# **RFE/RL**

## **CELEBRATING 60 YEARS OF RFE**

### WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION: JEFFREY GEDMIN, PRESIDENT, RFE

### REMARKS BY WALTER ISAACSON, CHAIRMAN, BROADCASTING BOARD OF GOVERNORS, PRESIDENT/CEO, ASPEN INSTITUTE

### TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 28, 2010 6:30 P.M. WASHINGTON, D.C.

Transcript by Federal News Service Washington, D.C. JEFFREY GEDMIN: We are blessed and privileged to have an individual give remarks tonight who knows a lot about journalism and a lot about broadcasting and a lot about RFERL. He is an American phenomenon. He is a former chairman of CNN. He is a former editor of TIME Magazine. He is the president and CEO of the Aspen Institute.

He is a biographer of books on Ben Franklin and Einstein, and a new one coming out on Steve Jobs. And he is - I'd like to say, Walter, now most important, the chairman of the BBG: the Broadcasting Board of Governors. And I think it's a great thing, Walter, that you've taken time to join us tonight to share some thoughts about RFERL 60 years down the road. And we hope, also, about broadcasting in general. So welcome. And thank you very much. (Applause.)

WALTER ISAACSON: Thank you very much, Jeff. Some of you don't know that Jeff and I were partners, along with Tom Korologos and his wife, at the Aspen Institute when Jeff ran Aspen-Berlin and I was running Aspen-U.S. And so it's great to be partners with you still, Jeff.

And it's also good to see so many people here. Ross, congratulations on your book and everything else. It was really good that Ross and Enders were running Radio Liberty and Radio Free Europe when the Wall came down.

Those of us who are amateur historians always want to know how much to ascribe the credit to Ronald Reagan, to the pope or whatever. But we now know the two people who really do deserve the credit - (laughter) - for the fall of the Berlin Wall. And it's a great honor to have them here with us.

It's also an honor for me to be here to celebrate this wonderful event tonight: the 60th anniversary of Radio Free Europe. And in doing so, it gives you the opportunity to reflect back on the history of why it was there, to reflect back on why it was founded 60 years ago and to recall that burst of creativity in the late 1940s when Democrats and Republicans, wise men, and wise women of both parties and all political stripes rose above their partisan differences and created a group of organizations knowing that we were about to be in engaged in a really serious global struggle: a struggle against the spread of Soviet-backed Communism.

They set up – they knew it was partly a military struggle. So they set up NATO. They knew it was partly an economic struggle. So they set up everything from the Bretton Woods Institutions like the World Bank and the IMF to the Marshall Plan. But most of all, they knew it was a struggle for the values, for the hearts and for the minds of the people of this world. And they established Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty. The role of these institutions can, in some ways, be seen by the fact that the Cold War ended up being a struggle more for the hearts and minds than being a war that ended with a bang.

In fact, the role of RFE and Radio Liberty changed fundamentally in 1989 when the Cold War ended – not with a bang, but with, sort of, an exaltation of the concept of freedom. And it did so not because we created more intermediate-range nuclear missiles than the Russians did or because we had the Fulda Gap better lined with tanks than they did. It happened because our ideas and our values triumphed. And they triumphed because the free flow of information and the free flow of ideas is what helped win a war of that sort.

I was in Czechoslovakia – what was then known as Czechoslovakia – when that happened. Early on in the late summer of 1989 when things were crumbling, in the early fall of 1989, I started off in Bratislava. Some of you may know the Forum Hotel there, which, back then, was the one place that foreign broadcasts were brought in. It had the satellite dish.

Now, I remember one afternoon, the people who worked in the hotel – the maid came to me and said, do you mind if we use your room in the afternoon? Because kids like to come – the students like to come in and they like to hear the music videos. They like to listen. And this one of the few places – I said, of course, that'd be great.

And I came home early that afternoon. I came back to the hotel early that afternoon so I could maybe see some of the students. But they weren't watching MTV. And they weren't watching Eurochannel's music videos. They were watching CNN, and what was happening in Gdansk shipyards that August and September period. And I realized that in an age of satellites and in an age of the flow of information, those regimes that required the repression of information were going to lose.

