

# VOICE OF AMERICA'S NEW RADIO STATION TO CUBA

JEFFREY FELTMAN

*In the fall of 1983, Congress passed legislation establishing a new U.S.-funded radio station aimed at broadcasting the "truth" about the Castro regime to the Cuban people. Feltman argues that Congress may have made a costly mistake. A Congressional compromise resulted in the creation of a specialized service aimed solely at Cuba, based on the examples of Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty. Not only is this model inappropriate to the Cuban situation, Feltman asserts, but for the same broadcasting expense an expanded Voice of America could reach many more people, both in Cuba and in other Latin American nations far more likely to be influenced by the American viewpoint.*

As members of the Ninety-Eighth Congress returned from their summer 1983 recess, the Korean airline tragedy, the presence of American troops in Lebanon, and the continuing problems of international finance dominated the news. Considering the immediate importance of these and other issues, it is hardly surprising that Senate Resolution 602, the Radio Broadcasting to Cuba Act, was passed by both Houses of Congress in September 1983 with little discussion in the press.<sup>1</sup> It completely slipped by the U.S. public; even those Americans who were curious about Radio Marti, as the proposed U.S. government-backed station has been called, may have found it difficult to sustain interest during the two years of debate that followed its first introduction to Congress in November 1981.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, the relatively small funding requirements for Radio Marti diverted attention from the legislation.

Yet it is likely that Americans will be living with the consequences of S.R. 602 long after the Marines have left Lebanon and the KAL 007 shock has subsided. The seemingly innocuous and unsensational Radio Broadcasting to Cuba Act will most likely acquire the permanence of the

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Jeffrey Feltman received a MALD from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy in June 1983. He is currently the Fellows Program Director for the Executive Council on Foreign Diplomats in New York City.

1. U.S. Congress, Senate, S.R. 602, 98th Cong., 1st sess., 1983.
2. U.S. Congress, Senate, S.R. 1853, 97th Cong., 1st sess., 1981. This bill was introduced into the Senate on 16 November 1981, and was the first in either House after Executive Order #12323 of 22 September 1981, outlining the Radio Marti proposal.

Cuban communist regime it is designed to oppose. Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) served as models for the proposed Cuban service supported by the Reagan Administration. These U.S.-sponsored stations have continued to beam their messages to Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, respectively, despite budget cuts and detente.<sup>3</sup> Radio Marti may develop similarly into a permanent fixture on Cuban airwaves.

Unlike the European stations, even the modified version of Radio Marti that was finally passed by Congress may result in unforeseen U.S. domestic consequences. More importantly, the establishment of a service broadcasting solely to Cuba is not cost-effective. It is a waste of resources that could otherwise be used to broadcast to all of Latin America and the Caribbean.

### PROPOSAL AND COMPROMISE

Like Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty, which trace their origins to the Cold War, the Radio Marti proposal developed as a reaction to an unfriendly and intransigent communist regime that monopolizes the news services within its borders. The purpose of the station, named after the 19th century Cuban poet and independence fighter José Martí, has remained the same throughout the lengthy debates: Radio Marti is to serve as a surrogate domestic news source, broadcasting news about Cuba to Cubans.

When the proposal was announced on September 23, 1981, National Security Adviser Richard V. Allen expressed clearly the sentiments of the Reagan White House:

This Administration has decided to break the Cuban government's control of information in Cuba. This radio service will tell the truth to the Cuban people about their government's domestic mismanagement and its promotion of subversion and international terrorism in this hemisphere and elsewhere.

It will tell the Cuban people what these activities cost in terms of living standards for them and their children and will correct the false image they have been given of Cuba's international reputation.<sup>4</sup>

The Presidential Commission on Radio Broadcasting to Cuba, which was appointed to study — and support — the proposal, concurred. The

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3. S.R. 602 appropriates \$14 million for fiscal 1984 and \$11 million for fiscal 1985. According to the Board for International Broadcasting's *Eighth Annual Report* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1982), pp. 18 and 35, Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty cost between \$80 and \$90 million annually, while the VOA's budget exceeds \$109 million annually.

4. John M. Goshko, "U.S., Accusing Castro of Lying to Populace, Plans New Radio to 'Tell the Truth' to Cuba," *Washington Post*, 24 September 1981.

