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Address by
Edward R. Murrow, Director, U.S. Information Agency
before the National Press Club
Washington, D.C., May 24, 1961

WHO SPEAKS FOR AMERICA ?

It is with mingled pleasure and awe that I join you today... pleasure at being again among so many of my former colleagues... awe that I am now the object of those scowling, critical visages among whose array I once sat with my own frowning brow. The frowning brow has not changed. We have only changed seats, and I must now answer questions instead of propounding them.

I come to this microphone to tell you of the U.S. Information Agency. In a sense, it is a reciprocal visit. There are members of this club who have shared our international microphones on the Voice of America. For example, three of your members -- William Stringer, Ernest K. Lindley, and Fred Collins -- do a weekly broadcast for the Voice, entitled "Issues in the News." The program has had an excellent response from a widely appreciative audience. I trust I shall do these gentlemen no offense, however, if I share with you one letter we received that was not so enthusiastic. "Dear Voice of

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America," the letter said, "Never in my life have I heard three more indecisive talkers. They never have anything definite to say. Keep them off the air and run John F. Kennedy instead." Let me add, though, that if I have as few detractors as they, I shall count myself among the fortunate.

I have been in my job as Director of the Agency scant weeks. Operating as we do in 98 countries around the world, there is much about the Agency that I have yet to learn. But as a former working newsman like most of you here today, there are a number of thoughts and impressions that I would share with you in my present role as a government official.

Our Agency operates in a difficult, not too well defined area. We embrace a multitude of disciplines and professions. Many of you are newsmen who devote your careers, as I did for 25 years, to expression in a single medium of communication. USIA employs not one but seven: radio, television, movies, press, book publishing, exhibits and the arts. We are involved in an entire range of problems: from a press run in Beirut, an exhibition in Turin, a stage performance in Munich and radio relays in Colombo. From a news telecast in Bogota to a sound-tracked film strip in Paris to a book typeset in Manila -- upon all the myriad of details we initiate, we create, we facilitate.

Even more important we must deal amidst the intangibles: the difficult, delicate human art of persuasion. For by word of mouth, by cultivated personal contact abroad, we seek to persuade others of the rightness of our view and that our actions and our goals are in harmony with theirs. And this brings on a thought: in the course of a single working day how many of you

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gentlemen here could exercise your expertise competently over an array of problems as diverse as these?

To those bold enough to reply in the affirmative, I offer a note of caution: this is only half the Agency's problem. For we deal not only in communications but also in policy. We articulate and distribute not advertising for cigarettes and soap suds but clarifications of government policy and deeds. And we speak in many languages to many peoples of vastly differing cultures and styles, of vastly differing levels of comprehension. We must deal also with the very considerable pre-conditioning foreigners have had to the image and the ideas of America. We must deal with the realities of their fears, their concerns, their stereotypes -- however unjustified, their existence is real -- of the product we promote: the actions and the hopes of the United States.

Thus the effective overseas USIA officer must be a creature who combines the talents of professional proficiency with persistence and patience. He must try to know as much about seven media of communication as most of you gentlemen know about your one. I shall not indulge your sufferance by reading a roster of qualified officers in the Agency. But I assure you I have found I am able to call upon resourceful minds of many disciplines. We have men who number among their accomplishments, before coming with the Agency, such positions as a broadcast Peabody Award winner; a past President of NBC International; a former producer with Eagle Lion and Warner Brothers studio; the former President of a college; several deans of universities, including a Dean Emeritus from Columbia University; an original editor of Newsweek; an author of 15 published

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novels, 6 of which have been adapted for motion pictures; editors of metropolitan newspapers and national press services; overseas bureau chiefs, foreign correspondents, and Nieman fellows in Journalism. Overseas they are supported by an equally diversified and distinguished staff: nationals of the countries in which we work, writers, editors, artists, lecturers and others. They are a talented and varied crew. They serve by choice, I know, for many of them annually refuse private offers for far more money than they now earn.

