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Charles (Chas) W. Freeman in Conversation with Hadi Gharabaghi and Bret Vukoder

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Interview Information

Charles (Chas) W. Freeman Jr.'s career in foreign service and policy is among the most prolific and diverse. Currently a senior fellow at Brown University's Watson Institute, Freeman's work spans the State Department, executive branch, and Department of Defense, taking on such roles as President of the Middle East Policy Council (1997–2009), Ambassador to Saudi Arabia at the peak of the Gulf War (1989–1992), and the principal interpreter (1971–1974) for President Nixon when US relations with China began to open up. In our conversation, however, we primarily focus on the two positions he held with USIA, serving as a cultural affairs officer in south India (1966–1968) and Director of Program Coordination and Development (1978). These two positions grant Freeman a unique understanding of both the on-the-ground dynamics of fieldwork and the complex variables involved with cultivating policy and agency methodologies. Furthermore, the unique breadth of Freeman's experience—both in and outside of USIA—provides rich insights and context for how motion pictures fit within the wider systems of Cold War politics and power.

Freeman's First Position with USIA/USIS As a Cultural Affairs Officer in South India (1966–1968)

Hadi Gharabaghi: Please tell us about your career as a USIS officer.

Chas Freeman: I was sent to south India, where I attempted to learn Tamil [in the early 1960s]. I was rotated through American consulate generals, different sections, including the United States Information Service section—USIS. I had a series of disagreements with the American ambassador in Delhi, Chester Bowles, who concluded that I was not incompetent but a troublesome fellow in every department except public speaking outreach to youth in universities and the defense of American policy in Indochina—with which I violently disagreed but was an effective advocate for. Bowles took advantage of my absence from India—[while I was] briefly on rest and recuperation in Rangoon, Hong Kong, and Bangkok—to reassign me to USIS, thus removing me from the positions in which I had made trouble for him.

That was very kind. I was twenty-three years old. Suddenly I had a [multimillion-dollar] budget and several hundred people working for me, and I had to learn how to manage, which is one of the great skills that USIS officers had. I always thought that the difference between people who worked in the mainstream State Department part of the foreign service and USIS was simply this: if given six weeks to do it, the State Department people could not organize a group of three men in the men's room, [whereas] USIS would get precisely there on time but would have forgotten why they were doing it.

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So this was an essentially two-year situation [in] which I ran seminars in "American civilization"—I actually believed there was such a thing back then—in American universities. Part of which, to get to your subject, was showing films where they were available. I also did other activities like staging musical and dance performances, speaking quite actively in defense of US foreign policy. As it turned out, when I had been asked by the University of Andhra Pradesh at Guntur to come and speak in defense of the Vietnam War, I had a crisis of conscience. I did not believe in that. I was involved in the initial stage of the teach-in movement at Harvard before I went into foreign service. So I thought I had three choices. I could claim my mother had just died or I was sick or something, and duck the issue, but that would simply postpone it—aside from being dishonest. Or I could quit on the grounds that I could not perform that duty, which was one of the duties that had sent me to India. I had taken Uncle Sam's nickel, so that was expected. Or I could act as an advocate and do it, and I decided on the latter. It turned out that I was the only officer in the entire mission of many hundred people who had even accepted such an invitation. Everyone had found an excuse. So I got quite good at defending a policy I disagreed with. [Laughter]

Fast forward, a major part of my career was involved not with India but with China, then later with the Arab world. And to give a little bit of background before bringing it to the second encounter with USIA, [in my third year at Harvard Law School,] I was asked to teach a seminar on negotiating with the Chinese. I had faculty status while I was a third-year student and wrote much of what became the Taiwan Relations Act while I was at Harvard. I returned to Washington and had an interesting time dealing with Taiwan. The head of the Bureau of Public Affairs, Hodding Carter—whose wife was Betty Werlein, the champion of human rights—asked me if I would come and run the Office of Public Programs, which was the main speaker's bureau for the Department of State. Then I got a job as the director of plans and management, which, remarkably, involved the restructuring of the bureaus and the resources to do it.

Freeman's Second Job with USIA As the Director of Program Coordination and Development (1978)

John Reinhardt, who was the head of USIA, and Charlie Bray, who was his deputy, were very dissatisfied with the way in which programs and program materials were generated by the agency. They felt they were centrally directed and top-down. They wanted to make it bottom-up and have the people in the field decide what would best suit their communication purposes locally. So I was invited over to USIA to become director of program coordination and development, which was the main strategizing element within the agency.

I should add that my boss was Alan Carter. He was a highly regarded theoretician of communication within the agency. He called me into his office and said: “I have this theory, and the theory is that the field should direct the production, and Washington headquarters should be responsive to the field. Rather than giving them orders, we should let them order us around.” I said, “Well, that sounds very sensible to me. How do you propose to implement it?” He said: “I have no idea. That’s up to you.” So I spent seven months at USIA. The tour was brought short by US–China normalization, when I was called back by Secretary [of State] Vance in December of 1978. What I was doing there was revolutionary—and by the way, it worked. So I walked the corridors there, keeping my back to the wall since everybody was probably out to get me. Not only was I an outsider, I was turning everything upside down.

In this context, what were the products we were coordinating? First of all, there were speaker programs, people who would go abroad to express their views, which in those days were not constrained by political correctness or political polarization. We took great pride in presenting alternative views and demonstrating, thereby, the freedom of speech which then existed in the US—doesn’t really exist much anymore. We mounted exhibitions, photo and art exhibitions. We programmed the performing arts, dance, music, showing off American higher culture—and sometimes lower culture—and film.

Views on Motion Pictures while Serving As Director of Program Coordination and Development

"The film division in USIA was well known for being independent and cantankerous. They regarded themselves as artists who would brook no interference by the philistines elsewhere in the organization. A great deal of their work, of course, was collaborative with independent filmmakers. I thought those filmmakers to be mainly in the United States, but I have come to understand that they were, in fact, around the world."

