

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training
Foreign Affairs Oral History Project
Information Series

THOMAS C. SORENSEN

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Initial interview date: July 25, 1990
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INTERVIEW

Q: This is Larry Hall, interviewing Tom Sorensen for the USIA-AA Oral History Project. The date is July 25, 1990, and the place is Albemarle County, near Charlottesville, Virginia, the home of Tom Sorensen.

BIO-SKETCH

Tom, would you kindly give us a brief bio-sketch, starting with where you were born and where you were educated?

SORENSEN: I was born on March 31, 1926, in Lincoln, Nebraska, where my father was a lawyer who was active in politics. He subsequently was elected to two terms as Attorney General of Nebraska, and had two unsuccessful tries for public office after that.

I went to Lincoln High School, a public school, and to the University of Nebraska, where I had a Bachelor's Degree with majors in Political Science and in Journalism. I did graduate work thereafter in political science, although I did not complete my thesis.

Because my father and mother were intensely interested in public affairs, from early childhood there were daily discussions at the dinner table about national, state and international politics. I had a great interest in international politics, fueled by World War II which came along at an impressionable age, when I was a teenager.

Early Pre-USIA Work in Journalism

In graduate school, I specialized in international affairs. I went to work virtually full time when I was 19 years old for The Nebraska State Journal. Subsequently, for several years, I was news director of an independent radio station in Lincoln, and did commentary, as well as news, and much of that focused on international affairs.

So, when I saw in Editor and Publisher Magazine in November of 1950 that they were looking for journalists with an interest in international affairs for overseas assignments in the State Department's Foreign Information Program, I was enthralled.

1951: Entrance Into USIA Predecessor Agency: Beirut in January '52

I had earlier met a fellow Nebraskan, Charlie Arnot, who was then head of IPS, the press service, and so I applied. Things moved very slowly in those days and maybe they still do. The full field clearance took a long time, but in November of 1951, I joined the Service.

I had earlier been told that my assignment would be Baghdad, as Information Officer, but the Information Officer in Beirut had the misfortune to be married to the sister of the British spy McLean so the poor man was dismissed from the Service as a "security risk." As a consequence, luckily for me, I got the assignment in Beirut and, after a Washington orientation period, went with my wife, Mary, and nearly two- year-old daughter, Ann, to Beirut, in January 1952.

Q: Tom, is it also true that you once had a student while you were back at Nebraska, Johnny Carson?

SORENSEN: Yes, I taught two courses in that period -- I was a graduate student and also working for the newspaper and then the radio station -- two courses at the School of Journalism: the basic "Beginning Journalism," and "Radio Journalism," which was compulsory for speech majors.

Carson was a speech major, an amiable fellow earning his way through college by putting on magic shows in church basements. I liked his style, so after I applied at USIA, I tried to get him to come to KLMS as Assistant News Director.

He thought about it and told me a couple of days later that no, he thought he'd like to try to break into the big time and go to the Coast. I said that I thought that was immature and so on, but I did offer Carson, as I recall, \$35 a week, a little bit less than he gets now.

Q: Thank you, sir. Now, would you kindly elaborate a little bit on the kind of assignments you had with USIA first, starting with Beirut and then going on to your service in Baghdad and subsequently Egypt, and then back in Washington, where you were controlling some of the operations in the Near East and comment on the relationship of that work that you did at that time to the foreign policy of the United States, the usefulness of this whole endeavor to the United States?

SORENSEN: In Beirut, my first boss was a gentleman named Winfield Hancock Lyon, Jr., who, I believe, was a political appointee, non-career. When the Democrats lost the 1952 election, Mr. Lyon lost his job, and I had the wonderful good fortune to have you, Larry, come down from Turkey and become PAO in September 1953.

Our Ambassador, Ray Hare had a very high respect for you, as you will recall. He also had a high respect for the USIS function. When I say "high," I mean relative to other Foreign Service Officers of his age and era, which wasn't to say tremendously high. He felt it was a peripheral, but useful activity. So, I found working with you extremely enjoyable, and with the Cultural Affairs Officers at the time, Mildred Vardaman, and later John Nevins. I was in Beirut for four years before being transferred to Washington for Arabic language training.

1956: Temporary Assignment to Baghdad to Help Set Up Propaganda Side of Baghdad Pact.

After six months, I was asked by G. Huntington Damon, our Area Director, to go to Baghdad on temporary assignment to help set up the propaganda side of the Counter-Subversion Office of the Baghdad Pact. The Baghdad Pact, you will recall, was that unfortunate notion of Secretary of State John Foster Dulles. It was a mistaken concept from the start, an alliance of unequals which most Arabs (including most Iraqis) saw as simply the new face of western imperialism.

Incidentally, we were so "successful" in countering subversion that there was a coup d'etat in Baghdad two years later, and somebody told me -- I'm not sure it's true -- that the Iraqi

representative on the Counter-Subversion staff was one of the conspirators in the Qasim Revolution.

Anyway, I was there for a few months, successfully resisted it as a permanent assignment, and returned to Washington before Christmas 1956.

February, 1957: Information Officer, USIS Cairo

In February '57 I was sent to Cairo as Information Officer under PAO Bill Weathersby. I was there until the spring of '59, when I came back to the U.S. to the Agency to be the Desk Officer, Program and Policy Officer, for the Near East -- Lebanon, Syria, and Israel.

Q: Now, in all of those jobs, you had a good chance to observe the usefulness of the whole USIA function in relation to the whole foreign policy of the United States in that area, which was largely concerned at that time with the relationships -- not exclusively, but with the relationships -- between the Arab world and Israel, and the peripheral aspects of that.

Arab World's Love/Hate Relationship With U.S.

What do you think of the way that USIA fit into that role within the Foreign Service community?

