

At Voice of America, There's No Cover-Up On Watergate News

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While Radio Moscow Ignores Story, VOA Is Telling All; A Major Goal: 'Balance'

By ARLEN J. LARGE

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WASHINGTON—The voice of Sen. Richard Schweiker bounced off the ionosphere and rolled to the ends of the earth:

"I believe that the public review of the released transcripts will inevitably destroy your capacity to lead our nation effectively for the remainder of your term. I am convinced you can best serve your country and the presidency by resigning now."

That was Sen. Schweiker reading his get-out-now letter to the head of the American government, and it was the American government that put him on shortwave radio for the whole world to hear. Although the liberal Pennsylvania Republican never has been a big ally of President Nixon in the Senate, his open call for resignation was news, and the Voice of America is in the news business.

The Watergate story, involving the possible toppling of a President, is presenting VOA journalists with one of their biggest challenges in the government radio network's 32-year history. Last weekend's handling of the fire-storm reaction to the White House Watergate transcripts provided a good sample of their coverage.

The VOA strives to follow the World War II tradition of the British Broadcasting Corp., which by bluntly reporting early allied defeats established credibility for its stories of later victories. In another world are propaganda pumps like Radio Moscow, which in stark contrast simply ignores Watergate because the story is diplomatically inconvenient. Radio Moscow's English newscasts to North America continue to stress the joys of detente and still promise President Nixon a warm welcome on a June visit that gives many U.S. Congressmen the willies.

"The Senator From Boeing"

One recent Moscow newscast heaped praise on the establishment of an airline route between the U.S. and the Soviet capitals—a move that Radio Moscow said was made necessary by "the expanding economic and cultural cooperation between the two countries." There was a sharp attack on Democratic Sen. Henry Jackson of Washington for his resistance to detente. The commentator called him "the Senator from Boeing," a nickname sometimes heard around the Senate, and accused him of preferring "the icebound trenches of the cold war." There was a discussion of internal political controversies in France, Germany and Chile, but there wasn't a word about the top topic in Washington.

Once in a while, though, the Soviet broadcasters acknowledge Watergate in little explosions of irritation that could have been written by Ron Ziegler. "When all is said and done," one commentator said, "one thing will remain in history—not only in American history but in world history, I think—and that is a very soiled image of America because this business has been dragged on really too long."

The "very soiled image" can't help but come through in the Voice of America's straight-arrow reporting, but its officials try to make the best of it. "We're trying diligently to convey the idea that what the world is seeing is the genius of our checks and balances at work," VOA Director Kenneth Giddens says.

Undoubtedly only a few Americans hear the VOA's news, music and feature stories, although it's possible for anyone with a shortwave radio to do so. But around the world, an estimated 50 million adults listen to the Voice of America at least once a week for some notion of what goes on here. Programs are broadcast in 36 languages, but officials think that a high proportion of the audience listens to shows in English. These days listeners are getting what the network's high command hopes is a showpiece of balanced, credible reporting on Washington's troubles, plus a cram course in the mysteries of presidential impeachment.

The Aim Is "Balance"

A major goal of Watergate coverage is "balance." Somebody saying something bad about the President is matched against somebody saying something good, using their voices where possible if the newscast is in English. This format, heard on a home receiver here the other night, also uses the standard radio news technique of a remote pickup from a correspondent on the scene.

VOA White House correspondent: The White House said again that the President has no intention of resigning, that there has been no reconsideration of that position, that he does not expect to be impeached, and that no more Watergate material will be given to congressional impeachment investigators or the Watergate special prosecutor.

Announcer: The House Judiciary Committee—investigating the impeachment, or formal indictment, of the President—and other members of the House continue to react to the President's refusal to make

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available more information. House Democratic Leader Thomas O'Neill said:

Voice of Rep. O'Neill: I would say that he's not only in contempt of Congress but he's in contempt of the Constitution."