So the film division in USIA was well known for being independent and cantankerous. They regarded themselves as artists who would brook no interference by the philistines elsewhere in the organization. A great deal of their work, of course, was collaborative with independent filmmakers. I thought those filmmakers to be mainly in the United States, but I have come to understand that they were, in fact, around the world. That is very interesting—the role of USIS giving some of the postwar European [film] directors, in particular, their initial start. So, what were the films? The films tended to cluster around different themes. One of them was the merits of democracy, as opposed to the Stalinist system that the Soviet Union had and was trying to export. I remember a particularly good film about Congressman [Richard T.] Hanna running for office in California, which showed everything from the grassroots organization of the campaign up to the denouement, which concluded with his election. There were other films that were more artistic and less topical.

What happened under the new programming system, before I fled the scene, was interesting. People had a hard time adjusting to it. In the USIA system, every year the country public affairs officer would file a “country plan.” Suddenly, these became very consequential. What we did was to take all country plans, aggregate them, estimate the demand for particular kinds of product, and then turn, or commission, the productions of those products over. That was a grave intrusion on

the independence of film people, who had been accustomed to doing whatever the hell they wanted and had very little contact with what was going on—where the rubber met the road overseas.

Anyway, so this is the background—my experience in the field as a program officer and my previous experience as the coordinator for USIA. I'm not sure how much all that bears on your research, except I expect before USIA was euthanized in the 1990s—which I deeply regret—the theory was now that Fox News was providing "fair and balanced" coverage of everything and available globally, there was no need for a government viewpoint or a societal viewpoint independent of the government, which USIA attempted to provide. So I think it was a mistake to get rid of this vehicle for propagating American views about things and explaining the realities of America, which were shockingly ill understood. There were stereotypes that were useful to puncture, and I saw that as a prime function of what I was doing. Not so much to try in a short period to give people a rollout on all of American history but to put enough on the table—or on the screen—to shake people up a bit and force them to perhaps think and even do a bit of reading that would change their mind.

Bret Vukoder: We are coming from the position of film and media studies, of course, in which USIA is incredibly invisible—in terms of its history, in terms of its massive corpus. So you are offering us rich context that helps us film and media scholars contextualize the way these films operated, the way they circulated and functioned within culture. That's incredibly valuable. When Hadi and I came to the archive, we did not quite know what paradigms, what historiographies should apply. We were just neck deep in the archive, trying to make sense of it all. So, any on-the-ground details, any policy details, or any cultural details regarding the agency itself really enliven and animate so much of what we've read within the archives and what we've watched within the films. So maybe we can begin our questions about your role as a cultural affairs officer. You already gave us some great details, but what did your day-to-day look like, especially in terms of moving images, film?

CF: I should expand on some of what I said. Oddly enough, USIA brought in a museum curator from West Virginia named John Hoare Kerr. So Mr. Kerr, who was my boss, was ingenious in one peculiar way. When he arrived in Chennai—then it was Madras—he instantly got a doctor to certify that for health reasons, he had to spend a day at the beach. So he wasn't in the office. His portfolio fell largely to me. So I was doing more than purely what I would've done. And part of what I did, part of what the USIS operation did, was publish weekly newspapers in the regional languages. This was a large operation, and it was during the beginning of the agricultural revolution—which was sponsored by the Ford Foundation, which brought new varieties of rice to the Tanjore area and new kinds of wheat to Punjab in the north. So there was plenty of money to employ a large Indian staff and plenty of money to carry out programs. At one point—I was not involved in this—some of the local Indian employees had been taking films out to villages and showing them on things like bedsheets, to the delight of people in the villages. I should add, Chennai is one of the great centers of film production in India. Everybody knows about Bollywood, but this is Tollywood, I think. There was a huge production of Tamil and Telugu [language] films being done there. So all the films were there, and this was one of the activities that was carried out. The university programs included a Center for American Studies at Osmania University in Hyderabad, which has emerged as another center of digital innovation. We had three reading rooms in the region outside Chennai—one was in Bangalore, one was in Kochi—I think—and one was in Hyderabad. These were libraries that had periodicals, as well as books, both didactic and fictional. They were also programming centers where there was an American resident. That person would convene gatherings in the evening, bring speakers, whether they were Fulbrighters in India or local people, and have a seminar on a subject

of interest for the community. This was a very active program, but much of it was shut down later by Indira Gandhi, who was quite anti-American in many respects and not well handled by us, diplomatically. In any event, India underwent two phenomena that were important at the time. One was a kind of political breakdown, where the monopoly of the Congress Party eroded—and in the case of the south, disappeared—in the 1967 election. The second was famine. The agricultural system collapsed, and India was much more dependent on a sealift of wheat from the United States.

BV: I've seen some of the numbers from the 1950s and 1960s, in terms of USIA personnel in India, the budget. Was the attention given to India exclusively a function of its massive population, or were there other political concerns that led USIA to allot many of its resources to India?

CF: I think the interest varied from time to time. There is this rhetorical, though not very practical, point of resonance between India and the United States. India is often described as the world's largest democracy. So that tied in nicely with the American ideological arguments during the Cold War. India was and remains committed to non-alignment and was particularly dogmatic about it during [the major world events of the late 1960s]. John Foster Dulles, whom Nehru once famously [called] "dull, duller, Dulles" [laughter], was convinced India was an immoral country because it would not choose sides. And I suppose part of our effort was meant to wear down the Indians and encourage them to take sides, in which case it failed.

Sourcing Films, Working with Filmmakers, and Engaging the Local Community

BV: Earlier you mentioned that in 1978, you shifted to a more bottom-up approach. Before that, the USIA employed a more top-down approach. In a practical sense, during your time in India, what did that mean in terms of your relationship with local leaders, local cultural elites, in terms of programming, in terms of the film culture? Was there a lot of interactivity, communication, and partnerships with many local entities?

