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STATEMENT OF

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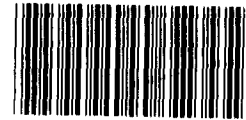
INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS DIVISION

U.S. GENERAL ACCOUNTING OFFICE

BEFORE THE

COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS

UNITED STATES SENATE



126571

ON

RADIO FREE EUROPE/RADIO LIBERTY

BROADCAST POLICIES AND PRACTICES

AND THE BOARD FOR INTERNATIONAL BROADCASTING

OVERSIGHT OF RADIO PROGRAMMING

Mr. Chairman, Members of the Committee:

I am pleased to be here to discuss our recent work on Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) and the Board for International Broadcasting (BIB).

Senator Pell asked us to evaluate the radios' broadcast procedures and the BIB's oversight of RFE/RL programming. Last week we provided the BIB a draft of our proposed report and requested its comments for consideration in preparing our final product. Today I will summarize the major points in that draft report.

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First I will briefly discuss RFE/RL's mission statement and policy guidelines. These guidelines aim for objective, relevant broadcasts. They spell out a number of things to be avoided, such as emotionalism, vindictiveness, and belligerency; they caution against identifying with opposition groups or political factions in or outside the broadcast area; and they prohibit programs which use rumors or unsubstantiated information.

Departures from these guidelines are considered serious because they can damage the credibility of the radios and, by extension, the image of the United States. In the past year, for example, RFE/RL analysts have questioned the airing of broadcasts which:

- profiled the Jewish assassin of a prominent Czarist-era political figure in what the analysts believed was an anti-Semitic fashion;
- portrayed the West and Christianity unfavorably; and
- quoted a book accusing Franklin D. Roosevelt of conducting "un-American, undemocratic, and unconstitutional methods of provoking war".

To enforce the guidelines, RFE/RL management relies foremost on the individual broadcast services--that is, the writers and editors who develop the programs. Management believes that the broadcast services--largely made up of emigres--are in the best position to determine what is of interest to, and appropriate for, target audiences. Management also relies on post broadcast reviews to identify violations so that corrective action can be taken.

We found this approach had several problems. For example:

--The broadcast services were frequently not following existing policies that require the writing and script approval functions be kept separate. We found cases where the same individuals were writing, editing, approving, and airing their own material.

--The unit charged with conducting post broadcast reviews of all programs did not have enough staff to perform this mission.

--Violations were not being tracked, and there was no formal system for discussing and resolving these concerns. Frequently the analysts who identified potential violations were not aware of the outcomes.

There was no senior level focal point--other than the RFE/RL president--to ensure policy compliance. A position of executive vice-president for programs and policy had formerly provided this focus, but that position was eliminated in order to increase the autonomy of the broadcast services.

We recognize that the methods used to ensure compliance with policy guidelines are management choices. One person's control may well be another's censorship. We believe, however, that management needs to be involved in programming decisions in order to fulfill its responsibilities. At a minimum RFE/RL management needs several things, including:

- a reliable system for communicating policy,
- assurance that existing policies are being followed,
- sufficient staff to carry out post-broadcast reviews, and
- follow-up procedures to make certain that corrective action has been taken on cited violations.

A high-level focal point is also needed to direct the necessary attention to policy compliance issues, especially to follow-up on reported violations, and assure corrective action. The RFE/RL president--with his many other responsibilities--cannot devote the constant attention needed for this role.

I would like to point out that, since our audit work, RFE/RL has made some changes. For example, we understand that additional analysts have been hired, and the president has initiated a quarterly report to the Board members on reported violations.

#### BIB'S OVERSIGHT

Turning now to BIB's oversight of the RFE/RL programming. The BIB was established in 1973 to allocate funds to RFE/RL and to provide federal oversight of the radios. Before 1982, RFE/RL had a corporate board of directors responsible for making major policy decisions. In 1982, the BIB members assumed corporate responsibilities in addition to their oversight responsibilities. This change was intended to strengthen the federal board's authority and to eliminate the deadlocks between the

BIB and the radios which had occurred over the years. In essence there is now a single nine-member board responsible for both federal oversight and for making major policy decisions affecting RFE/RL.

At this point, Mr. Chairman, I would like to emphasize that our work focused on only one of the BIB members' many responsibilities--that is their independent oversight of RFE/RL programming. In this regard, we found very little documentation relating to recent BIB program oversight activities. BIB files contain some discussions of programmatic concerns, but we found no guidance or directives to RFE/RL based on the current Board's review of troublesome broadcasts. Most Board sessions deal with corporate topics, such as the budget, personnel matters, and facility modernization. Some BIB members told us it was difficult to distinguish between their two roles, and that when they conduct corporate activities, they automatically conduct oversight.

It was somewhat easier to identify the BIB staff's activities. The BIB staff--composed of four Senior Executive Service employees--has in the past played an important role in carrying out the BIB's day-to-day oversight responsibilities. We found that the current Board is not effectively using these staff resources for program oversight. The Board has not provided guidance to its staff on program oversight activities, and staff program oversight efforts have decreased significantly since 1982. For example, several staff told us they no longer regularly investigate outside inquiries about the radios'

programming. They also said they no longer regularly discuss outside program evaluations with Board members, or attend BIB meetings.

According to one staff member, some BIB members are very active and this may explain why less emphasis has been placed on the staff's service. For example, although the BIB was expected to be a "part-time" board, the chairman worked 171 days out of a possible 211 in the first 10 months of fiscal year 1984.

The BIB needs to define its program oversight goals and provide appropriate guidance to its staff. The Board's oversight could also be enhanced by increased feedback from outside sources, particularly the Department of State. We found that feedback from foreign service posts has decreased over the last several years, and that coordination between State and the Board has been infrequent.

In summary, Mr. Chairman, we believe there are numerous opportunities to improve RFE/RL broadcast controls and enhance BIB oversight. After we have an opportunity to consider the Board's comments, we will be making formal recommendations. We believe these recommendations will help safeguard RFE/RL's credibility as an objective and accurate broadcasting service.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my statement. I will be happy to respond to any questions you may have.