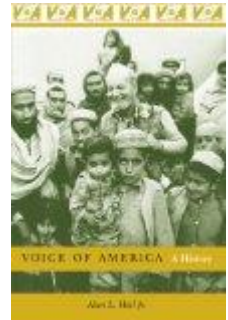


Alan L. Heil, Jr. *Voice of America: A History*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2003. xi + 538 pp. \$26.50, paper, ISBN 978-0-231-12675-5.



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Six Decades of Official Broadcasting

Alan Heil Jr. has a big story to tell in *Voice of America: A History*, a sprawling, well-reported work that covers in an engaging writing style the first sixty years of America's official overseas broadcasting service. The colorful personalities, technical achievements, fierce political battles and just plain fascinating stories that Heil covers, however, make for a long, sometimes unfocused book. It is important for the specialist, but does not give the non-specialist reader the definitive big picture of the Voice of America (VOA) that the title seems to promise.

There has not been a major institutional history of the Voice of America since the 1970s, when Robert Pirsein's *Voice of America: An History of the International Broadcasting Activities of the United States Government, 1942-1962* (1979) came out. Of course, other works have examined the VOA thematically or over short time periods—such as Laurien Alexandre's *Voice of America: From Détente to the Regan Doctrine* (1988). Others have looked at the VOA as one of several organizations broadcasting news and views to overseas audi-

ences, such as Michael Nelson's *War of the Black Heavens: The Battles of Western Broadcasting in the Cold War* (1997) or as part of the broader American propaganda effort. *Voice of America* builds on these and gives the reader a close-up look at the VOA's personal and institutional dynamics, especially from the 1970s onward.

In *Voice of America* Heil sees the VOA as essentially a news-gathering and broadcasting institution, not a diplomatic tool and not a propaganda agency. Although he acknowledges that the VOA has an obligation to explain America to the world, operating at "the crossroads of journalism and diplomacy," he clearly sees autonomous journalism as the best way to make America's case (p. 174). To a great degree this reflects Heil's own career in the VOA. After working as a journalist in the United States, he joined the VOA as a news writer trainee in 1962 and rose through the ranks before retiring in 1998 as deputy director. Heil's experiences gave him first-hand, insider knowledge and access to scores of current and former Voice staff, which results in a great deal of new in-

formation. But it also led him to an insular perspective. Ultimately, it is not only an institutional history, but also a personal one. As he writes in his introduction, his purpose is to "tell the story of America's Voice as I saw it" (p. 2).

The VOA's story starts in 1942. There had been other broadcasting ventures before American entry into World War II, but the official Voice of America debut came in February 1942 followed by a quick expansion and bureaucratic turf battles. With victory in 1945, the VOA lost its primary purpose, and much of its staff, funding, and facilities. But the Cold War rescued it from obscurity and after 1948 the service revived and by 1950 was flush with cash and expanding its overseas services. (It was barred by law from broadcasting within the United States.) As the money increased, so did the political pressure. The VOA did not escape the anti-Communist paranoia of those years, and Senator Joseph McCarthy used a series of drawn-out congressional hearings to claim subversive influence behind the VOA's technical and programming decisions. Although the charges were unfounded, it took until the mid-1960s for the Voice of America to recover from the McCarthy "debacle," according to Heil (p. 58).

Problems with McCarthy highlighted in an extreme form one of the dominant themes in *Voice of America*--the battle between journalistic values and institutional autonomy on one hand, and political and diplomatic demands on the other. U.S. politicians and diplomats often saw the service as a tool to put over policies, and objected when VOA journalists seemed to undercut it with their reporting. But the American journalists working for the central program services (News and Current Affairs) continually pushed for more independence and high standards of objectivity and balance--the commonly accepted ideal for professional journalism in the United States. Their victory came with the Voice of America charter, which emphasized traditional journalistic norms while acknowledging the need to represent Amer-

ica and official policy. The charter was written in 1960 and became law in 1976. This obviously did not represent the last word on independence. U.S. embassies frequently tried to micromanage VOA staff in their areas, and officials and politicians in Washington tried on occasion to steer the VOA's coverage, commentary, and tone. These disputes intensified during times of crisis, such as the 1991 Gulf War and the 2001 Afghanistan War.

