

Interview with Hans N. Tuch

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

HANS N. TUCH

Interviewed by: "Cliff" Groce

Initial interview date: February 24, 1988

Copyright 1998 ADST

Tuch's Early Experience With Voice of America: Munich, 1957

Q: What were the circumstances of your joining the Voice of America (VOA) in the first instance back in 1957?

TUCH: I had just finished Russian Language training preparing to be assigned to Moscow as Press and Cultural Attach#. However, the Soviets were balking at giving a visa to me at the time to add an additional person to our Moscow staff, and indicated that they would only permit one person to do that kind of work in Moscow, and so I was actually footloose and fancy free at that time. Barry Zorthian, the VOA program manager, whom I had not know, asked me to come in and suggested that I go to the VOA program center in Munich, which as you know was broadcasting at that time in the languages of the Soviet Union — Russian, Ukrainian, and Uzbek — and also in the East European languages. He asked me to go there for really two reasons: one, the Policy Officer who was there at the time was Mike Fodor, and old and recognized, distinguished European journalist, I think for the Chicago Post. He had given Dorothy Thompson her start, John Gunther his start. He was getting very old, was almost blind, very hard of hearing, and he was having a very tough

Library of Congress

time continuing to work. Barry said, "We really need only one policy officer in Munich, but if you could go there and help him, in effect do his job for him, that would be very useful to VOA."

VOA Begins Changing Character of Its Broadcasts to USSR and East Europe

Secondly, he indicated that the Voice of America had made a major change at that time, in 1957, in its broadcast policy. Until that time, the Voice had functioned primarily as a very tough and explicit cold war organ in its broadcasts, primarily to the communist world. It had been aggressively anti-communist. The decision was made in 1957 that times and circumstances had changed and it would be much more profitable for the Voice to try to become an internationally recognized news organ which was credible throughout the world, which would try to reach the same kind of a reputation as the BBC had enjoyed since World War Two. And that needed, of course, drastic changes in broadcasting approach and language and tone. In Washington, that was being accomplished, but he indicated that Munich, which was doing direct broadcasting to Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, was not complying, that the tone had remained the same. As a matter of fact, they resented the way Washington had changed the policy, and there was an absence of supervision on the part of VOA management on the broadcasts coming out of Munich, primarily in tone but also in content. So I was asked to help in producing this new tone and new policy changes. And that is what got me to Munich.

Trials of Tuch As Policy Officer: Radio Munich

Q: Would you describe the role of the policy officer in Munich at that time?

TUCH: Mike Fodor had been monitoring what was being broadcast, and then usually on the following morning made his comments about what had been broadcast. And then on the basis of messages from Washington would go down the list of principal topics and issues that were to be broadcast on that day, but did not really have much impact on any change in tone. What I, in a practical sense, started doing, I started writing commentaries

Library of Congress

and news analyses in the new tone that was, at least in my view, required for the Voice. I had some fascinating experiences in writing these commentaries. I remember one that I offered to the Bulgarian Service — and I'll leave names out at the moment — as something I thought should be broadcast as a commentary, and the then chief of the Bulgarian Service looked up at me after reading it and said, “You know, it's too bad that Senator McCarthy didn't get rid of all the Communists in the Voice of America.” This was kind of the mood and the atmosphere in part of the Voice. Now I must say that the Russian Service in Munich was a first-rate service. Charlie Malamud had been the chief, but he had had a heart attack and so he resigned and Nelson Chipchin was the chief. They had a very old Lithuanian running the news operation, by the name of Grinius; he was first-rate. So you had in your Russian Service a first-class broadcasting outfit. One of the people who was in that service at that time, took was Mrs. (Lucy) Obolensky, who is now married to Eli Flam after her husband's death.

Others were good, too; the Hungarians were first-rate. Some of the Baltic services were quite good. The biggest problem to me, and to everybody else, was the Uzbek Service, because the people did not speak either English or German, which was the second language used in Munich. The only language in which you could communicate with them was Russian, and just having come out of Russian training — this was my advantage— I was able to speak Russian with them, but never really knew whether they understood me or I understood them. There was this fascinating episode. They only had a 15-minute daily broadcast, and of course that was the only Uzbek program broadcast because in Washington there was no Uzbek Service. And because they had only 15 minutes it was very difficult to include in that program anything else but news. I had done a commentary for the house on some subject, and they came to me and said, “We want to broadcast this commentary.” I said, “Well, you just can't do it because it's seven minutes long and therefore you can't fit it into your 15-minute broadcast.” “But,” they said, “We want to do it,” so I said, “All right, I will make two commentaries out of it and you can broadcast one-half each on successive days.” It was, as far as I was concerned, broadcast. But after

Library of Congress

about three weeks we received a message from our Monitoring Service in Washington, that they could not understand what the Uzbeks had broadcast on those successive days. I asked for a translation, and what happened was, they ran out of time on the first half of the commentary and the next day, so as not to lose any of my very valuable words, they started with the last two sentences of the previous day's commentary and went on. This was the kind of thing we experienced all the time.

Actually, I spent quite a bit of time writing during my year, because that was really the only way that I found I could influence both the tone and the policy of our broadcasts. The thing that made it difficult operating in Munich was that the then-Director of the Center, Bob Franklin — a very nice person with a marvelous radio voice — was not an effective executive. He had a very difficult time managing the personalities that were involved at that time in VOA. As a matter of fact, there were some VOA old-timers and professionals who had been in it a long time, and they were not willing to take new direction easily. So I spent most of my time trying to affect the broadcasts by writing for them, because it was difficult to reason with the personalities.

