

## Edward R. Murrow at the National Press Club, May 24, 1961



*President John F. Kennedy with Director of USIA, Edward R. Murrow, March 21, 1961. Cecil Stoughton. White House Photographs. John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum. Digital Id.: JFKWHP-ST-C61-1-61*

Famed broadcast journalist Edward R. Murrow (1908-1965) chose the National Press Club as the forum for his first speech since taking office a few months earlier as director of the United States Information Agency (USIA), the organization responsible for communicating U.S. policy abroad and carrying out much of the government's international information and cultural programs. Created in 1953 as an independent agency reporting directly to the president, USIA took over from the State Department the operation of Voice of America (VOA) radio broadcasts and U.S. Information Service (USIS) centers around the world, programs that had been established during World War II to communicate U.S. war aims and otherwise aid in the war effort abroad.

Following the war, State Department officials, skeptical of the diplomatic value of programs they considered "propaganda," persuaded Congress to cut VOA and USIS allocations severely. In late 1947, however, a committee of U.S. senators traveling in Europe reported "a campaign of vilification and misrepresentation" conducted by the Soviet Union's newly formed propaganda agency Cominform to discredit the Marshall Plan recently implemented to rebuild Europe with massive amounts of U.S. aid.

Congress subsequently passed the Smith-Mundt Act—with the Senate voting unanimously in its favor—to establish a permanent peacetime program “to promote the better understanding of the United States among the peoples of the world and to strengthen cooperative international relations.” President Harry S. Truman signed the bill into law on January 27, 1948, and funding for international cultural and information programs was greatly increased.

Truman defined the Cold War conflict as “a struggle, above all else, for the minds of men.” To combat Soviet propaganda that characterized the U.S., according to Truman, “as a nation of ‘warmongers’ and ‘imperialists,’” he called for a “great campaign of truth” to provide countries around the world with “honest information about freedom and democracy.” Truman worried that in the many areas where people “are making their choice between communism and democracy,” access to accurate information often was limited.

USIA’s official mission statement—“to persuade foreign peoples that it lies in their own interest to take actions which are also consistent with the national objectives of the United States”—guided many of its programs, including VOA radio broadcasting; the administration of libraries and information centers; the production and distribution of motion pictures, books, pamphlets, and magazines; and the creation of exhibitions to display technological advances and the abundance of consumer goods available to ordinary U.S. citizens. Since the end of the Cold War, a number of historians have credited the cultural campaigns of USIA and the State Department for stimulating discontent behind the Iron Curtain and interest, especially among youth, in Western ways of life, and thus influencing many to demand an end to communist rule.

Murrow had attained international acclaim for his gripping and eloquent eyewitness accounts broadcast over the radio from war-torn Europe—Vienna during Hitler’s *Anschluss*, London during the Blitz, Buchenwald after the liberation—that detailed horrors of war along with the courage of ordinary people. Murrow narrated his dramatic reports with measured calmness, a style that influenced successive generations of news reporters. Media historian Erik Barnouw succinctly summed up Murrow’s manner of delivery: “The style had quiet dignity. It avoided stuffiness and also the condescension of folksiness. It permitted pungent phrases but always mildly spoken. It abhorred the ornate, the strenuous, the frenzied. It favored short, concise statements.”

Prior to his directorship of USIA, Murrow gained extensive experience in the administration of international cultural, educational, and news reporting organizations. In the early 1930s, as assistant director of the Institute of International Education, he arranged student and professor exchanges between U.S. and foreign universities. Following Hitler’s rise to power, Murrow served as the assistant secretary of an organization that brought to the U.S. German professors dismissed from their positions. Murrow became CBS Director of Talks and Education in 1935, and as CBS European Director in 1937, he recruited the stellar team of newsmen, known as Murrow’s Boys, who helped inaugurate the era of modern broadcast journalism. Following the war,

Murrow took a desk job at CBS as Vice President in Charge of News and Public Affairs until 1948, when he returned to broadcasting as a reporter, director, and producer.

Murrow's first extensive foray into television, the documentary series *See It Now*, achieved renown for its innovative use of the medium and willingness to address controversial issues that previously had escaped the eye of prime-time television. His exposé in 1954 of the demagogic methods of anti-communist crusader Senator Joseph R. McCarthy cost Murrow his sponsor after McCarthy accused him of aiding the communist cause. CBS eventually cancelled *See It Now* due to controversies the show sparked.