SORENSEN: Well, then as now, the Arabs had a love-hate relationship the United States. They believed, then and now, that the United States was responsible for the creation of Israel, and sustenance of Israel, whom they viewed as an alien intruder into their region. At the same time, they had a special affection for the United States, stemming partly from our democratic institutions and our Jeffersonian history, but also, in part, from the fact that the Americans they had known in that region over the previous century had been benign missionaries, teachers and medical people, who provided a great deal of assistance in helping the development of the region.

In fact, the Syrian Protestant College became the American University of Beirut, which has survived, despite all.

Q: And created many Prime Ministers for most of the Arab world in its time, did it not?

SORENSEN: That is right, but more then than now. So, there was this affection for the United States and what the United States stood for in general, and there was a disaffection for what the United States stood for in particular. That was at the heart of U.S./Arab relations then, as it is at the heart of U.S./Arab relations now.

Role of USIA in Arab World in 1950'S

Now to come around to answer your immediate question: The role of USIA, (which I think I see more clearly now than I did then) was to provide sustenance for those who wanted to maintain this American link. They needed to know about us, to hear about us. Our explanations about U.S. policy were mostly futile, but the flow of information about the United States, and cultural activities involving the United States, kept the flame alive for the day when relations would be better. We are still waiting for that day, but that was the function of USIA. I think it was a valuable one.

Q: You think it was a valuable one? I was just about to ask you. In fact, that role, that long-term role, do you think that would justify the existence of those operations in any case, even though we were not able to foster specific, local, foreign policy objectives?

SORENSEN: Well, we wasted a lot of time and money and emotional capital in trying to do the impossible, and that was both a strategic and a tactical error on our part. But, what we did do, on the other side, on the long-term -- call it "cultural," although I still have trouble with that word in this context -- side, was worth the money expended.

SORENSEN: There Is No Split -- and Should Not Be --
Between Cultural and Informational Aspects of USIA Programs

Q: Will you comment, in a general way, on the different roles? Is there a split between information and culture? Are these two different things and do they blend into each other, or what kind of a mix do you think the Agency might have had best in the Middle East, if that wasn't ideal?

SORENSEN: I never thought there was a split. I didn't then and I don't now. If one creates a split, it turns the purely information part into a kind of PR propaganda machine, whose credibility is damaged by being separated from the total presentation of the American story. We'll go into this further later on when we discussed what happened subsequently.

Q: Right.

SORENSEN: I think the two belong together. I thought so then; I think so now; and, of course, although they were then separated in Washington, they were not separated in the field. The Public Affairs Officer was in charge of both the cultural and the information programs. Although the cultural program was back-stopped in the State Department, the Ambassador, in every instance that I know and, certainly, in Beirut and in Cairo and in Baghdad, looked to the PAO just as much for guidance on the cultural side as he did on the information side.

Q: I think that was generally true, although it may have varied from post to post in intensity. I'm going to ask you a question in a minute on the specific types of programs you think were most effective in those days, in connection with your operating on the ground in Beirut, in Cairo, in Baghdad, and from your viewpoint in Washington, as well.

Exchange of Persons Programs Was the Most Effective USIS
Effort in Arab World in Late 1950s

Q: What specific kinds of programs, if you can think of some, do you think were most effective?

SORENSEN: I think a number of the programs had a positive effect. The exchange of persons program certainly did. It brought adult leaders, opinion makers, doers and shakers, to the U.S., and students as well. Their visits to the United States had a positive effect on a great many of them, with both short-and long-term consequences. The program also brought American academics and performers abroad -- useful, but probably less so.

Otherwise, Only Reasonably Effective USIS Activity
was Keeping Stream of Information Re, U.S.
Constantly Before Arab Eyes -- Mainly Through Press,
But Also Other Media

In Lebanon, where there were many small newspapers, all hungry for content, we filled the papers with our press releases. I became skeptical of the effectiveness of this; we were counting column inches, not changed minds. Looking back, maybe I wasn't entirely right. The flood of column inches kept a flood of information about the United States in front of the Lebanese. The Christian Lebanese, who worried about their eventual fate in a vast sea of Muslims, wanted to always have a contact, a tie, with the United States, although they too periodically felt betrayed by the U.S.

The two years that I spent in Egypt were those immediately following the Suez War.

Q: This was from 1956 to 1958?

SORENSEN: 1957 to '59. They were very enjoyable years, although Egyptians needed permission from the Ministry of Interior to have contacts with us, so you knew that the people you knew and were friendly with were all authorized "friends" of the Americans.

It was a period in the Middle East, at all levels of diplomacy, private diplomacy as well as public diplomacy, of little progress. I didn't think we accomplished anything. Even now I don't feel I accomplished much in the two years I was in Cairo, except helping to keep that pipeline of information about America. Now, of course, Egypt is our friend. Maybe we helped lay the base for that back then.

Q: The material providing that continuing contact was just news stories about the United States in general, films about the United States in general, nothing to do with specifics of foreign policy, but about the U.S. and keeping them in touch with us?

SORENSEN: That is right. We had a very effective Cultural Officer in Cairo for most of the time I was there, Bill Lovegrove who now, sadly, is no longer with us. Lovegrove was not at all politically minded. This, the Egyptians liked. They didn't want anything political.

I was clearly politically minded, and Lovegrove was ten times more effective than I was. He had the usual suspects, you know, piano players and various artistic ventures and so on there, all of which the Egyptians responded to warmly.

Q: But not to separate cultural items from information items, I assumed that Lovegrove used USIA films and USIA books and even some of the pamphlet material that you had available in his programs?

SORENSEN: His library was full of people looking at all of our media products. All the various media were used. In the field, as you know, unlike in Washington, there weren't walls between the media. They were mixed together and used according to what the people on the scene believed was the best way to use them. They weren't considered, in the places I served in the field, IPS programs or IMS programs or ICS programs. They were post programs.