In my first four months, I have asked many of my colleagues to postpone fellowships, assignments abroad and desirable posts long anticipated. Often at great personal inconvenience, their invariable response to me has been: "Whatever you think is best for the Agency, I will gladly do."

So it was that one of my own long-held illusions about government was rudely shattered on that January day when I assumed office. I arrived at 1776 Pennsylvania Avenue expecting a bureaucracy of dawdlers; instead I found a bounty of capable doers. For my own part, I have never worked harder in my life. I have never been called a loafing man -- though on occasion I confess a predilection for good conversation, fine wine and rich food -- but not since the days of World War II have I worked with such frantic fascination.

I am finding that this is truly the time of the "New Zeal", and it is not easy to set the pace for my younger colleagues. Our work product would stagger the mind of what we in government call "private enterprise". Our radio broadcasts live over 88 hours a day in 35 languages. Our special wireless file puts out up to 8-10,000 words a day to each of five world areas. Our films reach an

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estimated weekly audience of about 150 million people. When a special project goes through on a crash basis, we can get to an audience of over five hundred million. And in television, our "market" is rapidly expanding -- some 36 million TV sets and 160 million viewers.

Nor is our product dissipated meaninglessly. For the 50 million books we have published in 50 languages, there is incessant demand. In Blantyre, Nyasaland, a library opened in March of this year, and borrowers stripped its shelves nearly bare in about a month of operation. In another African post there was a greater demand for the Federalist Papers in four weeks time than the New York Public Library had in a year. And the first English classes formed in two newly-independent countries numbered among their pupils both Prime Ministers, a number of Cabinet officials as well as other high government leaders and their wives.

Our Agency by Congressional Mandate operates overseas. There is much misunderstanding about just what the U. S. Information Agency does. We have received letters with ominous overtones, such as a request to "send me all your information on counterfeiting" and "please rush me all the facts on bullet wounds, fast." Letter-writers have asked us "what percentage of young people are juveniles, how can I figure out which TV newscasters are Republicans, and why are most auctioneers called 'colonel'?" And do-it-yourself fans have written our Agency for information on how to bottle peanut butter, refinish driftwood, operate bongo drums, and make low-calorie soft-drinks.

Information is our job, but information of more serious import. I told the

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Senate hearing on my nomination that our Agency will attempt to make US policy as designed by the President everywhere intelligible and, wherever possible palatable.

We shall endeavor to reflect with fidelity to our allies, to the uncommitted nations, as well as to those who are hostile to us, not only our policy but our ideals. Yet, in our day-to-day efforts directed to this end, we do not stand alone. For much that is known and believed about this country is beyond the purview of our Agency alone.

Just as the work of USIA is far more than just Voice of America broadcasts, so is the real voice of America far more than just our Agency. From Norway to Nyasaland, from Rio to Rangoon, the story and the face of America goes out in movies, television, magazines and the press. The military, with fighters and their families, number one million abroad. Over four million American tourists travel abroad each year. Another half million Americans live overseas for reasons embracing both business and pleasure. Foundations, educational exchanges, and international scholarships send our young intellectuals and their studious professors swarming to foreign universities. Fifty thousand foreign students and hundreds of thousands of foreign tourists visit our country every year to hear and evaluate the first-hand voice of America.

And all of this has great impact. Italy has built its first drive-in movie. An authentic drug store stands in the shadow of the Arc de Triomphe. England, heaven bless its warm draught lager, is beginning to drink cold beer in cans. American blue jeans and slacks vie with the kimono in Japan. Nairobi has its parking meters; there are skyscrapers in Johannesburg and supermarkets in

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Leopoldville. Air conditioning has settled in Santiago, and even Moscow has succumbed not only to jazz and Louis Armstrong but also -- heaven assuage the souls of Marx and Lenin -- to American installment buying. And these are but frothy facets of the spreading style of America -- or of the 20th Century, since both in so many ways are synonymous.

