

# THE U.S. INFORMATION AGENCY: AN INTERVIEW WITH CHARLES Z. WICK

ANDREW D. BURTON

*Burton:* Would you give an overview of USIA activities during the past six years, discuss its objectives and tell how, if at all, your personal objectives have differed from administration policy?

*Wick:* The concern that I had for USIA's main objectives was to use whatever abilities I had, tied in with the president's own concepts of public diplomacy, to advance all the goals of the agency. The charge of the agency has been well-defined in legislation and by what has been done in the past. I thought that my job was to build upon what my predecessors had done, to see that the agency got more visibility inside the government, as well as outside. There was a belief when I arrived that the agency, not having any constituency and being a relatively small agency, was relegated to a rather uninfluential role. And the foreign service officers in the USIA felt that they had a secondary image, as against the foreign service officers of the State Department. So I did what I could to correct that by calling attention to the fine group of foreign service officers I found here. That has been accomplished; a much more enhanced image of the USIA has been created. And they earned it. For example, an agency foreign service officer was on the last three or four presidential overseas trips, including the economic summit and Southeast Asia trips. Their performance really impressed me. The fact that the president has been a great backer of the USIA has translated itself into similar recognition by other government agencies and the Congress has recognized the great value of the USIA in the war of ideas as the only viable alternative to the war of weapons. Also, the Congress has granted the president's budgets, which have resulted, in the 1981 to 1986 period, in a more than 90 percent increase in

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our budget. Unfortunately, under Gramm-Rudman, that's going to be cut back somewhat.

[As to personal objectives] . . . there is no ideology by me in my concept as to how I discharge my job. I took an oath of office. The Voice of America, which is one of our more powerful modes of disseminating information and contacting world publics, has its own specific charter. To pursue an ideological course or a bias would be contrary to that charter — now, one might do it somewhat subtly, but then you get down to a question of good faith or bad faith. From my knowledge and perceptions, having done a lot of traveling, having been around for quite a while and having dealt with people all over the world [I have found] that the greatest way we can convey the values of America is to show its diversity. People feel very comfortable with somebody who doesn't claim he is perfect. So we show the different sides of America — which we are supposed to do on the VOA, and which we follow in other areas. People opposed to the administration are [invited to comment]. Senator Albert Gore of Tennessee, for instance, said [on the Voice of America] some unfavorable things about the administration's position on the question of organ transplants. He said we were wrong and that he did not want the government involved in these areas of organ transplants.

I feel we achieve great credibility with people around the world when they have the feeling that whatever we do say is on the level and that our facts are not skewed.

*Burton:* How has technology increased the visibility of the USIA?

*Wick:* It has had a giant impact. [Secretary of State] George Shultz, the president, every cabinet officer and many others have used Worldnet and have been awed at the instantaneous multiplier coverage they have received around the world in getting their views understood. It's practically the first time in the history of public diplomacy when they themselves have been able to address world media — radio and television — and debate the nuances of our policies . . . , and correct the misimpressions that others have of their policies. Our job is to get [our ideas] understood, which is very difficult when [you are dealing with the foreign press].

*Burton:* How else do you try to influence world opinion?

*Wick:* We do two editorials each day on the VOA — and we label them as such. At the head of each editorial we say ‘The following editorial represents the viewpoint of the United States government.’ After the editorial we say ‘The preceding editorial reflects the viewpoint of the United States government.’ So there is no ideology — other than to tell the world about America in all its diversity.

The rest is news. The news is sacrosanct. There are no editorials in the news portion [of the broadcasts]. We cannot do that — it would be a violation of the charter. It would be illegal. As I told you, we are also charged with conveying the policy of the United States government. When we do, we label it.

And there are various other initiatives. One minor sort of undertaking is sending artistic ambassadors around the world. That has created a lot of friends and a lot of visibility.

*Burton:* There was some discussion about people sent abroad being asked to present the views of the administration. For example there was an exchange of letters in the *New York Times* in which a professor argued that he was told to put forward administration policies, whether or not he agreed with them. Secondly, there was some debate about whether certain speakers were not being invited to go abroad as representatives of the United States government, through the medium of the USIA. Would you say whether that debate was misfocused, or whether it reflects policies which have since been changed, or whether they never really existed?

*Wick:* It was misfocused. We responded to these allegations and we are satisfied that we put the matter to rest. In fact we did put it to rest. In our charge, and in the Voice of America charter, we are charged on behalf of the American taxpayer with telling the world about America’s policies. The administration was elected to formulate policies. When we send Americans (American participants) abroad, we don’t ask them what their affiliation is — political affiliation. However, if we’re sending artists abroad or groups of performers, there is nothing we have to know other than their abilities. When we send somebody abroad to talk about American policy in South America or Central America or whatever, we obviously aren’t going to send somebody who disagrees with [our policies]. So when you get down to administration policies, it would be ridiculous — just like you sending out someone from your ad department and then having him sell an ad for a different magazine.

You see what I mean? If we're going to have someone go talk on medicine, we are not going to send somebody who's an engineer. We'll send someone who's a doctor. So in that sense, when it comes to American policies that are to be explained, we obviously don't send somebody who disagrees with them or someone who can't explicate them. But this is so easy to be misfocused, using your word, that unless one can go into depth with the allegation and the rebuttal, it's pretty hard. The so-called 'black list' was a real canard. The charge was [made] totally out of whole cloth. Many [on the list of 650 names] were Democrats. The way the list arose was this: names would be sent around here for different seminars and all [those things] we make recommendations for and some of the names were culled. Some people were rejected for a given seminar — some being more appropriate than others. That's where it came from. Anyway, we have chapter and verse on that — letters to the editor — to delineate the entire matter. So that thing died.