Q: Exactly. You were there for a number of critical years as far as relations between the Arab world and the United States were concerned. Do you have any feelings about the Voice of America and its Arabic or its English language programs into that area, or from your experience in Washington, do you have any feelings about it?

VOA Was Listened To and Was Useful

SORENSEN: The Voice of America was listened to. You will recall that we had transmission facilities on -- was it Rhodes?

Q: Rhodes, yes.

SORENSEN: Broadcasting a medium wave signal into the Mediterranean.

Q: As well as short.

In Total: USIS Effort Kept Open a Valuable Link Between U.S. and Arabs, But Could Never "Sell" Policies Arabs Disliked

SORENSEN: As well as short, but the medium wave had, by far, the greatest impact. People listened to it. Again, it was part of the totality of this connection with America that I talked about. It didn't make anybody change his views overnight. But the Egyptians weren't dumb. They knew that their own radio was hopelessly propagandistic, and so

even though they might have not liked American policy, they listened to the Voice (and the BBC) when they wanted to know what was really happening.

Q: Right. So, again, the VOA served, along with all of the other arms of the USIA establishment, to keep up that continuing link between people and the United States, even though they may have frowned upon our foreign policy.

SORENSEN: There was another way in which the VOA was important. Nasser's regime did not accurately convey to the Egyptian people, through the totally controlled and nationalized press, what American policy really was. We could not get it into the newspapers, because the newspapers weren't allowed to print it.

We published a little newspaper called As-Saddaga (Friendship), which had extremely limited circulation, restricted by the government. So the only way to find out what American policy was, was to listen to commentary on the Voice of America.

Now, some people thought that the Voice of America was only for news and it shouldn't appear to be an instrument of American policy because listeners might think that it had something to do with the U.S. Government. But I never met a listener to the Voice of America who didn't think The Voice had everything to do with the U.S. Government. Nobody out there thinks it's an independent radio station.

While they wanted to hear the straight news, and that's what got, the editorial, the commentary, provided them with an accurate description of U.S. foreign policy in the area which they were not getting from their own media or from their own government.

Q: Do you agree that that was a good idea, as long as the commentary was clearly labeled "commentary," separate from the news?

SORENSEN: Yes, I do, and I fought for that then and believe in it now.

*Q: I'm going to stop this a minute, while we get ready for the next area.
(Off the record.)*

1960 and Early '61: Circumstances Leading to Sorensen
Appointment as Deputy Director/USIA for Policy and Plans
Including Prior Acquaintances with President Kennedy

Q: Tom, now let's talk about the period, your point of view as the Deputy Director of the Agency, after your appointment under Ed Murrow during the Kennedy Administration, and your view from the top of the Agency as to its relationship with other parts of the foreign policy community in Washington, with the White House, as well as the Department of State, and then the effectiveness of the Agency and where its strengths and weaknesses are, and perhaps with reference to specifics of foreign policy at the time and your comments on the present and future, as well.

So, why don't you start there, with your appointment and how it came about?

SORENSEN: Well, as you know, my brother, Ted, was the principal policy assistant to Senator John F. Kennedy of Massachusetts from 1953-1961 -- though he and spent most of the years between '56 and '60 with Senator Kennedy running for president. Kennedy was nominated and elected in '60, and Ted was appointed Special Counsel to the President.

I felt a little nervous about this relationship during the campaign and my Area Director, Bill King, sent me on an inspection tour of the region covering most of the fall of 1960. So, when there were some leaks; as I recall it, Kennedy was drawing on a classified USIA poll showing a decline in U.S. prestige, I was glad to be thousands of miles away. I didn't have anything to do with that leak, if indeed there was a leak, but it helped to have distanced myself.

Q: A great piece of administration by Bill.

SORENSEN: After the election, Kennedy had, like all transitions do, a number of task forces working up various position papers between the first week in November and inauguration on January 20, 1961. The transition was being coordinated by Dick Neustadt, a Harvard professor who is an expert on the presidency and on transitions. Clark Clifford also was playing a major role as the most experienced Democratic former White House man around in those days. Taking a look at USIA was a group headed by one of Adlai Stevenson's law partners, John Sharon, assisted by Lloyd Free, a public opinion pollster, who had been in USIA --

Q: You mean USIA before it was USIA?

SORENSEN: Before it was USIA, that's right, in the State Department days. Lloyd Free basically drafted that report for the Sharon Committee.

In addition to that, Senator John Kennedy -- I'd met him a number of times since I first returned to Washington on leave in 1954, and we'd nearly always talked about USIA -- asked me to give him an insider's view of what I thought USIA should be doing and how it should be organized. I provided a report to him, one of the main points of which was that I thought that the Washington separation of the Cultural Program was artificial, unnecessary and unwise. I had a meeting with President-elect Kennedy in early January 1961, at which he discussed the memo with me.

He asked me who I thought should be appointed Director of USIA. I mentioned Ed Murrow, along with one or two others, but I'm sure I had nothing to do with Murrow's appointment. Chet Bowles had presented Murrow's name and, of course, Murrow's name was very well known to Kennedy, and Kennedy was known to Murrow -- not entirely favorably, at this point but that's another story.

When Murrow was appointed Director, Kennedy gave him my report, which I gather Murrow liked. Don Wilson, of the Washington bureau of Life Magazine, a very able journalist and a close personal friend of Bob Kennedy -- Susan Wilson and Ethel Kennedy had been girlhood friends -- had been nominated by the President to be the Deputy Director of the Agency, a Presidential appointment.

Wilson actually came before Murrow. He was selected first, and I was assigned to the Office of the Director (Abbott Washburn was Acting Director during that time) to help Wilson get oriented and so on.

Murrow came in and asked me to help him get oriented, and in the process we talked about everything. After a week or so, he said, "Do you want to be Deputy Director for Policy and Plans?" It's what I had wanted and dreamt about but hadn't expected, so I said, "Uh, uh," and he said sharply, "Well, do you want it or not?" I assured him I did.