CF: No, there were not. It was not an intimate relationship in the film area at all. But to answer the beginning of your question, which probably was ten questions [laughter], basically we had a catalogue of films, and we could order films. The catalogue had interesting items in it that other people in India didn't think were terribly relevant, but I thought very relevant.

For example, there were films on the development process in South Korea. South Korea is one of the most remarkable success stories on the planet. This was a country, in the 1950s, [that] was devastated by war and had a per capita income of about $50 per year. South Korea came from nowhere. It is now a full member of the OECD [Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development], 86 percent of high school graduates go on to university, it has the highest level of intellectual achievement, it is one of the great innovators, and its culture—like K-pop—is taking over the world. So I thought what was happening in South Korea was really interesting, in wonderful contrast with order in India, which was a sort of Fabian socialism with Soviet characteristics. That was Nehru and company—the British notion of socialism. It wasn't terribly successful. So I think South Korea was interesting. That was an interesting example of what I found in the catalogue.

There were other propaganda items on behalf of other American client states—stuff about Taiwan, for example, which was of personal interest to me, but I thought it was irrelevant to Indian audiences. So we had the power to order items that were already produced. We could make suggestions about what we wanted to have produced, but the chances it would be were rather poor.

That's probably the result of two things. First, the normal contempt of headquarters for the field's suggestions, which is a trouble in every organization. And second, the very insistent independence of the film division, which didn't really want to take any suggestions from anybody. So no, we did not have partnership with the local film studios, which I think probably was a mistake. By the late '60s, when [I was in India], the early phase of USIA international collaboration in film had largely passed. The Marshall Plan was the incubator for that, and it had receded into the past. And USIA was very dependent on Hollywood and filmmakers who were aspiring to be in Hollywood but were independent.

HG: If I may follow up on that, when you say "film division," are we talking about certain offices within the United States?

CF: We are talking about film people within USIA. I don't remember what the name of the office was. There was a section of USIA that made films, commissioned films, or collaborated on films. Now, this is another problem, of course. Any system that is trying to use American media to communicate with a foreign audience with a very different cultural background has to cross a whole series of hurdles. First, there is the cultural bias of the filmmaker in the United States. I saw a terrible example of this. As you know, I was the ambassador to Saudi Arabia during the Gulf War. The CIA produced a film about Saddam Hussein, which they thought would turn people against him. I saw it before it was to be used in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere in the Arab world and wrote an angry message to the agency saying if this is shown anywhere in the Arab or Islamic world, it will be totally counterproductive. If you show it to the European audiences who are imbued with Islamophobia, they will like it because it shows Saddam Hussein praying, ostensibly toward Mecca. Actually, he was a little bit confused about where Mecca was. But he was riding on a white horse, heroically [signifying] the counter to the crusade, I assume. It looked like the conquest of Spain or something like that. [Laughter]

HG: Do you remember the title of the film?

CF: I don't remember it. It was awful! It was so awful. I banned it from any showing in Saudi Arabia, even to Americans. Just terrible. So this is an example. As I vaguely remember, CIA went to Hollywood and said we want a film maligning and demeaning Saddam Hussein. Hollywood is not exactly full of people who are sympathetic to Islam or even know a damn thing about it. They produced something that looked like some Israeli fantasy, which was just totally inappropriate.

So this is the first hurdle. What about the cultural myopia of the filmmaker? You have the problem with the filmmaker, naturally, being an artist in his own mind who wants to retain complete editorial independence. So here is the bureaucrat from USIA, maybe the CIA, or whatever, coming in and saying: “We want a film on [a particular topic]. It has to have this element and that element because the intended audience is so and so, coming from here.” I suspect the filmmaker gives the bureaucrat the bird. So that’s another problem.

Then you have an issue that is the imperfect communication between the post, which is brought into the culture you are trying to reach, and the Washington bureaucracy, which is living within the Beltway and inhaling its own propaganda as it does so. That is a problem.

"What about the cultural myopia of the filmmaker? You have the problem with the filmmaker, naturally, being an artist in his own mind who wants to retain complete editorial independence. So here is the bureaucrat from USIA, maybe the CIA, or whatever, coming in and saying: 'We want a film on [a particular topic]. It has to have this element and that element because the intended audience is so and so, coming from here.' I suspect the filmmaker gives the bureaucrat the bird."

Defining the USIA’s Role and Subculture Relative to the CIA

HG: Following up this point that you are making—so we have USIA, we have USIS, there is CIA, and then you mention Hollywood. How do these entities connect, communicate? Did the USIA or USIS have any direct or indirect connection with the CIA? Anything in your experience that can put more meaning into this field of ambiguity?

CF: There was a very strict wall between the CIA and USIA. As a State Department officer, I cooperated with the CIA. As a USIS officer, I had no contact with them. They, for their part, were under strict instructions not to involve themselves, even though a lot of what I was doing presented a very tempting target to them because I was meeting all kinds of people they couldn’t get to. I was ingratiating myself with people they might have looked over to recruit as agents. They were barred. So that was clear.

Now, later in the history of USIA, during the Reagan administration, Charlie Wick was named as the director of USIA. As you know, his most famous film as a producer was Snow White and the Three Stooges [1961].

BV: [Laughter] That’s the only film he produced, right?

CF: That’s the only one he did. American civilization is intact, you know. [Laughter] I knew [Wick]. A couple of times, he asked me to come over. But I remember in the men’s room of the executive floor of USIA, there was graffiti that said, “Mickey Mouse, where is Charlie Wick’s wristwatch?” [Laughter]

“[Charlie Wick] was a great pianist, a buddy of Ronald Reagan, and frankly knew nothing about the world.”

