

Audio Transcript

Episode 276 of "[E&P Reports](#)" Vodcast Series
with *Mike Blinder*

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[Voice of America turmoil through the eyes of veteran VOA journalist Steve Herman](#)

Voice of America (VOA), the U.S. government-funded international broadcaster, is facing an unprecedented crisis. Journalists have been cut off from their newsrooms—emails shut down, phones disconnected, and no way to reach editors—leaving many in a state of uncertainty. Steve Herman, Chief National Correspondent for VOA, finds himself among more than 1,300 colleagues placed on excused absence under an executive order deeming them potentially disloyal. As the shutdown stretches on, audiences once served by VOA's trusted reporting are turning elsewhere, raising questions about the future of one of America's most enduring journalistic institutions.



Mike Blinder: I would like you to imagine waking up one morning to find your newsroom cut off—emails shut down, phones disconnected. No way to reach your editors or even know if your job still exists. And that’s exactly what happened to journalists recently at Voice of America. The ripple effects are still streaming through our industry with many commenting and editorials everywhere. And that’s gonna be our topic today. Greetings. I am Mike Blinder, publisher of E&P Magazine. Welcome to this episode of E&P Reports, and I’m joined by Steve Herman. Steve, welcome to the program.

Steve Herman: It’s a pleasure to be here, Mike.

Mike Blinder: You are not in the offices of VOA, I assume you are—where? Right now?

Steve Herman: I’m at the National Press Club in Washington, DC. We’re not allowed to go to our offices.

Mike Blinder: So I hear. Just to give some quick background, you are a well-known veteran journalist. You’re currently listed as the VOA Chief National Correspondent. I’m assuming you still kind of have that title. Am I correct?

Steve Herman: I have not been relieved of my title or fired from my job, but since February 28th, slightly before 1,300 of my colleagues were given similar notices, I was informed that I was immediately placed on excused absence. There was a reference in the letter that was sent to me to an executive order the president had signed two weeks prior to that, which noted that those deemed disloyal and foreign service to the president’s foreign policy could be suspended or relieved of their jobs. I need to explain, Mike. Technically, I am a foreign service officer of the United States Government under the US Agency for Global Media. But I’m a journalist first and foremost. And as you may know, although I’m not sure everybody in the audience would know, there’s a firewall between the Voice of America Newsroom and our parent agency and the rest of the government per se. We operate under a charter, which is also a law that we must be a fair and balanced news operation. And we must tell both sides of America’s story.

Mike Blinder: We are gonna offer a link to the VOA Charter on the landing page for this episode. We’re also going to chat with a man who we believe is still employed by the federal government. We’re not sure, but we’re gonna dive into all of that right after this—stick around.

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Mike Blinder: Alright, Steve, before we get into what's going on with you and your colleagues, first, talk to me about VOA. Maybe some of us don't touch it in the industry. I mean, I know it's heritage. I actually posted a quote from Edward R. Murrow about the founding of this organization. What kind of journalism did or should or were you guys producing at VOA? And what audience did it serve? Can you give us just a quick view overall?

Steve Herman: Sure, please. Yeah. Mike, Voice of America went on the air in the early days of World War II, and it was somewhat unique in its approach. It said, whether the news is good or bad, we're gonna tell you the truth. That first broadcast was in German. Hitler was not amused. Paul Crosley, an entrepreneur out of Cincinnati who owned WLW Radio, was tasked by the U.S. government under wartime conditions to quickly erect a transmitting site for what would become the Voice of America. It went on the air, and Adolf Hitler quickly referred to it as "those Cincinnati liars." Ever since, we have been the bane of autocratic leaders around the world. We relish in criticism because that means that it's effective. Now, there's not a lot of reason that Americans would know about Voice of America unless you've lived overseas or you moved to the United States and grew up in a different country. You probably were not aware of it. It's an external broadcasting service. We do not target Americans or the U.S. It is one hundred percent funded and part of the federal government. Although we started out, as I said, on shortwave radio—because that was the only way to reach Eastern Europe and Asia at the time—we mostly have been doing, in recent decades, television news. There's still some radio, and there's the website, all that. We're on all the big digital apps in 50 different languages, reaching several hundred million people on a weekly basis—where we were until a little more than a week ago.

Mike Blinder: Some say it's not relevant anymore. There are so many different ways that people around the world are gaining their news. Why have this US channel available? Can you speak to that? Sure. As an employee there, but also as a journalist, is VOA's role still relevant in your opinion in today's society?