Later that week, I went to Prague. It was right when Vaclav Havel was being let out of prison. I was a journalist. I was working for TIME Magazine. So I was very lucky. As journalists, as you know – you get a view of history and you get to watch it. And our stringer in Prague, a guy named Michael Donaff (sp), who was friends of Havel's family, he said, let's go to this apartment. He'll talk to us. It's a beautiful apartment, as some of you may know, overlooking the Vltava River.

I went there. I was sitting there on the couch, stunned that this man, you know, had just been let out of prison, who was one of my heroes. And he was talking about the free flow of information, Radio Free Europe, the way ideas had come across.

And I do remember, too, that the doorbell rang. And nobody got up to answer it. So I got up and I opened the door and it was Dubček. Now, Dubček had hardly met Havel. But he had come from Bratislava by train to pay his respects.

And I remember thinking then that in the end, these two generations of values, the values of Dubček coming out of the Cold War and the values of Havel that were being expressed in 1989 and the Velvet Revolutions all the way to the present were the type of values that would inevitably win in this great struggle in this world.

We're going to Prague: Enders, Victor, myself, the rest of the BBG, in, what, two weeks? And thanks to Jeff, we've arranged to have a meeting with Havel. He's known as the spiritual father of Radio Free Europe. Because of him, Radio Free Europe is in Prague. He was the one who asked that it be moved there. And we will get the chance to thank him for all he stood for.

But we're also going to meet with another – with a Nobel Prize winner, Shirin Ebadi, the human-rights lawyer. And that will remind us, I hope, that we're engaged again in a new global

struggle. We're engaged in a global struggle that's no less difficult and no less pressing than the struggle that the founders of Radio Free Europe were part of 60 years ago; a new struggle against repression and intolerance.

The historical marker for that struggle was September 11, 2001. And the challenge for us is to respond with the innovation and the creativity to this new global challenge with that same innovation and creativity that the people in the late 1940s responded to the advent of the Cold War.

In this new struggle, just like in the old one, one of the most important arrows in our quiver will be the power of a free press in promoting democracy and freedom. That has been the motivating force, of course, of my 30 years in journalism. It has been the core mission of Radio Free Europe in 60 years of its glorious history. And, indeed, it's been the core mission of U.S. international broadcasting as a whole since the debut of Voice of America almost 70 years ago.

But we need to be as innovative and as creative as the founders of RFE were. This is particularly true in a digital age, an age that offers not only new channels to disseminate our journalism but the ability and, indeed, the imperative, the duty to not only disseminate journalism but to interact, to engage; to engage with people to share, to set up peer-to-peer networks rather than merely to hand down the news.

Because the hallmarks of digital media are that they are networked, that they can be usergenerated. They can be collaborative. They can be social. They encourage engagement and discourse. They are interactive and they are peer to peer. And that's why they're so good for us. They're so good for what we're fighting for because this is really cool and it's great for our side.

If you had asked the founders of Radio Free Europe 60 years ago in their wildest dreams to imagine the best possible weapon that they could have in the war of ideas, if they were truly visionary, they might have imagined the Internet.

It's the best thing you can imagine for what they were trying to do, and for what we will try to do in this current new struggle that we're engaged in. It's a network that respects no borders, it's harder to jam than most broadcasts and it encourages engagement and interactivity, which is one of the strengths we have in this struggle.

In their wildest dreams, they may have even thought of Wikipedias – collaborativelygenerated sites of information created in dozens of languages. They may have thought of SMS messages and texts that could go to mobile devices anywhere in the world. They may have thought of Facebook and Foursquare and blogs and proxy servers.

I doubt they would have been that visionary. But in respect to the vision they did have, we must seize the opportunity to use these new tools, just as they seized the opportunity 60 years ago to struggle in the Cold War using the new tools of broadcast media.

When I was in Kashgar on another trip in the late 1990s, I saw the power of the Internet in this regard. Kashgar, as you know, is right across the Gobi desert from the rest of China – in a

tiny café - in a street corner there I walked in with a couple people. We were on a TIME Magazine tour.

And I saw four kids – four students sitting around a computer. I asked what they were doing. They said they were on the Internet. And I said, oh wow, let me try something. He was speaking Uyghur – I don't know if anybody here is from [Radio Free Asia's] Uyghur-language service.

