

MEDIA AGENCIES

U.S. AGENCY FOR GLOBAL MEDIA

Mora Namdar

MISSION STATEMENT

The mission of United States Agency for Global Media (USAGM) is to inform, engage, and connect people around the world in support of freedom and democracy.¹ However, this mission statement does not reflect the current work of the agency. The mission is noble, but the execution is lacking. To fulfill its mission, USAGM should also aim to present the truth about America and American policy—not parrot America’s adversaries’ propaganda and talking points.²

OVERVIEW

Originally formed as the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG) in 1994, the BBG changed its name in 2018 to the United States Agency for Global Media. The USAGM is a sub-Cabinet agency of the U.S. government with a budget of just under \$1 billion. The agency oversees two government broadcasting networks: the Voice of America (VOA) and the Office of Cuba Broadcasting (OCB). USAGM also oversees 100 percent of the grant funding for several “independent” grantee organizations, including the Middle East Broadcasting Network (MBN), Radio Free Asia (RFA), Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), and the newly formed Open Technology Fund (OTF).³

- **The Voice of America** provides news and information in 48 languages to a weekly audience of more than 326 million people worldwide. For more

Mandate for Leadership: The Conservative Promise

than 80 years, VOA journalists have supplied news and information about the U.S., audience-specific regions of interest and concern, and the world at large. VOA radio and television signals are broadcast to approximately 3,500 affiliates, and satellite transmissions reach countries where free speech is banned or where civil society is under threat.⁴

VOA uses digital, web, and mobile media as well, which, while sometimes useful in propagating valuable information globally, has created specific violations of the agency's prohibition against broadcasting to the domestic U.S. audience—particularly with regard to flagrantly political content, as has been the practice with recent and current VOA content directors and managers.⁵ The network once had a generally well-received brand value, but it has deteriorated under decades of poor leadership and a loss of its once-prized unbiased reporting. There are bright spots within VOA, but mismanagement and declining production values have diluted its once-great reputation as a singular voice in American news broadcasting abroad.

- **The Office of Cuba Broadcasting** oversees Radio and Television Martí, a multimedia hub of news, information, and analysis that provides the people of Cuba with programs through satellite television, radio, and digital media. These programs present news and information about Cuba's oppressive government from the outside world that would otherwise be heavily restricted.⁶ The OCB remains a critical avenue of truth to the Cuban people but has been threatened with crippling budget and operational constraints, including empathetic attitudes toward Communist Cuban leadership coupled with organizational hostility toward the OCB by certain elements of USAGM leadership. During the Biden Administration, the OCB has been threatened with closure, while also suffering chilling reductions in force.⁷
- **The Middle East Broadcasting Network** is an Arabic-language news organization with a weekly audience of 27.4 million people in 22 countries in the Middle East and North Africa. The MBN consists of two television networks, radio, websites, and social media platforms. Together, they deliver news and analysis on the region, American policies, and Americana. The MBN has correspondents throughout the Middle East and North Africa.⁸
- **Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty** is a private, nonprofit, multimedia broadcasting corporation that serves as a surrogate media source in 27 languages and 23 countries, including Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan, Russia, and Ukraine.

2025 Presidential Transition Project

Founded in the early days of the Cold War (Radio Free Europe in 1949 and Radio Liberty in 1953) and merged in 1976, Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty were intended to execute edgy and daring information operations and unrestricted news reporting deep behind the Iron Curtain. Unfortunately, like other broadcast organizations under USAGM, RFE/RL has surrendered much of its rich history to an approach that favors political trends as opposed to operations that support and represent America abroad. While there are some bright spots within RFE/RL, much of the network has redundant programming with certain VOA language services, often with competing, counterproductive, or dissimilar messaging.

The recent addition of RFE/RL's Hungarian-language service, Szabad Európa, falls outside the intended scope of RFE/RL's charter by targeting a democratically elected, pro-American European and NATO ally.