*Burton:* Following your recent trip to the Soviet Union you said that your talks were in the true spirit of Geneva and that the discussions were extremely frank and courteous and helpful. Earlier you had characterized the Soviet Union in quite strong terms. Do you see yourself in contradiction on this?

*Wick:* Not at all. When I was there, there was a true spirit of Geneva, I found. And much to my surprise, there was no America bashing. And whatever I said reflected accurately what happened then. But the spirit of Geneva is evaporating, as recent events have confirmed.

*Burton:* Is this the Nicholas Daniloff case you are referring to?

*Wick:* Yes, the Daniloff case I think particularly, and the fact that the Soviets rejected a visa for three Voice of America correspondents who were going to go with the Chatauqua group and I had to make the decision at the last minute — because they denied the visa at the last minute — that I'd hold all three back as a protest, rather than have them tell us who from the Voice of America may or may not cover the news. There is a series of events that are on the record, as you know, that shows the Soviets have reverted again to their pre-Gorbachev practices of intimidation, duplicity, stonewalling on agreements. So I haven't changed my mind about my trip. It's just too bad that spirit didn't last too long.

*Burton:* Would you care to comment on the Soviets' handling of the Chernobyl incident?

*Wick:* That's another excellent example of stonewalling, of not being candid, withholding that information for whatever number of hours it was, at least 36 or longer, while these dangerous radiations were polluting their neighbors, and then denying and stonewalling when they were confronted with the evidence that we and others got from satellites. So that's a far cry from openness.

*Burton:* But at the same time, what did you make of the reporting that was made in the West that was perhaps taken from incomplete information? For example, there were statements from Arms Control and Disarmament Agency Director Kenneth Adelman as to the number of deaths.

*Wick:* I think one cannot use any type of equivalency of whether we do the same things that they do and therefore they aren't bad guys. They are very bad guys. I don't know what you're referring to with Ken Adelman. But in our system we report the news as we see it. This is not possible under the Soviet system.

*Burton:* Would you comment on the suggestion [in a book by Seymour Hersh] that U.S. intelligence had confusing information in the time right after the shooting down of the Korean Airlines plane over the Soviet Union?

*Wick:* I don't know anything about that. I don't quite understand what he's getting at. I didn't read it. We prepared Jeanne Kirkpatrick for her demarche in the Security Council of the United Nations on September 6, 1984, which helped expose the Soviets as being totally disingenuous on the whole thing. We have read the transcript of the conversation [of the Soviet pilot]. I don't understand how anybody can confuse that. I guess that one theme is that the Soviets maybe thought it was a spy plane, right? Well, I don't know how there could have been confusion. You will see in the transcript: 'I have it in my sights; I'm going around it. The lights are on.' It circled the plane a few times, at least, in tracking it. Above it and below it. I think just common sense of anyone who was not an expert would cast great question as to whether somebody thought that was an intelligence operation as against an airline. That's all I know about it. While being on the inside

of the government, I've never ever heard anything at all about any allegation that it was anything other than a civilian airline.

*Burton:* So there's no doubt in your mind.

*Wick:* None at all.

*Burton:* Political changes have occurred in Haiti and the Philippines. How do you see the role of the USIA in areas of potential change — like South Africa, Chile, or South Korea?

*Wick:* The USIA's role is to foster the policy of the United States. And that policy is to encourage any nation to democracy. It's in our interest to have democracies around the world. Why? There is no recorded instance ever of democracies starting a war. And in this global village today we need all the friends we can get. We feel that democracies share natural values, humanistic and otherwise, that bind us together and make a totalitarian adversary less able to achieve hegemony and have its viewpoint prevail.

*Burton:* What methods do you have for finding out whether people are listening out there? Specifically, in Central America.

*Wick:* We are able easily to tell how we're doing and how we're being received just by talking to people down there. You don't have the restrictions that you do behind the Iron Curtain. We have posts all over Latin America. We have visitors from Latin America. They have a free press in those countries. So it's a very open type of society down there. I would say from what I observe from up here, Americans are generally admired. This so-called latent distrust and all is not very widespread. We get about 385,000 letters a year to Voice of America from all over the world.

*Burton:* Could you speculate about the direction the USIA will take over the next couple of years — are there any new initiatives in the pipeline?

*Wick:* My strategy is to fulfill the charge of the agency to tell the world about America. Obviously you'd want the biggest bang for a buck, and harnessing new and emerging technology where feasible is the best way to go. So we have been able to do that with Worldnet. We're completing

installation of TVROs — television receive-only dishes — around the world at our posts. We're using computers for contact with our posts. We're installing a trial computer for linkage with many newsrooms of prominent media in Western Europe — we're starting with Germany in two or three weeks.

[Editorial writers, for example] will be able to get [directly] a very clear picture of what we are talking about, and more importantly what we are not talking about. We will do much better in most of the papers in Western Europe and elsewhere, no matter what their political bent is, if they understand exactly what our policies are.

*Burton:* So you feel that the American message is not getting across?

*Wick:* The text which forms the image of the message is not getting across at all well. You have many foreign correspondents here representing their media and they can file maybe 600 or 650 words on SDI and somebody is going to run an editorial or report what they say. And a professional journalist at the other end will do much better if he has 2,000 words of what George Shultz said or what the president said or what Caspar Weinberger said or what Clayton Yeutter, the trade representative, said. I'm not saying that immediately means they'll take our positions but at least they will know our positions and there will be a lesser chance that our positions will be misrepresented.