But through the translator, they said they were on the Internet. And I said, let me try something. And I typed in Time.com. Of course, it was blocked. I typed in CNN.com, of course, it was blocked. One of the kids elbowed me aside and typed. Boom, CNN pops up. Typed. Boom, TIME pops up.

I said, what did you do? He said, oh, we know how to go through proxy servers in Hong Kong that the centers are clueless about. (Laughter.) That is what I saw at Radio Free Asia. That's what I see in Radio Free Europe. That's what I see in Voice of America – is our ability to stay a step ahead of those who would repress the free flow of information.

I think all of our broadcasts and all of our news entities are adopting very well to this wondrous, new, information ecosystem. RFE's Persian service, known in Iran as Radio Farda, has a popular Facebook page that uses and engages in social media and pushes the border of what can happen in that heavily-censored society.

VOA's Persian News Network has produced groundbreaking coverage of events in the aftermath of last year's election fallout. And to do so, they relied quite a bit on uploaded, user-generated content. Not just user-generated content that was put on automatically like in some places, but that was verified by good journalists who knew what they were doing, and helped curate a new form of journalism in which user-generated content and great journalistic insights and credibility are wedded together.

So at the BBG, we're taking a careful look at this connective media and drawing upon the experiences and expertise of industry leaders around the country. I was with Sheryl Sandberg last night in New York, who is the chief operating officer of Facebook. Maybe after the movie and the donations, she'll be CEO – (laughter) – and Mark Zuckerberg will go onto greater things.

And she's agreed to participate at one of the idea labs that we're doing. We're going to do a series of idea labs on, what would you do if you were Facebook and you were trying to create a media the way the people 60 years ago created Radio for Europe?

Our starting point is to look at case studies of what worked. And also, to be cold-eyed about case studies that didn't quite work. We can talk about Twitter in Iran but we can also talk about the limits of Twitter in Iran. And we have to see what works and what doesn't work.

We have to be able to build online communities with our audience that actively engage them on issues of mutual concern and interest. In some ways, this may be yet another paradigm shift in U.S. international broadcasting, because not only will we be disseminating news, handing it down or broadcasting it, we will be sharing news.

We will facilitate the conversations that don't just disseminate but that share information, news and ideas. And it will be a very tricky mix that our partners in the commercial world have not yet mastered, which is how to merge great journalism with, also, the sharing of communities and peer-to-peer sharing of information.

We will have to do that by creating global communities on a limitless range of topics – some that are traditional to the things we cover, such as the role of women or the realms of religious discourse or the news of the day or what happened in Afghanistan or the debates over world affairs – but also on all sorts of other topics of interest to people, ranging from genetically modified seed corn and whether it works to breast cancer and what's the best way to treat it. With experts in America and experts around the world facilitated in dialogues by our journalists, they can share information in multiple languages with interest groups around the world, handing out the news but also creating an interactive discourse.

So we will not only be broadcasters, but facilitators of sharing networks of information, and we will have to marry our role of journalists to this new age so that we can make sure that this is a way for people to have accurate and credible information, something that is not at the moment the strong suit of the Internet.

In addition, I think we can create – and Enders has been thinking through this idea as well – a great virtual global news service that can provide reliable reporting for every medium, for every forum, in every channel, including those created by us but also channels and information services created by our audience, by our listeners, by various people around the world who want to do blogs, who want to do their own feeds. But they also want to know what really happened. And our news service can provide them with the information that they can disseminate in their own social networks.

Third, I think we have to be at the forefront of translation – translation technology, but also crowd-source translation, marrying both the new technologies that are coming down as well as the social networks and collaborative translations, and do it in a way that meets our journalistic standards and credibility so people can trust that they are having a dialogue across language barriers and getting it right.

And fourth, we must be at the vanguard of the fight for Internet freedom. Secretary Clinton gave a really good speech on this – here at the Newseum, I think. She didn't have to come up to this floor; I think she had a lower floor than you got, Jeff. (Laughter.) But it was a really good speech on balancing Internet freedom with the security.