Not least, RFE/RL has been plagued by several serious espionage-related security risks within its ranks.⁹

- **Radio Free Asia** is a private, nonprofit multimedia news corporation that brings news and uncensored content to people in six Asian countries that restrict free speech, freedom of the press, and access to reliable information. RFA also provides educational and cultural programming, as well as forums for audiences to engage in open dialogue and freely express opinions. RFA utilizes on-the-ground reporters and networks of in-country sources, citizen journalists, and eyewitnesses who provide leads, tips, images, and video.¹⁰

Several reports from the Office of the Inspector General (OIG) were released showing waste and self-dealing, including security vulnerabilities and RFA leadership awarding insiders millions of dollars of grant funding.¹¹ For example, as the OIG stated in one report, the then-president of RFA “established the Freedom2Connect Foundation (Foundation)” and thereafter “awarded two contracts, totaling \$1.2 million” to the foundation she herself founded.¹² Furthermore:

[The] OIG found that RFA did not comply with Federal procurement requirements for grantees. OIG identified instances in which RFA and its agents did not comply with OMB [Office of Management and Budget] conflict-of-interest procurement requirements for grantees. Specifically, OIG found that RFA entered into 14 contracts, totaling \$4.0 million (51 percent of the amount of OTF FYs 2012 and 2013 project-related contracts), with organizations that had some affiliation with either RFA officials or members of OTF Advisory Council.¹³

Mandate for Leadership: The Conservative Promise

This same leadership proceeded to wastefully form the Open Technology Fund as its own independent grantee with the help of USAGM senior management prior to the tenure of Trump-appointed leadership.

- **The Open Technology Fund's** goal is to provide funding to support the research, development, and implementation of Internet freedom technologies that circumvent censorship. OTF was formed under dubious circumstances by using consolidation rules to usurp the mission and funding of USAGM's pre-existing Office of Internet Freedom (OIF), which funded far more diverse technologies with much greater transparency. OTF, however, operates with far less transparency and strictly restricts funding to "open source" technology. OTF does not support any technology with even partially "closed source" code, notwithstanding that such closed-source code would provide more protection against hacking.

Although OTF touts large user numbers, this could not be substantiated upon requests for information, and it was discovered by former senior USAGM leadership that OTF makes extremely small, insubstantial donations to much larger messaging applications and technology to bolster its unsubstantiated claims.¹⁴ Despite its vibrant self-lobbying and publicity efforts, OTF remains a wasteful and redundant boondoggle. Its grantee status was suspended by Trump-appointed USAGM leadership for a number of reasons, including noncompliance with its grant terms and for actions that resulted in several fraud and waste investigations.¹⁵

The OIF, which predates OTF, was historically under USAGM's Office of Chief Strategy Officer and for years had been performing the same tasks as OTF within USAGM headquarters for the benefit of all USAGM broadcast networks. With much greater transparency, OIF succeeded with fewer staff while simultaneously fielding more diverse and robust technologies. Absent a meaningful organizational impact analysis to justify the wastefulness of the decision-making process, OTF usurped the entire OIF budget and was set up as a new grantee organization.

Exacerbating matters, OIF was shut down in order to provide massive grants to the opaque activities of OTF and its founding leadership, who went on a free-spending boondoggle for high-end Washington, D.C., office space, furnishings, and top salaries for its leadership team. Numerous career staff whistleblowers came forward to sound the alarm about OTF to Trump-appointed leadership, citing concerns about the OIG reports, wasteful spending, and other substantive performance matters.¹⁶ Nonetheless, the

Biden Administration reinstated OTF to full operational status and ceased all investigations immediately after assuming office.

ATTEMPTS AT REFORM

Late in the Trump Administration, following the long-delayed Senate confirmation of Michael Pack as USAGM Chief Executive Officer (CEO),¹⁷ agency leadership rapidly initiated long-overdue and necessary reforms,¹⁸ including security reforms repeatedly requested by the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) and the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) that had been ignored by USAGM leadership.¹⁹ Unfortunately, as was the case with the OTF, the Biden Administration immediately reinstated personnel who had been fired for gross security violations, placing the agency back into its previously failed posture—one that poses a danger to national security.

The Firewall Saga. The vital error in USAGM’s current organizational/cultural calculus is the agency’s selective application of a journalistic “firewall.” The amorphous interpretation of a firewall shifts, depending on which Administration is in office and who is asking questions.

