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STEPS TOWARD  
AN ADEQUATE  
U.S. OVERSEAS  
*Information*  
*Program*

by EDWARD L. BERNAYS

JULY  
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STEPS TOWARD

# AN ADEQUATE U.S. OVERSEAS *Information Program*

by EDWARD L. BERNAYS

RECENT demonstrations against the United States in Paris, Beirut, Rangoon, Jakarta, Algiers, Tokyo and South America have focused intense public interest on the overseas information activities of the United States. Many in and out of government are reappraising the program's part in our foreign relations.

Four years ago some thirty of us in the public opinion field formed a committee to advance America's overseas information program. We chose the name "National Committee for an Adequate Overseas U.S. Information Program." Admittedly cumbersome, it described our intentions. The word "adequate," particularly, conveyed the difficulties the U.S. faces in its overseas information program. Realistically, we could work only for an "adequate" program. This limitation stems from the nature of our free, highly developed, democratic society and from other causes. Many complex and diverse problems must be solved if we are to make progress—problems semantic, historical, ideological, practical, technological, organizational, political, economic, human and otherwise.

With all the difficulties, I am surprised we are doing as well as we are—a by no means adequate performance. Only a revolution in the thinking and action of the American people will improve those aspects of the operation which can be improved. Nothing should be permitted to stand in the way of such improvement. An examination of the problems may help the American people to understand them better and to make a start toward betterment.

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### Problem Number One

Problem number one deals with semantics. We call the activity "overseas information." We do not mean overseas information alone. We mean a program to influence people's opinion and attitudes in support of the United States through the planned distribution of facts and ideas. Congress and the Executive Branch of the government in the last decades have not come to grips with this reality behind the nomenclature.

Uncertainty about nomenclature has prevailed since the Committee on Public Information first undertook such activity in World War I. In World War II, as in World War I, despite vital national need, odium attached to those who did this work. When later we adopted propaganda as a peacetime effort, as a normal part of our U.S. diplomatic relations and foreign policy, we still had compunctions about the ethics and propriety of trying to influence foreign peoples, and whether our government should use a weapon nowhere mentioned in the Constitution. We assuaged our sense of guilt by calling what we did information. Giving out factual truth or information was part of the democratic doctrine. It relieved us of moral responsibility in trying to influence other people. Yet social science has found that one man's truth may be another man's untruth.

For our national purpose facts are facts and truth is only truth when they are accepted by others. Of course, we as a nation must be concerned in using only truth. But to make the truth meaningful and acceptable to those to whom it is projected, we must use it effectively. Fuzziness exists as to what this instrumentality we call U.S. overseas information really is. The Administration, Congress, the Agency and our people are obfuscated about the operation. Those at whom we aim our activities are aware of its purposes.

### What Should Be Accomplished?

A second problem is overcoming ignorance of Administration, Congress and the people as to what such activity can accomplish. Often accomplishments are expected that are outside its scope. In 1954 a report of the Royal Commission of Enquiry into the Overseas Information Services of Great Britain assessed the value, actual and potential, of overseas information. Its conclusions, based on the sheer weight of evidence, found overseas information played an *essential* role in the foreign policy of England and other great powers. The Commission said, "... a modern government has to concern itself with public opinion abroad and be properly equipped to deal with it ... information services must today be regarded

as part of the normal apparatus of diplomacy of a great power." It pointed out that "propaganda is no substitute for policy or for military strength, economic efficiency or financial stability" and that it is as easy to under-rate the potentialities of such a program as to overrate them. The effect on the course of events of such a program is never likely to be more than marginal, it said, but "may be decisive in tipping the balance between diplomatic success and failure."

These conclusions, yet unrecognized by many of our policy makers, apply with equal force to our own overseas information services. At Congressional appropriations hearings a Congressman will ask why money is needed for activity in a country where the U.S. position has deteriorated due to a force majeure of events. Overseas information is not regarded as a normal continuing function of foreign relations. It is often thought of only as an ad hoc innovation to fight Communism in the cold war.