There were one or two occasions when I had a really marvelous time actually reporting. I remember one specific occasion, fairly late in the evening, and there was no one around in the newsroom. I happened to be still in the office because I was waiting for the last program to be broadcast that evening, and we received word that there had been a plane crash at the Munich airport. I took a tape recorder and got into the car and rushed out there, and of course it was the tragic crash of the plane that carried the Manchester soccer team. I was literally one of the first people on the scene, and followed some of the ambulances to the hospital, and started reporting on what had happened. I got more calls from the BBC, from German radio, international calls asking me to report for them on what had happened.

At any rate, I left in the summer of 1958, July '58, to be transferred to Moscow, finally, and at the same time a major change was made in the Munich center. John Albert was

Library of Congress

assigned as the new director and was also directed to change the approach. They no longer did direct broadcasting from Munich. We (JA and I) had only about a week together at the most. Bob Franklin was transferred, and John Albert was left to make the complete change (having been informed via cable from Washington while he was en route to Munich that he was to drop direct broadcasts and cut back to a “program center” from a “radio center”). Some of the people who haworked there were then transferred to Washington and remained there for many years, and did very well. There were several people that I was very fond of, who I thought were first-rate. Piltti Heiskanen for one; he stayed on in Munich. Bob Jellison, who had been in the newsroom, got other Foreign Service assignments and later succeeded me in Berlin as PAO where he then died of a heart attack. But for me, it was great fun with the Voice, because despite all the problems you had, the thing that impressed me then at the Voice, which was really confirmed later on, was that outside of the Foreign Service, the Voice was the one professional operation in USIA. Everybody was a professional who worked there, and whether you had disagreements or unpleasantness they were all professionals and whatever needed to be broadcast, it went on the air, not a minute late. This is something that had always impressed me about the people at the Voice. And of course there was also the esprit de corps. They were real professional broadcasters, not amateurs at what they were doing.

Departure From Munich - Moscow Assignment

Q: So after your experience in Munich, you went back into the regular Foreign Service. What was your acquaintanceship or relationship with the VOA in Moscow and in subsequent assignments?

TUCH: Initially, it was too close as far as I was concerned, because at that time the Voice was jammed in the Soviet Union, totally jammed, with the exception of English language broadcasts, which had never been jammed. But in most cases, the frequencies on which English programs were broadcast were so close to the frequencies on which Russian and other Soviet languages were broadcast, much of the English was very often obliterated.

Library of Congress

One of my principal initial duties was, every night, not to monitor the broadcasts but to monitor the jamming, and to identify the individual hammers. For that I had to learn Morse Code, because the Soviet jammers identified themselves every 30 seconds with a Morse Code signal. By recording these individual identifications, and then traveling around the Soviet Union, we could identify individual jammers, where they were and what frequencies they were jamming. This was done purely for technical reasons, and was a very, very boring exercise. I tried to pass it around to my embassy colleagues. We made up schedules so that people took turns listening in the evening and recording the jammers. But they held me to these monthly reports of identification of jammers, and that continued until the time it was determined we had really identified all the jammers and knew where they were, and so they let me off the hook for a while. The English broadcasts were our lifeline to the West, because that was the way we in the embassy got our information, from the Voice of America and also from the BBC. It was then that I became a really confirmed Voice of America listener, and continued to listen throughout my Foreign Service career whenever I was abroad.

Various Relationships to VOA While In Other Assignments

Q:When you were in Brazil, you once proposed the abolition of the VOA Brazilian Service and the conversion of those funds to local television production (by your staffer Hugh Foster) in Brazil. Lillian LaMacchia (the head of the Brazilian Service) to this day has never forgiven you.

TUCH:She's never forgiven me. As a matter of fact, she generated a vicious attack upon me in O Globo, which is one of the major papers in Rio. The correspondent of O Globo was a close friend of hers and also a purchase order vendor for the Brazilian Service.

I was always concerned about the Voice as an instrument, a medium for conveying information from America, and I felt strongly that in certain areas of the world, and under certain conditions, it was not only the most important medium for conveying information,

Library of Congress

but it was the indispensable medium. Especially to certain denied areas of the world — the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, China, certain parts of Africa, certain parts of the Arab World — not only was it the best but our only means of conveying information. In Brazil, I felt differently. I felt, first, that we did not have a very good signal, and it was not going to be improved. Secondly, the effect of our broadcasts, as compared first of all to other radio listening, we did not have a very large audience. Thirdly, I felt that the use of our resources for radio broadcasting in Brazil could be used more effectively with other media.

This is something I have felt all along. That was one of my main arguments with Ken Giddens when he was director of the Voice of America and was my boss for those few months. He wanted the Voice to broadcast in all the languages of the world, everything the Soviets broadcast in. I felt we should only broadcast to those areas where it was an effective instrument of information, possibly the first, second or third most effective instrument. I never felt we should broadcast to Japan and I never felt we should broadcast to Germany at that time because, one, it was a media-saturated society and the Voice would not really be heard very effectively in those countries. Secondly, there were many other sources of good information, of uncensored information that the Germans and the Japanese could hear on radio and in other ways. Thirdly, it would take us at least five to ten years to build an audience if we were broadcasting. And fourth, I felt that the expenses, the costs of starting a broadcast and continuing broadcasts to those countries could be used much more effectively in other media, like exchange programs or in the print medium, but not radio. And the fifth reason was that our technical resources were so limited that we could not accommodate all our priorities with the technical resources that we had available, so if we had added other languages like German or Japanese we would have had to take away from the priority languages such as Chinese or Russian, and I felt this should never happen, that indeed we should go the other direction and increase our broadcasts in Chinese and Russian if we could and possibly eliminate other things that we were broadcasting where it was not such an important medium.

