



# **How Trump's obsessions with media and loyalty coalesced in a battle for Voice of America**

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On Monday, President Trump's long-deferred pick to head the U.S. Agency for Global Media finally started work after a bruising, two-year Senate confirmation battle.

By the end of Wednesday, Michael Pack had achieved a clean sweep of the top offices of every division he oversees — including venerable news outlets like Voice of America and Radio Free Europe.

The swift purge of former appointees has increased the worry among Democrats and press freedom advocates that the Trump administration is attempting to gain control over an independent but federally funded media organization with among the largest audiences in the world. On its own, the Voice of America delivers television and radio programs to 236.6 million people — and in some countries dominated by state media, it is the only free and unshackled news source.

“USAGM's role as an unbiased news organization is in jeopardy,” Rep. Eliot L. Engel (D-N.Y.), who chairs the Foreign Affairs Committee, said Wednesday in a statement. Pack, he added, “needs to understand that USAGM is not the Ministry of Information.”

Yet the machinations of recent weeks also epitomize Trump's knack for turning a relatively obscure issue or backwater agency into fodder for a culture war — with little more than a tweet.

The president first nominated Pack, who is in his mid-60s, for the USAGM job in 2018. Pack is revered in Republican circles as something of a unicorn — a documentary filmmaker with solid conservative credentials (he served as president of the Claremont Institute, a prominent think tank) who could also make PBS-quality work. His projects have included “God and the Inner City,” about three faith-based

organizations; a film on the 1994 Republican takeover of Congress; and an appreciative documentary about the life of Clarence Thomas, featuring extensive interviews with the Supreme Court justice.

Pack was recommended for the post by Stephen K. Bannon, the co-founder of the far-right Breitbart News who later served as senior counselor to Trump.

“He’s my guy, and I pushed him hard,” said Bannon in an interview. The two met a decade earlier while working on an Iraq War documentary, “The Last 600 Meters.” Bannon believed that the U.S. media agencies should be “on point” with the administration’s foreign policy, especially in confronting Chinese communist officials.

But Democrats held up the Pack confirmation — in part because of allegations under investigation by the District of Columbia’s attorney general that a nonprofit organization Pack ran diverted funds to his production company. Pack had also served a short tenure as a senior vice president at the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, where he was part of a controversial push to add more conservative programming, such as PBS shows for Tucker Carlson and Paul Gigot, the editorial page editor of the Wall Street Journal.

Pack’s nomination languished, with Republican leaders such as Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell more focused on getting conservatives confirmed for federal judgeships than little-known agency posts. Meanwhile, despite Trump’s obsession with the media, there was little reason for the news products of Voice of America and its sister organizations — all aimed at an overseas audience — to land on his radar.

But this spring, two factions of Trumpworld converged to place Pack’s nomination front and center.

China hawks — such as Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and White House trade adviser Peter Navarro — have long had VOA in their sights and recently chafed at elements of VOA’s coronavirus coverage that did not align with their own campaign to demonize China’s role in the pandemic, according to people familiar with their views who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss internal conversations. (Voice of America was among the topics Pompeo raised in his meeting with his Chinese counterpart Yang Jiechi in Hawaii this week, according to a person familiar with the discussions.)

Meanwhile, Trump’s White House staff — notably former acting director of national intelligence Richard Grenell and John McEntee, head of the Presidential Personnel Office — saw a moment to call attention to one of the last held-up nominations by appealing to the president’s concern for loyalty in his ranks, these people said.

Trump’s anger about the delay in Pack’s nomination was “a confluence of two things — the loyalists and the hard-liners,” Bannon said. And Trump had some heightened awareness of VOA because of tough questions he had fielded at coronavirus press briefings from its White House correspondent Steven L. Herman. In April, Vice President Pence’s office threatened to retaliate against Herman, who disclosed that Pence’s staff had told journalists they would need masks for a visit to the Mayo Clinic, undermining Karen Pence’s claim that her husband failed to wear a mask because he did not know about the policy.