So that was apparently the feeling of people in USIA about him. He was a great pianist, a buddy of Ronald Reagan, and frankly knew nothing about the world. But there were professionals in the building that carried on. USIA, when it was reimagined by John Reinhardt, Charlie Bray, the aforementioned Alan Carter,

as well as Harold [F.] Schneidman, who was also a very powerful figure within the agency. When it was reimagined, they tried to put the emphasis on two-way communication. They saw a role for USIA in Washington in conveying foreign viewpoints to the policy process. I think that was overly idealistic. And the policy process has people from the foreign service of the Department of State, AID, who are constantly condemned for defending foreign viewpoints—you know, "going native" or something, having "clientitis." It is very hard to explain to a group of foot washing Baptists how Hinduism works and why it might be relevant to programs or policies in India. USIA was purportedly attempting to supplement or inject an empathy element to US policy that, frankly, it needs. But that wasn't necessarily the way to do it. So it was unfortunately renamed USICA, which of course immediately evoked the CIA! ICA, CIA—what's the difference? In fact, there was a terrible difference.

Since you raised the issue of CIA, Hadi, I should back up. In the 1950s, the CIA did all sorts of very useful things. One example is Encounter magazine (1953–1991), which was a brilliant liberal-democratic, anti-communist publication. It was a focus of intellectual dialogue in Europe, particularly. They supported the Swatantra Party in India, which was the free market advocate, as opposed to statism, that was holding India down. I don't want to get into ideological issues, but they provided funding and ensured a hell of a lot of quality intellectual discourse. The only thing that USIA did that matched that was the publication Problems of Communism, which was a first-class examination of evolutions in Marxist-Leninist ideology in the societies that had it as a guiding ideology. So that effort by CIA, which included funding for the Asia Foundation and some other institutions, all ended when the Church Committee hearings exposed CIA misdeeds and miscalculations, like the famous exploding cigars for Fidel Castro and assassination attempts on Patrice Lumumba and other people. This led to the "baby being thrown out with the bathwater" idea.

HG: So you are saying that there were aspects of the CIA operation—depending on what people were doing and what kind of operation—that actually succeeded in seemingly [creating] an intellectual discourse, using money and resources. There were also directions taken within the same organization that were diametrically different—looking at cases of engineering plots, violent overthrows, murder, and assassination. Are you suggesting that these activities started collapsing into each other to create the myth of what we call the CIA today?

CF: I am not sure if I put it exactly that way. In terms of your frame of reference, the relevant thing is that the production of the dreadful film I mentioned about Saddam Hussein was not an accident. This was the agency that had lost its ability to make films. It has been taken out of that business. And to some extent, the vacuum was filled in different areas by the creation of different institutions or by the empowerment of USIA. A new institution was, for example, the East–West Center in Honolulu at the University of Hawaii, which still exists and was a focus of scholarly training exchanges throughout the entire Pacific Basin and the Indo-Pacific.

BV: So, in a way, there is almost an inversion of USIA operation relative to CIA operations as we move from the 1950s into the 1960s. When you're speaking of the CIA in the '50s, is this in part about its connection to the Congress for Cultural Freedom and some of those efforts?

CF: Yes, that stuff, which was pretty good stuff. If you go back and read that material, it holds up pretty well. It was not dishonest, not overtly manipulative. Certainly, it had its own appeal intellectually and was quite effective, I think. But that the clandestine and covert element of American

propaganda largely went away—that is not entirely true. When I was discussing what the USIS operation in Madras did, I did not mention the placement of newspaper articles. It turns out, and I am sure you will be surprised, that journalists are very lazy. If you give them a well-written thing that they can slap their name on and publish in their paper, they are thrilled. It's like catnip for cats. We produced articles, for which we overtly went to newspaper editorial offices and said: "Here is this thing, would you like to publish [it]? It's available to you if you want it. You don't have to pay us." There was a lot of material placed. We did the translation into Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, Kannada, Marathi, Bengali. This was a service to these newspapers. But parallel to that, the CIA had a covert placement program where they would insert what is called either "gray" or "black" propaganda into newspapers around the world. One of the problems with this was USIA and USIS were under a legal ban from distributing their products in the United States. The one exception, really, was Problems of Communism. That had to be given a civic, legal exception. When the CIA placed articles which were not true—black propaganda—not attributed to them or any American source, in foreign newspapers, these began to come back to the US. So Dawn in Pakistan suddenly publishes an article, it says that Elvis Presley has been sighted on the Afghan border. Then this finds its way into National Inquirer. Well, I'm just being facetious—but this is the sort of thing that might happen. And then, there is gray propaganda, stuff that was overtly placed by the CIA through agents. It was mostly true, but—like much of what passes for journalism these days—slanted.

BV: To what extent did USIA operate in gray propaganda?

CF: No, no. No gray propaganda. But obviously, [it put out] viewpoints that were favorable to the American position. By distinction, with the visiting lecture series, you never knew what the hell the guy is going to say. That was okay because the purpose was to demonstrate the diversity of opinions within the United States.

HG: I just keep thinking, as you explain, that USIA published no gray propaganda but [used] a method of journalism that maintains a certain intellectual bias, if we can frame its work. Then we have the CIA with a whole terminology of "gray" and "black" propaganda—even the use of terminology itself, etc. And the two institutions are operating overseas in the field. They publish fundamentally different articles, both of which show up in foreign local press! Let me give you on example. You are probably aware of the 1953 CIA–MI6 coup in Iran.

CF: Of course.

HG: It's such a fateful event.

CF: That was all the fault of BP and the British! [Laughter]

HG: You have seen the documentary Coup 53, right?

CF: Of course! I am well aware of this. I think this is one of the greatest blunders of our postwar history.