Beneath them, and of far more lasting impact, is the broadening outward flow of ideas and techniques of how to live and work together, of respect for neighbors, of faith that every human problem is capable of human solution. We and all the other voices of America that reach outside our frontiers are helping to spread the concept of "access", of individual self-fulfilment and citizen participation.

I tell you all this not to defend our culture but to define our Agency. You gentlemen of the press share very much with our Agency the making of the picture of America that is known abroad. To give you but random figures: 89% of the people in West Germany consider the press as their major source of information about the USA. 77% in Burma, 81% in Britain and Japan, 85% in Peru and Uruguay. All of these are people, gentlemen, saying the press is their major source of information about America.

And the impact made on these people through the press is of course largely beyond the exclusive influence of USIA. Yet the picture is even broader. Not only the press, but the television, the movies, the travelling tourists, the missionaries and the businessmen, are part of the chorus that is the real voice of America. It means there are no more domestic issues. The speech of a single Senator to a hometown audience can have more impact abroad than months of

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our Agency's informational activities. A breakthrough in science or medicine, the price on the big board in Chicago, import duty on textiles -- we have lost the luxury of living in isolated America -- these events and issues are absorbed, debated and pondered on all shores of every ocean.

To some of us the picture of a burning bus in Alabama may merely represent the speed and competence of a photographer, but to those of us in the U.S. Information Agency it means that picture will be front-paged tomorrow all the way from Manila to Rabat. Here in Washington itself, for example, there exists a much unreported encumbrance on our African relations that can lose us as much influence as anything the Soviets might do. Where do we house African diplomats in our capital? These are representatives of Negro nations led by Negro leaders. It is bad enough that they read headlines of Birmingham bus burnings and beatings. It is even worse that they find it near impossible to live in the capital of our nation. Landlords will not rent to them; schools refuse their children; stores will not let them try on clothes; beaches bar their families. Today there are some 30 African representatives in Washington with what is euphemistically called "unsatisfactory housing." Fully 1/3 of these are termed emergency cases. There will be some 50 more families arriving in the next six months, 100 in the next year. It is not only that these people are humans like the rest of us, but that they are leaders of nations whose friendship this land deems vital. We would have them join our company of honorable men in defending against encroachment our dedication to dignity and freedom. But it is a dignity to which we will not fully admit them.

It was William Shakespeare who in the "Merchant of Venice" wrote lines

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that could come from the mouth of any of these wronged Negro diplomats.

"If you prick us, do we not bleed?

"If you tickle us, do we not laugh?

"If you poison us, do we not die?

"And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?"

And if revenge they should, it would be recounted as a diplomatic debacle for the United States. And if and when that day should come, do not fly to your Information Agency crying that we have not told "our story" abroad. For in this damaging indignity there is blame enough for us all. And let us remember, this is not something the Communists did to us. We do it ourselves in our own capital. Is it possible that we concern ourselves too much with outer space and far places, and too little with inner space and near places?

Let me turn back to the subject at hand. You did not invite me here to talk about our duty and our opportunity as citizens, rather to tell you about our work. Quite reasonably, you wish to know where we hope to go and how we shall try to get there. At the outset let me emphasize that I did not bring to the Agency the infinite wisdom of an outsider, with magic cures for all that's wrong.

In fact, much of what I have found is good, effective, solid. I recognize, as I know you will too, that the role of our Agency has limits. We are but one arm of the U.S. government. As such, we must respond to the policy of that government. To put it more bluntly, USIA can be no better than the policies it supports and explains. Yet within that limitation there are obviously practices and principles to which we are committed. It is fundamental that we operate on a basis of truth. Ours is, and must be, a dedication to the factual.

But this itself poses difficulties. We operate abroad; our audience is foreign. And in this world there are no absolute standards of truth. What is

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one man's truth is another man's falsehood. Our objective is, and must be, credibility. It is easy to assume that because we tell the truth as we see it, others will believe us. But statements that are true are not always believed. It is a measure of our difficulty that in this relentless half-war, truth and credibility are not co-equal.

Candor and openness have their merits...as the successful Alan Shepard demonstrated. They also have their demerits...as the abortive Cuban episode demonstrated.

