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## PRINT &amp; PIXELS

## An Abuse of Power

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*The new head of the U.S. Agency for Global Media, ostensibly dedicated to furthering American principles, is now endangering brave journalists who have spent their careers defending them.*

**T**here are so many troubling changes in Washington these days, it is hard to focus on what has been happening to the U.S. Agency for Global Media (USAGM). But to anyone concerned about the parlous state of press freedom around the world, not to mention the sharp decline of America's reputation, there is no more pressing issue.

To understand why this is, and why the leadership of its current CEO Michael Pack is so dangerous, it helps to know how we got here.

By different names, America's government-funded system of foreign-language media has been around since 1942, when the United States beamed a radio broadcast into Nazi Germany that opened with the words: "We bring you voices from America." The phrase caught on, and by 1945, Voice of America (VOA) was broadcasting news of the war in 27 languages.

Between 1949 and 2003, the system of networks grew to five, each with its own distinct history and culture. Two of these, VOA and the Office of Cuba

Broadcasting (OCB), are federal agencies. Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) was created in the early 1950s as a private citizens' initiative but was covertly funded by the CIA, then later reborn as a private, nonprofit corporation that receives federal grants but is governed by an independent, bipartisan board. When Radio Free Asia (RFA) came along in the 1990s, and the Middle Eastern Broadcasting Network (MNB) after 9/11, they were set up along the same lines.

This patchwork of five networks constitutes one of the world's largest media operations, with a budget of \$637 million and almost 3,600 employees dedicated to providing impartial, accurate news to 350 million people in 100 countries and 61 languages. After a major re-structuring in 1994, both the federal agencies and the grantees were placed under the oversight of a part-time, nine-member body called the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG).

Much criticized for partisanship and inefficiency, the BBG grew increasingly dysfunctional until 2016, when a group of congressional Republicans led by Rep. Ed Royce of California succeeded in abolishing it. Unfortunately, the deed was done hastily and shortsightedly, by inserting a few amendments into the 2017 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) that placed all five networks and their support structure under the command of a single CEO appointed by the President, confirmed by the Senate, and answerable only to the White House. The Democrats went along, because they were sure the 2016 election would be won by Hillary Clinton.

To many observers, this change was worrisome, because at no point in its history had this large, complex, diverse, globe-spanning media organization been under the direct control of a single individual, much less a political appointee in an era of intense partisanship. But in December 2016, when the NDAA was signed by President Obama, almost no one in Washington was focused on USAGM. Then, after Trump took office, three and a half years passed without anyone being confirmed as the new CEO, and the whole thing began to look inconsequential. Now, after long delay, Trump's appointee, Michael Pack, has arrived. And it is beginning to feel like a nightmare.

**P**ack is a successful documentary filmmaker who was Senior Vice President for Television Programming at the Corporation for Public Broadcasting under President George W. Bush, and most recently president and CEO of the California-based Claremont Institute. Full disclosure: I have known Pack for many years, and when he was first nominated in June 2018, I felt relieved that Trump had chosen someone so intelligent, disciplined, and prudent for what I knew would be an extremely tough job.

Two years later, on June 4, 2020, Pack was confirmed by the Senate. Shortly after that, Amanda Bennett, the Pulitzer-Prize-winning director of VOA, resigned. On June 17, his first official day in office, Pack fired two more network heads: Bay Fang, president of Radio Free Asia, and Emilio Vazquez, acting director of the Office of Cuba Broadcasting. All three were Obama appointees, so their departures were not surprising.

What came next was surprising. Libby Liu, a George H. W. Bush appointee and former head of RFA now directing a special program, the Open Technology Fund, aimed at developing digital tools to penetrate the so-called Great Chinese Firewall, was sacked before she could resign. And finally, Pack dismissed two staunch Republicans, RFE/RL president Jamie Fly and MBN president Alberto Fernandez, who in spite of having been appointed by Trump were esteemed throughout USAGM.

The day after this “Wednesday night massacre,” Pack sent an email to all USAGM employees. This message—his first—was clearly intended to smooth any feathers ruffled by the firings. But I doubt it had that effect. It began with a summary of Pack’s resumé, followed by a quotation from Abraham Lincoln, and a warm if vague assurance of his “commitment” to the agency’s “morale” and “mission.” Then it struck a chillier note, announcing Pack’s intention “to examine some of the problems that have surfaced in the media,” and warning that, while he hoped to “confer extensively with you—the talented and dedicated men and women of USAGM, . . . current circumstances will limit the kind of outreach and contact we have for a while longer.”