Although a firewall should ensure journalistic independence, it has been used without formal regulation for decades in order to shirk legitimate oversight of everything from promoting adversaries’ propaganda to ignoring journalistic safety. Often, the “firewall” is touted when journalists are either promoting anti-American propaganda that parrots adversarial regime talking points or promoting politically biased viewpoints in opposition to the VOA charter.²⁰

Such weak oversight, alien to any other large media network or news organization—particularly one derivative of U.S. foreign policy and national security goals—was erroneously enshrined in a document known as the Firewall Regulation.²¹ The Firewall Regulation was entered into the *Federal Register* on the eve of the Senate confirmation of President Donald Trump’s USAGM CEO, Michael Pack. It was the quintessential “midnight reg” designed to throttle the statutory and executive authority of the agency head. It stipulated that agency management, by standards unknown to most large broadcast companies, was forbidden from engaging in oversight and direction of content in any way—even false content. It ran counter to the law, including the Smith–Mundt Act,²² and it was harmful to the agency itself and to the foreign policy and national security goals of the U.S. government.

Even content that went well beyond fair and accurate reporting on U.S. domestic and political problems could not be reined in by front office leadership under the Firewall Regulation. Soon, VOA’s White House correspondent was posting content highly critical of, and personally insulting to, the U.S. President—in contradiction of VOA’s own journalistic standards, policies, and procedures. USAGM career officials considered such content sacrosanct and bravely independent “journalistic”

Mandate for Leadership: The Conservative Promise

content protected by the “spirit of” the Firewall Regulation—despite ample evidence to the contrary.

Late in the Trump Administration, USAGM political leadership, following an intensive U.S. Department of Justice review, revoked the Firewall Regulation over the protests of journalistic organizations—none more vociferous than VOA itself.²³ While the abuses of the Firewall Regulation are particularly disconcerting, they encompass just a fraction of similar overreaches of the agency’s journalistic mission.

Current and former USAGM/VOA leadership who wanted to maintain virtually zero accountability and oversight waged a campaign of interference, resistance, and disinformation to stifle change at the agency. Perhaps not coincidentally, various media outlets with relationships to former and future USAGM leadership published near-daily criticisms of Trump Administration appointees and also of grantee organization leaders who were appointed by CEO Pack to implement long-overdue reforms.²⁴

Agency Mission Failure. Currently, the USAGM, by and large, is not fulfilling its mission, which remains so ill-defined and ambiguous that it enables the organization to go about its business largely unguided with little to no oversight. Rather than providing news and information in an accurate, reliable way that promotes and supports freedom and democracy, the agency is mismanaged, disorganized, ineffective, and rife with waste and redundancy.

These shortfalls are either oriented toward, or directly contribute to, the agency’s media organizations joining the mainstream media’s anti-U.S. chorus and denigrating the American story—all in the name of so-called journalistic independence. Indeed, content during the Trump Administration was rife with typical mainstream media talking points assailing the President and his staff. The few bright spots within VOA and the OCB are often stifled instead of supported. Top-level talent often leaves the agency or is met with obstacles rather than support.²⁵ Opportunities for modernization and effective strategy are ignored, and wasteful spending and misallocation of resources are the norm in an environment in which nepotism is rampant and political gamesmanship protects bad actors.

Amanda Bennett²⁶ was confirmed as USAGM CEO in 2022 after two years of being blocked by several Members of Congress. Legal advocacy organization America First Legal Foundation even wrote to President Joe Biden asking him to withdraw her nomination,²⁷ citing several severe national security failures while she was director of VOA.²⁸ Her tenure as director during the Obama Administration (and her holdover into the beginning of the Trump Administration) was marred with operational failures, security failures, and credibility failures. Those failures are reportedly ongoing during her current tenure as CEO.²⁹

NECESSARY REFORMS

Security Issues. The Office of Personnel Management³⁰ and the Office of the Director of National Intelligence flagged severe security failures during four

extensive investigations of the USAGM, each conducted during a 10-year period between 2010 and 2020.³¹ Security personnel and former agency senior leadership ignored these issues and allowed them to persist.³²

