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INTERVIEW

Introduction

This is a reflection, many years later, of the highlights of my career with USIA overseas and in Washington from early 1950 to my retirement near age 60 in 1976.

Chile was my first post, at a time when USIA was part of the State Department. At that time it was not a career service, and USIA (USIS overseas) officers were looked down upon by the self-considered elite in State. Yet, having made a name for myself in journalism as a foreign correspondent for Associated Press, I was accepted in Santiago even though I was new to the business and a bit apprehensive about engaging in

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At this point, I confess that all through the 25 years of my career with USIA I had some lingering misgivings about propaganda except in situations where I was convinced that US policy was exactly right and that foreign audiences should be brought around, if at all possible, to see things our way. But often I had an unpleasant feeling in the pit of my stomach that our foreign policy was faulty, and that I was in error, in the larger scheme of things, to be involved in propagandizing it. However, the foreign environment in which my wife and I worked was invariably pleasant, the hours and pay were good (considerably better than when I was with AP), and generally speaking we found Embassy people intelligent and attractive colleagues.

Chile: 1950 - 1952

The Chileans under President Gabriel Gonzalez Videla were quite pro-US, very simpatico, and seemed content with their democratic regime even though there were pockets of terrible poverty. There was a small communist element, but it presented no threat to the government. Even so, we decided in USIS there that one of our roles was to keep communism from increasing. so we issued news releases to the press and radio about the failures of communist movements in various countries, and how it suffocates the very freedom of which Chileans were so proud. We also showed films around the countryside, films supporting democracy and critical of communism, but also informative about the United States and its institutions.

One of the most effective pieces of work I did as Information Officer in Chile, in my judgment, was to design, write and have published a comic book, "Juan Verdejo Y sueno de Utopia" (Joe Everybody and his Dream of Utopia), describing how the little man may be attracted by the utopia promised by the communists but winds up worse off than before. The project was praised by Washington as one of the best projects done in years anywhere. The comic book was eagerly grabbed up by youngsters and taken home, and we had the feeling that it was effective in planting seeds of doubt about communist movements. For one thing, it explained what communism was, and we felt that few Chileans except the elite had the vaguest idea. (Later, there was new thinking in Washington headquarters that aiming for the masses was next to useless, that propaganda should be targeted primarily at the educated elite, the potential leadership in any country. Yet, my next post, Cuba, was being run by an unlettered former Army sergeant named Batista.)

Cuba: 1952-1957

This was perhaps my most interesting and demanding post, and the most stressful, because US policy supported the Batista Dictatorship, cruel and unprincipled, but anti-communist. Two political ambassadors, Arthur Gardner and Earl E.T. Smith, in the Eisenhower administration were completely sold on Batista, and refused to accept the

advice of Embassy intelligence and political officers to back off a little and realize that an opposition movement was growing and could win.

I believe it highly likely that a tough career ambassador could have convinced Batista early on, when Fidel Castro was first in the Sierra Maestra with his ragtag guerrillas, to conduct an honest election, even at the risk of having his chosen candidate lose, and go off to his home in Daytona, thus eliminating all reason for a Castro revolution.

In my role as Public Affairs Officer in Havana, having moved up from Information officer after a year, I dealt with all segments of the media and cultural community, but also became involved with pro-Castro people without intending to do so. There were more and more all the time as Batista's excesses became widely known -- tortures, killings, corruption. One of our closest friends was an economist, Rufo Lopez-Fresquet, who had an American wife. Rufo later became Castro's Minister of the Treasury, defecting two years later to teach in the US Rufo was extremely close to the Castro movement, although he remained in the capital, and was a great source of intelligence information which he passed onto me and also to my Embassy colleagues in the political and CIA sections once I convinced him they would not betray a confidence.

But despite this channeling of inside information to the ambassador at staff meetings there was great reluctance at the top to believe there could be any serious movement against the man they often played canasta with and admired.

I had excellent contacts with the Cuban media and was able to place a great deal of material, but this may be due in part to the official Batista policy of friendship with the US, and an abhorrence of communism, so that editors were under pressure to follow this line.

My Information Officer, Sher Helms, and I came up with the idea of a colorful monthly poster "Mundo Grafico", made up of photos and short captions, which store owners placed in their windows to attract customers. Hundreds of these went up for public view all over the island every month. We also put up racks at airports filled daily with USIS pamphlets
for travelers to read on the planes. One of the best cultural officers in the business, Francis Donahue, had contacts everywhere.

In short, USIS-Havana was, in my view, a first-rate, highly imaginative, adequately-funded endeavor, and effective in what it set out to do. Yet Castro took over, seized the press and radio stations, converted Cuba to a form of Marxist state, ranted against the United States to thunderous public approval, and US-Cuban relations came to an end.

