

## Restoring the Voice of America after a Trump ‘wrecking ball’ won’t be easy. But it’s worth saving.

By **Margaret Sullivan**

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When Sanford Ungar visited a small village in Bangladesh as the Voice of America director two decades ago, he wore a tiny lapel pin that featured a microphone and the letters “VOA.”

The villagers who saw it overflowed with appreciation, he recalled.

“It was like I was a rock star or a Bollywood actor,” the former Washington Post journalist, now the director of the Free Speech Project at Georgetown University, told me recently.

This happened throughout his travels in many places that were “information deserts” — where there was an “absolute starvation to know what was going on in the world, including in their own countries,” and, importantly, with the news often told in their own languages.

Now the organization is under siege, thanks to the efforts of Michael Pack, President Trump’s appointed chief of the U.S. Agency for Global Media, which oversees VOA as well as Radio Free Europe, Radio Free Asia and others. With about 4,000 employees, many of whom are journalists, along with another 1,500 freelance “stringers,” the organizations broadcast in about 40 languages.

A federal judge last month slapped down some of Pack’s brazen moves to politicize the government-funded news organization on free-speech grounds. That included his investigation of VOA White House correspondent Steve Herman for alleged anti-Trump bias, and his attempts to direct coverage. The judge ruled that these efforts were unacceptable because they breached the “firewall” intended to separate the organization’s political management from the journalism.

Undeterred, Pack may have found a way around the judge’s ruling. Last week, he pushed out Elez Biberaj as interim VOA director and installed conservative Robert R. Reilly, a former VOA director who wrote the book “Making Gay Okay: How Rationalizing Homosexual Behavior Is Changing Everything,” which argues that widespread acceptance of gay culture harms society. The VOA director is on the journalism side of the firewall, making the appointment a rather obvious end-around.

In other words, with another month to go in the administration, Pack — and Trump — aren’t done yet.

“What Trump and his henchman have tried to do is unforgivable,” Ungar said, describing Pack as having “walked in there with an automatic rifle.”

No one claims that VOA is flawless. It has had its share of controversies — and the very idea of it has always had its

detractors.

Sure, these critics say, VOA was set up to counter Nazi propaganda in the early 1940s, but isn't it just a form of American propaganda itself? Not according to its charter, which calls for accuracy and truthfulness: "a balanced and comprehensive projection of significant American thought and institutions."

Amanda Bennett, the former top editor of the Philadelphia Inquirer and longtime Wall Street Journal reporter who stepped down as the news organization's chief in June just ahead of Pack's arrival, rejects that idea. VOA plays it straight, she says, and serves an irreplaceable purpose in the world.

"Everywhere I traveled as director I was proud and amazed at how deeply VOA was respected, admired and envied around the world, especially for its freedom of speech," she told me.

What's going on now, Bennett said, "feels like taking a wrecking ball to an institution that has represented the most basic of American values for more than three-quarters of a century."

Pack certainly came in with guns blazing: He fired or suspended the heads of each of the broadcasting networks under his supervision; declined to renew expiring visas of foreign journalists employed by VOA, citing unspecified "security" concerns; dissolved a bipartisan board; and suspended the agency's general counsel, David Kligerman — the author of the regulation that established the "firewall" between the agency's management and journalism.

"It would be one thing if anyone could see even a hint of what Michael Pack promised Congress he would do — improve morale, improve VOA's standing in the world, encourage broader coverage of conservative ideas and people," Bennett said. What he's done, though, "simply looks like destruction."

President-elect Joe Biden has indicated that he'll replace Pack. And VOA's supporters note with hope that, as the former chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Biden has some appreciation for its work. Former State Department official and Time magazine managing editor Richard Stengel is thought to be Biden's choice to replace Pack; he has been assigned to assess what's happening there during the transition.

But will repairing VOA and its sibling organizations really be a top priority for the Biden administration? Given the range of problems Biden is inheriting, that's hard to imagine. And the broken pieces won't be so easy to put back together, given everything that's gone on.

What's more, Pack is still working on his goals — "drain the swamp, to root out corruption, and to deal with . . . issues of bias," he has said. One can only imagine the endgame.

Ungar and Bennett, though, certainly hope the damage can be reversed, because they think VOA's work is essential. And to those who claim that what it does is shameless government-funded flag-waving, Ungar points to the many times that its journalism might well have made powerful American politicians unhappy — for example, full-scale coverage of the Clinton impeachment hearings.

Ironically, Trump sees in VOA the delicious promise of a true, worldwide propaganda organization under his control — if only he could get rid of its pesky, built-in objectivity. He and Pack certainly are trying to do just that.

We ought to hope they fail.

At its best, Ungar told me, VOA can show the world what American-style journalism and values look like.

“Democracy,” as he put it, “is worth preserving and promoting. I’m okay with that.”

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