HG: And yet, this happens so early in CIA history, and it is not the only one, either. Again, the CIA seems to be doing certain good things, according to you, and yet this very early covert operation of

placing articles. I have read about the people who did it in the case of Iran. Very bright people. Richard Cottam was one of them. A bright young guy, gets his degree from Harvard, he goes to Iran through a Fulbright scholarship in early 1950s, and then starts publishing fake articles in the Iranian press. How can all this make sense?

CF: This really doesn't have anything to do with USIA directly. But remember that after the end of World War II, there was a serious danger of communist electoral victory in Italy and France. One of the first tasks of the CIA, which was created in 1947 as the successor to OSS [Office of Strategic Services], was to manipulate those elections. And so, by the time the British recruited them to help overthrow Mosaddegh and democracy in Iran, they were well practiced in this art. Of course, the issue of regime change—you know, it's the bad old American habit—it also occurred in places like Guatemala during this period, and it has never stopped, really. Salvador Allende was another classic case of a democratically elected leader being taken out. And we can claim, in my view, a great deal of credit for Boris Yeltsin having won the election in Russia. So this works two ways. The problem with violating the principles of Westphalianism is that it boomerangs. And I am sorry that so many people within the Beltway don't seem to be able to understand that.

HG: The point that I am making is that from the local perspective, as we call ourselves USIA researchers—we got the materials, we get the films, and we start researching when we go to these local USIS spaces, so to speak—we notice that there is such a high degree of awareness of the atrocities done by the CIA, to a degree that's as if they are mapped over each other in a very strange way. So my question is—in the consciousness of USIA as an organization, I can't imagine that they were not aware of covert operations. They would be thinking, "If we are doing this, there should be a purpose behind it." As you mentioned, there was such a gulf between USIA and USIS. Was it all just a bureaucratic operation?

CF: No, no. I would say you are dealing with two very different subcultures. They both had a professional deformation, to borrow the French term. That is, the narrowness of the vision that becomes a framework of analysis that is unidimensional. In the case of USIS, you are seeing the representation of liberal America. This is a group of people who believe fervently in the freedom of speech, who believe in the Bill of Rights, who believe in the Constitution, who believe in much of the mythology of the American past as it then existed. They were innocent people, if you will, maybe naïve.

And then you have the CIA, which is divided into two basic subcultures. One is the analytical one. These are people who suck on their pipes and [wear] tweed jackets and think about what is happening in foreign societies, and what the latest statement by Ahmadinejad means, and so forth—even though, probably, Ahmadinejad didn't know it himself. [Laughter] But the analysts will figure it out. Then you have the operators. These are case officers and people who run espionage operations. Their job is to persuade foreigners to betray their own country, to commit treason. In that subculture, the greatest merit you can have, for the purposes of promotion, is the ability to lie effectively, because a great deal of what you are doing is under false pretenses. You may be convincing some poor guy in Iran, let's say, that he is employed by the French, when he is actually employed by the CIA. This is a common technique in espionage, false flag operations. The Israelis are masters at it. But the KGB and Americans are pretty good at it too.

So, two subcultures: one emphasizing deceit and the other emphasizing truth, as seen. Now, you mentioned "inherent bias." I have a memory of a wonderful article by the late Ben Bagdikian. I think it was in [Columbia Journalism Review], comparing the three major news magazines of the 1950s with each other in terms of attempted bias or political orientation. One of the findings he made, which is stuck in my mind, was regarding Time magazine, which was associated with moderate Republican elements at the time. Newsweek was more liberal and associated with the Democratic Party. The US News and World Report was widely viewed as right-wing. What he found was that the fairest and most objective reports in those three magazines were in US News and World Report. The right-wing orientation came from the selection of subjects and the articles—not the articles themselves. They were actually very straightforward. So this is the manifestation of what you are suggesting, that USIA, although bent on running programs that reflected truth, was selective about which truth it chose to propagate. So I'd explain it that way. My friends in CIA will all kill me now. [Laughter]

"I would say you are dealing with two very different subcultures [in USIA and the CIA]. They both had a professional deformation, to borrow the French term. That is, the narrowness of the vision that becomes a framework of analysis that is unidimensional. In the case of USIS, you are seeing the representation of liberal America. This is a group of people who believe fervently in the freedom of speech, who believe in the Bill of Rights, who believe in the Constitution, who believe in much of the mythology of the American past as it then existed. They were innocent people, if you will, maybe naïve...And then you have the CIA…Two subcultures: one emphasizing deceit and the other emphasizing truth, as seen."

The Agency Shifts Its Strategies under John Reinhardt and Charlie Bray: USIA to USICA

BV: As Hadi knows, I am particularly interested in that transitional period between 1976 and the Wick–Reagan era of USIA. It can almost be characterized as a regression, when Wick takes over USIA. Before getting into that, I am curious—what was the primary impetus for the institutional shift to USICA? Was it the post-Vietnam geopolitical situation? Are there other factors involved with Carter and Reinhardt's decision to alter the terrain of the operations of USICA?

Figure 1: The Swearing-In of John E. Reinhardt as First Director of the International Communication Agency (1978), selected image
[NARA 306.3575]

CF: I think both John Reinhardt [Figure 1], who was a distinguished ambassador to Nigeria and other places, and Charlie Bray, who had been the spokesman for the Department of State, went to USIA from the Bureau of Public Affairs at the State Department. One of the things that they did that was innovative while there, which I inherited after they left, was to create a public opinion–polling function. Now, it is illegal for the US government to pay for polls. But they hired someone from Columbia School of Journalism, Bernard Roshco—a very fine man who was an expert in polling and public opinion. If we went to Gallup or one of the other major polling companies and said: "We noticed most of your polling is directed at commercial interest. So, you are collecting information for Procter & Gamble and Paramount Pictures. This political and policy-related stuff that you do is kind of a public service built on top of this advertising-driven function that you have. But we can help you make the policy question relevant. We can tell you what the actual options are, as seen within the US government, and what the priorities are. So we can make you more relevant to the political process."