Library of Congress

Q: Were there any other relationships with, or influences upon VOA by you during the period before you came back to the Voice as Deputy Director?

TUCH: Very much. When I came back from Moscow I became first the deputy area director and then the area director for Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. And I think it was an accomplishment of mine — Henry Loomis was then the director of the Voice and he wanted to modernize the Russian broadcasts and the Russian Service, and he felt the only way he could do that was if he, in some way, honorably, got Alexander Barmine to give up his service as the chief, and replace him with someone who was much more contemporary in terms of Soviet and Russian activities, policies, experiences. I sacrificed myself and took on Alexander Barmine as my special assistant for Soviet affairs, “uptown” at USIA, and we got Terry Catherman, who was my successor in Moscow, to become the new chief of the Soviet Branch, which then became a Division. He was able really to modernize the Russian broadcasts, first of all by bringing in Americans who spoke Russian, with an accent, certainly, but who had had recent experience in the Soviet Union, as exhibit guides or students, and thereby were able to complement the very old-time Russians who had been in the Service over the past twenty years. Terry and I were very close friends, and so whatever we could do, uptown, to support the broadcasts... Everybody who had ever served in the Soviet Union — Pic Littell was the first, and Terry and I were the next two — we were absolutely convinced that the broadcasts, even through jamming — and of course jamming was halted in 1962 when the U. S. and the Soviet Union signed the first partial nuclear test ban treaty — but we felt that these broadcasts were so vital for us, so important to maintain and augment and improve, that we would do everything possible to accomplish that. So my relationship at that time, especially with the Russian Division, I got to know them quite well and worked closely with them.

Then I went off to Sofia, that time with the State Department, and the Bulgarians continued jamming the Voice, the only East Europeans who continued to do so. Leonard Marks,

Library of Congress

who became the director of USIA in, I think, 1965 after Carl Rowan, left, came on a visit to Sofia, accompanying Senator Magnuson, who was the official American representative at the Plovdiv Industrial Fair, at which we were exhibiting for the first time. He came actually a couple of days ahead of Sen. Magnuson, and I met him. I had not know him before that time. I was charg# at the embassy then, and he said, "Tom, you're in charge so don't mind me. I'm just going to go with Senator Magnuson. You decide where I should accompany him and where I should stay out of the way." Of course we arranged for a visit by the Senator to Todor Zhivkov, the head of the Communist Party and also of the government. I said, "Leonard, You've got to come along, it will be very interesting," and Leonard came along with Senator Magnuson to meet Zhivkov. And Leonard said, "I'm just going to sit there, I'm going to be silent, I'm not going to say a word, so don't worry about me." I said, "I'm not going to worry about you, Leonard." Well, Leonard Marks could sit still only so long, and finally popped up and said, "Mr. Chairman, I really have only one question to ask of you: Why do you still jam the Voice of America? The Soviets have stopped jamming, every other Eastern European country has stopped jamming, but you continue to jam the Voice of America." Todor Zhivkov, who was not known to be very quick on the uptake, in this case, was. He said, "Mr. Director, I can stop jamming the Voice of America just like that. But if I did that, what would you and I then have to talk about?" He said, "As a matter of fact, Mr. Director, I will stop jamming the Voice of America under one condition: that you grant Bulgaria most-favored-national treatment." Marks laughed. This was really the extent of my relationship with the Voice of America except that we continued to listen to the English broadcasts on a daily basis.

Circumstances of Tuch's Return to VOA As Deputy Director

Q: So, years later, after all these various Foreign Service experiences, you returned to Washington and wound up as Deputy Director of the Voice of America. What were the circumstances that led to your appointment?

Library of Congress

TUCH: I was at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy that year as the Edward R. Murrow Fellow. I had been abroad for eleven years, and was assigned to the Fletcher School, which was something that I felt very pleased about. It's a marvelous assignment, and I spent most of my time teaching public diplomacy. This was a two-year assignment and I expected to be there for two years, but after one year one day I got a call from Jim Keogh, the Director of USIA, asking me to come down to Washington for a conversation with him. I really didn't know what it was all about. And nobody else did either. I came down, and he said, I would like you to break your assignment at the Fletcher School and come back down and be the Deputy Director of the Voice of America. It broke my heart, but on the other hand, if you're asked by the Director — and it was a very responsible job for me — and he was quite honest with me about why he wanted me to take on this job. He said that he did not have a good relationship with Ken Giddens — as a matter of fact they were hardly speaking with one another — and he wanted me to really go down to the Voice and be his surrogate there.

“Well,” I said, “This is almost impossible to do. My loyalty would obviously have to be to the Director of the Voice, and how could I be both the deputy director of the Voice and then be responsible to the director of USIA?” This was in September, and I'd be coming down on the 15th of October. And he said, “You don't really have to worry about this; no matter how the elections come out on November second, two weeks hence, I will quit, so I will be gone, and if the Democrats win, so will Ken Giddens be gone. So you will not really have any problem as between myself and Ken Giddens.” So on that basis I agreed, and I started on October 15.

