



Mark Haefele," John F. Kennedy, USIA and World Public Opinion," *Diplomatic History*, Volume 25, Issue 1 (Winter 2001): 63-84.

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Mark Haefele's excellent essay is a welcome addition to the growing body of historical research addressing propaganda, public opinion and cultural diplomacy in the history of the Cold War. Recent books including W.S Lucas's *Freedom's War* (Manchester, 1999) and David Krugler's *The Voice of America and the Domestic Propaganda Battles, 1945-1953*, (Missouri, 2000) have done much to advance knowledge of the first fifteen years of the post war period. Haefele's article stands as a welcome indicator that the time has come to apply the same sort of attention to the Kennedy and Johnson period of Cold War propaganda, or to enter into longer sweep of the interface between world opinion and American policy and presentation of particular issues as Mary L. Dudziak has done with her forthcoming: *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton, 2001).

Haefele's work is also provocative in the consideration of the Kennedy administration. As Haefele makes clear, Kennedy took world opinion seriously. This is borne out in his attention to the work of USIA, its polls and its initiatives around the world. When Kennedy's contact with the agency, his appetite for its reports and digests of world opinion and for summaries of its activities is compared to the record of other administrations, his approach and Haefele's piece become all the more interesting.

Kennedy's USIA was special. Only Eisenhower gave anything like the same amount of attention to propaganda. Eisenhower had learned the value of psychological warfare - what he called 'the P factor' - on the battlefields of Europe, and established the USIA in 1953 to apply the lesson to the conduct of the Cold War. The agency would be a home for a wide range of US propaganda activities from embassy press relations to the Voice of America international radio. At the heart of the USIA lay the principle - derived from business - that propaganda and public opinion, like market research and advertising, were distinct activities and hence best trusted to expert practitioners. Eisenhower accordingly drew his USIA directors into the process of foreign policy making.

Eisenhower's mechanisms were a gift to Kennedy, with his heightened sense of the United States President as the leader of the Free World. Kennedy frequently started the day by perusing and annotating digests of world press submitted by the USIA, and poured over polls the obsessive eye of a gambler studying the form of horses. The agency prospered from the 'Kennedy spirit'. The presence of Murrow and rhetoric of 'ask not what your country can do for you' brought a confluence of gifted writers, keen young officials and talented broadcasters and filmmakers. This grouping did not survive the trauma of Vietnam. Ironically, perhaps the greatest achievement of the Murrow years

at USIA was the agency's management of the Kennedy assassination and the global marketing of JFK as the martyr for a generation.

Although, as Haeefele makes clear, Kennedy's USIA successfully engaged the issue of global opinion, the Kennedy era was not quite the golden age that some USIA sources - including the standard insider's account, Thomas Sorenson's *Word War* (New York, 1968) - would have us believe. As the recently declassified post mortem on the Bay of Pigs (FRUS, 1961-1963, Vol. X, Cuba, 1961-1962, doc. 231, Memo 1. Cuba Study Group to President, 13 June 1961), makes clear, Kennedy excluded USIA from the build up to the landings. Murrow knew of the plan only because Tad Szulc of the New York Times tipped off his deputy some two weeks before D-day. The director of VOA learned of the landings from his car radio on the way to work. Murrow's role in policy making over the Nuclear Testing and defoliant issues is an exception. Even there he is shaping rather than initiating a policy, and only to a limited degree. By September 1963 his frustration over the making of Vietnam policy had taken its toll. As his biographer A. M. Sperber notes, he began talks with ABC news towards a return to broadcasting. Then came the cancer that claimed first a lung and then his life.

Structurally, Kennedy neglected to make the director of USIA a fully mandated member of the NSC, and it was only in the Johnson years that the USIA staff moved from the Foreign Service Reserve to the same Foreign Service Officer structure enjoyed by the State Department. Yet Lyndon Johnson had far less time for the agency or its insights. Johnson's interests tended to focus on the issues that commanded his obsession. Telephone tape evidence reveals that he chose the African American journalist Carl Rowan to serve as his USIA director with one eye to impressing domestic Black opinion. During the Dominican Crisis of 1965 Johnson demanded agency Psychological Situation Reports several times a day, but he had less of an interest in the general work of the agency. He not only suspended the general polls but also requested that the weekly report on agency activity be down graded to bi-weekly. He was eager to use the agency as a tactical resource in Vietnam, but when Rowan's successor, his friend Leonard Marks, pointed out that the nation's global standing could only be saved by a withdrawal from Vietnam, he responded with rage. He cut off contact with Marks for an interval of some months.

