

September 5, 1956

Memorandum to the President [Howland Sargeant]

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Summary:

A Radio Liberation official reports to AMCOMLIB President Sargeant on the Munich Radio Conference of RL, RFE, VOA, USIA, and State Department officials on U.S. international broadcasting

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F. Schramm #2

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September 5, 1956

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MEMORANDUM TO THE PRESIDENT

FROM: Director, Radio Programming Support Division
SUBJECT: Preliminary Report on Munich Radio Conference

It was a very full week. Attached is a copy of the advance schedule, which does not include all of the extra-curricular informal discussions, lunches, dinners, etc., such as the 5-hour dinner meeting which Bob Kelley held in a private dining room on Monday evening for all "Moscovites", former and present, and key staff personnel.

About 50 people participated in each of the general sessions (see attached list and seating plan). Although Schramm is a marvelous chairman, there was naturally a certain amount of lost time and motion in such large sessions, and it was also sometimes impossible to get the floor before discussion of a particular question had to be cut off by lack of time. The entire proceedings were recorded, both by a stenographer in shorthand and by a battery of tape recorders. Schramm will prepare a full report based on the "briefing papers", which were prepared from the material submitted by the participants in advance (copy attached), on the record of the proceedings, and on his own notes. I will only attempt to outline herein the high points, with a few of my own remarks, reserving more detailed comment for the full report when it is received.

Schramm opened the first session by noting major factors affecting our broadcasting during the past years: (1) the thaw; (2) the accompanying changes in orbit broadcasts to their own peoples, -- more complete and objective reporting, modern music, etc.; (3) ideological disillusionment, stemming largely from de-Stalinization; and (4) the end of Soviet jamming of BBC contrasted with ever stronger jamming of us.

The session then moved on to reception conditions inside, with Hornung projecting on a screen a series of curves showing the trend of reception conditions as measured by each of the peripheral monitors. Each chart had two lines, the upper showing the percentage of time that the program could be received on at least one frequency and the lower indicating the percentage of all broadcasts getting through on all frequencies. RL's lower lines generally compared favorably with the others, but their upper lines are much higher because of the larger number of transmitters and frequencies used. Hornung concluded with a map purporting to show by dots each spot at which reception of any of the three had been reported positively. This map revealed large gaps in info, with only half dozen dots inside the entire USSR.

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This was followed by reports of monitoring results inside which varied from country to country but were generally discouragingly negative, ranging down to the USSR with a batting average of little better than zero (several dozen cases of reception of VOA and only 3 of RL out of hundreds of attempts). The various broadcasters then spoke up in turn to cite the types of encouraging reception evidence they are getting, in sharp contrast to the reports of the internal monitors.

In subsequent discussion of what could be done to improve monitoring inside, it appeared that little could be expected in the near future. The people inside are forced by limited staffs and heavy workload to handle monitoring as a side duty, usually in the evenings after a full day at the office. They cannot get away for much travel, and the relatively few people who do travel have other things to do: does it pay to sit in your room trying to listen through jamming when you might be out roaming around, meeting people, seeing things, etc.?

The second session, devoted to "psychological climate", brought general agreement among the broadcasters on changes in climate similar to those which we had outlined in our contribution to the briefing papers, but also an admission that we base our estimates on very limited evidence, especially in the USSR. Major factors are the thaw, in general, and the ferment caused by de-Stalinization. The representatives from inside, however, -- and especially those from Moscow, -- tended to minimize the effect of these factors on the people, the latter maintaining that the only probable change has been in the diminishing of terror and consequent willingness to express opinions and questions more freely. In any case, what does this mean to us? There was general agreement that we must all shift emphasis from "revolution" to "evolution", in oversimplified terms. Our concept of "democratic education" (the furnishing of information and ideas and assisting people to formulate their thinking in the way they would if they had access to the same information) was generally accepted as the right approach for the new conditions. D'Alessandro, who has apparently been the chief protagonist of the more militant approach, voiced concern lest in our efforts to encourage further thaw we give the mass of people inside the impression that we are accommodating ourselves to Communist rule.

This session concluded with general recognition of the need for coordinated study of the attitudes of the peoples of the USSR, a sort of centralized audience research operation, which must be within a government agency so that it can have access to all information.

