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Selected Personnel Practices of the Voice of
America Warrant Management Attention

Statement of
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Before the Subcommittee on
International Operations,
Committee on Foreign Affairs
House of Representatives



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Mr. Chairman, Members of the Subcommittee:

I am pleased to be here today to discuss our report on personnel practices at the U.S. Information Agency's Voice of America (VOA) and Radio Marti.¹ We undertook the review at the request of the former Subcommittee Chairman because of the number of complaints the Subcommittee had received from VOA employees. We provided these complainants and other employees the opportunity to express their concerns. Of 2,020 employees in the United States, 178 made over 680 allegations concerning personnel matters. Using these allegations as a starting point, we reviewed various personnel processes and practices.

Our goal was to determine if there were systemic personnel problems that management should address. Because most of the employees requested confidentiality, some of the allegations were generalizations of problems, and clear documentation was lacking in some cases, we did not try to pursue individual cases. Instead, we used the information provided to examine the processes concerning each of the area addressed to determine if VOA had complied with legal requirements and regulations. We did not attempt to determine if the best qualified employees were selected in promotions, awards, and hiring or the performance evaluations were correct.

1Voice of America: Selected Personnel Practices Warrant Management Attention (GAO/NSIAD-89-160, July 12, 1989.)

In summary, we found that in some cases, the problems were not as dire as the employees had alleged. The lack of supportive documentation and/or the lapse in time since some of the incidents occurred precluded us from making factual determinations on the validity of some of the specific allegations. However, discussions with VOA officials and examination of available reports, personnel records, and other documents corroborated the existence of a number of personnel problems.

Our review showed inadequate controls over time and attendance; weaknesses in the administration of certain contracts; differences in grade structures between VOA divisions, which caused dissension; underrepresentation of women and minorities, especially in the senior or supervisory ranks; limited employment rights for noncitizen employees; and inappropriate use of excepted service hiring authority.

During our review, VOA initiated a number of actions to address these and other personnel-related issues. Moreover, in commenting on our report, the agency agreed to implement our recommendations. Subsequent to the report VOA has provided us with oral briefings on the status of its actions to implement the recommendations. We have not reviewed the actions.

Now, let me briefly highlight our principal findings and the Agency's responses, starting with the issue of time and attendance.

INADEQUATE CONTROLS OVER TIME AND ATTENDANCE

VOA had not developed or enforced sufficient internal control procedures to ensure that VOA paid employees only for actual hours worked. In three regional language broadcast divisions, we found instances of (1) abuses in time and attendance reporting, (2) failure to abide by overtime and compensatory time rules, and (3) work scheduling shortcomings.

To improve control of time and attendance, VOA initiated seminars on time and attendance rules, established a policy of zero tolerance for violation of time and attendance rules, reviewed the justification for an 8-hour day without a meal break, and installed a computer-assisted security system that will make it easier to monitor time and attendance on the weekends and evening shifts.

WEAKNESSES IN CONTROL OVER PURCHASE ORDER VENDORS

Our review of contracts for program consultants, known as purchase order vendors, during the first 6 months of fiscal year 1988 in four of VOA's regional language broadcast divisions disclosed numerous problems. VOA used between 300 and 400 vendors to meet programming requirements; however, VOA had no central unit to monitor their use. As a result, in four of the regional language broadcast divisions, contracts were not awarded on a competitive basis, contracts were awarded to former employees and relatives of current employees without proper approval, and three of the divisions did not follow the Federal Acquisition Regulation

concerning proposed purchase orders exceeding \$10,000 for any one vendor. We reported many of the same weaknesses in 1982.

To better manage its use of purchase order vendors, VOA established a central oversight unit to ensure compliance with established policies and procedures for use of purchase order vendors. In addition, VOA publishes its requirements for foreign language-related contracts every quarter and is considering a proposal to centralize all small purchase activity within one unit.

DIFFERENCES IN VOA GRADE STRUCTURE

Complaints were made about the wide differences in VOA's grade structure. Generally, opportunities for advancement in the Regional Language Broadcast Divisions were limited to grade 12 or below; at the time of our review 84 percent of the staff in these divisions were at grade 12 or below. These divisions are staffed primarily with noncitizen and foreign-born employees who acquired their citizenship after coming to VOA. In contrast, 62 percent of the staff in the News and English Broadcasts Divisions were grade 13 or above.