I asked him if this wouldn't create some kind of embarrassment. He said, "I didn't ask the President, but I told him I was going to do it, and he said, 'Fine.'" Murrow was subsequently nice enough to say at the first staff meeting that, "I would have appointed Tom Sorensen, even if he'd been my brother," which was typical Murrow humor.

Sorensen's Intent to Reorient Agency Objectives and Operational Methodologies

What I wanted to accomplish in that job was fairly defined and not very broad. Murrow had Wilson and me involved in everything, from personnel to budget, but I focused on policy, on "the message." I wanted to change the mission of the Agency, both the written Mission that the President promulgates, (there had been an Eisenhower Statement of Mission after the Agency was created in 1953) but even more so the "lower case" mission as perceived by the people who worked there. I wanted to see the President's mandate to USIA rewritten to make USIA more of a pointed tool of U.S. foreign policy, rather than some sort of vague, general, "Tell the American story abroad" (whatever that is), assignment. I thought that loose definition meant 50 things to 49 people, and that it diffused the effort and effectiveness of the Agency.

I did not want to turn USIA into some kind of hard hitting Ministry of Propaganda, not at all. But I wanted it to become an objective-oriented rather than media-oriented organization.

As I saw it, we should start with the objective: Identify what it is we are trying to persuade people to believe about us. Then, but only then, create products aimed at achieving that objective. In other words starting with the result you want and working backwards, rather than starting from the product and going out there and looking for a result.

This did not require changing the tone of the Voice of America, although it meant sharpening its editorials to reflect the views of the United States Government and not the views of some editorial writer. The same applied to the other media, but the issue was more crucial with the Voice of America, partly because radio goes directly to the consumer rather than through the USIS field posts, but also because the Voice, perhaps because it dealt directly with the consumer, had a very special esprit de corps, a very special view of itself as an independent radio. This view was fostered by VOA's very effective leader, Henry Loomis, who had first come into the Agency as a Special Assistant to Theodore Streibert, its first Director.

I also wanted to see the Cultural Program managed by State, integrated in so far as much as it was politically possible, into the total effort. (I say "politically possible," because the father of the program, Senator J. William Fulbright of Arkansas, was absolutely opposed to having the activity in USIA, and it didn't happen until Fulbright left the Senate.)

I saw the Agency's mission, both in Washington and world-wide, as the peg on which this all hung. I thought we ought to have clear-cut objectives in each country. I was a big believer in country plans, plans that also were objective-centered, that started with the objectives and worked back to operations. This was the opposite of the all too common, "We've got a nice big Press Section, we've got this section and we've got that section, now how can we use them to do something helpful?" World-wide and at the country level, I wanted the USIA effort to be honed to be more effective.

So, I created in the Office of Policy and Plans, which was the operating part of my job, a little operation to identify themes, which would apply worldwide, to help the media focus on the kind of product that was needed. This way, a guy who wanted to make a great film in IMS wouldn't be doing something totally different from a guy who had this idea for a great commentary in IPS or somebody who had an idea for a great books program in ICS, et cetera, et cetera.

The idea was not to homogenize or politicize. The idea was to sharpen and coordinate the message so that the Agency would have greater impact. Edgar D. Brooke, who had been a PAO in Beirut (though I had not served under him there except for three months when I was in Beirut on TDY during the U.S. Marines' landing in 1958), returned to Washington to take on this extremely difficult job. Ed got a lot of resistance from a lot of quarters, but in his -- and this is one reason why I thought he was the right man for the job -- in his charming, southern Virginia manner, he was a lot less abrasive than I was in those days, and he went around smoothing feelings that I ruffled.

USIA Gets New Statement of Mission

Murrow supported this approach 100 percent. In due time, at our suggestion, McGeorge Bundy, Special Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, asked Murrow to provide a new draft Statement of Mission for USIA. Murrow asked me to draft it and I did. It went over to the White House, was approved by Mac Bundy and the President and

became operative. Well, of course, just because you have a Statement of Mission doesn't mean that everything or even anything changes immediately, but at least it's there, in print.

VOA Fear That Policy Oversight at Agency Level Would Damage Its Credibility: Turf Battles Followed

Now, there was then -- although, perhaps, not as much as there was later, under Lyndon Johnson, under some other presidents -- this fear, sometimes touching on paranoia, among some Voice of America staff that the policy people were trying to interfere with their running a free and independent radio station, which would somehow damage its credibility. Actually, its credibility, its virginity, was equally precious to us on the policy side, maybe more so because we were more interested in the objective-centered approach than were the people at the Voice, but we saw it differently in execution.

So here we have Edward R. Murrow, now Director of the United States Information Agency, who spent a lot of time in his radio and television career battling CBS management interference in product. Henry Loomis, a great bureaucratic in-fighter, played this angle for all it was worth -- which was plenty. He massaged this part of Murrow's psyche constantly. Of course, Murrow knew what Loomis was doing. Sometimes Murrow came down on Loomis' side, but more often on mine.

Ed Murrow as a Program Administrator

I have no quarrel at all with the way Murrow dealt with that issue. You know, he had the reputation of being a poor administrator. Wrong. A good administrator is one who could do just what he did, in balancing those two important aspects of running a government broadcast station. I thought at the time he did it brilliantly (perhaps because he usually agreed with me) and, in retrospect, I still think so. I don't believe that Murrow ever lost the confidence of Henry Loomis, while at the same time he retained my total confidence. That's effective administration!

Was USIA "in on the Takeoffs" as well as "the Crash Landings"?

Back in 1960, and I guess it goes on until this day, there was always talk about "being in on the takeoffs as well as the crash landings of American foreign policy," one of the grand old cliches of the business. It was actually used, I think, in the Sharon Report, possibly in mine, and Murrow, not normally a man for cliches, used it as well.