Besides the who-said-what segments of the news shows, the VOA uses staff-written "backgrounders," which try to analyze Watergate's intricacies. Some are simply impeachment primers: "Impeachment of a federal official is not a trial but a decision that a trial ought to take place, based on the possibility that an official may have committed a serious offense. An impeachment can be voted by a majority of the House of Representatives, but the subsequent trial is conducted by the Senate."

The backgrounders lay out presidential vs. congressional arguments without saying who's right. A discussion of executive privilege was almost symmetrically balanced, saying on the one hand: "He (the President) has said often that in refusing certain demands for such materials, he is in fact protecting the institution of the presidency," followed on the other hand by: "But the current situation is regarded by many as one in which presidential confidentiality and executive privilege do not apply." Like many other government radio services, the VOA uses excerpts of editorials from major newspapers to give listeners a variety of views.

No matter how hard VOA editors strive for balance, the flow of Watergate events on some days seems to run just one way. Last Friday was such a day, with almost nothing good going for Mr. Nixon. Sen. Schweiker and some other congressional Republicans were demanding his resignation, which VOA dutifully reported. A survey of press comment was devastating, with the announcer reading parts of the roughly worded Chicago Tribune editorial demanding Mr. Nixon's departure ("He is devious, he is vacillating, he is profane").

Such was Mr. Nixon's plight that the VOA could only balance the Republican resignation talk with an appeal by Vermont's GOP Sen. George Aiken to keep the impeachment machinery rolling and with the recorded voice of Vice President Gerald Ford at a Buffalo news conference: "I can say that the President is in excellent shape mentally as well as physically."

On unbalanced days like that, "we're just going to have to say it that way," VOA Director Giddens says. "We're not going to make up anything."

The 65-year-old Mr. Giddens, an architect by training, was brought to the VOA in 1969 by the Nixon administration from Mobile, Ala., where he headed a radio-TV broadcasting company. He ponders aloud the problems of keeping Watergate coverage in perspective.

"In Europe, six or seven governments have fallen this spring. Looking at it from the perspective of a world observer, this is just one more government in trouble. The reason it could be different is that the United States is so big and powerful that its influence is felt everywhere."

He says he must rely mainly on his professional news staff's seat-of-the-pants editorial judgment to decide how much time to give the Watergate story. But it's a sensitive policy question as well. "How do you know when you've said enough?" he asks. "How long should a piece of string be? How long should a man wear his hat?"

The VOA has managed to stay out of hot public controversies over its coverage, probably because most Americans don't listen and judge. Editorial arguments on handling sensitive stories have been kept inside. It's natural to expect that administration higher-ups would complain that the VOA has said more than it needs to about the President's troubles, and Mr. Giddens doesn't exactly deny it. "Discussions do go on," he says evenly, "about how long this piece of string should be."

Listening to the on-the-air product, however, one could hardly conclude that VOA's professional newsmen in the basement of the Health, Education and Welfare Department building have been muzzled. "It's a complicated story, so it takes space to tell it," says Bernard Kamenske, news-division chief.

Two correspondents and two writers and tape editors have been detailed to a special unit to handle the House Judiciary Committee's current impeachment investigation. A special unit similarly covered President Nixon's trip to China.

Even if the administration wanted to choke off Watergate coverage, it couldn't silence commercial news organizations serving foreign audiences or the VOA's overseas competitors in the government radio business. The British Broadcasting Corp., which during World War II set the world-wide standard for straight news reporting, is covering Watergate aggressively from its Washington bureau. By now, BBC listeners are as familiar as anyone else with John Dean and the cast of other Watergate characters, the Howard Hughes \$100,000, the maneuvers of "Mr. Jaworski" and the sayings of Chairman Sam.

The BBC writers sometimes throw in more interpretation than their Voice of America counterparts allow themselves.

"President Nixon is standing firm against the mounting demands for his resignation from senior members of his own Republican Party," the BBC reported from London the other night. "In what the BBC Washington correspondent describes as a show of force by the White House, Mr. Nixon and aides have let it be known that the President has no intention of resigning over the Watergate affair and that he remains convinced that he'll not be impeached. Even so, says our correspondent, the atmosphere in Washington is more tense than it's been for a long time."