropriate spending, and downright excessive spending. And honestly, that is just the surface of what we suspect we are going to find. We are in the middle of a congressionally suggested independent audit as we speak.

Below are just some examples of the misspending of American tax dollars:

- **\$75,000.00** to fund a COVID-related study on how Mac computers could be used to create a "social distancing" friendly workspace.
- **\$100,000.00** by the Afghan language service to sponsor an Afghan Cricket team.
- **\$400,000.00**, to, as one USAGM senior career official put it, "sweeten the deal" and reward African affiliates who aired VOA free content. That same employee described those payments by writing "quid pro quo" in his budget request next to those expenditures.
- **\$825,000.00** to fund a New York music show.
- **\$6,000,000.00** contract ceiling for a Deloitte Consulting study, the purpose of which was to help USAGM develop a plan to modernize and streamline programming. Despite the expense, USAGM never implemented that plan.
- An unspecified amount of funding to pay for a VOA employee to tour American universities to produce a series of stories on American universities' Iranian Studies programs. Despite the effort and expense, none of the stories were ever aired.
- Endless examples of lavish international travel. Of note, the RFE/RL president regularly travels with large entourages, all at taxpayer expense.

Perhaps the most egregious example of wasteful USAGM spending occurred under Amanda Bennett, who was Joe Biden's choice to lead USAGM despite her previous poor leadership of VOA. Bennett signed a \$250 million lease at the end of 2024 to relocate the agency from the federal Cohen Building – where USAGM and VOA had been headquartered literally for more than 70 years – to a luxury high-rise with glass and Italian marble finishes on Pennsylvania Avenue, close to the White House. The ceilings throughout the building were even too low to accommodate basic studio heights, as well as camera, lighting, and sound gear. It is my understanding that it would have cost *at least* an additional \$100 million just to make it minimally suitable for VOA's

core broadcasting mission. For awareness, I cancelled that lease a few weeks after I started at the agency.

These expenses and other have been foisted upon the backs of the hard-working American taxpayer. If you are wondering if USAGM and its decades of reckless spending are emblematic of why Americans are distrustful of their bloated federal government, I think the answer is obvious.

In the contracting space, this agency has flat-out perpetrated illegal conduct. For example, federal procurement rules allow so-called no-bid contracts in situations where the dollar amount to be paid to the contractor is below a certain dollar threshold. There could still be abuses in the no-bid contract space, but what we have specifically found at USAGM is that contractors who had previously received no-bid contracts may be receiving no-bid contracts above the federal permissible dollar threshold. Simply stated, this violates federal law. I look forward to working with Congress to help unravel these and other contracting abuses.

Americans have gone through an unpleasant lesson in fraud and waste carried out through government-funded NGOs, grantees, sub-grantees and agencies misusing billions in tax dollars. But they are not as familiar -- I certainly wasn't -- with another type of government graft used to steal from the American people: litigation settlements. While this is likely a problem in all corners of the federal government, it is all too rampant at USAGM.

Big Washington D.C. law firms partner with employees, sue the agency for exorbitant amounts, and the agency's legal department quickly and compliantly settles. The employee and their attorneys walk away tens or hundreds of thousands of dollars richer.

This agency has a surprisingly high number of settlements. One former attorney at the agency even noted in a series of text messages that she had never seen such large settlements in any of her years across the government. Most egregious of all of the settlements were the numerous employees at USAGM who were fired for misconduct or resigned during their investigation into serious issues who were dubiously brought back to the agency, rehired during the Biden Administration and given massive settlements to the tune of \$600,000 each. For their reckless lack of oversight of the agency's security abuses, alone, these senior officials could have been fired for cause for gross negligence in failing to protect national security.

In each of these cases, the American people always lose.

### **Lies: USAGM Has Hidden Its Failures from the American People and Lied to Congress**

Perhaps the saddest, and most ironic, part about everything we have uncovered is that USAGM, VOA, and the grantees – which are supposed to be focused on telling America's story and being open and honest with the world – has been focused on fighting transparency and concealing its conduct and habits from the American people and Congress. Previous management has fought efforts to improve security vetting, make the agency more efficient, and even remove wasteful or harmful personnel from the agency. I even learned the other day that USAGM may be out of compliance with the Federal Records Act and other federal laws that require agency records be

sent to the National Archives and Records Administration. This is obviously problematic for an agency that claims to be for transparency.

During a recent conversation, I was telling someone about all the fraud, waste, and other issues I have uncovered at USAGM. The response I got was, “It sounds like a crime scene.” I said, “It kind of does.” Sadly, the mismanagement, abuse, and waste has gone on for so long that the agency is fatally unaware of its own corruption and, as such, is not salvageable. President Trump, who fully recognizes this, has called for the elimination of the agency beginning in the next fiscal year.

### **Congress Needs to Fix Federal International Broadcasting**

Everything I have shared with you thus far, and will be discussing today, has made it clear to me that our current federal international broadcasting framework has failed. But dealing with these challenges over the last few months has led me to put some thought into what the future of the U.S. government’s international broadcasting enterprise could or should look like.

While I stand ready as part of the President’s Administration to work with you and other members of Congress in the future, I can at this time make one key recommendation based on what I have seen and learned.

My recommendation is that whatever direction for reform is chosen, Congress needs to direct that reform with legislation. The current framework is simply unworkable, but unfortunately, some of the worst elements of the current machinery are locked in by previous Acts of Congress. It is a tangled mess of statute piled on statute, and it has been a long time since Congress took a step back and looked at the whole framework. In my opinion, it is important that Congress not just “do something,” but wipe that slate clean and start over so that international broadcasting apparatus is efficient and effective and not duplicating what is being done in other agencies. President Trump has called for the elimination of USAGM because he recognizes that it is corrupt and mismanaged. I agree with him. We can segregate what is salvageable and find a good home for those assets and capabilities at another agency – perhaps the Department of State, which already has an entire under secretariat dedicated to public diplomacy and communicating with the world.

Indeed, we have decades of experience, spanning from World War II to the present, that give us clear examples of what works and what does not work. The media landscape has changed since then. It is leaner and more effective. You can do a lot more with a lot less, especially in our current age of technology, and reach many more people in the process. We need to embrace those lessons and put them into practice.

### **Conclusion**

I thank the Committee for its time today, and I look forward to answering your questions.