### Increased Support

A third problem is how to increase Congressional and our people's support. Congress' support is proportionate to the people's, a truism of representative government. Our young country places reliance on material strength, neglecting reliance on ideas, in international relations as in education. Ignorance, suspicion, skepticism and fear of overseas information intensify this negative attitude. Our experience has conditioned us to abhor propaganda: the German prior to World War I, the Communist of the Bolsheviks during and after World War I, Hitler's world-wide propaganda, Mussolini's fascist, Japanese co-existence propaganda in World War II, and the ever-rising tides of Communist propaganda today. We are concerned lest our own government use this tool to try to control the minds of men here. We fear the possibility of a breakdown of the competition of ideas in the democratic market place of ideas, though we don't seem to mind commercial advertising propaganda.

Our moralistic viewpoint that propaganda is not truth militates against our support of the overseas information program. And we cannot understand why there should be one Voice of America when our tradition always calls for many voices.

People who support an overseas information program often do so for the wrong reasons—that people overseas become our friends if they know us better; that the more we communicate, the better the results; that information serves the function of persuasion; and that gifts make friends.

A fourth problem is that of making our national policymaking leaders more aware of the importance of shaping their foreign policy deeds in

ways to affect foreign attitudes favorably. The propaganda impact of the substance, timing and method of government foreign policy is important. What our government does is always more important than what it says. A goodwill tour that turns into an ill will tour is unsound foreign policy and poor propaganda.

A fifth problem is to make Americans aware that what happens in this country shapes attitudes of foreigners toward us. Foreign policy begins at home. We as a nation are judged by the attitudes and acts of our people in relation to the national ideals we profess. News flashed to the world of an Indian ambassador mistreated in a Texan airport because of his color or a Pakistanian diplomatic corps member arrested as a gypsy in a Westchester suburb may be more potent in conditioning foreign attitudes than foreign policy statements of a Secretary of State. Little Rock, a *Confidential* trial and bombings of Negro homes and Jewish synagogues in the South play their parts in our losing prestige in other parts of the world.

A sixth problem is determination of the content of our messages. We must know what we want to communicate. What is the America we want to project? Is it the America of the conservative or progressive; of long-hair artists or of comics and rock and roll; is it urban or rural; technological or idealistic? How should our unresolved controversial issues be treated, whether of reciprocal trade treaties or international policy? And what criteria should govern content that may be critical of the Administration in office, Congress or other powerful interests? Granted the program is nonpartisan and objective, by what criteria are ideas and facts to be chosen and presented from the welter of ideas around us? Multiple truths vie for attention. Which shall be selected? Research may answer the question as to the kind of information that has impact and on whom. We still have to decide on content policy. Certainly, dynamic ideas like those of Thomas Jefferson, Woodrow Wilson and other great American leaders have a place on any program. And it is obvious that the organization carrying out policy should be independent, free of politics, red tape and bureaucracy.

#### **A Balanced Picture of U. S.**

A seventh problem is shaping the program to present a balanced picture of the U. S. Most people get their image of the United States through private commercial communications channels. News media, American and foreign, radio and press, present us to the world in symbols that do not necessarily present a balanced image. A deviant happening in Kentucky or

Wyoming may, through distribution by wire, radio, mail or word of mouth, affect our country's reputation in Iraq. Unofficial voices from America constantly affect the changing image the minds of men get of us—movies, books, comics, our products wherever used, over a million tourists a year abroad, a half million American residents abroad, and the members of our government personnel abroad, military and civilian. The members of the foreign diplomatic corps here and the impression of America that foreign students and travellers bring back to their homelands affect our prestige. Activities of American private overseas information agencies play a part: Radio Free Europe to satellite countries and Radio Liberation into Russia. Any official U.S. agency has the almost impossible task of trying to keep the image of the U.S. well defined and balanced, in competition with these myriad other impacts on foreign people, but without duplication.

An eighth problem is that of resolving competition of official propagandas of our allies with our program. No coordinated approach has been worked out between our official Agency and those of our friends. At times, when there is a difference of policy between us and our allies, we may become the target.