In April, Bannon lashed out publicly at Voice of America and its former director. “Amanda Bennett should be fired today. She’s a running dog for the Chinese Communist Party,” he said on his podcast. Bennett, who enjoyed a long career at the Wall Street Journal, the Philadelphia Inquirer and Bloomberg before joining VOA, declined to comment.

That same month, the White House went on the offensive. In a stunning statement, the White House accused VOA of promoting “foreign propaganda” because of stories that suggested China’s Wuhan lockdown had achieved some success in stemming the virus’s spread; the statement also blasted VOA for tweeting a video of the Chinese government’s light show celebrating the end of the shutdown. Trump’s social media director, Dan Scavino, tweeted a similar slam on VOA. A week later, Trump himself called VOA “disgusting” during a press briefing. “We have never promoted propaganda for anyone,” Bennett told The Washington Post at the time. “We cover stories from all different sides. That’s part of the reason we are so trusted by people around the world.”

A spokeswoman for the Voice of America referred questions to the Agency for Global Media. A representative for the agency did not respond to specific questions but later put out a statement about Pack’s transition.

Conservatives have long viewed public broadcasting with suspicion. In 1995, Newt Gingrich, then speaker of the House, called it “this little sandbox for the rich” which was supported by “a small group of elitists who want to tax all the American people so they get to spend the money.”

But Trump’s antipathy toward the media and his willingness to take punitive action against his critics within the government have caused Democrats to see his push to get Pack appointed as particularly ominous.

Pack started the job more than a week after his June 4 Senate confirmation, in part because he wanted to have his new office swept for bugging devices, said two people with knowledge of the agency’s inner

workings, who spoke on the condition of anonymity out of fears of retribution.

Trump's 'ask China' response to CBS's Weijia Jiang shocked the room — and was part of a pattern

Surprisingly, the agency heads fired by Pack on Wednesday included two Trump appointees — Alberto M. Fernandez, who headed Middle East Broadcasting Networks, and Jamie Fly, who headed Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. Also dismissed were the directors of Radio Free Asia and the Office of Cuba Broadcasting. VOA Director Bennett and Deputy Director Sandy Sugawara resigned in anticipation of the moves that Pack was expected to make; as did Libby Liu of the Open Technology Fund.

On his podcast Thursday, Bannon exulted over Pack's confirmation and first-week personnel moves, saying he had "accomplished in one day what people have been trying to do for 15 years," in purging directors that Bannon's allies perceive as too soft on China.

Lawmakers on Thursday blasted Pack for the firings, as well as a move to disband advisory boards for each of the agency's divisions with plans to replace them with his own aides.

Sen. Robert Menendez (N.J.), the ranking Democrat on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, said Pack was "hollowing out" the agency to appoint new managers he could control — a move he said would "undermine its historic role" and independence. He called the firings "an egregious breach of this organization's history and mission from which it may never recover."

Michael J. Abramowitz, president of Freedom House, which monitors and encourages democratic movements and institutions around the world, warned that "illiberal leaders abroad" take careful note

of restrictions placed on news outlets in the United States and may follow the Trump administration's example by cracking down on VOA or other news organizations in their own countries. "The United States should be an exemplar, not a detractor, of press freedom around the world," he said.

Pack's team clapped back at critics late Thursday in a news release complaining about "obstructionism" that held up his nomination. In a highly unusual move, it also indirectly disparaged prior leadership, by vowing to eradicate "the known mismanagement and scandals that have plagued the agency for decades." The statement, though, did not explain or describe the scandals it was referring to.

In a particularly vivid passage, the news release portrayed staff as greeting Pack's introductory message "with an overwhelmingly positive response" and provided some pointed examples:

"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.'"

None of the agency staffers quoted were named in the news release.

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/media/how-trumps-obsessions-with-media-and-loyalty-coalesced-in-a-battle-for-voice-of-america/2020/06/19/f57dcfe0-b1b1-11ea-8758-bfd1d045525a\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/media/how-trumps-obsessions-with-media-and-loyalty-coalesced-in-a-battle-for-voice-of-america/2020/06/19/f57dcfe0-b1b1-11ea-8758-bfd1d045525a_story.html)