First Day On Job Crisis: Threatened Firing of VOA News Chief, Bernie Kamenske

And on that morning came my first major crisis at the Voice of America. I arrived at 8:30 — I really knew hardly anybody; I knew Jack Shellenberger, who was the program manager — and was just getting myself settled in the office, when I got a call from Mr. Keogh to come uptown to USIA headquarters right away. (I had met Ken Giddens the week before;

Library of Congress

we had had lunch together and were quite honest with one another. I told him what I had been told by Jim Keogh, and he reacted accordingly, saying quite frankly that he didn't want me, that he wanted to choose his own deputy, but understood that this was not in the cards and therefore let us work together. We agreed, and as a matter of fact we did work very well together. We had a good relationship — until the day that he was fired.)

Anyway, I went uptown, and I was confronted by Mr. Keogh, Gene Kopp, his deputy, the head of Personnel, and the General Counsel. I was told that the first thing I was to do that day at VOA was to fire the news chief, Bernie Kamenske — whom I had not yet met — because the previous day he had gone public in the Washington Post with a blast at the U. S. Government because of a broadcast the previous week by our VOA correspondent in Jerusalem, Charlie Weiss, who had stated in a broadcast that he had checked some information with the PLO with regard to a PLO attack on Israeli forces. Our ambassador in Tel Aviv, Malcolm Toon, had blasted the Voice of America for being in touch with the PLO because nobody in the U.S. Government — no official American — was ever to have any kind of contact with the PLO. He, as Chief of Mission, had to be consulted, and if he had been consulted he would have denied our correspondent the opportunity to check a fact with the PLO. Bernie Kamenske, who was a very proud and independent, and a very good, very competent news editor, decided he could not take that kind of interference and went to the Washington Post and gave them a statement. I said, “Look, I could not really, as my first task on my first day at the Voice of America, fire the news chief. My credibility in the whole organization would be shot, and I could never reestablish it; I can't do that.” “Well, you have to do it.” I said, “Let me go back and sort things out and I will come back with my recommendation, but I will not initially fire him.”

I went back to VOA, and consulted the director, and he said “You do whatever you want to do, I don't talk to the people uptown,” something to that effect. So I asked to see Bernie Kamenske, and he came to my office, and we met and sat down. I listened to him and he told me the story. I reacted, saying, “Look, what you did is unacceptable to me from one point of view only: namely, that if we're going to be colleagues and if we're going to work

Library of Congress

together you cannot blind side me on anything. If you feel that you have to go public and you cannot resolve your problems internally, you owe it to me to tell me first. Or in this case you owed it to my predecessor, Vallimarescu” — which he had not done the previous weekend. I said, “Let us come to an understanding right away: that in this particular case I will go uptown and try to defend you. However, we have an understanding that you will never do this again without telling me first.” And he agreed. So I marched back uptown, with the same kind of a group, now including the Security chief, and I said I really cannot fire him. If anybody is going to fire him, you will have to do it because I will not. Finally it was agreed that he should get a letter of reprimand.

But I had done my bureaucratic homework, and I said, “Fine, let us give him a letter of reprimand, but you know I am not authorized to sign such a letter. Only the Director of Personnel can sign official letters of reprimand.” I left it at that, and there was never a letter of reprimand.

VOA Director Ken Giddens Fails to Resign When Administration Comes In; Is Finally Removed April, 1977

So this was my first day at the Voice. And then I spent three and a half very happy years there, I must say. One of the first major problems was the Ken Giddens, whereas all other presidential appointments, upon the accession of a new administration, would resign, and left automatically, Ken had no idea of resigning. As a matter of fact, he felt that any administration, Republican or Democrat, would be just delighted to have him as director. He had been there for seven and a half years and therefore it never entered his mind that he was going to resign his job. For a few weeks, no attention was paid to that as the new administration came in, but after the Inauguration questions were beginning to be asked. He stayed till April 9, and on April 9, in the morning, I received a call. Gene Kopp, who had been the deputy director of USIA under the previous administration, had stayed on as deputy director during the transition while John Reinhardt was waiting to be confirmed as director. John had been named but not yet confirmed on that date, if I remember correctly.

Library of Congress

Well, Gene Kopp called me over and said, "I want to tell you that I've just had a call from the White House ordering me to call Ken Giddens and tell him today is his last day, and I just wanted to let you know beforehand." So I went back, and by the time I had gotten back to the office Ken had gotten the call, and was shattered, literally shattered. He did not believe that anything like that could ever have been done to him. He left the office; he went home. The word, of course, spread immediately, and the following week we had a very good farewell party for him. He was very emotional about it, and I think this is something he's never forgotten. And then there was a five-month hiatus while a new director was being selected. It was made clear to me that I would not be appointed director because they were just not going to appoint a career officer to what was a political job. Finally R. Peter Straus was named, and really didn't have much of a problem being confirmed. He came on, as I recall, in August as the new director of VOA. R. Peter Straus had been the president of Straus Communications Corporation, the flagship of which was WMCA in New York, a very successful radio station.

New VOA Director, R. Peter Straus, Not Interested In Actual VOA Management

Q: What was your relationship with Straus, and what were the major problems you confronted early on in his administration?