He told Kennedy, when he was appointed, that he thought that should be the case. Kennedy recognized that Murrow was a great Voice of America. I mean, Murrow was the "voice of America" in many ways before he became Director of USIA.

Kennedy, possibly because he was of the new generation, possibly because he was an ex-journalist, possibly because he had very close ties to a number of journalists, understood, better than any of his predecessors, how important this element of political management was. "News management," his critics called it in those days. "Public diplomacy" it's called in foreign affairs. Kennedy grasped the importance of the psychological aspects in the conduct of foreign affairs.

However, that didn't magically transform the view in the Department of State. Traditional, but able diplomats, from Chip Bohlen to Alex Johnson, may have given it a little lip service, but I don't think they saw it as Kennedy did, and Secretary of State Dean Rusk, certainly did not. However, Rusk had a good Assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs, Robert Manning, (subsequently editor of *The Atlantic*), his deputy Jim Greenfield, (subsequently foreign editor of *The New York Times*), who did. As did Carl Rowan, who followed Manning as Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs, and of course succeeded Murrow as Director of USIA.

Q: You were saying, Tom, it's not enough to just say that you have to be in on the takeoffs as well as the crash landings; you have to do something about it. Murrow did what?

SORENSEN: President Kennedy used the National Security Council as a kind of inner cabinet on foreign affairs. The people at the NSC table were the people he wanted there, including Murrow.

Kennedy later told both Arthur Schlesinger and my brother that Murrow didn't speak up as much as Kennedy would have liked, but husbanded his thoughts -- but when he did speak up, he was listened to. Like the rest of us, he wasn't right all the time, but Murrow had a lot of international experience, and he had a judgment about the opinion of mankind that was shrewd and informed.

USIA Was Not in on Bay of Pigs But Were on Cuban Missile Crisis

Murrow was not told, nor were many others including my brother Ted, about the Bay of Pigs in advance. But Kennedy never made that mistake again, and the head of the Agency was involved in all subsequent takeoffs, as well as landings in that administration.

I say "the head of the Agency," because in the great crisis of the Kennedy Administration and possibly of the '60s, possibly of the entire post-war period, the Cuban Missile Crisis, Murrow was in the hospital and Don Wilson, who was Acting Director of the Agency, served on the inner NSC, "EXCOM," the Executive Committee of the NSC.

So, USIA was in on it. There might have been jurisdictional disputes with the Public Affairs people at State, who were not represented in EXCOM, but there were not.

From the beginning of the crisis, when the Soviet missile launches were first spotted by U-2 surveillance aircraft over Cuba, the President was insistent that his hand not be revealed until he revealed it. He was a little unhappy, when I had been lunching at the White House with my brother Ted, (who was and is extremely discreet), and guessed that there was something big afoot about Cuba or Berlin or something. In order not to have me speculating over at 1776 Pennsylvania Avenue, Kennedy, grumbling, authorized my brother to tell me at the same time that Don Wilson was brought in.

This was, interestingly enough, even prior to Pierre Salinger's being brought in by a day or two, but it shows the value that Kennedy attached to USIA. He wanted this story told abroad in exactly the right way so the U.S. would not be viewed as the aggressor; that it was not developing a pretext to attack Cuba.

I had the privilege (and pleasure) of writing the policy guidance for us and for the posts, which was transmitted simultaneously with the President's speech. In advance I wrote the policy guidance, a "talking points" paper; and we had a press and radio commentary written. There was unhappiness at the Voice on that, but nobody seemed to feel that it was a time to worry about bureaucratic privileges.

Serious Disagreement on Handling of President Kennedy's Speech at American University

However, there was a real problem a few months later. I got so annoyed that I remember it to this day. President Kennedy, in a speech at the American University commencement, wanted to send a message to the Soviet Union that, in the wake of the resolution of the Cuban missile crisis, we were now prepared to try a new tack to ease the cold war. It was this speech that led to negotiations for the underground nuclear test ban treaty of a few months later. That the crafting, presentation, and dissemination of that speech was carefully orchestrated. It was "public diplomacy" at its best.

Mac Bundy was, I think, out of town; anyway, Carl Kaysen, his Deputy at the NSC, worked with me on this and we worked with my brother, Ted, who was drafting some language before Kennedy's final version. At speech time, all was ready and the USIA policy guidance written and distributed.

The Voice kissed it off, despite policy guidance. Well, this was a case where I believed that the Administration's judgment was better than the copy editor's judgment at the Voice, which after all is the U.S. Government's radio station.

Q: When you say "kissed it off," what precisely do you mean?

SORENSEN: I don't now recall the details. It was maybe not the lead story, or it was given short shrift. The Voice's daily commentary was on some other subject. It didn't have impact. We didn't do our job.

I raised holy hell about this, so Murrow summoned a meeting of Loomis and me. Henry said that, in his opinion, the speech wasn't that important. Henry was defending his turf and his men, and that's okay. But, I don't think it mattered what Henry's opinion was or what my opinion was.

Our boss, the President of the United States, was making a major innovation in foreign policy and if the VOA doesn't participate in that, when does it? That is an egregious example of what happened in lesser ways at other times, the specifics of which I no longer remember. Of course, there is a natural tension between the broadcasters and policy side that will always be there. Since Charlie Wicks' directorship, this has, in part, been bypassed by having direct satellite press conferences with U.S. government officials answering questions from newsmen without having the intermediary of a policy officer in IOP (or whatever it is called now) or a commentary editor or writer at the Voice of America. Now, it is direct, and that's fine.

The Effectiveness of WorldNet Telecasts and Importance of Putting the Right Officials on the Programs

The "WorldNet" interviews have been enormously successful. I travel abroad as a businessman, and journalists tell me they love it, this televised satellite press conference. I think it's a great innovation of USIA, and one of the reasons it's great is it removes all the middlemen.