One of the things these companies were doing was polling on behalf of politicians. Therefore, in the 1976 presidential campaign, when Jimmy Carter came out of nowhere Georgia to compete for the presidency, one of the most striking findings we had and were aware of was that he managed to hit the top of the bell curve on every issue. It was brilliant. I think this was James Carville who did that. Whoever it was, it got Carter elected. Part of the process that Reinhardt and Bray had started during the 1976 period—probably in part of a backlash to Henry Kissinger's very European style of diplomacy—was to stage town hall meetings around the country in which the officials were instructed not to speak but to listen, to answer questions, and to do so simply, so they were more in tune with what the public wanted. That was the idea. Kissinger, of course, didn't much enjoy this, and that was the end of that for him. But lower-level officials were subjected to this reeducation process. It was sort of an American version of the Cultural Revolution. People were not made to adopt strange poses and didn't have dunce hats put on them, but they were subjected to public opinion in a direct and sometimes humiliating way that was educational.

So these two guys [Reinhardt and Bray], when they went to USIA, [thought] this can be the genesis of the idea that we can be the voice of empathy for foreign interests in the policy process. They had the theory that instead of having one-way communication—Washington communicating only American ideas to the benighted foreigners—the foreigners should be given the chance to communicate their view of various American policies to American policymakers. That's improving the quality of the policy. That was their philosophy. That is why they wanted to change "information agency" to "communication agency," because they had an idea of two-way communication. So, that's the explanation. I knew both of those men—who are, sadly, no longer with us—quite well. I have great respect for both of them. I think John Reinhardt was more practical than Charlie Bray. Bray was quite idealistic in this regard. There was help by the way, in this transformation and in the town meeting process, from the Kettering Foundation, which is based in Ohio and was very active in supporting a government more responsive to popular opinion in foreign affairs.

Challenges to the Two-Way Mandate in the Charlie Wick Era and an Anecdotal Encounter with Reagan

BV: I know about 180 employees of USIA in 1976 basically wrote a letter implicitly embracing what became that [two-way] mandate. Was there a synergy with career persons at USIA when Reinhardt and Bray brought in that ethos?

CF: I think they agreed in theory, but when it began to be implemented directly, they weren't so sure. You mentioned the Charlie Wick era, which was, of course, the complete antithesis to this concept. The most notable shift [during the Wick era] was in the Voice of America. Voice of America suddenly began to voice what they called "editorials," which were essentially Republican ideology. I had a wonderful moment in Beijing when I was in charge of the embassy there. The head of VOA under Reagan [Kenneth Y. Tomlinson] came out and had a two-day session with the head of Radio Peking—a very tough lady—and at the end of it, there was an informal lunch somewhere. I was doing the interpreting, among other things. He leaned across the table and said to this woman, "Tell me, what do you think of our broadcasts these days?" And she thought for a second and said, "They remind me of us during the Cultural Revolution," which was not praise in any respect.

I must say I listened to Voice of America for two reasons. First, it was a useful source of news. But I also listened to it because it would cause problems. Now, there were all kinds of ludicrous assertions made that I had to then defend and excuse when talking to the Chinese. I listened to it in the early morning for what that day's problems would be. It was not admiring at all. Generally speaking, USIS personnel during that period were extremely demoralized. Resistance. This was the opposite, to go back to Hadi's earlier question about what subculture prevailed in that group. This is very much the opposite of the culture where they had come from. It was neither a two-way communication nor liberal-democratic in its nature. It was very parochial and culture-bound stuff with no empathy for foreigners whatsoever.

Figure 2: The Reagans Meet with Chairman Deng Xiaoping at The Great Hall of The People (April 28, 1984)
Freeman was present as an advisor and interpreter during this meeting. [NARA C21471-21]

This, I would say, was not the fault of Ronald Reagan himself. I was not an admirer of his political views. But when he came to Beijing, I ended up riding around in a car with him for three days. I'm essentially bilingual in Chinese, so they wanted someone, if there was a problem, that could communicate between his Secret Service and the Chinese protective detail. But also, there was a thought that Reagan might have interest in a policy question, and I might be able to answer that, which of course was not the case. [Laughter] So, on the way in from the airport, there's Ronald Reagan and Nancy Reagan, dead silence, and I thought, "Well, this is no good." Ronald Reagan had never really met a communist before, and there were over a billion of them around him. So I started doing a tour guide number—I once worked as a tour guide. I said: "This is this. This is that." And then I pointed and said, "This is workers' housing over here for

some factory." He said, "Oh, workers' housing. That reminds me of a Soviet joke." And he told the Soviet joke, and it was pretty funny. I said, "You know, they don't really have that Eastern European or Arab sense of humor here, an anecdotal sense of humor. Although they all know Nasreddin Hoja stories, so that's common to the entire Muslim world—and one-third of Beijing traditionally was Muslim." [So I told him a local joke, and] he thought that was pretty funny, and we ended up exchanging jokes for the whole three days, no policy questions. Finally, we're going to a meeting at the Great Hall of the People with Deng Xiaoping [Figure 2]. Jim Baker, then the chief of staff, [presents an urgent domestic policy matter to Reagan]. Reagan looks at the folder, hands it back, and then turns to me, "Did I tell you the one about the Irishman and the moose?" Baker looks so disgusted. [Laughter] Finally, Reagan, who was very empathetic, actually, and knew about the matter [Baker brought up], turned to me and said, "You know, Chas, they say hard work never killed anyone, but why take a chance?"

This guy that I had not admired in terms of policy—I concluded if I'm marooned on a desert isle, he's the guy I want to have with me. So he can't be blamed for a lot of the crap that went on—and it was crap—in his administration, whether it's Oliver North's capers with the key-shaped cake and the contras and all that, or Charlie Wick's antics.

