



Trump appointee launches assault on Voice of America, affiliates

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The bodies continue to pile up at the nation's government-funded but editorially independent news services, raising fears that they will soon become a propaganda arm of the Trump administration.

If that happens, the loss of credibility to a 78-year-old effort to bring straight news to people around the world where it is often in short supply, will be immeasurable.

The respected Voice of America and its affiliates, including Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and Radio Free Asia, are all part of the US Agency for Global Media, which this month came under the leadership of Trump appointee Michael Pack. Pack is a conservative filmmaker and ally of former Trump strategist Steve Bannon with whom he has done several film projects.

The global news service, which operates in 47 languages and employs more than 1,100 journalists, was founded in 1942 to tell "America's story," but to do it free of government interference, to always observe the "firewall" that separates news from propaganda — a firewall that is at the heart of independent journalism.

Senate Democrats skeptical about Pack's commitment to that mission — and concerned about a still-pending investigation of his business dealings by the attorney general of the District of Columbia, managed to hold up his confirmation for nearly two years. This April, however, the White House turned up the heat, berating the Voice of America for being pro-China in its coverage of the coronavirus outbreak there. President Trump personally entered the fray May 15 saying,

“Voice of America is run in a terrible manner. They’re not the Voice of America. They’re the opposite of the Voice of America.” Senate Republicans got the message and pushed through Pack’s confirmation.

By Monday VOA Director Amanda Bennett and Deputy Director Sandy Sugawara had resigned, telling staffers that Pack “has the right to replace us with his own VOA leadership.” Bennett is a former editor of the Philadelphia Inquirer and a two-time Pulitzer Prize winner.

Bannon celebrated by telling the Washington Times, “Now patriots can begin the process of cleaning up the mess she leaves behind.”

That foretells a horrifying reality about the new agenda at VOA and its affiliates.

In his Wednesday memo to staff, Pack insisted, “I am fully committed to honoring VOA’s charter, the missions of the grantees, and the independence of our heroic journalists around the world.”

By Wednesday night, the heads of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, the Open Technology Fund, Middle East Broadcasting, and Radio Free Asia, were gone. CNN quoted a source saying the head of the Open Technology Fund, which helps support a free and open Internet, had resigned effective in July but was fired Wednesday anyway.

Another Bannon ally, Jeffrey Shapiro, was expected to take over the Office of Cuba Broadcasting. And conservative talk show host Sebastian Gorka was also reported to be in the running for a VOA post or membership of the agency’s governing board.

Senator Bob Menendez, ranking Democrat on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, said in a statement issued Wednesday night, “The wholesale firing of the agency’s network heads, and disbanding of

corporate boards to install President Trump's political allies is an egregious breach of this organization's history and mission from which it may never recover."

The latter, of course, is the truly troubling part. VOA reaches some 280 million people in 60 countries — many of them places where free and independent media are virtually unknown.

A congressional inquiry is surely be in order to determine if VOA will continue to abide by its charter which demands it "serve as a consistently reliable and authoritative source of news. VOA news will be accurate, objective, and comprehensive."

Taxpayers deserve to know whether the \$637 million in funds the agency is looking for will pay for something they can be proud of, or whether this once respected news service is becoming an international Trump News Network.

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