On Cuba, we had no choice but to be truthful and complete. At noon on April 17, we expanded our Spanish broadcasting to Latin America from one hour of origination to 19 hours. Within two hours we were on the air. I mention this with some pride. What network could undertake such expansion on such short notice with no change in personnel allowance?

There were Latins relaying our broadcasts who said, "you are too honest, you will be misunderstood." There were Americans who protested, as the letter writer from California who heard the tirades of Dr. Paul Roa on our Spanish broadcasts and suggested we leave such broadcasting to the Voice of Castro. The answer was that Dr. Roa was speaking in the United Nations debate which we carried in its entirety. We carried the whole story -- Castro's announcement, the self-labelled "invasion", the writhing in Washington, the agonies in the UN, and even the agonizing reappraisal which a critical aftermath spilled over the Administration.

But if truth must be our guide then dreams must be our goal. To the hunger of those masses yearning to be free and to learn, to this sleeping giant

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now stirring, that is so much of the world, we shall say: "We share your dreams." As a nation, we have never been allergic to change. Ours was the first of the great revolutions. It is a birthright we do not intend to let go by default. Our responsibilities of nationhood are predicated on a helping hand to others who would elevate their crushing way of existence by change into a more bountiful society. We offer no panaceas, no final solutions. We offer to join in the search for betterment. We offer our experience and our energies in partnership in the quest for greater human excellence. This we not only endorse. This we sponsor and promote, and provoke. A tradition of government by the governed, of revolution by consent -- all of these are among the greater virtues that we have to demonstrate to a world sorely in need of great virtues.

But we shall go further. We are taking the offensive in this war of ideas. We shall be more alert in exposing Communist techniques and tactics. Distortion and duplicity about this land and its people will not go unanswered.

How shall we accomplish this dual role?

First, the projects that we launch are delivered abroad, primarily through our posts -- 218 of them in 98 countries around the world, staffed by some 1,200 American men and women and their valuable local assistants. Their relation to Washington is as the rim of a wheel to a hub. We in Washington set policy and direction for our posts abroad, but it is as a service center to our overseas operators that we serve our main function.

Second, I have already mentioned that we operate in seven principal media of communication --- radio, television, movies, press, book publishing, exhibits and the arts, as well as the all-important field of personal contact ---

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reaching out to all parts of the world in virtually all languages. As the informational arm of US policy, what we do is often imposed on us by the impact of events. But we do not await events. We anticipate, prepare and organize our resources. There is also sometimes a need to concentrate on a selected short range of subject-matter. We have thus established a new post, entitled "Director of Media Content". This job is to aim our output, to pull together the sinews of our several media, to multiply their effectiveness by combining their effort.

Next, we are concentrating our attention on the fields where the ideological competition is being waged. This means expansion in Africa -- where new nations have arisen -- and in Latin America -- where new difficulties have been born -- and in Southeast Asia -- where new pressures are upon us. We will not do this, however, at the expense of thinning the lines of communication with our traditional friends and allies.

To our neighbors to the south, we shall ask them to face the facts about this man called Castro. We shall ask them to recognize the nature of his totalitarian dictatorship, his betrayal of the ideals of the revolution that brought him to power, his suppression of basic human liberties, his treason to the ideals of civilization, and his atrocities, his calculated reliance on the Sino-Soviet bloc and the danger that this threatens to free institutions in the Western Hemisphere.

But we shall do more than merely affirm the negative. We shall examine and explain the promise of the new "Alliance for Progress", the economic and social promise that can bloom from the new planted seedling of US-Latin American cooperation.

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In Africa, there are new lands emerging with new leaders. It is a continent groping for directions, churning with ideas, surveying our style, sampling our ideals. One need only recall the heady wine of our own independence in 1776 to appreciate the new intoxication of Africa. To them we must do more than criticize their politics and caution them on the Soviets. We must share with them our hands and our hearts, our techniques and our time. We must, perhaps above all, accord them the dignity of friendship and respect. In Africa alone we have opened 12 new posts in the past year: Mali, Ivory Coast, Togo, Dohomey, Niger, Upper Volta, Congo, Gabon, Central African Republic, Chad, Ruanda-Urundi, Malagasy Republic. New countries, all of them, some not even in existence when I assumed this office less than four months ago.

