

FORMER DIRECTORS URGE CONGRESS TO PROTECT THE VOICE OF AMERICA

WASHINGTON -- A bipartisan group of former directors of the Voice of America (VOA) is urging Congress to “act quickly” to save VOA in a letter sent to the Chairs and Ranking Members of the relevant House and Senate appropriations and Foreign Relations subcommittees.

“VOA’s mission is critical to the national interests of the United States, and VOA’s personnel are hard-working professionals who put themselves at risk for their work,” the letter said.

Originally sent to members of Congress on March 25,, the letter was signed by nine of the ten then-living former VOA directors, including first Trump administration VOA appointee Robert Reilly, and President Reagan’s appointee, the late Richard W. Carlson, who died just days after joining signatories. Also signing were Danforth Austin, a George W. Bush-era VOA director and Chase Untermeyer, VOA director from 1991-1993 under President George H.W. Bush. The letter was addressed to Senators Lindsay Graham (R-SC) and Brian Schatz (D-Hawaii), as well as Representatives Mario Diaz-Balart (R-Fla) and Lois Frankel (D-Fla), the chairs and ranking members of the relevant subcommittees in the Senate and House appropriations and foreign relations committees.

“We understand that the international broadcasting services of America’s adversaries in Russia and China are already taking up the slack,” the letter noted, by “increasing investment in their language services and in some cases taking over time slots on local stations around the world that we have been forced to abandon.”

An executive order from President Trump has directed that VOA and an array of other federal agencies and offices “be eliminated to the maximum consistent with applicable law,” which the former directors said “amounts to a gift to China, Iran, Russia and other oppressive regimes around the world.”

Until its approximately 1,300 journalists were shut out of their building on March 14, VOA reached a weekly global audience of 361 million people, in 49 languages. Employees were either dismissed or placed on administrative leave, by orders of Elon Musk’s Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE).

The letter makes a particular plea for the fired personal service contractors at VOA.

“These contract staffers, who represent almost half the workforce, tend to be more recently hired journalists, and they often work in VOA’s most prominent language services, including Russian, Chinese, Persian and Korean,” the letter states. “They are also among VOA’s most vulnerable employees: many of them lack U.S. citizenship yet would be jailed if they were forced to return to their home countries, specifically because of their work for VOA. They tend to be the most recently arrived in America, with fewer alternatives to a VOA salary and a J-1 visa.”

Please find the full text of the letter pasted below. If you would like to request an interview, please contact Lara Shane at larashane2003@gmail.com or at 703-740-7837.

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FULL TEXT OF THE LETTER:

March 25, 2025

The Honorable Lindsey Graham (Chair), Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs

The Honorable Brian Schatz (Ranking Member), Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs

The Honorable Mario Diaz-Balart (Chair), House Appropriations Subcommittee on National Security, Department of State, and Related Programs

The Honorable Lois Frankel (Ranking Member), House Appropriations Subcommittee on National Security, Department of State, and Related Programs

Dear Senators and Representatives,

As former directors of the Voice of America appointed to serve under presidents from both parties, we urge you to act quickly to reverse the plans announced by the current Administration to eliminate one of the most cost-effective instruments of American soft power.

As you know, an executive order has directed that VOA and an array of federal offices “be eliminated to the maximum extent consistent with applicable law.” About 1,000 journalists have been placed on indefinite administrative leave. Those who showed up to work to broadcast programs were locked out of the building. The agreements which fund our sister organizations, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Radio Free Asia and the Office of Cuba Broadcasting, have also been terminated.

We understand that the international broadcasting services of America’s adversaries in Russia and China are already taking up the slack, increasing the investment in their language services and in some cases, taking over time slots on local stations around the world that we now have been forced to abandon.

All these steps were made without consultation with Congress, which has voted repeatedly to support these networks and has had no hand in the plans to shut them down. At the same time, the orders amount to a gift to China, Iran, Russia and other oppressive regimes around the world.

Since its foundation in 1942, VOA has expanded from shortwave radio to every type of communication—including television, radio, internet, and social media—with a current weekly audience of 361 million people in 49 languages. In Africa, for example, Beijing invests billions in information programs through CGTN, Xinhua, and China Daily, while Russia's RT and Sputnik push anti-American propaganda. Gutting VOA cedes an entire continent to America's adversaries and allows authoritarian regimes to control the narrative. VOA operates with extraordinary efficiency in Africa: just 200 staffers produce 59 radio shows and 31 TV programs, in addition to managing 16 websites and dozens of social media accounts in 16 languages.

While nearly all VOA staff remain in the limbo of administrative leave, all of the agency's personal service contractors already have been terminated. These contract staffers, who represent almost half of the workforce, tend to be more recently hired journalists, and they often work in the VOA's most prominent language services, including Russian, Chinese, Persian and Korean. They are also among VOA's most vulnerable employees: Many of them lack U.S. citizenship yet would be jailed if they were forced to return to their home countries, specifically because of their work for VOA. They tend to be the most recently arrived in America, with fewer alternatives to a VOA salary and a J-1 visa.

VOA's mission is critical to the national interests of the United States, and VOA's personnel are hard-working professionals who put themselves at risk for their work. Both deserve your support. We urge Congress to act to save VOA and act to help it keep this critical group of VOA journalists working. Through these actions, the United States can continue to project truthful journalism and America's values around the world. Moreover, it operates under a legislative charter adopted by Congress in 1976 that requires its programming to be "accurate, objective, and comprehensive." While there are (and always will be) ways in which VOA can be streamlined and improved, VOA's news programs are, by law, not allowed to be false or unbalanced. If they are, that law can be enforced. With a mission to provide reliable news and to tell America's story, VOA has a profound impact.

We former VOA directors urge you to take the steps necessary to restore this vital agency.

Sincerely,

Mary Bitterman (1980-1981)
Richard W. Carlson (1986-1991)
Chase Untermeyer (1991-1993)
Geoffrey Cowan (1994-1996)
Sanford Ungar (1999-2001)
Robert Reilly (2001-2002, 2020-2021)
Danforth Austin (2006-2011)
David Ensor (2011-2015)
Amanda Bennett (2016-2020)