In brief, the USAGM is vulnerable to exploitation by foreign spies. During the last six months of the Trump Administration, known foreign intelligence operatives were removed from the OCB and RFE/RL. During the 10-year period between 2010 and 2020, both the OPM and the ODNI found that the USAGM's Office of Security (under the Office of Management) had grossly ignored and flouted many of the federal government's most critical and long-standing information and personnel security protocols, regulations, and practices.³³

During the investigative period—in which the findings were largely, if not wholly, ignored by agency senior leadership—over 1,500 USAGM personnel (nearly 40 percent of its total workforce) were performing their Tier 3 and Tier 5 national-security-sensitive positions with falsified and/or unauthorized suitability-for-employment determinations and with access to sensitive federal buildings and information systems. In many cases, records (including Social Security numbers), were falsified or replaced with notional placeholders, and fingerprints (in many dozens of cases) were never submitted to the Federal Bureau of Investigation for basic background investigations.

By the time these issues were addressed by members of the Trump Administration, more than 500 personnel with unauthorized access and clearances had left the USAGM and rolled into other federal agencies with reciprocal clearance authorizations. Many others disappeared into U.S. society. As of January 2021, the USAGM had not yet determined the whereabouts of these individuals.³⁴

The USAGM must never again be entrusted with delegated authority over its personnel security programs and suitability determinations until such time as it can prove that these failures will not happen again. These responsibilities must remain with the Department of Defense and the Office of Personnel Management, to which they were transferred in the final weeks of the Trump Administration.

Journalists' Security. Agency journalists, both on and off American soil, have faced danger,³⁵ yet their superiors have done little to protect them. Whistleblowers and Trump Administration officials found that protection of USAGM American and foreign journalists employed by USAGM networks and grantee organizations was severely lacking.

Against often-significant resistance, political appointees forced action to enable broadcasters (who were under verified threats) to broadcast from remote locations while being protected by federal law enforcement officers. Likewise, political appointees met resistance from senior career officials when insisting that foreign-based journalists in high-risk countries make their locations known to the agency in the event they required rescue, extraction, or safe housing. Such safety measures, argued career officials, would somehow represent a violation of

Mandate for Leadership: The Conservative Promise

journalistic independence. With only rare exceptions, resistance to the most basic journalist safety measures was the knee-jerk response from USAGM career officials.

Wasting Taxpayer Dollars. The USAGM’S current operations, properly managed, can be conducted on less than \$700 million per year. Prior to the arrival of President Donald Trump’s appointees in June 2020, budgeting, financial responsibility, and spending totaled over \$800 million per year, with virtually no oversight or supervision. Waste, unnecessary spending, nepotism for pet projects, redundant programs, and unnecessary hiring abounded.

Consolidation and Reduction of Redundant Services. Currently, the USAGM funds numerous redundant services through its own offices, through Voice of America and the Office of Cuba Broadcasting, and through its grantees. For example, VOA has a Mandarin-language service but also funds redundant services through Radio Free Asia. VOA also has a Farsi-language service that duplicates one funded through Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. Surplus services in the same languages are often unnecessary and counterproductive. Fiscal responsibility and transparency should return to the USAGM, with consolidation being a cornerstone of the strategy.

As noted previously, the Open Technology Fund duplicates activities that already existed at the USAGM in the Office of Internet Freedom. Numerous career whistleblowers came forward to sound the alarm to President Trump’s USAGM political team about OTF’s abuse and overreach.³⁶ Its opaque, expensive, and unnecessary usurpation of an existing USAGM office is an egregious example of government waste and illustrates the general disdain for U.S. taxpayers that is rife within this agency. Full reinstatement of OIF would allow full agency and congressional oversight into how so-called “Internet freedom” money is being spent.³⁷

J-1 Visa Program Abuses. Rather than use the appropriate I visa³⁸ intended for foreign journalists, the USAGM uses the J-1 “cultural exchange” visas to allow foreign nationals to transition easily into jobs that American citizens with cultural and linguistic expertise could satisfy. The J-1 visa is intended for cultural and academic exchange programs, among others—*none* of which include journalism.³⁹ Additionally, J-1 visas are meant for non-immigrant temporary exchanges. The USAGM’s J-1 visa holders often go on to apply for permanent residency, which violates the intention of this visa.