This email was followed by a press release containing this paragraph:

Pack’s message was met with an overwhelmingly positive response by staff and grantees, who personally reached out and candidly congratulated him. One noted, “you emphasized that we all have a mission that unfortunately some have forgotten in recent and past years, to the disgrace of all.” Another said, “I am sure that with your arrival we will be able to rejuvenate our agency, to get rid of any bias and partisanship, and will be able to adequately transmit America’s image and ideas to the outer world.”

It is remarkable how closely this resembles an official Chinese Communist Party communiqué, translated into stilted, unnatural English by a person with absolutely no ear for the way people actually talk. If these two documents are examples of what Pack and his team think is persuasive communication, then America’s best weapon against hostile propaganda has fallen into incompetent hands.

Either that or malevolent. At the time of this writing, Pack has refused calls to sign off on J-1 visa extensions for foreign nationals working for VOA in Washington. Here he crosses a very red line, because he is not just evicting a few network heads who are American and will land on their feet. He is potentially delivering scores of men and women who have dedicated their lives to furthering American ideals into the hands of ruthless regimes intent upon destroying those ideals. At a minimum, these people will be unable to find work when they return home. Many will also be subject to harassment, threats, violence against themselves and their families, arrest, imprisonment, and death.

Who can push back against this abuse of power? After firing the network heads, Pack dissolved the bipartisan governing boards of the grantees, which included seasoned, knowledgeable individuals like Ambassadors Ryan Crocker and Karen Kornbluh. Those boards had been rendered toothless by the amendment to the 2017 NDAA, but their members had remained in an advisory capacity.

Now Pack replaced them with young Trump loyalists whose top priority seems to be the American culture war over sex, gender, and the family. An important concern, to be sure. But what relevance does it have to USAGM? It is true that some language services have defended the rights of gay activists persecuted by regimes, like Russia’s, that have learned to wrap political repression in a cloak of traditional morality. It is also true that of all the topics reported on by the USAGM system, one of the least well-handled is religion. But this calls for debate, not demolition.

It is hard to imagine these new board members wanting to sentence VOA journalists from China, Russia, North Korea, or Iran to the brutal treatment they are likely to receive if they are forced to return to their countries of origin. But as noted above, the boards no longer have a say. On June 23, a lawsuit filed on

behalf of the grantees charged that by firing their presidents and governing boards, Pack had violated their “legally protected independence.” On July 2, the case was dismissed, reluctantly, by D.C. District Court judge, who wrote: “Congress has decided to concentrate unilateral power in the USAGM CEO, and the Court cannot override that determination.”

So there he stands, the all-powerful CEO of a venerable American institution devoted to the defense and furtherance of America’s most cherished principles. On July 8, Pack ran an op-ed in the *New York Post* that ticked off a few of the criticisms leveled at USAGM over the last 30 years, but also included this tribute to its larger mission: “The world needs to hear from us, and it needs to hear what America actually stands for: the principles enshrined in our Declaration of Independence and Constitution.” To be fair, this op-ed reads less like Chinese propaganda than USAGM boilerplate. But it is stunningly cynical. For example, it does not mention a single one of those cherished principles—for example, the one about curbing dangerous ambition through a system of checks and balances.

During the two-year delay between his nomination and confirmation, a great many people inside and outside USAGM reached out to Pack, offering advice and assistance. He also received several invitations to visit Prague, Dubai, Hong Kong, and a hundred other bureaus in the field. All of these overtures got the same response, even before the Covid-19 pandemic: *Thanks anyway, I’ve got this covered*. This did not sit well with those making the overtures, because they knew how hard it is to wrap your head around the tangled history and complex inner workings of this odd, unwieldy bureaucracy—even if you are, or think you are, the smartest person in the room.

Why reject all this help? At the time, Pack told me and others that he did not need any advice from “people on the outside” because he had “a sherpa in the White House.” As word of this sherpa began to circulate, speculation was rife about who it could be. I never knew, and now I no longer care. By their fruits ye shall know them. A sherpa is a native of the high Himalayas who makes his living guiding foreigners up the perilous steeps. Whoever coached Pack did the opposite. And now we are standing on the edge of a precipice.

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