Commission reported to the House Committee on Foreign Relations that "whether people live in Gdansk or Havana, those in a closed society thirst for more information."<sup>5</sup>

The General Assembly of the Inter-American Press Association, though not politically or directly affiliated with the proposal, added weight to the supporters' arguments with its 1981 resolution to "make every effort to bring about the end of the news blackout for the people of Cuba, and support any means that would help achieve that objective."<sup>6</sup>

More militant advocates joined those expressing humanitarian concerns for the free flow of information — arguments conveniently not applied to dictatorships friendly to the United States. The president of the South Florida Broadcasters Association proposed that Radio Marti could be used as a means to "keep Castro in his place," and, according to Frank Calzon, Executive Director of the Cuban-American National Foundation, "these radio broadcasts would be a part of a policy of containment of Castro, of protecting U.S. policy in the Caribbean."<sup>7</sup> Representative Toby Roth of Wisconsin spoke for the "cold warriors" when he voiced a more extreme view:

As I said before, I think that this is something we should have done in 1962. Let's give the true story to the Cuban people so that they will throw Cubans out of Cuba. Let's throw Castro out of Cuba and give Cuba back to the Cubans.<sup>8</sup>

To achieve these diverse goals, the supporters of Radio Marti worked for an independent station under guidelines of the Board for International Broadcasting, the semi-private agency chartered in 1974 to supervise RFE/RL. As recently as the summer of 1983, proposals to establish radio broadcasting to Cuba were presented as amendments to the Board of International Broadcasting Act of 1973, which would have added Radio Marti to the Board's responsibilities.<sup>9</sup>

Some members of Congress suggested that radio broadcasting aimed at Cuba should merely be added to the Voice of America's already existing Latin American service, arguing that dual facilities and bureaucracies would be needlessly expensive. They believed that the established credibility of the Voice of America (VOA) would also diminish possible criticisms

5. Quoted in U.S. Congress, Senate, S. Rept. 97-544, 97th Cong., 2d sess., 1982.

6. Reproduced in U.S. Congress, House, Committee on Foreign Affairs, *Hearings and Markup Before the Committee on Foreign Affairs on H.R. 5427*, 97th Cong., 2d sess., 1982, p. 53.

7. Cuban-American National Foundation, *U.S. Radio Broadcasting to Cuba: Policy Implications* (Washington D.C.: Cuban-American National Foundation, 1982), p. 7; *Hearings and Markup*, p. 89.

8. Cuban-American National Foundation, *U.S. Radio Broadcasting to Cuba*, p. 22.

9. See U.S. Congress, House, Committee on Foreign Affairs, H. Rept. 98-284, 98th Cong., 1st sess., 1983, for discussion on House Resolution 2453.

of Radio Marti as a "cold war" station, a label which the Reagan Administration was trying hard to avoid.

The Administration protested the VOA idea vigorously, perhaps fearing that the importance and effects of Radio Marti would be lessened if the service were made subservient to the Voice of America. Secretary of State George P. Shultz wrote to Speaker of the House Thomas P. O'Neill, Jr. in August 1983, urging him to support Radio Marti and warning that

the . . . proposal to place Radio Broadcasting to Cuba under the VOA cannot be accepted. Such proposals offer no advantages, only serious disadvantages, for the United States and VOA. As mandated by its Charter, the VOA is to serve as a "window on America." Surrogate broadcasting is more properly the function of radio services like Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty — the models for Radio Broadcasting to Cuba.<sup>10</sup>

Despite the Secretary's influence, Congressional supporters of either an independent or a VOA-sponsored Radio Marti eventually realized that a compromise — or continued stalemate — was inevitable. House Resolution 2453, like the ill-fated bills which preceded it, floundered in 1983 because it established an entity independent of the VOA. After a two-year battle, the Senate bill that was passed by both Houses specified that the service was to be part of the Voice of America. The VOA's charter was amended accordingly.<sup>11</sup>

The supporters of Radio Marti were disappointed. Although the President would sign the bill, the final product was "not the bill the Administration had hoped for," according to a National Security Council spokesperson.<sup>12</sup> Representative Dante Fascell of Florida, one of the strongest proponents of the original proposal, lobbied for an independent service but recognized that a compromise was necessary "as a way of getting something," according to a staff member.<sup>13</sup>

## RESULTS

Yet with the filibusters, defeats and committee delays and hearings behind them, the supporters should be pleased with the compromise. The administration of Radio Marti, or the Cuban Service of the VOA, as it

10. Letter from George P. Shultz to Thomas P. O'Neill, 5 August 1983. A copy of the letter was sent by J. Edward Fox, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Legislative and Intergovernmental Affairs, to all representatives on 5 August 1983.