Shortwave Transmission Upgrades and Improvements. Non-web-based technologies that are proven and durable, such as shortwave radio transmission stations, have been grossly deemphasized in budgeting in favor of newer web-based technologies. This move is dangerously short-sighted and puts the U.S. at a perilous strategic disadvantage in the event of a major conflict, particularly with Russia or China.

There is great concern about the vulnerability of undersea cable trunks that make up the Internet cloud. The vast majority of global Internet traffic—95 percent—is transmitted through these cables, including news transmissions and

web-based content produced by the USAGM's broadcast networks. While the robust and popular use of the Internet is ideal during peacetime, during times of major conflict, widespread damage to the undersea cables that carry communications across the globe can reasonably be expected. Long-lasting power outages are also likely, such as those Ukraine experienced in the aftermath of Russia's 2022 invasion.

The USAGM's responsibility for the only U.S. global shortwave radio capability is of critical strategic importance if America is to carry its message to people seeking information and freedom within conflict zones. Shortwave technologies also make it possible to carry broadcasts in areas where Internet traffic is severely restricted, as it is in many authoritarian states today.

ORGANIZATIONAL ISSUES

Personnel. Personnel is one of the biggest concerns for the USAGM and its grantees. Attracting talented staff who will stay and letting go of poorly performing personnel are hurdles. Additionally, whistleblowers have come forward with numerous credible allegations of illegal nepotism and improper hiring practices.⁴⁰ Past agency leaders have ignored national security procedures when hiring and have failed to adequately vet staff.⁴¹ Government hiring policies and federal law must be followed, and serious policy changes must be implemented to end these practices.

Relevant Government Entities

- **The White House.** As an executive branch agency, the USAGM ostensibly should report to the President and coordinate activities with the National Security Council (NSC)—especially given the direct and implied national security aspects of the agency's messaging globally. However, there currently is no specific office in the White House or NSC liaison for the USAGM.

The original network, VOA, functioned under the Office of Coordinator of Information as early as 1941, the War Department's Office of War Information from 1942 to 1945, the State Department from 1945 to 1953, and the U.S. Information Agency from 1953 until the creation of the independent Broadcasting Board of Governors in 1999. Although some oversight and management functions of the agency are provided by the State Department, the USAGM otherwise has little connectivity to larger departments or agencies and even less to the White House. With the dissolution of the U.S. Information Agency in 1999, the USAGM has virtually been under its own supervision and guidance. The results have been dismal.

Mandate for Leadership: The Conservative Promise

- **The State Department.** VOA was most effective before and during the Cold War when it was under the direct supervision and control of the War and State Departments, respectively. If VOA is not put in the direct chain of command under the NSC, serious consideration should be given to putting VOA under the direct supervision of the Office of Global Public Affairs at the Department of State. The Office of Global Public Affairs was formed during the Trump Administration by consolidation of the State Department’s Bureau of International Information Programs and Bureau of Global Public Affairs.

Ensuring that taxpayer-funded TV, radio, and messaging tells America’s story is imperative and should be coordinated with the existing foreign-language social media platforms at the State Department. Currently, VOA’s foreign-language TV programming is unreliable in telling America’s story, given its amorphous interpretation of its independence firewall and its waning adherence to certain provisions of the Smith–Mundt Act depending on which political party is in office.

The VOA firewall is meant to protect broadcasters from government interference with content; however, USAGM staff have abused the firewall and used it as an offensive measure to block oversight. Additionally, the Smith–Mundt Act stipulates that USAGM services are meant to tell the American story abroad—never to domestic audiences—but the agency has used its taxpayer funding to promote partisan messaging in the U.S. One of the most egregious examples was when, in 2020, it bought ads on its foreign-language social media sites to disseminate a Biden campaign ad and targeted it to a major Muslim population in Michigan.⁴² Moreover, VOA often airs foreign adversaries’ propaganda, which is antithetical to its congressionally mandated core mission. State Department oversight or “command” may be one way to ensure that VOA and the rest of the USAGM returns and adheres to its original mission.