Although Johnson was hostile to bad news from USIA, the Nixon administration seemed hostile to the agency as a whole. Nixon moved USIA reports to a 'by request only' basis and generally only asked for poll or press digests when he wished to gauge the response to a particular speech or piece of diplomatic grandstanding. Henry Kissinger effectively sidelined the agency director from the National Security Council, creating a special Siberia of a sub-committee for the purpose. An agency set in a Cold War paradigm could not prosper in the world of détente. Then came Watergate. The White House did not need USIA polls to know how the nation was faring in world opinion, but the willingness of the Voice of America to relate events to the world won plaudits for honesty at least.

The Ford and Carter administrations used the USIA to rebuild the damaged reputation of the United States in the aftermath of Vietnam and Watergate. The era saw what could be

compared to a national 'brand re-launching' of the United States in the bicentennial, Carter's human rights initiative and attempt to re-shape USIA into the International Communications Agency, with a new mandate to explain the outside world to Americans. In 1976 the charter governing the Voice of America acquired the status of law. At last 'the Voice' had an answer to the succession of Ambassadors, USIA directors and Presidents (including Murrow and Kennedy) who had sought to appropriate its airwaves as a blunt instrument of international propaganda.

Public opinion moved back to the top of the foreign policy agenda with the Reagan years and the USIA director returned to the NSC in full force, in the form of the irrepressible Charles Z. Wick. Like Leonard Marks, Wick possessed the great advantage of being a close friend of the President. Wick had the added advantage of serving a President who understood both the power and the limitations of communication. Reagan's USIA presents itself as the perfect window of the Second Cold War. The initiatives - support for Solidarity or the deployment of cruise missiles - are laid bare, as is the ideological struggle necessary to transform the gentle institution of the Ford and Carter era into a combat ready ideological powerhouse. Reaganism ploughed into the Voice of America and left a trail of angry resignation letters. Reagan's USIA also illuminates some of the unexpected issues of the time. Officials worked to combat the Soviet rumour that AIDS came from an army germ warfare experiment at Fort Detrick, Maryland; they also sought to harness the emerging commercial forces of media globalization. Charles Wick established what he called the International Council: a gathering in Washington DC of the five hundred richest industrialists, and most influential politicians in the western world hosted by the President at which the key US policy makers introduced their concerns for the future on issues like the end of the Cold War and the War on Drugs. Rupert Murdoch acted as master of ceremonies. The idea withered during the Bush years.

The end of the Cold War created an obvious crisis for USIA. Long standing agency claims to be a necessity of the Cold War left USIA as an obvious candidate source for the 'peace dividend' budget cuts. To this was added a further irony. The USIA had played a part in making the world 'safe' for free market capitalism, but it was not a free market institution. VOA found itself threatened by the ideology it had propagated, forever fielding criticisms in Congress that its work was now being done by CNN. The VOA director Geoff Cowan had a smart response to this: 'CNN is great if you speak English and live in a hotel.' But the budgets shrunk regardless.

The Agency played a key tactical role in the Gulf War, managing the strains within the coalition, and stepped into the breach to teach free enterprise to the former Soviet bloc. In both the Bush and Clinton eras the agency suffered from a weak director. Both presidents used that office to repay longstanding debts to old friends: Bruce Gelb in one case, Joseph Duffey in the other. Clinton was certainly aware of the problem of world opinion. He knew, for example, that the world resented the failure to the United States to pay its United Nations dues. The administration struck a deal with Senator Helms to release funds to clear this debt, but as the price of the deal agreed that the USIA should be re-absorbed into the State Department as of 31 September 1999.

As Haefele's work suggests, USIA remains a rich and largely untapped vein for historical analysis. The agency's input into high policy making is readily traceable at the Presidential libraries, and the National Archive post files hold a treasure trove of material on the role of USIA officers in 'country teams' around the world. The archives of the Fulbright program at the University of Arkansas promise their own illumination of the development of US cultural diplomacy. The work has only just begun.

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