TUCH: My personal relationship with Peter Straus was first-rate. We got along very well. I found him to be a very bright, intelligent individual, very fast on the draw, very "New York," and his timing in everything he did was first-rate, until the last thing he did, when he resigned from VOA, and I'll come to that later. But he was a bright, interesting, interested person. His one problem was that he was not really committed to or interested in running the Voice of America, which, after all, is a major — let's put it — corporation. It's a very big establishment. It had at that time 2,200 employees, a budget of \$60-70 million, and it was a big enterprise, managerially. He was not really very interested in running such an enterprise. He was interested in being the head of the Voice of America, in appearing in public as the head of the Voice of America, in putting himself before the public and the

Library of Congress

Congress as the head of the Voice of America, but he was not interested in managing the Voice. Which in a way was nice for me because he left it to me. The only problem I had sometimes was in some of the things that he suddenly got interested in a promulgated without any further consultation with anybody. For instance, one of the first things he did — he had never heard the term GMT, Greenwich Mean Time, before, and at that time all of our broadcasts were identified by Greenwich Mean Time. Because they were broadcast to all areas of the world, you didn't use local time. Audiences were used to GMT because most international broadcasters used the term, but he thought it was silly and so from one day to the next he said, "We will no longer use GMT on the air." So when I asked him, "What will we use,": he said, "You will say, it is now five minutes before the hour or six minutes after the hour." Not very serious, not very substantive.

There were a number of issues he obviously had to get involved in, major issues that we confronted. One of them certainly was the new technology. He was not interested in that, but he supported it. I felt one of the really major accomplishments of the Voice during those year, '76 to '78, was our technological improvement in transmitting the Voice broadcasts. The principal one was that we started using satellite circuits in feeding our broadcasts across both the Pacific and the Atlantic to the overseas transmitters. The satellite signal was first-rate, like a local station. By eliminating the hop, you improved the quality of your broadcasts 100%. The reason it was initially difficult was because one of our major problems at the Voice at that time was the competence of the engineering staff. The previous engineering head, Ed Martin, had left — this was before my time — after being transferred to the director's office as a "consultant." And a man by the name of Ken Langenbeck came in, and his credibility within the engineering staff was nil. He was one to resist going satellite, and it had to be done over his objection.

Difficulty With VOA Engineering Department

The engineering department was difficult for me from a management point of view because I'm not an engineer, and I had great difficulty sorting out who was competent

Library of Congress

there and who was not. What we finally did was, we went to SRI, which was then still called Stanford Research Institute, and asked some of their people to do a survey for us, as a consultant, to determine what kind of engineering staff we had and how competent they were to do the job for VOA. We got a very mixed report from them which was not terribly helpful to me, because I still didn't know whether Ken Langenbeck and his staff were competent engineers or not. But the engineering management for me became a major problem since I didn't know whom to go to or whom to trust or whom to work with. It turned out later that Ken was accused by our Agency Inspectors of having done something illegally in a bidding process in going to one bidder and telling him the bids of the other competitors, and he left somewhat under a cloud from one day to the next.

Problem of Outside Meddling In VOA Broadcast Policy

The second major issue during my time at the Voice, and the one that really engaged me the most, and one I really wanted to be involved in — I had been a believer in the Voice as a medium of conveying information, and I felt very strongly that we must support and build up the Voice so that it is a worldwide credible news organization, and we could do that only if we protected the Voice against outside interference — which came all the time. It was this kind of protection that management could give to the Voice news operation to make it the reputable organization it ought to be — independent, objective, comprehensive news organization that it was chartered under the law to be. Outside interference came from practically every direction, practically every day. We received telegrams almost daily from ambassadors abroad saying the lead news story was entirely inappropriate for the Voice that morning; it was wither too long or too short or it shouldn't have been broadcast at all; it was embarrassing to the U. S. Government to have this news story; that it was too high up in the newscast, or too low down in the newscast — this kind of thing. Secondly, we would get calls from the Department of State, from desk officers, from assistant secretaries, saying such and such was happening that day, but you cannot broadcast it on the Voice, or the State Department spokesman would make a statement we we'd be told, "Don't broadcast that statement to Afghanistan, or don't broadcast it to

Library of Congress

Brazil.” This kind of thing was done all the time. I must say that John Reinhardt, who was director of USIA at the time, was first-rate in backing up all my decisions on that, both when I was acting director and when we had a director who didn't want to get involved in such issues. Initially, whenever I got such a telegram or such a call, I would call him and say, “I got another call from the State Department,” or “I got a telegram from this or that ambassador,” and he said, “Well, it's in the news, isn't it?” And I said, “Yes.” And he said, “Well, why don't you just throw it in the wastebasket? After all, nobody interferes with news broadcasts of the Voice, right?” And I said, “Yes.” And he said, “Well, do it!” On two occasions, when it became a really critical issue, he actually accompanied me and represented me in the confrontations.