Q: Yes. Do you suggest that -- don't let me put words in your mouth, but this implies something about the background of the particular American official being interviewed, in terms of his own cognizance of how messages get across, does it not?

SORENSEN: Well, it does, and you've got to be sure that the official who is being interviewed is someone who truly reflects the nuances of U.S. policy. While you don't have a USIA middle man, the official is the middle man, in effect, between the President and the Secretary of State -- if he's not the President or the Secretary of State, which he usually isn't.

He can get it wrong, but I'd rather have him get it wrong than one of us in the relaying business, so to speak, get it wrong.

Q: In a way, the selection process of picking the particular official who will be interviewed takes the place of providing a policy guidance.

SORENSEN: Absolutely, Larry. I think that's a good way of putting it and it's extremely important. I mean, it's almost as important as what the guy says, because if you pick the wrong one or the guy who is not articulate or the guy who can't handle himself, or the guy who doesn't quite understand policy, or, indeed, somebody who may not be 100 percent in favor of it, it is -- as you government people say -- counter productive.

Q: In a sense, this suggests that the role of public diplomacy needs to be understood by our top level spokesmen in whatever department of government may be called upon to answer to a foreign audience and should understand what public diplomacy is and how it works.

SORENSEN: Yes. I think that, although they may not know about or have any better understanding of USIA now than they did 30 years ago, that the role of public diplomacy by whomever -- USIA doesn't have a monopoly on public diplomacy -- is a lot better understood now than it was then, and it's a lot more taken for granted, including, in the Department of State at the upper levels, than it was.

Of course, we have a whole new generation of Foreign Service officers, or two generations of Foreign Service officers, who have grown up in the field with competent USIA people.

Q: Who are better prepared.

SORENSEN: Who are better prepared, right.

USIA-CIA Relationships

Q: Tom, would you please say something about the CIA/USIA relationship?

SORENSEN: After the Bay of Pigs fiasco in April, 1961, the CIA's Deputy Director for Plans, who was in charge of operations, was eased out of office along with the CIA Director, Alan Dulles.

John McCone came in as Director and the new DDP was Dick Helms. McCone told Murrow, "We don't want ever again to get caught by something like the Bay of Pigs, where the CIA believed that the people of Cuba would overthrow Castro when USIA had polls saying the opposite. We're going to start a new relationship."

Two things happened. One is that, for quite a long period of time, Helms came regularly to my office and gave me general briefings on what the CIA was doing, with particular emphasis in the psychological field.

Secondly, from that time on, Murrow, Wilson and I were brought the very highly classified daily CIA report by a courier who sat in our respective offices as we read it.

On Murrow's last day in office -- I'm jumping ahead now, but in early January of 1965, Wilson and I were sitting there morosely and Murrow's secretary buzzes him and says, "The CIA courier is here. Do you want to read it?" Murrow said, "Oh, I might as well, it's my last day. On the other hand, I could wait until tomorrow and read it in The New York Times."

We all laughed and Yoichi Okamoto, USIA's best photographer (later LBJ's), took the picture of that, and is the picture that appears on the back cover of my book. A similar photo appears in Joe Persico's recent wonderful biography of Ed Murrow.

Q: The title of your book is?

SORENSEN: The Word War: The Story of American Propaganda, published in 1968 by Harper & Row, with a foreword by Robert F. Kennedy. I should add that the book obviously contains far more detailed recollections and views than this interview could -- and more accurate, too, as I wrote it in the several years following my departure from USIA, not 25 years later as we are today.

Anyway, the relationship between USIA and CIA was cordial, was correct, during the time I was there, both with Murrow and my year with Carl Rowan. I mean, I have no way of knowing whether they did sneak somebody in, but they would have no special reason to. They had a staff man, Bill Carpenter, who was a liaison with my office. (We had liaisons with other foreign affairs departments.) So, the relationship was good, and McCone and Murrow had a very good relationship throughout.

Anecdotes: Meetings With Jack Kennedy --
Before and After He Became President

Q: Very good. Is there anything else along that particular line you'd like to say here?

SORENSEN: There were a couple of individuals that I knew who were career CIA people who were recruited into USIA, but when they cut their ties with the CIA, their ties were cut. There's no question about it. They pledged that, and I totally believed them. At least one of them went on to have a very distinguished career in USIA.

Q: To clarify a little bit, when you mentioned the liaison with the CIA, that was a special liaison with the DDP. We had always had liaison at the area level with the CIA.

Now, do you have any anecdotes about President Kennedy and USIA?

SORENSEN: On my daughter Ann's twelfth birthday, I took her --

Q: What year would that be?

SORENSEN: That would be 1962, February 13, 1962. I took daughter Ann, at brother Ted's kind invitation, over to have lunch in the White House Mess. We went upstairs to show her the President's Oval Office and all that, and while we were there, the President came in. He chatted with us, and there was a very candid discussion about lots of things including personnel that Ann was told she was not to relate at school the next day.

Then Kennedy noted that his Administration was being hammered by young newspapermen out in Vietnam. David Halberstam and various others were writing all this stuff because they "didn't understand U.S. policy" and what was really happening. Since I was an ex-newspaperman and a USIA man, wouldn't it be a good idea -- said the President -- for me to go out there, talk to people in the embassy, talk to all these troublesome journalists who were stationed there, and come back and give him a report?

Well, I said, "Yes, sir," although I opined that maybe it wasn't a great idea because my being Ted's brother brought the issue closer to his office than it probably should be. He subsequently agreed. I can't remember now whether he agreed on the spot or whether it was a day or two later. Anyway, somebody else went out there.

Of course, it was a mission impossible because the parties were irreconcilable. You know more about that than I do, but that was, I think, Kennedy's first touch of this, what later on became, of course, a terrible problem in both the Johnson and Nixon Administrations.

Q: You met the President on other occasions, did you?