The discussions of Wednesday's session on audience and Thursday's on impact overlapped somewhat with each other, and also with Tuesday's. Attention was given to the threat to our audiences resulting from increased jamming against us plus a growing wariness and weariness of propaganda from any government, combined with the increased competition for their attention coming from the better programming by the orbit broadcasters (better reporting and better entertainment), the spreading growth of TV, and the attraction of jam-free BBC broadcasts.

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The discussion of impact revolved around two basic questions posed by Schramm: what can we really hope to accomplish; and how can we measure achievements? Lowry led off on the first questioning by setting a modest goal: to keep an open and questioning mind on the part of our listeners. Sherer defined it as simply the maintenance of a friendly attitude toward America, to which Segal assented. The broadcasters objected to these aims as too limited and held out for at least "democratic education". Lowry then agreed that his original goal should be interpreted as broad enough to include "democratic education".

During this discussion, Jones raised the question of the suitability of our name under new conditions. Lowry answered that his Embassy has no opinion on this subject. McFadden added that the Ambassador has discussed the question and that they are convinced that the regime has a high degree of acceptance, with no significant disaffection. They believe that the thaw comes from strength. I pointed out that the word "liberation" is not nearly as militant (or fearsome) in Russian as in English, which was seconded by Halasanth. Our mission was never questioned, but Schramm put the question of the need for an RFE as distinct from VOA to the representatives from the satellites. There was an affirmative answer from each, qualified by a caution from two that RFE must be more accurate to retain the confidence of the people.

Discussion of the measurement of achievements re-emphasized the previous agreement on the need for a centralized audience research operation in the government. I also discussed our recent exploitation of visitors as a new source of information on audience, attitudes, listening habits and conditions, etc.

The question as to what price VOA would have to pay for Soviet agreement to stop jamming, as they have done with BBC, was then raised. Lowry stated emphatically that the unjammed BBC broadcasts are not innocuous, that they have not been noticeably watered down for this purpose. They have always been much less militant than VOA, of course, and they do not editorially criticize the orbit regimes. However, they report speeches and published material critical of same, and present factual and comparative information which is by implication critical of the orbit regimes and systems. The suggestion was made that VOA try limiting itself to straight reporting for a period and then go to the Soviet regime and ask why they were jammed. There were no conclusions reached in this part of the discussion, but I think that there was more or less of a consensus that VOA should not move too quickly and too far in the direction of "watering down" its broadcasts, that there is probably full justification for a VOA which attempts to carry on a little "democratic education" from the American point of view and shows a little more concern about the welfare of the captive peoples than BBC. (Although the new VOA directive arrived in Munich that week, it was never referred to during the sessions.)

Another question discussed in this phase grew out of a description by the Hungarian representative of a conversation with a highly placed member of the Party in opposition to the present leadership who urged recognition and support of such opposition within the regime itself by outside broadcasters. The problem, then, is: how can you broadcast to opposition elements within

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the regime and to the anti-regime opposition over the same station? Griffiths handled this by acknowledging that this is a difficult problem which must be solved in the programming process itself: programs must be designed so that they will appeal to and be effective on the regime elements indirectly, without any direct appeal to them.

In his concluding remarks in the final session, Lowry restated his conviction that our (collectively) most serious problem is the retention of our audience in the face of the attraction of TV and of continued heavy jamming in contrast to jam-free BBC. He said that they had not considered the question of the price to be paid (by VOA) for jam-free transmissions. He noted the divergence of views between those inside and those outside on psychological climate and urged an all-governmental effort to reach agreement. He reiterated his modest objective of keeping an open and questioning mind, and noted that effectiveness is not an individual factor but a function of our objectives and of our ability to get through to our listeners. He sees VOA as only one of several avenues for Soviet contact with the outside, but, nevertheless, considers them (VOA broadcasts) important and would not want to see them discontinued. Lowry closed by saying that he couldn't comment on RL because they have heard us only 3 times and have heard no comments on us from the people!

Zorthian followed for VOA, noting again their evidence of extensive listening and effective impact and re-emphasizing the need for better information and analysis. He stated the IBS position that they should not engage in self-censorship to hurry Soviet elimination of jamming and pointed out that the Soviets now can hold the continued threat of resumed jamming over BBC as a sort of blackmail. This does not mean no change in VOA approach, but don't go too far.

In my concluding remarks, I first agreed again with Zorthian and others on the need for better, centralized collection, dissemination and analysis of audience information, especially important for us because of our difficulty in using classified material. I then took advantage of the opportunity to refer to our year-long policy re-examination and the resultant Policy Manual which seemed to conform so well with the programming concepts accepted by the Conference. Inasmuch as I had determined earlier that practically no one at the Conference had heard of the exercise or the Manual, I offered to send copies to them after my return to New York.