But the most interesting thing that gave us at the Voice a lot of heart in this issue was at one of the authorization hearings of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. The chairman at that time was Senator Percy, who claimed co-authorship of the law that established the Charter as a law, and was very interested in the Voice and very supportive of the Voice, but very critical if the Voice did something that he thought should not have been done. He stated to me at one of those hearings where I was the witness, “Mr. Tuch, if you let anyone, inside or outside the government, here or abroad, interfere in any way with the news broadcasts of the Voice of America, you are breaking the law.” This is very comforting coming from the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. The two occasions where I got into serious trouble in forcing this kind of even-handedness on the Voice was, the first time during the Panama Canal Treaty discussions, where of course it was U. S. policy to support the conclusion and signing of the treaty, and certainly I was in favor of it. But some of us, I think you included, felt that the Voice owed it to itself to broadcast some of the responsible discussion opposed to the Panama Canal Treaty, including that of Ronald Reagan, and because there was a considerable amount of what we considered responsible opposition to the treaty, whether you agreed with that or not. I remember we asked Senator Laxalt to come over and appear on a Press Conference USA and the following day I got a call from Zbigniew Brzezinski in the White House. “What the

Library of Congress

hell are you doing over there in the Voice of America, giving Senator Laxalt a platform?" I said, "Well, this is our obligation under the Charter, under the law." "Well, don't you ever do that sort of thing again." Period.

Several months later, we asked Paul Nitze, who at that time was chairman of the Committee on the Present Danger, to appear on Press Conference USA in his opposition to the SALT II Treaty. I remember we had a little session in my office first, with a discussion with him that was interesting, and he went off to the studio for the broadcast. The next day I got a call to appear at the white House before Mr. Brzezinski. On that occasion I called up John Reinhardt, and he and I went together. We explained that the Charter of the Voice obligated us to present U.S. policy and responsible discussion thereof. We felt that Paul Nitze was probably the most responsible person we could find to discuss opposition, which was certainly strong in this country. There again it became pretty unpleasant, but we marched out of there — John was with me all the way, he was perfect. I've always appreciated that. But, in sum, I thought we did accomplish quite a bit. Obviously I'm not an objective observer there, but we accomplished quite a bit to raise the worldwide credibility of the Voice during that period by letting the newsroom really operate without any outside interference. And whenever they got it they would report it and we would make a fuss about it. And we would tell Bernie and his staff, whether the duty editor or the slot person, "Forget it. Don't worry about it, just forget it." And then we would take it up.

Chalmers Roberts Report Results In Change of Status of VOA Reporting Abroad

Q: What was the origin of the Chalmers Roberts group?

TUCH: That was another issue which came up during that time, starting with Charlie Weiss's problem with the PLO. The thing was really initiated out of the news division, and it was presented to management that the Voice of America correspondents could not really be the kind of persons supporting and working in the news division if they were abroad as

Library of Congress

correspondents but also as U. S. Government officials — meaning that they would travel on official passports, that they had their offices in embassies or related to embassies, that they would get their housing, they would be part of the embassy structure, and that they could not function as correspondents in that position, and recognized as being in such a position abroad. The suggestion was made that if we really wanted to have credible, comprehensive newscasts, our correspondents have got to work on the same basis as correspondents for commercial or other international news services. We proposed that the correspondents be separated, so to speak, from the U. S. Government. They would still be U. S. Government employees, and obviously receive their pay from the U. S. Government, but for all intents and purposes they would go overseas as any other news correspondents for a commercial network or newspaper do, whether it's the New York Times or CBS or BBC.

Peter Straus was not particularly interested in this issue. As a matter of fact, correspondents were a problem to management, always were. This was a problem he didn't need. Why do we have correspondents at all? They were very expensive, and they were causing all kinds of difficulties to management all the time, so why even have correspondents? There was, however, great pressure on him from inside the Voice that we institute this new procedure, and he decided to have an independent outside consultation by responsible news executives and reporters to give him advice on whether this should be done or not. I suspect he hoped that they would come up with the conclusion that correspondents were not essential to the Voice of America, thereby then avoiding the whole problem. Chalmers Roberts, who at that time had retired from the Washington Post but was still writing for them, was made the chairman of this commission, and there was Pauline Frederick, and a couple of other people with good reputations on the commission, and they came in with a report saying that correspondents are absolutely essential if the Voice of America is going to be a credible news organ. No ifs or buts.

With that recommendation, we drafted several papers outlining the operating procedures and responsibilities of VOA correspondents, replacing the old Circular Airgram 800. We

Library of Congress

got the Agency to promulgate that, and that literally separated VOA correspondents abroad from USIA or U. S. Government establishments in almost every way. Ambassadors still, of course, had the right to comment on a correspondent's report after the fact, which to my mind is perfectly reasonable. The decision after the fact, however, would not be made by the State Department but by the VOA leadership. The one difference of VOA correspondents from other correspondents was that our correspondents would only report the news, not comment on it. They would not be used as commentators or news analysts because that would compromise them, but what made them so valuable to the Voice was to be a responsible news person on the spot to report the news so that we could depend upon him or her for the credibility and the objectivity and comprehensiveness of the news broadcast. We did not have to depend, often, on other sources. We had, of course, the two-source rule, which had always applied at the Voice, dating back to the forties, I understand, but the one exception to the two-source rule was our own correspondent. I think, from at least my point of view while I was at the Voice, and then for the next few years when I was abroad and listened to the Voice, that worked very well. The problem that was still facing us was that we felt we should have more correspondents, and the Agency, and certainly Peter Straus at the time, did not feel we needed more correspondents, so as long as he was there we didn't add. After he left, during the following six months, we did add at least two correspondents to the corps, and of course now they have many more.

Origin of VOA News "Commentaries" (Editorials)

Q: Do you remember Peter Straus's insistence that he had to be able to go before members of Congress and say that the American taxpayer had gotten his money's worth for nine minutes this week, in the form of three editorials? Some of us felt like saying, "We feel the taxpayer gets his money's worth every day, 24 hours a day, seven days a week." This was the beginning of the VOA editorial.