It's not that USIS didn't do enough. The people wanted a change. They wanted Batista out and they wanted Castro in, and they still do, 30 years later.

Washington Assignment

I was transferred to Washington a few months before the Castro takeover in 1959, serving in USIA as head of the public information office having to do with domestic press relations for the Agency, under, first, George V. Allen, and later, Edward R. Murrow. This was fairly straight-forward work extolling for American readers the highlights of USIS activities overseas, and serving as a spokesman for the Agency on newsworthy developments.

Ed Murrow was perhaps a more enchanting personality and capable newsman than he was an administrator, but he created a needed public awareness of USIA. The public for the first time knew what USIA was all about, and this was, I feel, a morale-booster for its people.

Mexico: 1960-1962

In 1960, I was transferred to Mexico City as Deputy Public Affairs Officer, and there helped run a large program which enjoyed considerable success because of Mexican interest in its northern neighbor, based primarily on economics. But the USIS program there was routine, employing the same tried and true tactics used for years all over the world – press releases, radio and TV programs, pamphlet production, writing speeches for the ambassador, attending cultural events in the name of the US It was a large Embassy, and when Tom Mann was Ambassador he commented more than once he'd met people in the elevator who were on his staff but had been around for months without his knowing of them.

As in other posts, I had the feeling that the higher level Mexicans received so much information about the United States from Hollywood movies and wire service stories in their own newspapers, US radio broadcasts, and the flood of US magazines at their disposal that they really didn't need anything USIS could offer. This information, of course, was both good and bad, and the Washington view was that we had to correct bad impressions about the US held abroad. But US - Mexican history works against us. As one Mexican editor once said to me, "Let's face it, you Americans took the part with all the good roads!"

My family and I enjoyed living in Mexico and mixing with Mexicans at various levels, but the work offered no great sense of accomplishment. We didn't feel we were changing Mexican attitudes about the US An anti-US bias was built into their history books even at the elementary school level and that is still the case today. Relations are harmed by obnoxious tourists, rich Americans buying up property, problems with border crossings, and the treatment of illegals in the US, petroleum economics, foreign aid debts, and numerous other elements make for strained bilateral relations that no amount of USIS activity could hope to even dent.

Yet, I was there only two years -- too short a tour of duty for Mexico.

Venezuela: 1962-1967

Director Murrow assigned me on direct transfer from Mexico to Venezuela as a result of a meeting of USIS chiefs in Lima, Peru, where the Caracas PAO, I was told later, put his arm around Mr. Murrow's shoulders and called him Ed, a familiarity not in keeping with the austere tone of the moment. Mr. Murrow obviously was not amused.

I had been warned that Venezuela would be a drag, that the Venezuelans were aloof, lacking in cultural heritage, and were not liked among other Latin Americans. I found this only partly true. In our widening circle we found Venezuelans for the most part bright, party-loving and proud of their economic fortunes, based on oil production. But they lacked the warmth of the Mexicans, the gaiety of the Cubans, and the sense of humor of the Chileans.

Like Chile in our day, Venezuela had a democracy of long standing, and, like Chile's dependence on copper, Venezuela had oil. But while there were extremely wealthy Venezuelans, the oil economy only affected a small percentage of the people and there were deep pockets of poverty. Leftist political movements did not thrive, however, but they showed flare-ups of violence at times. There were kidnappings of US military and businessmen, more for political propaganda purposes than for ransom, and the Embassy more than once was fired upon from the nearby freeway. The university was a safe haven for rebellious students who cached arms on campus knowing that government authorities were not allowed to enter. The university often was closed by the government for months at a time because of political activities.

In this atmosphere USIS did the usual kind of thing in dealing with the media and cultural circles, hoping to create a more positive image of the United States, and success was there physically if difficult to judge as to its effect on people's minds. The poorer and even middle classes had too much to worry about just surviving to give a damn about the US and its policies. The upper classes, while they might have been swayed to a degree by USIS materials in their newspapers, magazines and films on TV, more than likely had access to a vast amount of other material, including US publications and the impact of visits to this country. Many had kids in US schools and universities.

Voice of America (1968-1972)

My five-year tour with the Voice of America in Washington lacked the excitement of overseas living, but proved professionally the most interesting and challenging of my career. VOA Director John Chancellor wanted me as his deputy when my Caracas assignment came to an end, and I accepted with some trepidation. International radio was complicated, but highly effective. It was an entirely new field for me, and it took several weeks before I got the hang of broadcast frequencies, transmitter locations, program content, policy direction, foreign language talent, slow-speed ("Special") English broadcasting, news coverage, and the political wallop, the commentary that serves as the government's daily editorial.