SORENSEN: I met him on a number of occasions. I first met him before he was President in 1954, when I came back from Beirut on home leave, and my brother had gone to work for Kennedy the year before after his election to the Senate from Massachusetts.

My brother, Ted, had had a temporary job for a special committee chaired by Senator Paul Douglas of Illinois. The committee's work ran out, and Ted liked working on the Hill, and asked where he might find another job. Douglas said, "Young Congressman Kennedy has been elected to the Senate and is looking for a legislative assistant." Ted said, "Well, I don't know, I mean, his father is not liberal like you are," and this and that. Douglas suggested that Ted go see him. So, they interviewed each other and it worked out and Ted was working for Kennedy. I had my own doubts about Kennedy. There had been all the publicity either that year or the year before, I guess the year before, about his marriage to socialite Jacqueline Bouvier, and stories about his absenteeism in the House, so I thought, "This is a lightweight."

I had my reunion with Ted. He and I had always been close, since childhood. He said, "Would you like to meet the Senator?" I said, "Sure. Why not?" So, he took me into his office. Senator Kennedy had a great crop of hair and he looked about 18. That's before he cut his hair to look older.

He said, "You've been Information Officer in Beirut the last couple of years?" I said, "Yes." He said, "Sit down." For 40 minutes, he grilled me about the Middle East. He knew a lot about the region. He wanted to know about all the players, both the Arab players and the American diplomat players. He wanted to know all the nuances. He grasped it all immediately.

I emerged from his office awestruck. I said, "Ted, you've got a future president on your hands," which perhaps I didn't really believe, but I said so. Thereafter, I saw him from time to time through Ted.

My brother was living in McLean, Virginia. When I was in the States, I often would visit him. He'd go by and pick up his boss, who also lived in McLean, and then they'd drive and drop me off at USIA, and then they'd drive on down to the Capitol Building.

So, I saw him off and on, on various occasions, though not too many times after he became President.

Q: Tom, I know it's 25 years ago, but you've been a student of foreign affairs all of your life, perhaps more intensively now than ever. Your business has always been in connection with foreign affairs.

So, how do you see, at this moment in history when Eastern Europe is becoming democratic, in a way at least, and the Soviet Union apparently is much less of a threat worldwide, how do you see the function of USIA or is there a function left for USIA, the Voice of America or those other voices, the Exchange of Persons Program, the whole bit?

The Role and Importance of USIA:

- (1) In the Cold War Era, and
- (2) Now, in the Post-Cold War Climate

SORENSEN: Well, like all of us, I suppose, I had doubts about the effectiveness of what we were doing. It would vary from time to time. The temperature would go up and the temperature would go down. Then, for a long time, I was particularly skeptical about what we could do in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union.

But it is clear now that one of the reasons events moved so rapidly last fall and winter was the existence of a very large group of people who had held on to a lifeline with the west, with democratic ideals, with the United States.

Not just the formal dissidents, important as they were, the Vaclav Havel and so on, but a great many others who were dissidents in their hearts, Eastern Europe's "silent majority." For 45 years they were tuned into us, literally and figuratively.

USIA clearly played an important role during that long Cold War period, although USIA was not the key factor, nor perhaps even a factor at all, in bringing down those regimes. Now USIA can be important in helping new regimes evolve. They are not all going to be democratic and there will be lots of difficulty and some will have an easier time than others, but I think that the message of democratic pluralism, conveyed in large measure to Eastern Europe (where everything else was shut off) by the United States Information Agency, will continue to be terribly important.

Eastern Europe is a great Jeffersonian victory. The moral stature of the United States has probably never been higher. By example, by our history and by our presence, we could play a major role in the development of these new societies in Eastern Europe.

I think USIA, with its now unhindered cultural and information programs, can be enormously important. I think that that has also been true, though I was skeptical for a long time, in the Middle East.

I commented at the outset of this interview that the USIA is the guardian of the pipelines, so to speak. There are other pipelines but this is the official pipeline. It can be as important now as it was in the Cold War. But it will require a lot of perestroika at home. It may be difficult for those who have had a Cold War orientation for decades to switch to something else suddenly, but switch they're going to have to do, or somebody else is going to have to do it for them.

The tasks of USIA have changed, but the mission of USIA now hasn't changed in the slightest bit since the 1960s: to promote the broad foreign policy objectives of the United States, long term and short term, on the psychological side. The need remains.

Now, USIA had a big Cold War constituency when it didn't have much of any other constituency. Now that that rallying issue is gone, one worries about the Agency's future. Perhaps ethnic groups in the United States, which were so interested all those years in the captive nations, will perceive this role for USIA, and continue or renew their support for it, but I think we have to worry about it.

A lot depends on what kind of president we have and what kind of Secretary of State, and whether they understand this.

Q: You are suggesting that we had a great role in Eastern Europe, and you are saying that we continue to have a role. What about the rest of the world? A lot of people are saying that the information revolution, which makes it possible for even people in the Third World daily to get private Associated Press and other news reports of what's happening here, how do you see the need for an official role continuing, an official voice, an official disseminator, continuing?

SORENSEN: I don't think it's essentially changed at all. For one thing, they don't have access to the Associated Press because the government-controlled newspapers in these Third World countries, most of which are not democracies, don't allow the free flow of information. They may allow the Associated Press in, but it is edited, government edited before it is printed.

The need to bypass the private media and make clear what the U.S. is and what it stands for is as great now as it was before, and maybe in some ways it's greater. A lot of those Third World countries had the Soviet Union as a role model. They've lost that role model now. A lot of countries in Africa had a cause in South Africa. They are in the process of

losing that cause. Now, having lost their role model and their cause, they are up for grabs, so to speak.

Many of their leaders who have been in office for a long time and prant about socialism and democracy while actually perpetuating themselves in office and enriching themselves, these guys are going to be out of office. Eastern Europe taught people power. It's a scary thing. They taught it in the Middle East, in Africa, as well as elsewhere. I think that the role of USIA now becomes tremendously important as the world goes through this post-Cold War period.