11. U.S. Congress, Senate, S.R. 602, 98th Cong., 1st sess., 1983.

12. Associated Press, "Radio Marti is Approved by Congress," *Washington Post*, 30 September 1983, p. A32.

13. Interview with Barbara Burriss, special assistant to Rep. Dante Fascell, 1 October 1983.

is now more appropriately called, was altered dramatically, but the philosophy and intent of the service remained basically unchanged. It is still to behave as a surrogate domestic Cuban station. It is the purpose and implications of the bill, however, that deserve closer scrutiny by both the public and the Congress.

While the organization differs significantly from the initial proposal, the content of the radio broadcasting to Cuba remains similar to that of the original RFE/RL model. Yet applying the European model to the situation in Cuba is not entirely appropriate, as the situation in Cuba differs from that in Europe in several very important respects. Nearly all, if not all, of the Caribbean islands can receive American commercial stations as an alternate source of at least international news; most of the Eastern bloc population is out of the range of Western commercial broadcasts. Nor do Americans have to worry about the threat of retaliation from Eastern Europe as they do in Latin America. The RFE/RL services are stationed thousands of miles from the continental United States and broadcast in shortwave frequencies not used by most Americans.

Of greater importance, however, is the "newness" of the Castro regime as compared to that in Russia. Castro enjoys greater legitimacy — and even popularity — among the Cuban population than do his Eastern European counterparts, because many Cubans still remember with hatred the Batista regime. And Castro has introduced some reforms into Cuban society. Radio Marti could backfire completely if Castro can convince the Cubans that the new radio station should be seen in the context of the American fascination with — and desire for control of — Cuba, in the spirit of the Ostend Manifesto, the Platt Amendment, the sugar quotas and the Bay of Pigs. Castro could use the broadcasting as an example to fan anti-American paranoia, never far below the surface, throughout Latin America and the Caribbean.

Professor William M. LeoGrande of American University, in testimony before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, emphasized the differences between the European RFE/RL audience and that of Radio Marti:

. . . Polish nationalism is anti-Soviet and serves to undermine a regime linked to the USSR, whereas Cuban nationalism is anti-U.S. and reinforces a regime in conflict with Washington.<sup>14</sup>

Whether or not Congress differentiated between the European and Caribbean realities, at least some positive changes were incorporated into the revised bill. Some of the most controversial points were eliminated or their potential effects minimized. While "radio wars" are still possible,

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14. House Committee on Foreign Affairs, *Hearings and Markup*, pp. 182-83.

the frequency allocation is of much less immediate concern than it was when it was announced that the independent Radio Marti, if approved, would broadcast on the same clear channel AM (medium wave) frequency as WHO in Des Moines, Iowa, a major source of news and weather for midwestern farmers. Farming associations, broadcasters and cornbelt politicians alike feared Cuban retaliation and interference, especially after Castro proved his ability to disrupt radio services across 32 states with his 500 kilowatt "superstations." The highest frequency allocation allowed in the United States is 50 kilowatts, and because of the unique and crowded nature of the AM spectrum, disrupting radio service is fairly easy and inexpensive.<sup>15</sup>

In the approved bill, the Cuban service of the VOA may operate on the same AM frequency as VOA, or broadcast on shortwave (more difficult to jam and a spectrum area of less commercial concern for U.S. broadcasters), or lease time from commercial stations. Radio Marti will be using the VOA facilities in Marathon, Florida.

S.R. 602 contains a provision by which owners of radio stations may apply to the Federal Communications Commission for monetary compensation if they are victimized by Cuban radio interference.<sup>16</sup> Opponents to this clause have maintained throughout the debates that Cuban retaliation is not related to Radio Marti broadcasts; indeed, Florida stations have been complaining of Cuban interference for years and Castro has walked out of international broadcasting conferences.<sup>17</sup> The House Committee on Energy and Commerce reported, however, that it "is very much concerned that the operation of Radio Marti could greatly exacerbate what is already a severe problem of interference for American Broadcasters."<sup>18</sup>

In placing Radio Marti under the Voice of America, Congress was shifting in the right direction in an attempt to prevent some of these problems; S.R. 602 can be seen as a form of damage limitation. Contrary to arguments in support of the Administration's proposal for an independent station, this option does not violate VOA's charter. The Congressional Research Service judged that "the charter is so general that it would never cover anything so specific as Radio Marti."<sup>19</sup>

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15. "Senate Panel Approves Plan for Radio Marti," *New York Times*, 10 September 1982; see also House Committee on Foreign Affairs, *Hearings and Markup*, pp. 7, 46.