I then noted briefly that our type of programming seemed, to us, at least, to be least vulnerable of all to the type of dangers discussed during the Conference. (1) Jamming: best guarantee of reception is given by our brief, concentrated programs repeated around the clock. ("Is each minute worth the risk and discomfort?") (2) TV: we have long recognized potential value to Soviets, but feel that our concentrated programs repeated around-the-clock are by nature less vulnerable to this kind of competition. A listener can get all of our message daily and still not miss anything on TV. (3) Competition from orbit radio and BBC, and wariness of propaganda from any government: again, such competition and such wariness should be minimized by the special nature of our broadcasts and our station, speaking as their station, viewing the entire world scene, outside and inside of the motherland, from the point of view of the best interests of the people inside.

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I noted again that our main cause for concern is the heavy Soviet jamming against our own woefully inadequate transmitting facilities, and concluded humorously by venturing the hope that if VOA does decide to go in for jam-free broadcasts a la BBC, perhaps they'll sell us cheaply some of their surplus transmitting facilities!

In his final remarks, Schramm noted that probably the most fruitful feature of the Conference lay in the personal contacts and exchange of views in the extra-curricular lunches and meetings. He pointed to the two basic positions revealed on: (1) attitudes; (2) amount of reception; and (3) what programming should be. Both positions are based on evidence, but not enough evidence. The target for tomorrow is not only to get more evidence but to put it together and interpret it. (If he had to choose between more info or better analysis, he'd take the latter.)

D'Alessandro spoke up anti-climatically to plead for bigger and better and more transmitters, and for concentration by the engineers on frequencies which can be received by our audiences rather than by the technical monitors only. He also introduced a new last-minute plea for better programming coordination between the three to avoid programs competing for listeners' attention. And thus it was ended.

Comments: Schramm's remarks, cited in the next-to-last paragraph above, summarize the results as I saw them, pithily but fully. This did seem like a very costly exercise, in man-hours of top personnel as well as in monetary expenditures, but it may be the only means of bringing such gaps in information and differences of opinion into the open and to the attention of people who may be in a position to take some remedial action. For the members of our representation, none of whom attended last year's sessions, it was especially valuable in giving us an excellent opportunity to become acquainted with many people who were previously only names, to see them in action and sound them out, and to present our case to them. And if the gaps and differences highlighted in the sessions, with the repeated emphasis on the need for a centralized audience research operation, can result in any concrete progress, probably the cost was not too great.

In support of such centralized audience research, the most crying need would seem to be for more emphasis on contacts with the local population inside. I would venture to guess that young Bob R. in his few weeks had perhaps better contacts with more local citizens of various types, and possibly has a better understanding of the attitudes of such people than anyone now in the Embassy. This is apparently due largely to the continuing strict limitations in numbers of personnel permitted at the Embassies in spite of the fact, while the bureaucratic workload has increased greatly because of the fact. (Everyone seems to be reaping advantage from the fact except the State Department!)

Perhaps nothing can be done about the above. Whether or no, it is obviously of great importance for us to continue to seek out and brief travelers going in, as perhaps our best remaining hope for fresh information about our audiences.

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Lowry admitted, incidentally, that they had never had time to review any of our scripts or tapes. However, he promised to make a determined effort to tackle a few if we would send them. He further said that they have no need for any additional copies of our broadcast schedules.

The big backstage news of the week was the arrival in Munich of the new VOA directive. This was a major subject of informal discussion at a little meeting which included representatives of all participants except MRC. The directive was welcomed by all present, and all agreed that it greatly increased the importance of our mission. There was also agreement that it would meet strong resistance in MRC and speculation as to what measures might be taken to insure compliance if MRC does not follow the directive in good faith.

It also seems doubtful to me that we can ever expect career F.S. officers of the 2nd secretary level (or any other level) to get out, roll up their sleeves, figuratively, and strike some rapport with various Soviet citizens as would an intelligent, alert, fluent young student of Soviet affairs, even if they weren't too busy. (And if one did, it would surely be too much to expect him

(This paragraph was in original version, just before last para on p. 5. Was dropped for sake of diplomacy, but still fully applicable.) (R)

to ask about RLs perhaps VOA, but not liberation. This is not meant to reflect on individuals but on the system and the standards and priorities which it assigns.)