After a year working for Chancellor he bowed out to return to NBC to cover the six day war in the Middle East, and I was left running the place with its 2,200 employees for two years, with such stories breaking as the US moon walk and the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia. Eventually, since the top job at VOA is traditionally political, Kenneth Giddens from Alabama was brought in to head the place, and I remained his deputy.

It is fortunate that VOA has a lot of radio pros running its various divisions because changes at the top have little or no impact on operations. I did manage to put through, while Acting Director, a directive which lives to this day, giving VOA reporters overseas a free hand to report news as they see it without interference from ambassadors, who tend to be nervous about any reporting from their country of assignment.

In my time at VOA I came to consider international radio the best means of getting ideas across to people all over the world, and if I had the job of cutting the USIA budget to the very bone, I would eliminate everything but radio, and beef it up considerably. I came to consider expensive other USIA programs largely ineffective on the basis of cost-accounting -- useful to a degree, maybe, if you can afford them, but with nowhere the impact of direct broadcasting in dozens of languages. Overseas press releases, films for TV, programs for local radio, books for local libraries -- all these things require the services of someone to make a special plea for their use. Radio requires no such middleman. It broadcasts a strong message right over the frontiers and through censors into the ear of the listener.

Kenya: 1972 - 1976

USIA Deputy Director Henry Loomis assigned me to Kenya as PAO, observing that in his view, "it's the best damned post in the foreign service". It was where Henry and his family had made several hunting safaris.

In a way Henry was right. Kenya was a delight as a place for good living: the best year-around climate in Africa, game abounding in 17 game preserves (one at the edge of Nairobi), a newly-independent nation with an African hero, Jomo Kenyatta, as president.

Aside from the usual attention to media, USIS sought to influence opinion with an active library program, lectures, art shows for promising young African artists as well as resident Americans, film programs, and books to outlying African libraries.

No major coup can I claim from my five years there, but I believe we did well in getting high exposure for US policies, at least those which the audiences considered palatable. No kind of USIS activity, to my mind, can sell foreigners on a US policy which they consider against their own best interests.

Kenya, like many posts, was a favorite objective of frequent-fliers like Congressmen, journalists, and other dignitaries, as well as being the locale of numerous international

conferences, all of which meant briefings for visitors on the local situation. On several occasions business men or professional people holding their tax-free annual conferences in Nairobi would sit through such briefings in khaki, while their tour buses double-parked in the street outside.

Politically, what was disturbing about Kenya to me was the widespread corruption at and near the top, and the intense tribalism. Kenyatta may have been relatively clean, but everybody knew that his wife, Mama Ngina, was deeply involved in the ivory poaching trade, and he had numerous relatives, all of the dominant Kikuyu tribe, of course, on the government payroll. Almost every day there would be publicized ceremonies of business men giving huge checks to Kenyatta or his wife for "charity". (After Kenyatta died and the vice president, Daniel Arap Moi, took over, Mama Ngina was placed under house arrest and prohibited from leaving the country--Moi's effort to show he was against corruption.

I would have liked to fill out my second tour in Kenya, but I was transferred to Washington, into a made-up job rewriting the PAO handbook, because -- it was explained to me -- of my of my problems in getting along with the cultural affairs officer, whom I down-graded in a performance report because of his penchant for golf during working hours. He, in retaliation, accuses me of racial intolerance.

Whatever, I was nearing age 60, and at that time that magic birthday meant goodbye, Charley, unfair as that sounds today.

I took my retirement a few months before I had to, because I was bored doing practically nothing in USIA, and after 26 years of service, and a Meritorious Honor Award for running VOA during a time of crisis, I walked out of 1750 Pennsylvania Avenue having been wished God-speed not by any Director, or even Deputy Director, but by an assistant in the Personnel Office, who even pronounced my name wrong.

It's not inspirational to realize that every country where I worked for USIA is in worse shape now than when I was there. Chile is no longer a democracy, but a rightist dictatorship. Cuba is a Marxist state, its leadership antagonistic toward the United States. Mexico has deep resentment toward the United States, and, poverty-stricken, is in hock to this country. Kenya is rife with corruption and in economic trouble, with the world's highest birthrate. All this was beyond our ability to do anything about. Nations go their way, for good or bad, regardless.

Having worked 12 years as a newspaperman in San Francisco, I convinced VOA that I would be a suitable string correspondent, and have been covering the Bay Area for the past 10 years, voicing stories and features of all kinds. I also cover for the USIA Press service. So, despite my misgivings about some of the USIS activities overseas that I consider extraneous in today's world, and despite a rather disquieting last half-year in USIA employ, I still maintain my lines of communication with the Agency in order to keep my hand in Journalism.

Addendum

Richard G. Cushing: 1950-52

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