16. U.S., Congress, Senate, S.R. 602, 98th Cong., 1st sess., 1983.

17. "Cuban Radio Invades the U.S.," *Business Week*, 21 September 1981, p. 42. In November 1981 Castro withdrew from the North American Regional Broadcasting Agreement and walked out of the International Telecommunications Union Administrative Conference on Medium Frequency Broadcasting in Region 2 (the Western Hemisphere).

18. U.S., Congress, House, H. Rept. 97-479, Part II, 97th Cong., 2d sess., 1982, p. 5.

19. Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 19.

## UNREALIZED POTENTIAL

The battle for radio broadcasting to Cuba has been won, but the battle for the hearts and minds of the people in the Caribbean and Latin American region as a whole, a more important goal in American foreign policy, has been neglected. Whether or not radio broadcasting is an important and legitimate function of government is no longer a subject of debate, as it was in the early days of VOA and RFE/RL. However, few lawmakers have taken this accepted truth to its logical conclusion: if U.S. broadcasting is good for Cuba, where Americans can have little hope of changing government policies and alliances, it should be even better for people in countries where public opinion plays more of a role than it does in Cuba.

Countries in Latin America still testing economic philosophies and political alliances are much more likely to be positively influenced by credible news reports than Cuba would be; many Cubans loyal to the Castro regime are likely to reject American broadcasts aimed exclusively at them as quickly as Americans reject the polemics of Radio Havana and Radio Moscow. While some argue that Radio Marti is not intended to influence policy but only to provide news to the Cubans, this humanitarian concern for the Cubans' access to information seems incongruous with the Reagan Administration's recent attempts to restrict the free flow of information within the U.S. government.

The revised frequency allocation and compensation provision, while important, still did not change the proposal sufficiently to take full advantage of what benefits the United States can achieve through government-sponsored radio broadcasting. Incorporating Radio Marti under the VOA achieved only cosmetic rather than substantive changes. Had the opponents of the Radio Marti proposal succeeded in having VOA's Spanish-language programs expanded throughout Latin America, many of the benefits which can be achieved by Radio Marti could have been realized in Cuba and expanded to include other areas.

Funding a broadcasting service aimed exclusively at Cuba is a worthwhile step only if one obtains gratification from irritating the Cuban dictator. It is a way of venting American frustration at the inability to contain Castro's influence — certainly less damaging to American credibility than another Bay of Pigs fiasco — but it remains a negative reaction rather than a positive initiative. It is wishful thinking to believe that broadcasting will topple Castro's regime, achieving what twenty years of economic sanctions have failed to do, and it is irresponsible to hope that the broadcasting will incite rebellions which would certainly be violently crushed. Questions still linger over the role of RFE in the Hungarian revolt of 1956. Nor

will radio broadcasting to Cuba curtail the Soviet Union's \$3.25 billion in annual subsidies which keep the Cuban regime functioning.<sup>20</sup>

Cuba certainly should be the target of an increased U.S. broadcasting effort. The era of believing that American democratic practices speak for themselves has been over for decades, judging from the hostility and misunderstanding the United States faces on many fronts. Yet the final Congressional resolution initiating Radio Marti should have placed more emphasis on providing positive publicity for the United States, through credible and objective reporting, rather than on telling Cuba's story, or the American interpretation of Cuba's story, to the Cubans.

In addition to the Caribbean Basin Initiative and the stationing of American military advisers in the region, radio broadcasting to Cuba has been considered one of the informal tools of diplomacy in an American President's hands. Yet it is rather difficult to envision any scenario in which a Cuban service such as Radio Marti could counter the communist influence about which President Reagan often warns. An expanded Voice of America service not limited solely to Cuba would reach those countries in which American public diplomacy might yet have some influence. While the VOA would not serve as a surrogate station for Cuba, except through its new exclusively Cuban service, it is more important that public diplomacy and radio broadcasting serve the broad interests of the United States.

