



## **The Public Diplomacy Council**

# **FY 2008 International Broadcast Funding at a Critical Crossroads**

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## **FY 2008 International Broadcast Funding At a Critical Crossroads**

### **A Public Diplomacy Council consensus strongly recommends that the U.S. Senate**

1. Reaffirm the House of Representatives' commendable reversal in House Report 110-197 and HR 2764 of the Broadcasting Board of Governors FY 08 plans to: a) abolish Voice of America worldwide English radio broadcasts and b) eliminate or reduce 13 other VOA languages, as well as eight languages at Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and Radio Free Asia.
2. Increase the total FY 08 appropriation for U.S. international broadcasting from \$668 million to \$694 million to restore all core services as recommended by a bipartisan group of 11 former VOA directors earlier this year.

**Background:** For the past 65 years, VOA has been the nation's only official worldwide overseas broadcast network. Today, it reaches 115 million listeners and viewers around the globe each week, in addition to millions of readers via its websites in 45 languages. Since the end of World War II, English, the predominant language of the United States and of world diplomacy, trade and communications, has been VOA's flagship broadcast service. Over the past five years, however, the worldwide English radio service has been substantially reduced from around the clock to only 14 hours daily. Critical VOA English programming to the Middle East, Europe, and Latin America has disappeared, as have several of the relay stations that delivered it. Under the latest FY 08 cuts recommended by the BBG, the English service would vanish altogether. Only a residual stream of highly targeted English programming to Africa would remain, along with a few hours daily of limited-vocabulary Special English. Under the proposed cuts, six other VOA languages would be abolished outright and nine more would have their schedules reduced, some retaining only small TV units. At RFE/RL, there would be reductions in six services. RFA would lose one service and face reductions in another.

Fortunately, the House has recognized that despite program expansions to Muslim countries, these cuts would in effect gut the nation's overseas broadcasting capability nearly everywhere else. For that reason, the Council urges the Senate to enhance the House's commendable \$15.7 million restoration of VOA core services by adding \$10 million more. This would:

- a) renew VOA's classic role as an honest reflector of trustworthy and accurate news and analysis, and conveyor of American ideals and policies as well as policy debates
- b) preserve the vital place of RFE/RL and RFA as respected news sources to societies they reach
- c) pave the way for restoration of VOA's Arabic service recommended by this Council and the Council on Foreign Relations and for retaining VOA Russian on radio (not included in the House reversals) and
- d) provide additional resources to restore vital program development, news gathering and transmission support cut at VOA since 2002.

## **Rationale:**

\*Crises in Iraq, Iran, North Korea and the Middle East dominate the foreign policy and public diplomacy of our country. The Council endorses the Board's decision to implement national priorities in the post 9/11 period by investing more in languages of countries where Muslims are a majority. However, it urges that other strategic regions not be denied information via radio, television and the Internet vital to long range American interests. Our nation must be a significant player in the 21<sup>st</sup> century marketplace of ideas.

\*Eleven former VOA directors serving in administrations from Dwight Eisenhower to George W. Bush have appealed for cancellation of the cuts at the Voice described above. Among them is Sanford J. Ungar, who says abolishing VOA English would be "absolutely absurd." He asks: "Would Radio Russia ever stop broadcasting in Russian or Radio France International cancel programs in French?"

\*Ironically, China, Russia, France, Iran and a leading Arabic channel, Al Jazeera, have all *expanded* their English services to 24/7 on radio, TV or the Internet. English is an official language in 74 countries and more than a billion people worldwide speak it.

\*Continuation of VOA Russian on radio is essential. The Kremlin has cracked down on independent media, and has signaled it may soon ban all foreign relays on in-country networks. Alternative ways of reaching people there are being snuffed out daily.

\*VOA and RL have distinctly different content in their programs to the former Soviet Union. RL is a respected surrogate in reporting and analyzing events there. VOA provides regional, world and U.S. news as well as Western scientific and cultural programming to Eurasia. The two networks' schedules do not overlap. The Committee to Protect Journalists rates Russia as the third most dangerous country in the world for journalists. In China, more reporters are jailed than in any other nation.

## **The Public Diplomacy Council's proposed solution:**

For FY 08, expand funding as described above to ensure an accurate reflection of American perspectives to substantial numbers of listeners and viewers who otherwise would be lost. For FY 09 and beyond, mandate a minimum operational benchmark at VOA (say 60%) for preservation and multimedia enhancement of core programs (central news and operations, English radio and other U.N. official languages, and those critical to the national interest.) The annual outlay for VOA should be not less than \$200 million, adjusted for inflation after FY 09. The idea: to invest sufficiently in, and restore functional stability to, the one element of public diplomacy that can reach millions of people at a time more effectively than any other.

*The nonpartisan Public Diplomacy Council consists of 80 veteran professionals and scholars who advocate strengthening of the nation's overseas information, cultural and educational programs.*