When Murrow accepted President John F. Kennedy's request that he take the USIA post—a decision that mandated a 90 percent drop in salary—*New York Times* media critic Jack Gould wrote, "To whatever extent television has found its voice of conscience, purpose and integrity it was as much the doing of Mr. Murrow as any other single individual in the medium." In his *See It Now* commentaries during the McCarthy era, Murrow warned his audience that they themselves, not foreign enemies or domestic politicians, were responsible for the atmosphere of fear that threatened American freedoms. "Whatever happens in this whole area of the relationship between the individual and the state, we will do ourselves," he warned in one program. "It cannot be blamed upon Malenkov, Mao Tse-tung or even our allies." Quoting Shakespeare as he ended the McCarthy exposé, Murrow commented that the senator "didn't create this situation of fear; he merely exploited it, and rather successfully. Cassius was right: 'The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars but in ourselves.'"

During the Senate Foreign Relations Committee confirmation hearing on his nomination to be USIA director, Murrow noted that for his efforts to succeed, "it may well be that the example of this nation will be more important than its dollars or its words." Murrow expressed a deep belief that an effective presentation of American ideals abroad required demonstrable justice and equality at home. "If we, in this generous and capacious land, can demonstrate increasing equality of opportunity, social justice, a reasoned concern for the education, health, and equality under law of all our citizens," he stated in his testimony before the committee, "we will powerfully affect, and probably determine, the destiny of the free world—and that freedom may be contagious." When one senator asked Murrow if he intended "to tell the bad about the United States along with the good," Murrow responded, "If the bad is significant, it is going to be reported anyway, and we must report it. We must report it honestly, otherwise it will be distorted." Kennedy agreed, telling the VOA staff in 1962, "you are obliged to tell our story in a truthful way, to tell it, as Oliver Cromwell said about his portrait, 'Paint us with all our blemishes and warts.'"

In his Press Club talk, Murrow emphasized that the U.S. image abroad had been badly impaired by news stories of racial discrimination at home. While USIA's African programs competed with Soviet propaganda to persuade newly independent nations of the virtues of aligning with the free world, diplomats from those African countries had

experienced discrimination in the Washington, D.C., housing market, school system, stores, and recreation venues. After news circulated that the second secretary of the Nigerian embassy was turned away at breakfast in a Charlottesville, Virginia restaurant, a student in Africa commented to a USIS officer that “it is more important to us that one of our diplomats was refused service in a Virginia restaurant than any of this talk.” Calling attention to the effects of such discrimination, Murrow echoed his McCarthy commentary by stating that the resulting damage to foreign relations is “not something the Communists did to us. We do it to ourselves in our own capital.”

Murrow also made reference in the Press Club talk to the recent “headlines of Birmingham bus burnings and beatings.” On May 14, 1961, two busloads of Freedom Riders—interracial groups of activists traveling throughout the South to challenge segregation practices in interstate buses and terminals that had remained in effect despite federal court rulings barring such discrimination—were attacked by white mobs. One bus was stopped in Anniston, Alabama, and set on fire. A second bus proceeded to Birmingham, where a mob beat Freedom Riders with baseball bats and chains for fifteen minutes before police intervened. On May 20, a mob of 1,000 attacked Freedom Riders with clubs and pipes at the Montgomery bus terminal. The president’s brother, Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy, sent more than 600 deputy marshals to Montgomery to secure order. The next day, armed National Guardsmen escorted a Freedom Riders bus to Jackson, Mississippi, where members of the group were arrested at the bus terminal when they tried to enter a waiting room segregated for whites only. At Robert Kennedy’s instigation, the Interstate Commerce Commission issued regulations in September 1961 to desegregate all interstate bus facilities, and the Justice Department subsequently filed suits when various localities disputed the orders.