VOA officials told us that because of the way VOA's work is organized and accomplished, broadcasting positions in the News and English Broadcasts Divisions tend to be one or two grades higher than those in the Regional Language Broadcast Divisions. VOA applied the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) classification criteria and standards to determine the grade levels for these

positions. According to VOA officials, the higher grades were justified based on the complexity and originality of the writing and editing of scripts. However, during our review we learned that considerable original writing was also being done in the larger Regional Language Broadcast Divisions.

VOA has initiated a review of pay systems and developed possible legislation to give greater recognition of performance and contribution in the pay-setting process.

UNDERREPRESENTATION OF WOMEN AND MINORITIES

The percentage of women and minorities in the work force had increased since 1984, but VOA had not met its affirmative action goals for broadcasters, radio broadcast technicians, and radio electronic technicians. Women and minorities were generally in the lower graded positions. Of the 2,164 U.S. employees here and Americans overseas, 48 percent were women and minorities; however, only 18 percent of women and minorities filled positions of grade 13 or higher. Women filled only 3 of the 42 language service chief positions and 80 of the other 329 managerial and supervisory positions (grade 13 and above).

VOA advised us that to enhance the status of women and minorities, it is now targeting recruitment to groups and institutions that include large numbers of women and minorities, examining the application and selection process, analyzing the career paths within VOA to identify those experiences and skills which appear to

result in advancement, working with USIA's Office of Equal Employment Opportunity to identify affirmative action goals and strategies, and emphasizing to senior managers that EEO is a critical part of their job.

EMPLOYMENT RIGHTS OF NONCITIZEN EMPLOYEES

We also found that noncitizen employees have limited employment rights. Since VOA's noncitizen employees are excepted from the competitive civil service, civil service law affords them fewer job rights and less protection from adverse or disciplinary actions than their U.S. citizen (competitive service) counterparts; noncitizen employees cannot directly appeal such actions as civil service employees can. Noncitizen employees expressed concern that they are more vulnerable to abusive personnel practices than other employees.

VOA is authorized by law to employ foreign nationals in the United States, without regard to civil service and classification laws, in positions requiring special talent when suitably qualified U.S. citizens are not available. VOA employs over 300 noncitizens in the United States who are recruited from overseas as well as from the U.S. work force (typically, permanent resident aliens). VOA sponsors the noncitizens recruited overseas for entry to the United States as nonimmigrant exchange visitors on J-1 exchange visas. These employees in most cases lose their authorization to remain in the United States if their VOA employment ceases.

Although the J-1 visa is intended to bring people into the United States on a temporary basis, VOA has routinely used it to hire permanent employees. Over 50 percent of the noncitizen employees received a waiver from the requirement to return to their homeland for 2 years and were sponsored by VOA to become permanent resident aliens.

VOA has initiated a review of the employment policies for noncitizens to develop a better regulatory structure for making employment decisions and responding to concerns expressed by noncitizen employees. VOA believes the approach will lead to greater stability in employment and clarify the parameters of noncitizen employees' appointments with VOA. In addition, VOA and USIA are working with the Immigration and Naturalization Service to establish a new visa category for VOA noncitizen employees that would alleviate problems they and their families have in living in the United States.

QUESTIONABLE NEED FOR EXCEPTED SERVICE

HIRING AUTHORITY AT RADIO MARTI

Turning to Radio Marti, which operates quasi-independently from VOA, our review indicated that the continued use of the Schedule B noncompetitive, excepted service hiring authority to fill 117 positions, particularly the lower graded ones, was questionable. This authority was originally granted by OPM after it determined that it would be impracticable to examine applicants for the particular knowledge of Cuba that is required for certain positions

at Radio Marti. Our review of personnel files of 35 employees in the excepted service showed that 5 of them did not possess the required knowledge of Cuba called for by the Schedule B authority.

Personnel regulations do not provide the same protection to Schedule B employees as is provided to competitive civil service personnel. From an employee's viewpoint, continued use of the excepted service reduces job security and limits the employee's ability to express concerns to management.

Radio Marti has completed its initial review of all Schedule B positions to determine whether successful performance in the job requires preexisting knowledge of Cuba. We were advised that action has been taken to move to the competitive service those positions which can no longer be justified as an excepted service position. This is to be an annual process.

This concludes my prepared remarks. I will be happy to respond to any questions.