Agency Culture during Charlie Wick's Directorship

BV: So it was really a lot of the people he was rubbing elbows with that informed the policies of USIA? I have been doing a little bit of work on, if you remember, Let Poland Be Poland from 1982. That seems, in a lot of ways, to inaugurate some of that culture.

CF: That was Charlie Wick. Very much Charlie Wick. He came to China in August of 1981. I was the chargé. I took him and a couple of other visitors to see Deng Xiaoping, and he started lecturing Deng Xiaoping about the need to be anti-communist—or anti-Soviet, I guess. He really didn't make the distinction. Deng looked at him and said, "Young man"—because Deng was quite old—"at age twenty-three, I was the secretary-general of the Chinese Communist Party, and I was purged for being anti-Soviet. I was purged again in my thirties for being anti-Soviet. And I was purged in my seventies for being anti-Soviet. So don't talk to me about that!" Anyway, [Wick was] not the world's most well-informed or empathetic person.

BV: It seems that he really brought out the ecosystem of who's who of the conservative partisans too, like the Heritage Foundation, Roy Cohn, Rupert Murdoch. To your knowledge, did that inform USIA operations, given the extent to which Wick was involved with some of those circles?

CF: It doesn't surprise me. You know, one of the great defects of the American political system is its use of the spoils system, which encourages the provision of patronage to nincompoops, which we have in abundance.

BV: I only ask because I wonder—and this is kind of steering it back to film and television—to what extent Wick's approach to leading USIA shaped the way Worldnet was inaugurated and the television services. Is it a reflection of the reversal of the second mandate exhibited under Reinhardt? If Worldnet was a one-way propagation of ideas, though it framed itself as dialogue?

CF: Well, this is an agency that [in part] began under the leadership of Edward R. Murrow, whom

nobody would dismiss as insignificant or lacking in integrity. And [the Wick era] was a low point. But it reflected Reagan's background.

I should disclose, my father, who was in the navy in World War II, once went to a USO in the Hollywood Bowl, and the electricity failed. There was no microphone, [so] they called for someone with a voice that carried and no inhibitions to emcee the show. And [my father] volunteered and went up and did it. He was a great success, and the navy formally assigned him for the rest of the war to be its attaché in Hollywood. He lived in Long Beach and had been an engineer engaged in fire control systems aboard ships—now he was dealing with Hollywood. So there were all these B-grade actors—Errol Flynn, Howard Duff, Linda Darnell, and Ronald Reagan—hanging around our house. I didn't quite have the courage [later] to tell Ronald Reagan that he had known me when I was two years old. [Laughter]

The fact is, as you know better than I, there is a Hollywood mentality and a certain media savviness in Hollywood that was new to USIA. This was the capture of USIA by the right-wing element in Hollywood. Given the political complexion of USIS officers, that was a wrenching experience.

How the Two-Way Mandate Related to Moving Image Output and the USIA's Reception Studies

BV: From our end, I think, all of this does speak to some of the filmic and televisual output when we study the 1980s—that zeitgeist, that spirit that Wick brought to the agency. Maybe to go back a little bit, to your time with USIA in 1978—with the second mandate, with the reversal approach—how did that factor into the types of films and the types of programs you were putting out?

CF: I suspect it caused us a temporary hiatus in production. Frankly, I was there too briefly to see the results of my own reengineering of the planning system. I may have actually made a suggestion to exempt the film function from this on the grounds that the people in the [public diplomacy] field probably were not the best qualified to come up with script or film ideas. In any event, it wasn't exempted. And that reflected Alan Carter's philosophy and Hal Schneiderman's agreement with that.

HG: Can I ask a follow-up question exactly in that line? So I've done early USIS research, even during the period before the institutionalization of USIA in 1953. I reviewed a paper trail of embassy reports all the way back to the time of World War II. USIS offices started doing audience research and reception studies. This type of study never really stops. By the time we get to the '60s, as my colleague Bret's research also shows, there's plenty of tax money spent on reception studies. Now, putting this research in contact with your work, as you're bringing this incredibly important point of changing the culture from one-way to two-way communication, I suspect that reception studies were somehow contributing to that one-way paradigm as well. If not, then it raises the question of what they were doing with this research.

The money was continually spent to figure out what foreign people think. Did this ever cause any meaningful change? Yet the impression that I get from your story is that USIA was fed up with one-way hegemony. Then they brought you in, in hope of a change. Were you, by chance, aware of these studies, all this money spent on reception studies constantly asking foreigners what they thought about movies or who showed up demographically to watch film programs?

CF: Not directly, but we had as a major function—and I was enthusiastic about it—the creation of

analyses of audiences: what their interests were and what their biases were. I can't remember the name. I think it was called "directed audience" or something like that. And when I was in Madras, I reinvented Babbage's computer—the first computer in the nineteenth century, which was basically punch cards with knitting needles that would enable you to rearrange. In other words, coding on a punch card of audience characteristics on an individual basis. We didn't have the concept of, or the computing power, or the basis in the internet to create big data, which is the modern version of this. [This modern version is] very, very effective at manipulation of opinion, as we have seen in our advertising world and also in politics. Because of my experience, I don't use any social media because I prefer not to pollute my mind with secondhand information. And I don't own or watch television for the same reason.

I'm very aware of the manipulative capacity of information outlets, having once attempted to manipulate people through one. So I don't know about the early research, but I think this all had to do with communications theory. The logical combination of that really is a two-way communication. In fact, if you look at the modern social media, like Facebook, I think they're very insidious. They have a business plan which depends on uncovering your likes, dislikes—or your biases, if you will—and pandering to them. Not only that, they will connect you to other people who share those prejudices. This is part of a conjunction of social science research and advertising.