Library of Congress

TUCH: We still called them commentaries while I was there. The compromise we made at the time, after long discussions, was that we would have two things: a news analysis, which would merely analyze the news, and not given an opinion on it; the other thing would be that our commentaries would be like an editorial and would be introduced as an official comment on whatever. We obligated ourselves to do commentaries very frequently, practically daily, but that was the compromise. On the other side of the compromise was that we would write the commentaries and not clear them with anybody else, but they had the right to object or complain to us after the fact if they felt that our commentaries had not reflected U.S. foreign policy adequately. But the determination would be made in-house by the VOA policy staff.

Q: Beyond the ones we've discussed, what do you consider some of the highlights of your period as Deputy Director of VOA?

Reminiscences: Highlights of Period As VOA Deputy and Acting Director

A. Opportunity to Serve As Acting Director

TUCH: Certainly one of the highlights came when I was in the fortunate position of being acting director. I mentioned earlier that Peter Straus's political timing was near perfect when he was director of the Voice, but he made one serious mistake, namely, the timing of his departure, his resignation. I don't know, frankly, why he departed so suddenly from the Voice. I know he had some differences with Jody Powell, and I also know he had some differences with John Reinhardt, primarily differences of prestige — that he was responsible to the director of USIA and therefore was second to him — or whether it was his desire to become more politically active. He and his wife had been very active and had actually managed the senatorial campaign of Robert Kennedy, and he, I believe, wanted to become very active in the potential campaign of Teddy Kennedy. He left the Voice very abruptly, from one day to the next.

Library of Congress

While he was director, he had tried to be on a major television show at least once a month, or to give a major speech once a month, or to have a major comment in the newspaper about him or by him once a week. He liked that very much; this was part of his way of operation.

B. Tehran Hostage Crisis

Anyway, he left, and one week after he left the hostages were taken in Tehran. Suddenly the Voice was in the limelight because we were the only ones who were communicating with the public in Iran. We were broadcasting to Iran, only a half-hour at that time in Farsi, but we were communicating, and we heard from a couple of hostages who were not with the others that they were listening daily, and suddenly the Voice was in the public limelight. All the television networks and the local stations and newspapers came around for interviews and reports about the Voice of America broadcasting to Iran. Practically nightly for two or three weeks we were on the major network shows. I just remember that I was standing in front of the CBS camera, and all I could think of before the question was asked was, Eat your heart out, Peter Straus! Being on a network news show every night of the week. But, at any rate, I must say that our ability to respond to that crisis, and getting ourselves started in broadcasting in Farsi, and building our broadcasts from a half-hour to a two-hour broadcast within six months, I thought was a major accomplishment — of the Voice, not of mine. Allan Baker, who was the division chief for the Near East, was a professional, as his colleagues were, and we got the Farsi broadcasts on the air.

C. Updating Language Broadcast Priorities and Upgrading Transmitter Facilities

At the same time — and you and I worked very closely together on this — we were asked by the National Security Council (NSC), by Brzezinski himself, “What can the Voice do to improve its broadcasts to the Islamic World? What needed to be done, how should it be done, how much money was needed, how many new transmitters were needed, and where?” So we, the two of us, did two things. First of all, we did a language priority study

Library of Congress

updating the one that had been done in 1970 and updated in 1974 — and this was 1979. We did a very careful but a very realistic, and simple to read, study of what languages the VOA should be broadcasting in at that time, in what priority, and the number of hours, and how we could achieve that within a reasonable time, and what that time would be if we had the resources to do so. The second study was one determining where the shortages were in our capacity or capability of broadcasting to a certain area in a certain language for the appropriate length of time, and what the trade-offs in the priorities were, and what we needed to improve our technical capabilities. Those were two studies which were sent to the NSC, and were accepted and approved. Actually the budget for the following year was determined on the basis of these two reports, and actually the beginning of the modernization program dates to that time.

We felt very strongly that we needed one major additional relay station, and we felt that Sri Lanka would be the best place for it, both geographically and politically. The one area of the world that was very inadequately covered by the Voice, technically, was Central Asia, the part between European Russia and China, so we felt strongly that a new relay station with a number of high-power transmitters broadcasting northward from Sri Lanka would really fill that particular technical gap. On the other hand, by augmenting the Philippines and augmenting our capability in Kavala in Greece, and in England where the BBC was operating transmitters for us, we could do a fairly adequate job of covering the work, technically. We were also augmenting our relay station in Monrovia, and we made the decision, and started before I left, the medium-wave relay station in Botswana. We had a very tough time initially persuading the State Department to let us even negotiate in Sri Lanka for our relay station there. They did not want it, but finally agreed that we should try, and of course our successors have been working on that ever since then.