Murrow himself had been in Birmingham earlier in the year to prepare a documentary on racial violence when he received the call from Kennedy offering him the job of USIA director. Under Murrow’s leadership, USIA doubled the number of African Americans in the Foreign Service and increased their ratio in senior and middle grade USIA positions to 10 percent. When rioting occurred at the University of Mississippi in 1962 to protest a federal court ruling ordering the admittance of African American student James Meredith, the USIA covered the full story, including the move by Kennedy to send federal troops to quell the violence and insure that Meredith was registered. The VOA interviewed prominent civil rights leaders about the events. The following year, after police in Birmingham responded to demonstrators against segregation with fire hoses and attacking dogs, and Alabama Governor George Wallace physically blocked two African Americans from entering the University of Alabama in June 1963, the USIA broadcast and distributed in pamphlet form Kennedy’s speech that night declaring he would send Congress new civil rights legislation to end racial discrimination. He announced to the nation and via USIA to the world, “A great change is at hand, and our task, our obligation, is to make that revolution, that change, peaceful and constructive for all.” USIA produced a documentary on the August 28, 1963, March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom that won awards at a number of film festivals.

Murrow's first months as USIA director were rocky. He was taken to task a week after the Senate confirmed him when newspapers reported that he had attempted to convince the head of the BBC not to air a documentary he himself had narrated the previous year on the plight of migrant workers in the U.S. Murrow contended that the film, which had been denounced by a senator from Florida, had been made for "domestic consumption" only, but soon acknowledged that he had made a mistake in trying to prevent its showing abroad and agreed with a newspaper editorial that his action was "foolish and futile." Murrow privately offered to resign, but Kennedy expressed his belief that the incident was not a serious matter.

Murrow had accepted the position with the understanding that he would be consulted "as to the probable effect of a given policy abroad before the policy was made," as he told the House Subcommittee on Appropriations in March 1961. In a letter to Murrow setting out his duties, Kennedy agreed to an advisory role for Murrow—an upgrade in responsibility from previous USIA administrators—as he wrote, "I consider you one of my principal advisors, with a special concern and competence in assessing the psychological factors dealing with foreign affairs. As such, I want you to participate in the development of foreign policies and programs." A few weeks before the Press Club talk, however, rumors circulated in the press that Murrow was planning to resign, because he "was unhappy over being left out of top level conferences, where decisions were reached which his agency had to explain to the world," according to a UPI report.

On April 5, 1961, Murrow had learned from a *New York Times* reporter of an operation underway that had been planned and backed by the CIA to land Cuban exiles in Cuba to trigger an uprising against Fidel Castro's regime. He had not previously been informed of the planned action. Murrow met with Kennedy's special assistant for national security affairs, McGeorge Bundy, and expressed strong opposition to the operation, but nevertheless agreed to cooperate. The State Department did not supply USIA with promised information, however, and the Bay of Pigs landing on April 17 "caught the USIA unprepared and without guidance," according to a report prepared for the president. Murrow reportedly was enraged that he had not been consulted, especially because he knew that a recent opinion poll indicated the Cuban population supported Castro overwhelmingly and thus the intended revolt was bound to fail.

Kennedy subsequently put much credence in Murrow's advice on the psychological impact on world opinion of U.S. foreign policy decisions. When the Soviet Union announced in August 1961 that it planned to resume nuclear tests in the atmosphere, advisers suggested a range of responses from a nuclear strike on the Soviet test site to immediate resumption of U.S. testing. Murrow convinced the president that the Soviet announcement was "the greatest propaganda gift we have had for a long time" and that any rash response would negate the chance to "consolidate our leadership of the non-Communist world and isolate the Communist bloc." In a memo to Kennedy the day after the Soviet announcement, Murrow explained that by delaying a response, "We can within weeks achieve the position of the last best hope of freedom, sanity and survival.

This can be done not only by the exposure of Soviet duplicity, but also by playing heavily upon the fears of hazards to health and future generations.” In addition, he circulated a USIA survey of foreign press and radio reactions that indicated the largest increase in anti-Soviet attitudes since Khrushchev’s forces had crushed the Hungarian Revolution in 1956.

Kennedy’s secretary, Evelyn Lincoln, remembered later that after the president accepted Murrow’s advice to delay a response to the Soviet move, Kennedy told her, “He was sorry that he hadn’t benefited from Ed Murrow’s advice on the Bay of Pigs.” Following Murrow’s death in 1965, Robert Kennedy remarked that at Cabinet and National Security Council meetings, Murrow “never spoke unless spoken to. And I don’t know anyone else in government who made sense every time he talked.”

-- Alan Gevinson, *Special Assistant to the Chief,*  
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