The VOA's finest hours came in 1989 with the fall of Communist power in Eastern Europe and the democracy movement in China. The success in Europe was a ratification of decades of VOA work at telling the truth, and telling it accurately, according to the politicians, dissidents, and experts whom Heil quotes at length. One Eastern European compared life in the Communist bloc to living underwater, and the VOA and other western broadcasters to the reed tubes that let them breathe: "Without them, the entire people would have suffocated" (p. 237). In China the VOA intensively reported the democracy movement and expanded its services to broadcast that information back to an information-hungry Chinese audience. Listeners responded with fierce enthusiasm (p. 13). When Chinese authorities began jamming the VOA signals and when Chinese media put out disinformation on the June 3-4 massacre of the pro-democracy protestors, the VOA responded with additional broadcast signals and stepped up accurate reporting. In the following months the VOA built on its record and continued to expand and improve the Chinese service.

The VOA faced many additional challenges over the years, and Heil covers most of them.

Readers curious about the technical issues involved in a global broadcasting system will find their meat in chapter 5, in which Heil describes the development and operation of global short-wave network--and the "jamming" activities of its adversaries--from North Carolina to the Gulf of Guinea to Volgograd, Russia.

Issues of language were never far away for the VOA, which in 2002 was broadcasting in more than fifty languages. In 1959 the VOA pioneered a drastically simplified, slower, and non-idiomatic "Special English" to make reception easier and more intelligible for foreign listeners. Many listeners learned English this way (pp. 274-279). The VOA has also wrestled with precision in translation and the difficulty of conveying the right meaning when there is no equivalent word in a foreign language (pp. 279-287).

And music was always a key part of the mix. Through the early decades, the freedom the VOA sought to present was embodied by American jazz, and long-serving host Willis Conover. But the Voice of America dabbled in country, explored a wide variety of indigenous music, and gave listeners contemporary pop as well (pp. 288-301).

Heil's VOA experience and perspective are mixed blessing for the book. He participated in much of the history he chronicles and has been able to draw on his memory, transcripts, documents, and the recollections of scores of current and former VOA employees—he conducted more than seventy-five interviews in preparation for the book. This gives *Voice of America* a comprehensive feel and an intimate tone, and highlights the role of people in the large bureaucratic organization. It is one thing to say that VOA leadership fought intense pressure to run a controversial interview with Taliban leader Mullah Omar weeks after September 11, 2001. Heil does that, but then adds the newsroom scene the day after the broadcast when "journalists at every desk rose to their feet and gave their leaders a standing ovation" (p. 415). He has highlighted the fascinating stories of VOA staff, especially those who came to the foreign language services through harrowing adventures. For example, sisters Isabela and Zamira Ismali escaped Stalinist Albania in 1984 by swimming away into the sea. Within three years they were broadcasting to their homeland for VOA's Albanian service (pp. 400-403). Heil emphasizes the

continued relevance of cheap, portable shortwave radio in a multimedia age. He quotes one VOA leader: "CNN can be seen in hotel lobbies; V.O.A. can be heard in refugee camps" (p. 429). The author also understands and relates how the VOA was frequently the victim, or beneficiary, of political infighting on Capitol Hill or within the Department of State.

But the insider perspective sometimes gives an insular tone to *Voice of America*—the VOA newsroom and its dedicated, freedom-loving journalists are at the center of this story. Things that directly affect them get disproportionate attention. Heil devotes dozens of pages to congressional maneuvering and legal intricacies over the decades concerning the VOA's place in the bureaucratic structure, and the level of independence it was (or was not) granted. Great anecdotes about VOA staff, and from intensely grateful listeners, abound nearly to the point of overkill. In addition, the clear success of VOA in the late 1980s and early 1990s—when it was influential in the fall of Communism in Europe and the democracy movement in China—permeates much of the book's tone, giving a triumphalist feel to the narrative.

Heil presents a great deal of important and interesting information, but the packaging takes away more than it adds from the book. The mix of chronological and thematic chapters generally works well, but the chapters themselves are organized too loosely; the author breaks up the text with frequent subheads and sometimes seems to strain to find meaningful connections among the disparate elements. One chapter links the coverage of the 1969 moon landing with the 1989 fall of Communism in Europe; both were widely covered events but had little else in common. Another strains to link the author's coverage of the 1967 Six-Day War from Egypt with the broader issues of the 1990-91 Persian Gulf War. Some of the other chapters also have a cobbled-together feel, albeit, often with very interesting stories. The extensive use of subheads, long quotations, boxed text, and

bullet points exacerbates the reader's sense of fragmentation. In moderation all can be quite useful--giving the reader a break and highlighting especially poignant or important material. But eventually Heil goes overboard. Lengthy quotes--twenty to thirty lines and longer--and boxes of text within the text leaves the reader feeling distracted rather than informed.

Voice of America is an important contribution to the history of international broadcasting and a well-written potpourri of interesting information, but it is not the definitive book on the broadcast service. It is, as Heil states in the introduction, the history of the VOA as he saw it.

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