D. Personnel Problems

So I would say that the two areas — there is one other, but the two areas that really required or occupied my priority interest at the Voice were the news credibility of the Voice

Library of Congress

and the technical improvement of its signal. And thirdly, personnel problems. We always had personnel problems at the Voice, in some respects completely inevitable. You have a professional organization of some 40 or 50 nationalities together under one roof, some of the nationalities never having gotten along with their neighbors, some within themselves. There were constant pressures and tensions, some within language services — the Czechs and the Slovaks, the Serbs and the Croats, the Estonians and the Estonians, the Chinese, and in some of the language services, like the Russian, the old-time Russians with the Americans Russians, and the American Russians and the recent emigres. There were just constant tensions, some of which were almost impossible for management to address because we didn't understand the languages nor did we understand the issues. Fortunately we had some people in management who had served in these areas and who knew the issues and were aware of the tensions and could sort them out. For instance, Paul Modic had spent a lot of time in the Far East, and certainly managed the Chinese in his way very well. I couldn't. On the other hand, I was able to manage more of the problems with the East Europeans and the Russians because I had spent time there and was studying and interested in the area. And then you had the problems between the Greeks and the Turks. It was just constant.

On the other hand, we felt there were certain areas in personnel where we felt improvements could be made. For instance, in not having any kind of discrimination between the English language broadcasting personnel and the foreign language broadcasting personnel. That was one issue. Then there was the issue of civil service personnel and foreign service officers like myself who did tours of duty at the Voice. Obviously the civil servants felt that there were professional broadcasters and these outsiders who came in for one assignment of three or four years were not professional broadcasters and they were usually put in supervisory positions, thereby preventing the civil service broadcasters from going ahead in their career as they felt they should. On the other hand, the foreign service people felt that they had the immediate contact with the area, they had the recent experience in the area to which we were broadcasting, which

Library of Congress

the civil service broadcasters did not have, and that therefore they could make a valuable contribution. I thought that they could. But all these became major personnel issues that among reasonable people could be worked out. We at least addressed them, and tried to work at some of the worst ones. Of course we had to deal with two unions: AFGE, that we were constantly negotiating with, and we had the technical people's union, the NFFE. And then there was also the question in which Peter Straus as director was very active, and that was abolishing any discriminatory practices, whether on race, religion or sex, that had been practiced.

The major one there was the sex discrimination question, because many of the women in VOA, and I thought absolutely correctly, felt that they had been discriminated against in terms of their advancement as broadcasters. On the other hand, you had the very real question of cultural differences in other countries and other areas of the world. Let's say the Arab World: in trying to convey information to an audience, a woman broadcaster, it was felt, could not do this job adequately. Women would not be accepted broadcasting political information; cultural, yes, but not political. In a number of services it took a long time and considerable pressure to persuade them to use American contemporary standards, namely, that you did not discriminate against women in their professional work. I think that slowly discrimination was abolished. I'm not sure in every respect, but at least we had fewer complaints towards the end of my tour than in the beginning. Peter Straus formed a committee and asked me to chair it, of people in VOA, including women, including a union representative, including you, and we met at least once a week to discuss the problem of discrimination against women, and we looked at complaints and we got reports. Betty Ross was the sort of rapporteur, and she kept statistics on how the Voice was doing.

It was not only a question of sex, but in the Russian Service, for instance, who would broadcast in Russian? People with a Ukrainian accent were not permitted to broadcast to the Soviet Union because it was felt demeaning. On the other hand, we had people speaking with American accents, and we had to force that down the throats of the Russian

Library of Congress

staff, though only in cultural and feature programs. At any rate, it was a question that was persistent, but we addressed it, we grappled with it. Towards the end I had the feeling there was not too much that was still being complained about. There was a long period where the English language women in the newsroom, the journalists, complained that they were not permitted to broadcast their own stories. Since the feeling among the producers was that the quality of their presentation was not up to VOA standards, we set up training courses for these women to bring the quality of their work up to standard.

Q: What other recollections do you have that you'd like to talk about?

TUCH: I think that one of the things I should give you is my folder on the Voice, and a number of memoranda that I wrote, either to the director of USIA or internally, that might be useful as ancillary documents to this particular interview. I did produce a memo to my successor, Mary Bitterman, who came in in March of 1980. Peter Straus had left in October, and I was acting again. When she came in she brought in a new deputy director, Bill Haratunian, an old Voice hand, a Foreign Service officer who had been with the Voice many, many years. I left her a memorandum with things that had not been completed, for her and Bill to address themselves to. There were a number of things; for instance, we did not have a new engineering director. (And of course, the one that was found didn't stay long afterwards.) But there were a number of issues that were still to be addressed.

My time with the Voice, I must say in retrospect, was one of the most fascinating periods of my career. I still consider the Voice of America one of the most professional outfits I've ever been associated with. And within USIA I continue to believe it is the most professional organization in every respect. I think the best example I can cite to confirm that impression is that during the huge snowstorm in 1977 that paralyzed the U. S. Government it was announced that only people who were indispensable should come to work. The next day the Washington Post did a story on who was indispensable to the government. They went to all the Departments, and at the State Department they found that only the Iran task force was indispensable; nobody else was working. On the other hand they found that

Library of Congress

everybody at the Voice of America was indispensable because everybody was working. I remember two or three heartwarming incidents. In the Korean Service, the staff just could not get in from Virginia, and the chief of the service called in and had himself hooked up by telephone to the Voice and broadcast the Korean program from his home. There were several instances like that, and it was just amazing that with all the problems, and all the internecine tensions and pressures, the professionalism was superb at the Voice of America.

Q: I have to say, as a loyal VOA hand, I found very high professionalism in the Television and Film Service when I was transferred over there, and in the Press and Publications Service when I was there. So there is professionalism throughout the institution.

TUCH: I never worked in those. But that makes it sort of a wonderful experience to be associated with an organization where there are true committed professionals.

Q: Thank you very much, Tom.

End of interview