#### **Obtaining Qualified Personnel**

A ninth problem is how to get the best possible personnel into the Agency, from administrator down through the ranks. Administrators have been appointed who were not the best qualified men available for the job. Men from advertising, news magazines, diplomacy, higher education and the business side of broadcasting have headed the program. Naturally, they did the best they could. Often it was not good enough. No one may be the perfect man and have all the requisite qualifications. But certainly a lifetime of executive and administrative practice in the arts of persuasion would appear to be a prerequisite. He should certainly be an intellectual with respect for the social sciences—cultural anthropology, sociology, public opinion, etc. He should certainly be versed in foreign affairs, a diplomat and politician in the broadest sense. He must be imaginative and courageous. The Administrator is not always chosen because of his fitness for the job.

Equally difficult problems are involved with the ten thousand individuals in the organization. Status and tenure are uncertain today. There is no independent career service. Many staff members have only limited qualifications. A recent report of the U.S. Advisory Commission on Information states: "... certain areas are understaffed while others may well be overstaffed. Greater critical attention should be given to the Agency's



personnel policies and practices, as well as to the quality and quantity of the personnel itself." The report finds weaknesses in training, particularly in language training. "The Commission strongly re-states its belief in the necessity for a long-range training program for Agency personnel." Practical-minded administrators shy away from "intellectuals" and do not harness the knowledge of social scientists and of area and communications experts to the activity.

### **The Role of Research**

A tenth problem is research. In this pioneering work, continuing thorough research into area and political conditions, human behavior and output is a prerequisite. A pig in a poke is no international bargain. Research can help define the Agency activities, what we say, whom it reaches, under whose auspices it should be said. Research can help define the nature of the best interpersonal contacts, the tone of the message, the part the fight against communism should play, the media to be used and the program's effectiveness. Research can help define the assumptions on which the Agency proceeds. We must be sure the assumptions on which we are working are proven assumptions, if possible; that all work in accord with them. At present in the Agency many staff members often make their own assumptions without regard to their proven validity. If there were comprehensive research, the Agency and thousands of people in it would know the assumptions they were working on, were valid.

Some research is carried on. The program, social scientists maintain, calls for a much more comprehensive research.

Policies decided on after research should be clearly stated and made applicable to all people in the Agency concerned with them. When there is inadequate research, consistency in practice should prevail.

### **Needed New Facilities**

Problem eleven is providing adequate physical facilities for the transmission of our messages. Needed facilities in radio include the improvement of present equipment and additional facilities, to meet Communist propaganda efforts. Television facilities and activities need long-range expansion, so essential in the envisioned world-wide TV communications network. According to the latest U.S. Advisory Commission on Information report, "... the Agency has been unable to develop an imaginative and constructive TV program" and "... to use effectively a powerful new medium that is gradually spreading around the world, namely, TV."

Problem twelve is how a democratic overseas information activity can most effectively counter the monolithic propaganda of Soviet Russia. Their

attacks on us are based on falsifications, distortion and deception. Their accusations confuse the world and weaken our prestige.

Totalitarian Soviet Russia coordinates deed and words at top level to carry out national policy. The Central Committee of the Russian Communist Party works with Agitprop, the planning group immediately beneath it. Foreign policy and propaganda programs are decided on to affect the attitudes and actions of people throughout the world. Soviet Russia adds censorship, a controlled press, lies and double-dealing as instruments of national policy.

### **How Communists Function**

Communist parties and Communist fronts carry forward the Communist line on a world-wide basis, among them 40 international front organizations, including trade unions, teachers', lawyers', scientists' and women's groups. Many publications, newspapers, picture magazines, books are sold at low prices; exhibits and trade fairs are held. Travels of artists, scientists and technical experts propagandize the Communist doctrine. Soviet Russia is run as a propaganda apparatus, with 375,000 propagandists full time, according to a Senate Foreign Relations Committee report; with 2,100,000 part-time propagandists and with 7,000 Soviet newspapers as part of the domestic machinery. The budget is estimated to be several billion dollars. This is tough competition, aided by economic penetration and political subversion and other weapons in the cold war.