Clear lines of command and communications between the USAGM and an appropriate office of the National Security Council are also sorely lacking, as has been any reasonable accountability for USAGM senior leadership and strategy. The State Department’s Assistant Secretary for Global Public Affairs and Undersecretary for Diplomacy and Public Affairs should also be in the accountability loop for agency actions. While the U.S. Secretary of State technically has a seat on the board of the agency, it is a toothless seat that is often deferred to the undersecretary and/or assistant secretaries noted above. This position should be relevant and directive when U.S. foreign policy and strategic communications are at stake.

2025 Presidential Transition Project

For example, the years-long delay in confirming the Trump-appointed CEO left disastrous holdover leadership from the previous Administration. Employing effective leadership, even in an acting capacity, while a new CEO is awaiting Senate confirmation is necessary to prevent a repeat of this behavior.

- **Congress.** The USAGM receives its budget and mandates directly from Congress. Often, changes in major functions at the agency happen because of the lobbying efforts of a few connected individuals—often grantees lobbying for more funds and less accountability. Those changes can and do handcuff leadership from any meaningful oversight. An overhaul of the agency with review from Congress to modernize, streamline, and reduce waste must be done with congressional support.
- **Key nongovernmental stakeholders, allies, and non-allies.** These include industry groups, nonprofits, trade associations, foundations, and activist organizations, for example, America First Legal Foundation,⁴³ USAGM Watch,⁴⁴ BBG-USAGM Watch,⁴⁵ and Whistleblower Protection Project.⁴⁶

CONCLUSION

The USAGM is a story of a lost opportunity both to help restore the world's confidence in the promise and ideals of America and to set a high mark for journalistic integrity and unbiased reporting. These two areas have suffered severely under two decades of USAGM mismanagement and lack of oversight. Finding solutions to these problems and the restoration of the agency's networks must be the priorities of future agency leadership.

To accomplish this, the USAGM must be fully reformed top to bottom with congressional and White House support. The possibility of consolidating not only the agency's subparts, but bringing the entire agency under the supervision of the NSC, the State Department, or both would dramatically aid that reform.

If the *de facto* aim of the agency simply remains to compete in foreign markets using anti-U.S. talking points that parrot America's adversaries' propaganda, then this represents an unacceptable burden to the U.S. taxpayer and a negative return on investment. In that case, the USAGM should be defunded and disestablished. If, however, the agency can be reformed to become an effective tool, it would be one of the greatest tools in America's arsenal to tell America's story and promote freedom and democracy around the world.

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CORPORATION FOR PUBLIC BROADCASTING

Mike Gonzalez

Every Republican President since Richard Nixon has tried to strip the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) of taxpayer funding. That is significant not just because it means that for half a century, Republican Presidents have failed to accomplish what they set out to do, but also because Nixon was the first President in office when National Public Radio (NPR) and the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), which the CPB funds, went on air.

In other words, *all* Republican Presidents have recognized that public funding of domestic broadcasts is a mistake. As a 35-year-old lawyer in the Nixon White House, one Antonin Scalia warned that conservatives were being “confronted with a long-range problem of significant social consequences—that is, the development of a government-funded broadcast system similar to the BBC.”⁴⁷

All of which means that the next conservative President must finally get this done and do it despite opposition from congressional members of his own party if necessary. To stop public funding is good policy and good politics. The reason is simple: President Lyndon Johnson may have pledged in 1967 that public broadcasting would become “a vital public resource to enrich our homes, educate our families and to provide assistance to our classrooms,”⁴⁸ but public broadcasting immediately became a liberal forum for public affairs and journalism.