Anyway, the head of the USIS operation in Madras was a former park director in the American occupation in Germany. This is the bridge between the World War II propaganda operations, the information and cultural activities of the military following World War II, and this new agency—USIA. There's a continuity in personnel. Now, having said that, he was a very fine man. Having been a park director didn't disqualify him at all from being a thoughtful manager over a large operation in south India. But I was struck—this was the genesis of that generation of people in the agency.

Historicizing the USIA: "Historically Peculiar Circumstances" Leading to "Historically Peculiar Cultural Exports"

BV: If you don't mind, I'd like to ask one big-picture question that can maybe cap the conversation. As I mentioned, in our field—and I think in other fields as well—USIA is relatively invisible. A lot of that's attributable, of course, to the Smith–Mundt Act and the domestic distribution ban. So I think a lot of us are asking questions of historiography. How should we—as theorists, as historians—approach the study of USIA? From your perspective as an incredibly experienced diplomat, foreign service officer, and having worked with USIA—do you have any thoughts on how we should approach the archive, how we study USIA, or how we contextualize it relative to USAGM and other current media systems?

CF: So I'm not a historian, although I love history, and read it, and consider it relevant. It does, as Mark Twain said, rhyme from time to time but doesn't repeat itself. My perspective on all of this is perhaps not very helpful. I see this output as an expression of a particular type of American culture colored by official money and viewpoints at a peculiar moment in American history. What is the peculiar moment? If you contrast this massive production with what was before, it was not commercial. Back in 1921, the United States made a fatal decision not to follow the British path, chartering the BBC and financing the media by licensing media sets—radio sets or televisions. [Instead, the US] financed it with commercial advertising, and that is a problem that has become a great corruption of American politics, because you have to pay to access media, and you can't get

elected without it. Therefore, politicians are forced to prostitute themselves, which they do willingly these days, shamelessly.

So I think this is the short break with the past, that is, the pre–World War II era. It reflects the sudden emergence of the United States from relative isolation to hegemony over a bloc of countries, competing with a competing hegemony directed by the Soviet Union. The world that was created after World War II was one in which every country defined itself by the angle of relationship with one or the other of the superpowers. Either you are in a bloc with one or not, or you're struggling not to get into either block. This is a very peculiar moment in history. It's the emergence of a bipolar world order, which is most exceptional, and USIA and its output fits into this context, which was not that lasting. The bipolar world collapsed along with the Soviet Union from 1989 to 1991. The US was left in what Charles Krauthammer called a "unipolar moment." I think that was an overstatement, but still, there was no competing ideological or power center. Therefore, USIA was deemed to be irrelevant.

"[The Cold War] is a historically peculiar circumstance, the generated historically peculiar cultural export…The course of the nineteenth century created the nation-state, the idea of ethnic characteristics defining nationality and language defining ethnicity. But this was something very different. This was a global struggle, both on the geopolitical and ideological level. And it's subsumed the entire world. Nobody could escape from it."

What is this output? It is a historically peculiar circumstance, the generated historically peculiar cultural export. Now, there's more that's bound up with that. Of course, the onset of the Cold War had enormous impact inside the United States with McCarthyism, much of it directed at Hollywood and reflected in attacks on filmmakers and authors. The intellectual climate of the United States chilled as the Cold War intensified. The Cold War was peculiar in the sense that geopolitics and ideology coincided. The Soviet Union was both a geopolitical menace and an ideologically messianic menace as well. It was attempting to convert the world to its Marxist heresy, if you will. This is also peculiar. Normally, if you look at the world over the course of the four thousand years or so that we know about, you will find a contest between empires and states. Perhaps these are mostly multiethnic, multilinguistic bodies. The course of the nineteenth century created the nation-state, the idea of ethnic characteristics defining nationality and language defining ethnicity. But this was something very different. This was a global struggle, both on the geopolitical and ideological level. And it's subsumed the entire world. Nobody could escape from it.

Now we're in a period more typical of the last four thousand years, which is not unipolar but multipolar. Not divided by ideology, although we continue to try to divide it by ideology. China [for example,] doesn't have any ideology that it can explain or export, and it isn't interested at all in how foreigners govern ourselves. We can do whatever we want, and it won't bother [us]. And the Russians don't have an ideology now, other than the Russian Orthodox Church. The only ideologies that are actively contesting now where geopolitics is involved are those in the Islamic world, which has got a schism that it is trying to work out, namely the Sunni–Shia divide, which is ancient but now has modern characteristics. So you have crises within both Shia and Sunni Islam, as countries which were subjected to colonialism are trying to work off the hangover. There's no easy cure for that hangover, but I would argue that the Islamic revolution in Iran was the first of a series of efforts at self-determination to free peoples of the Middle East from the European imperialist order that had been imposed on them. And it's continued—it's had its echoes since then elsewhere. So this is a

return to a more normal time, but they strike us because we only know what we live through. And we lived through the Cold War. Today's youth don't even know what that is. We think the situation that we're entering is novel and peculiar, but it isn't. It's more normal than the world that our parents lived through. Anyway, that's my frame on this, which is probably hopelessly irrelevant, but it's the way I see it.

BV: It's tremendously helpful. The word you use, "peculiar," which suggests the Cold War is somewhat of an anomaly within this wider portrait of world history, is a really productive lens through which to consider the filmic, televisual output, as well as the general operations of the agency. It's incredibly insightful and helpful to our work, and I think it will be helpful to our readers too for contextualizing USIA.

HG: It was incredible to listen to you. Thank you so much for offering us your perspective, and it's quite an experience to hear you talking, crossing through the world, through this experience that you had with so many different societies and different ways of looking at situations around the world.

CF: Thank you. You're too kind, but if I have been at all useful, I'm pleased. I wish you all the best in your continued research. I think you've exhausted me. [Laughter]

HG: Thank you so much.

BV: Yes, thank you so much for your time. It's been wonderful talking to you.

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