Problem thirteen is how to assure the U.S. an enlarged, stable and continuing budget to cope with its overseas needs. Some experts believe the budget should be a billion dollars, ten times the present amount spent. A billion dollars is a small sum for the insurance values such a program offers. One company, Unilever, spent £83,000,000, approximately \$232,000,000 in advertising last year, communicating with 1,800,000,000 consumers in the free world. We are trying to reach about 1,000,000,000 more people.

Congress does not reflect a continuing planned informed approach in appropriating funds. A timid administration that fears the antagonism of individual Congressmen may lower its budgetary requests, beyond a necessary minimum. A Senator McCarthy makes the Agency a whipping boy and can cripple it for a time.

### **Present Size of USIA**

The Congress appropriated some \$100 million last year for the United States Information Agency. It has 10,000 personnel, with information missions in 79 countries and a total of 193 information service posts; 155 Information Centers in 64 countries; 77 Binational Centers in 25 countries; radio transmitters at 7 locations in the United States and at 10 over-

seas locations; motion pictures—about 1,100 program films in USIS film libraries, 2,542,275 books in USIS libraries, of which 1,764,191 are in English and 778,084 in translations; 22 bookmobiles; 68 magazines or editions of magazines produced abroad—18 in English and 50 in foreign languages. The Agency also produces two English and one foreign language publications in the United States for overseas use. The Agency has complete radio teletype facilities at 79 posts for receiving the Agency's wireless file; and has 225 exhibits of a permanent nature. With these resources, human and mechanical, it is trying to do a job in the broader frame of reference we have outlined.

The conduct of our foreign policy is so complex that no one individual, no matter how potent, can effect overnight change to solve the solvable problems.

In a democracy, fortunately, this condition is subject to change if public understanding and support can be aroused. Public understanding and support is a prerequisite to an adequate U.S. overseas information program. We know the thoughts and actions that guide our people in respect to overseas information cannot be changed overnight. We need public reorientation. That takes time. But enlightened men and women can help improve the situation.

### **A First Step**

As a first step, they can urge Congressional hearings by the Senate Foreign Relations or the House Foreign Affairs Committee to give public visibility to the issue to develop serious understanding of the issue. Experts would give testimony on the scope and function of the Agency and the problems it faces. Then democratic processes would be put in motion to cope with them.

A great voluntary national group comparable to the American Association for the Advancement of Science might arise from such hearings to support a continuing educational and information program.

Other voluntary bodies, like the Foreign Policy Association, The League of Women Voters, World Affairs Councils could be enlisted to use the great channels of public information and education to inform and educate the public and its leaders.

Nationwide interest would resolve many of the problems discussed. The semantic difficulties would be clarified. The objective would be defined to the Administration, Congress and the people alike. The support of Congress and the people would be ensured. Policy makers in their foreign policy actions would give greater attention to propaganda considerations. We

would learn that foreign policies begin at home. Content of a program would be defined as a result of debate and discussion.

### **Use of Private Channels**

The ideas, news and facts that flow from America to other countries through private channels would, of course, continue. More balanced presentation should result from heightened responsibility of media. There would be little difficulty in cooperation and adjustment with friendly countries. Public understanding and support should ensure that organization and execution of information, policy and strategy is at a high level. Recognition of program importance should trade up the personnel of the Agency. Educational facilities to train recruits and ensure them adequate rewards, status and tenure would be stimulated. Social scientists would participate in such a program.

Public understanding would ensure from Congress enlarged budgets, continuous and stable, and the provision of enlarged technological facilities. And we would have a more potent and efficient organization to meet false Soviet promises and pronouncements.

An official United States overseas information agency is vital under today's and tomorrow's foreseeable world. Problems to be overcome will not be solved quickly or completely. The Agency's effectiveness will always depend on how sound our national policies are. International persuasion is only one of the instruments of national policy. It must be coordinated with the highest policies and actions of our government. If international persuasion were based on clearly defined, sound national policy and backed by Congress and the people, results would obviously be more effective. Everyone interested in our survival can play a part in stimulating the public and private action to bring this about.