In Latin America, we hope to establish 11 new posts in key interior cities, and to strengthen 17 existing posts now undermanned.

In Southeast Asia we are taking additional urgent steps to communicate our determination to support our allies and to prevent neutral countries from falling to Communism. Communication in these lands is poor. Literacy is low. The challenge to our ingenuity and to our energy is great -- and it is expensive.

Our financing for this year will we hope be adequate. But I would remind you that our budget now awaiting approval was drawn up before the sudden increase in the menace of Castro's Communism, before the stepped-up Communist assault in Laos and the eroding subversion in South Viet Nam and Thailand.

In the matter of financial and manpower substance, our adversaries have a clear advantage. The Soviet bloc spends more money jamming our radio broadcasts than we spend on our entire Agency. Our total budget is less than

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the cost of one combat loaded Polaris submarine, and it is one fifth of the estimated advertising budget of our armaments manufacturers. One American soap company spends almost as much on advertising as the USIA spends explaining US policy abroad.

We certainly do not solicit billions for propagating the truth. But this country must be willing to do what must be done -- or we will forfeit to the inexorable tide of history our role as the promoters of freedom.

Implicit in meeting this challenge is the cost of physical facility. The Voice of America broadcasts 600 hours a week and, including packaged programs, uses up to 62 languages. But, as they say in the trade, let's look at the competition. We are fourth, ranked in order behind Russia, Communist China, and the United Arab Republic. But we certainly do not intend to remain in fourth position. We are building new transmitters, one in North Carolina, and one in Liberia, but we are seriously handicapped against the opposition because they are already located physically closer to much of the audience we would reach. We have had practically no increase in power since 1953 and it is in these years that our competition has passed us.

Our broadcast and other activities do need more money, but money alone will not do the job. We need immunization from accordion financing -- granting most of our budget requests one year, squeezing them tightly the next. No network or newspaper could flourish on such financial irregularity; neither can USIA.

We face a difficult time with staffing. We need more permanent staff -- talented people willing to work for little pay and less recognition. And we need

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the cooperation of the men who help shape the thinking of our citizens. We want them to share their thoughts abroad. In Moscow and Peiping, such intellectuals and journalists are summoned at government bidding. In America, we do not bid; we request. But the argument heard sometimes here that cooperation with the government hampers professional independence is, I submit, specious. We need your help and, while we cannot pay commercial rates, we can offer another compensation: the satisfaction that you helped keep our country strong.

The history of this Agency has been brief and turbulent. I trust its future will be long and fruitful. In the bare 20 years of its life, it has had five titles and a dozen different directors. Our origins lie in the frenzied beginnings of World War II, when we operated with a radio and a prayer. Our future may lie in the unseen systems of communication satellites, when we will operate with international television and perhaps those same prayers again.

The product of this Agency is all for export, much of it invisible, much of it unknown at home. Much of its end-product effectiveness is not measurable by common standards. We do not have a rating service, and frequently our work is known to the public only when we make a mistake. We do not ask for special consideration, and certainly not for sympathy, from those of you who work in the private sector of communication.

We do not ask that our mistakes be ignored, nor that our accomplishments be exaggerated. We shall do our best to tell you what the Agency is doing in the belief that you are as concerned as we in providing the citizens of this country with information as to what is being said and done in their name abroad.

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I have learned since coming to Washington at least two things: the first is that it is easier to ask questions than to answer them, and the second, that questions are never indiscreet but answers sometimes are. I suppose the art of answering is to produce a proper mixture of candor and discretion and to confess ignorance when it is obvious. And with a promise -- in answering your questions -- to follow this precept, Mr. President, may I turn the floor back to you.

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