But for those of us who are engaged in this, we know where we stand in the fight for Internet freedom. Wherever there is a firewall, it's our duty to storm it, to denounce it and to circumvent it. Wherever there is repression of the free exchange of ideas, it's our duty to walk in Havel's footsteps and undermine such repression. We will reaffirm our traditional role of delivering credible reporting on radio and TV, and now the Internet, even as we build up this new role of catalyzing social networks and conversations that are informed and driven by the credible content of our journalism. You can already see how our journalists are using some of these tools to create communities based on shared values.

Take the women in Africa, for example. They've always been networked. The women in Africa are connected by their common interests, but now, with mobile phones and mobile devices, they can broaden and extend that connectedness. What matters to their daily lives includes not only news, but information on health, maternal care, related subjects, economics, market conditions. They not only seek this information for themselves, but to share it within their communities, and we should be there providing it to them.

This summer, Radio Free Asia sent a team down the Mekong Delta to chronicle the ecological toil that the dams have placed – China's dams have placed – on that region. This was an ambitious and dangerous journalistic effort. It reported in daily reports and stunning multimedia segments over the course of 66 days, and it won the first prize for outstanding online reporting on the environment from the Society of Environmental Journalists.

And not long after the Haiti earthquake, Voice of America Creole increased its broadcast hours and also set up helplines, helped families reunite, had call-in shows. They brought 5,000 food coupons to camps, and after hearing complaints on various call-in shows, NGOs brought in more material. It was a way of sharing information to affect people's lives directly.

But let me reemphasize, again, that the fundamental BBG mission, through all of this change, remains exactly the same. It's fostering freedom through credible journalism. It's just that simple. As we pursue the passion the opportunities of this new digital age provide us with, we'll strengthen our traditional role to providing news and information through channels from shortwave radio to FM to AM to TV, because the importance of our endeavors stands as one of the cardinal lessons of the 60 years since RFE was founded – the years of the Cold War.

It was a war driven by ideology where the primary battles where not in the Fulda Gap, as I said, the primary battles were in the minds of the people. In a world in which Soviet disinformation was spread aggressively, U.S. international broadcasting responded. They responded strongly but simply, with accurate and credible news and information. It was a single idea behind these broadcasts, it was a simple conviction that people, no matter their culture or their country, will always incline towards truth over falsehood; they will always choose freedom over any forms of repression or tyranny over the minds of men.

It's sometimes said that our international broadcasting is in a difficult position because by law and by tradition it's tasked with two separate missions that might conflict: first of all, covering the news with the highest journalistic standards and secondly, being a part of America's public diplomacy by accurately conveying its policies and values to the world.

Let me say to you, my fellow journalists, that I will stress and we will stress the primacy of the first of these missions, our mission of being credible journalists, because it is the best – in

fact, it's the only way to carry out the second mission. You can't do it unless you're credible and telling the truth, and in the end, the truth is on our side. Credibility is the key to all that we do.

One case in point. A couple of years ago a woman was – called a woman in the media – was stoned to death in the Somali port city. Initial reports from the Islamists who announced it said that she was 23 and that she had committed adultery. That was information given to the media – until the VOA Somalia service investigated. The alleged criminal turned out to be a 13-year-old girl who had been raped. Getting the facts in Somalia and other conflict zones is clearly crucial. And that's the truth that will help us win in this great global struggle.

But the struggle is going to be hard. The enemies of freedom, whether it's al-Qaida or the Taliban or authoritarian regimes around the world, they like their social media too. They get it, they've been busy spreading in recent years, modernizing their own methods of repressing their people, curbing the growth of civil society. In Pakistan, the Taliban perfects its' hate radio, while next door in Afghanistan, militants are proficient in spreading dissident information about NATO operations through text messages on mobile phones.

In Iraq, insurgents disseminate jihadist videos that are viewed on cell phones by people in the region. China, Iran and other countries block democratic impulses using their later technologies, and Beijing has deployed armies of cyber militias to go after their country's cyber dissidents.

The BBG is at the forefront of combatting this. Through constant innovation and technical evolution, our engineers are opening up the Internet gateway for audiences in China and Iran. When we were touring the Cohen building a week or two ago, that was in some ways the most interesting moment of the tour – watching the five or six people in that group that are sitting there breaking the firewalls, getting people through.