Q: I think, in part, are you saying that the complexity of a democratic, or a pluralistic, society is such that these countries that now have the opportunity to become democratic need to know the difficulties that can be encountered as well as the rewards that are contained therein?

SORENSEN: Absolutely. We need a vastly increased Exchange of Persons Program. I don't know what all these programs are called now, but we ought to have a lot more people from Eastern Europe coming here. We ought to have a lot more people going to Eastern Europe.

I am personally very pessimistic about Africa, Sub-Sahara Africa. Outside of South Africa, I don't see many signs of change there. But, why should one be too skeptical when we see what results there were in Eastern Europe?

I think that the USIA is important in Singapore, Korea, Taiwan, and Malaysia, the Tigers of Southeast Asia, who have made enormous strides forward in their economies but lag behind in their political and social structures. We ought to be spending a ton of dough in Japan, whose relations with the United States are going to be probably the most important in the next decade. At best, they're going to be abrasive and, at worst, they're going to be a lot worse than that. We've got to be there, and we've got to be there speaking Japanese -- not just the language, but the mentality.

Business, the private sector, plays a big role now in all of this, not in the socialist Third World countries, but in the developed and developing economies. Nonetheless, there is still a need to wrap it all up, to explain what the official position is, to be heard over that great cacophony of noise out there.

I am really higher on the USIA's need now than I have been at any time probably in the last 20 years. We need it.

Interplay Between Government Public Diplomacy
and Private Media Today:
Private Media Can't -- or Won't -- Do the Job

Q: I will make a small point and then ask you a question whether you agree or not. In the United States now, information and activities have developed to such a degree that the private information sector has become, in effect, a kind of shadow government, in a way, constantly trying to bring its forces to play on the federal government.

In a sense, if these are the conveyors of the only message overseas, it is not quite a balanced program unless there is an official voice. Would you agree that there is anything to that?

SORENSEN: I think there is a lot to that. I wouldn't use the phrase "shadow government," because they don't have a program of their own. The media are reacting and they are making it a lot tougher for our government than they used to, which -- as a taxpayer not a bureaucrat -- I quite like.

I mean, the idea that the private media can do it alone is absurd. American newspapers don't circulate overseas. Except for CNN in a few places, American television isn't seen overseas. American movies are designed primarily for ages 12 to 18 now, and I'm not sure that I want that to be the sole message of America overseas, rock videos and all that kind of stuff. Maybe I'm getting too old.

But, I never thought the private media did it and they definitely don't do it now. I travel abroad a fair amount and, you struggle to get your hands on a copy of The International Herald Tribune or the European or Asian edition of The Wall Street Journal. Occasionally, there is a wrinkled copy of some edition of Time magazine, and that's it. The American media are not over there.

Q: As a matter of fact, CNN is starting to export its product, so there will be probably on a continuing basis, there will be more television news made by Americans seen abroad, but would that upset your argument in any way?

SORENSEN: I think that's great, but I think it's a long time before there is broad, general dissemination. CNN is seen mostly by Americans in four-star luxury hotels. The people we're aiming at don't see it. I suppose, if they're smart, a lot of government offices are getting CNN abroad just to supplement their news tickers, but I think it's awhile before we have general satellite broadcasting with the airwaves full of everybody's message.

But even then there will be an important place for USIA. Okay, so now we know from CNN what Ted Turner stands for. What does the American government stand for? Again, let's don't kid ourselves that USIA's just another radio station or another TV station.

Where Does VOA Belong
in the Government vs. Private
News Dissemination?

Q: I see. There has been some comment lately that perhaps the Voice of America, which has desired this for years, as you have indicated, should become semi-independent and not have necessarily the guidance of the USIA or any other part of the rest of the foreign policy establishment.

Do you think there is any merit to that?

SORENSEN: I understand what it promoters mean by semi-independent. "Semi," means we broadcasters get funded, get our salaries and all expenses paid, by the U.S. government. "Independent" means we broadcast whatever we like.

I think that is absurd. I see no argument for a semi-independent radio station. What is the point of it? In any case, anybody who has spent any time overseas at all seriously talking to people about this knows that, without exception, people believe the Voice of America is the U.S. government radio station. And so it is. Passing a law saying it's semi-independent or putting it under a board of trustees like Radio Liberty and saying, "This is an independent station," wouldn't fool anybody.

I think it would be a big mistake to fractionate this business after all the years it took to bring it together.

Exchange of Persons Program:
Where?
Department of State or USIA?

Q: What do you think about the idea that the Exchange of Persons Program should go back into the State Department?

SORENSEN: I think that is an equally terrible idea. The State Department's business is diplomacy, and there are already too many people who've gotten into the diplomatic act. I don't blame the State Department's concern about the proliferation of attachés from other agencies and departments of the government, but I don't think the State Department ought to get into other people's business, either.

The whole psychological area ought to be in one place, because when properly done it is an integrated effort. The pieces belong together. You can artificially separate them, as we did in the '50s and '60s, but it would still be artificial.

It certainly would mean a would mean decline in the influence and the value of public diplomacy. If you believe in public diplomacy, you can't really believe in breaking this thing up.

Q: Do you feel the academic community would be any more apt to support foreign policy public diplomacy were the Department of State to be the custodian of the Exchange of Persons Program rather than the Agency?

SORENSEN: No. I've never seen any sign that the academic community thinks the State Department is more pure than USIA. In any event, what the academic community thinks (if there is such a thing as the "academic community" and I doubt it has a monolithic view of anything); but if there is such a thing, I'm not sure that what it wants should be decisive.

Q: Fine. Thank you, Tom, for all of this. Is there anything else that you can think of that you'd like to add at this point?

SORENSEN: No, but I probably will later.

Q: We'll let you later.

End of interview