By focusing attention and debate on the Cuban service, supporters of Radio Marti have unwittingly minimized the potential of an expanded Voice of America. Presently the Voice of America broadcasts only 84 hours a week to Latin America and the Caribbean, compared with 133 hours by Radio Moscow and 280 hours by Radio Havana.<sup>21</sup> Globally, over 80 countries compete for listeners among owners of an estimated 11.4 billion radios.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, "at present, the Soviets outspend the United States about seven to one in their broadcasting and information efforts around the world."<sup>23</sup> With such large stakes, an exclusively Cuban audience is needlessly small and specialized when a larger general Latin American audience could be reached for nearly the same expense.

The VOA is already considered a credible source throughout the region,

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20. U.S., Congress, House, Subcommittee on Inter-American Affairs, Committee on Foreign Affairs, *Impact of Cuban-Soviet Ties in the Western Hemisphere, Spring 1980 Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Inter-American Affairs*, 96th Cong., 2d sess., 1980, p. 98.

21. U.S. Information Agency, "Communist International Radio Broadcasting in 1981," *Research Memorandum*, 1 November 1982, p. 1; U.S., 97th Cong., 2d sess., 1982, p. 4.

22. David K. Willis, "When BBC Talks, the World Listens. Despite Occasional Pressure, British Shortwave Has Retained its Reputation for Honesty," *Boston Globe*, 14 September 1982, p. 2.

23. U.S., Congress, House, H. Rept. 97-479, Part 1, p. 4.

and it had a Cuban audience long before Radio Marti was ever proposed.<sup>24</sup> In fact, from 1962 to 1974, VOA operated "Cita con Cuba," a five-hour supplement to Cuba in addition to its regular Latin American service. According to the Cuban-American National Foundation, the VOA discontinued this program "in an effort to accommodate the Castro regime."<sup>25</sup> Representative Michael Barnes of Maryland, however, reported that the House Committee on Government Operations indicated "a lack of news to continue its operation. A lack of verifiable news within Cuba."<sup>26</sup>

An expanded VOA service to Latin America would certainly reach a wider audience and have the potential to influence a larger number of people than would the Cuban service; it is likely that the VOA could reach more Cubans as well. Castro would have more difficulty lashing out against general regional broadcasting since Radio Havana also broadcasts regionally and would have less incentive to interfere with its propagation. As a rule, he has not jammed or interfered with the VOA.

Considering this, Congress should have examined the potential of the VOA more closely and specified that objective reports of Castro's global adventurism be reported not only to Cuba, as in the Radio Marti plan, but to the entire region through increased VOA broadcasting instead. Such reports, if verifiable, certainly could be defined as international news and fall within the realm of VOA's general programming. Cuba would still have an alternative news source on international developments, and world public opinion might have a more sobering effect on the Cuban dictator than any domestic opposition.

The Voice of America's new Cuban service needs to be re-examined, but it is likely to continue wasting money and effort — in lost potential — for years, unless it is countered with Cuban retaliation. Radio Marti may incite the long-feared radio wars, which could affect over two hundred stations across 32 states, according to the Congressional Budget Office.<sup>27</sup> If the compensation to these broadcasters approaches CBO's estimated \$40 million, then perhaps taxpayers will realize the problems associated with radio broadcasting to Cuba, although there will be some who will point to Castro's jamming and interference as proof of Radio Marti's success.<sup>28</sup> In the event of a radio war, commercial stations would certainly lobby against continuation of the U.S. government channel.

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24. Cuban-American National Foundation, *U.S. Radio Broadcasting to Cuba*, p. 12.

25. *Ibid.* p. 11.

26. U.S., Congress, House, Committee on Foreign Affairs, *Hearings and Markup*, p.23.

27. Margot Hornblower, "Caribbean Basin Plan, Radio Marti Supported," *Washington Post*, 10 September 1982.

28. U.S., Congress, Senate, S. Rept. 97-544, 97th Cong., 3d sess., 1982, p. 17.

In this case, Castro's vengeance might serve as a stroke of luck. In re-examining the motivations for radio broadcasting to Cuba, perhaps more lawmakers might recognize that radio broadcasting is a tool which is more appropriately applied to preventing an unfriendly regime from coming to power than it is to deposing an entrenched communist dictatorship. Radio Marti can succeed in neither of these tasks, while an expanded Voice of America Latin American service might succeed in winning hearts and minds throughout Latin America.