And our – what are called the surrogates, such as Radio Free Europe and Radio Free Asia, they operate in closed societies, but they provide millions of citizens with the independent, reliable news that those governments are trying to suppress.

Look at the Af-Pak border. A female listener from the Swat Valley was critical of Pakistan's state and the private media that covers the – the coverage of the floods. She described the media as Punjab-biased, and it was ignoring the floods in her region. She said it was only VOA's Deewa Radio that informed them on the situations of their province.

All over Afghan and Pakistan, Voice of America and Radio Free Europe are achieving great successes. RFE's very popular Radio Azadi is the leading source of news in Afghanistan, and it hosted, as all of you know, in August [2009], the first-ever presidential debate to feature an incumbent in Afghanistan's history. When Jeff asked me to speak here, I asked who spoke last year and he said, Richard Holbrooke, so I almost said, no, I'm not sure I want to follow in Holbrooke's outsized footsteps – (laughter) – but I did notice how we stressed the role of RFE and VOA in the struggle in Afghanistan.

We can't allow ourselves to be out-communicated by our enemies. There's that Freedom House report that reveals that today's autocratic leaders are investing billions of dollars in media resources to influence the global opinion.

You've got Russia Today, Iran's Press TV, Venezuela's TeleSUR, and of course, China is launching an international broadcasting 24-hour news channel with correspondents around the world – spent – reportedly set aside six (billion dollars) to \$10 billion – we've to go to Capitol Hill with that number – to expand their overseas media operations.

As we talk about the future of international broadcasting, there's a temptation for some external observers to oversimplify and to emphasize one platform over the other. So let me be clear: Those of us on the new BBG are customer-oriented, but we're platform-neutral. We keep abreast of the latest technologies, but at the same time, we love the fact that the Afghans use their radios.

We love the fact that TV and radio is where we need to be, and we love the fact that all of it works together if we create a great reliable, credible global news service on all platforms disseminating information to all communities and all communities of interest around the world.

As part of thinking through this future, at our last BBG meeting we began a year-long comprehensive strategic review. We said, we have to do it right, along with these listening and idea sessions on new media. Part of that will be included – our strategy for intertwining new and old media to invite an engagement media, an engagement media that can be many people involved in a rich dialogue.

Before I close, I do want to acknowledge, as Jeff did, the thousands of courageous and tireless journalists who worked for U.S. international broadcasting. Over my years in journalism, I've always marveled at the people on the frontlines, the people who are out there every day trying to get the story. Each day, they help demonstrate to the world that the U.S. remains committed to the free flow of information, and they risk a great deal in doing that.

And as I've said, so much has changed in the world, so much has changed in technology, so much has changed that we'll have to continue to adapt to, but some things remain the same: America's voice must be heard, and that voice must be credible. It must always speak the truth. As William Harland Hale – I don't know if Alan Heil is here, is he? I saw him – I read his book, and it's when I first read this quote, but it's something all of you must know by heart, the very first quote, the very first sentence of the very first Voice of America radio broadcast in 1942: "The news may be good, the news may be bad, but we shall tell you the truth."

We're going to win this struggle because it defines who we are as a nation, the ability to tell the truth and to believe that the free flow of information will promote the forces of tolerance and democracy. My old friend Benjamin Franklin, when he was trying to help create this nation, one of the first things he did was create a postal service. He wanted the free flow of information up and down the colonies so that we could unite.

And the first thing he did when he was sent to Paris to get France in on our side in the revolution was he built a printing press, and he printed all of the documents, such as the Declaration, coming out of America, because he knew it was a battle for the hearts and minds of those who believed in liberty and believed in freedom. And while he was doing that, while our Constitution was being written, on the corners of Philadelphia, Thomas Paine and countless other pamphleteers were engaging in discourse and the free flow of ideas and information.

In this new, digital age in which economies are driven by information, the future belongs to those societies that thrive on the free flow of information rather than those that threaten it. That's who we are as a nation and that's why we'll triumph, again, just as we did in the Cold War, thanks to the vision and the values of the people who started Radio Free Europe 60 years ago and the work of people like yourself in this room who keep that vision and those values alive today. Happy anniversary. (Applause.)

(END)