Not only is the federal government trillions of dollars in debt and unable to afford the more than half a billion dollars squandered on leftist opinion each year, but the government should not be compelling the conservative half of the country to pay for the suppression of its own views. As Thomas Jefferson put it, “To compel a man to furnish contributions of money for the propagations of opinions which he disbelieves and abhors, is sinful and tyrannical.”⁴⁹

A DEMONSTRATED PATTERN OF BIAS

Conservatives will thus reward a President who eliminates this tyrannical situation. PBS and NPR do not even bother to run programming that would attract conservatives. As Pew Research demonstrated in 2014, 25 percent of PBS’s audience is “mostly liberal,” and 35 percent is “consistently liberal.” That is 60 percent liberal compared to 15 percent conservative (11 percent “mostly conservative” and 4 percent “consistently conservative”).⁵⁰

NPR’s audience is even to the Left of that, with 67 percent liberal (41 percent “consistently liberal” and 26 percent “mostly liberal”), compared with 12 percent conservative (3 percent and 9 percent “consistently conservative” and “mostly conservative,” respectively).⁵¹ That may be an acceptable business model for MSNBC or CNN, but not for a taxpayer-subsidized broadcaster.

DEFUNDING THROUGH THE BUDGETARY PROCESS

Cutting off the CPB is logistically easy. The solution lies in the budgetary process. In 2022, the CPB submitted to the Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies Subcommittees of the House and Senate Appropriations Committees its budget justification for fiscal year (FY) 2023. In it, the CPB requested that Congress give it a \$565 million advance appropriation—a \$40 million increase compared to its FY 2022 funding.⁵² Unlike most other agencies, the CPB receives advance appropriations that provide them with funding two years ahead of time, which insulates the agency from Congress’s power of the purse and oversight. This special budgetary treatment is unjustified and should be ended.

The 47th President can just tell the Congress—through the budget he proposes and through personal contact—that he will not sign an appropriations spending bill that contains a penny for the CPB. The President may have to use the bully pulpit, as NPR and PBS have teams of lobbyists who have convinced enough Members of Congress to save their bacon every time their taxpayer subsidies have been at risk since the Nixon era.

Defunding CPB would by no means cause NPR or PBS—or other public broadcasters that benefit from CPB funding, including the even-further-to-the Left Pacifica Radio and American Public Media—to file for bankruptcy. The membership model that the CPB uses, along with the funding from corporations and foundations that it also receives, would allow these broadcasters to continue to thrive. As George Will wrote, “If ‘Sesame Street’ programming were put up for auction, the danger would be of getting trampled by the stampede of potential bidders.”⁵³ Indeed, “Sesame Street” is on HBO now, which shows its potential as a money earner.

PUBLIC INTEREST VS. PRIVILEGE

Stripping public funding would, of course, mean that NPR, PBS, Pacifica Radio, and the other leftist broadcasters would be shorn of the presumption that they act in the public interest and receive the privileges that often accompany so acting. They should no longer, for example, be qualified as noncommercial education stations (NCE stations), which they clearly no longer are. NPR, Pacifica, and the other radio ventures have zero claim on an educational function (the original purpose for which they were created by President Johnson), and the percentage of on-air programming that PBS devotes to educational endeavors such as “Sesame Street” (programs that are themselves biased to the Left) is small.

Being an NCE comes with benefits. The Federal Communications Commission, for example, reserves the 20 stations at the lower end of the radio frequency (between 88 and 108 MHz on the FM band) for NCEs. The FCC says that “only noncommercial educational radio stations are licensed in the 88–92 MHz ‘reserved’ band,” while both commercial and noncommercial educational stations may

Mandate for Leadership: The Conservative Promise

operate in the “non-reserved” band.⁵⁴ This confers advantages, as lower-frequency stations can be heard farther away and are easier to find as they lie on the left end of the radio dial (figuratively as well as ideologically).

The FCC also exempts NCE stations from licensing fees. It says that “Noncommercial educational (NCE) FM station licensees and full service NCE television broadcast station licensees are exempt from paying regulatory fees, provided that these stations operate solely on an NCE basis.”⁵⁵

NPR and PBS stations are in reality no longer noncommercial, as they run ads in everything but name for their sponsors. They are also noneducational. The next President should instruct the FCC to exclude the stations affiliated with PBS and NPR from the NCE denomination and the privileges that come with it.

2025 Presidential Transition Project

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