Steve Herman: Yeah, and I would add that I've researched this as a scholar of public diplomacy as well. I wrote a book about it called "Behind the White House Curtain," which goes into some of the history and why VOA is important, and what happened in the first Trump administration as well. It's relevant because, as you well know, there's a lot of disinformation and misinformation floating out there. But we're not a commercial operation, we're not ratings-driven. We broadcast in languages that probably no one else does—like to the Rohingya who are in these refugee camps across the border from Burma and Bangladesh.

We broadcast in Tibet, we broadcast in Burmese. And in those languages, there may be no independent, credible voice—whether it's radio, television, the internet, or whatever. And we have a tremendous reach. We broadcast into North Korea. That's one of the target countries where we still do use medium wave and shortwave radio.



We have several thousand affiliates around the world carrying our program. In Indonesia alone, we have over a hundred FM stations that carry VOA programming in Bahasa Indonesia. That's just a tiny sample of what this operation entails. When I would walk in the building, Mike, it felt like the United Nations of broadcasting. You have journalists from all over the world—some of them who fled their countries because they were going to be put in jail. Some of them had been put into jail.

There are some USAGM journalists who are in prison right now because USAGM oversees not only Voice of America but also Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Radio Free Asia, the Mideast Broadcasting Networks (Radio Sawa and Alhurra TV in Arabic), and the Office of Cuba Broadcasting, which has Radio and TV Martí. Additionally, there's the Open Technology Fund, which helps people behind great digital firewalls where the internet is cut off. It teaches them how to use VPNs and other services to get around that.

So there are a lot of missions going on, and US international broadcasting, funded by the US government, is the largest such operation in the world.

Mike Blinder: In a way, I mean, our Madisonian democracy—the document written by imperfect men, which I call the perfect document that we are supposed to live by—is the Constitution. In it, it states our industry. We're the only industry, the news media or journalism press, that's mentioned in that document as being free and unfettered. That's why that charter you referenced before the break is so critical, correct? It's kind of like that firewall where here we are, funded by the government, but we are free and unfettered. In light of recent events, do you think that charter's been compromised, in your opinion, sir? You and your colleagues—if you could speak to it.

Steve Herman: Well, I think we're going to see that question perhaps answered to some degree in courts of law in future weeks and months. All I can do is say that when I joined the Voice of America, Mike, I swore an oath to the Constitution. I did not swear an oath to whoever was president at the time or to a political party. In my conscience, I cannot swerve from that oath that I took.

Regardless of whatever the consequences are going to be to me, I take it very seriously. I can tell you that my 1,300 colleagues take it just as seriously. This is the mandate. This is the charter. And we had a tussle about this in the first Trump administration, where I was among those targeted by political appointees. We fought back—in the courts, in the court of public opinion, and through investigations by the Office of Special Counsel and the Office of Inspector General. There were also some court rulings that exonerated us and stated that the political appointees had stepped over the line and appeared to have done things that were not legal.

Mike Blinder: All right. So let's dive into your world—yours and your colleagues'. Have you been paid since that date in February?

Steve Herman: Yes, I got a paycheck last week.

Mike Blinder: Okay.



Steve Herman: So I was put on leave indefinitely with pay. Who knows what the situation will be in the days ahead.

Mike Blinder: Do you know if all your colleagues are in the same position?

Steve Herman: Well, no. Most of them are—those who are civil servants, full-time employees of Voice of America. However, there are about 550 people who were on personal service contracts. In the newsroom, I don't know who's a full-time employee or civil service versus a contractor—they're reporters, editors, technicians, engineers. We don't differentiate; we're all on the same team doing the same work. But those 550 contractors were notified that their services are no longer needed and that their contracts would be terminated effective March 31st.

Mike Blinder: So if they throw the switch back on tomorrow, you're going to have depleted resources the moment you go in?

Steve Herman: Well, Mike, like a lot of newsrooms around the United States, I would argue we already had depleted resources before all of this happened. People were just working their butts off all the time. If there were to be some sort of judicial ruling by the end of the month saying you cannot terminate those contractors and you have to bring everybody who's suspended back to work, we could get the operation back up.

But I see the damage that's already been done since our programming has been off the air for nearly a week as we speak. The audiences are going somewhere else. The vacuum is going to be filled by voices from Beijing, from Moscow, from Pyongyang, from Tehran. And that's why it's critical for us to get back on the air as soon as possible.

Mike Blinder: I mean, I'm not editorializing here, but it's a fact that when VOA was shut down, the propaganda from Moscow was very positive. Correct?

Steve Herman: This is weird, right? Ask yourself—why is the state-controlled press and the Kremlin, and why is the Chinese foreign ministry celebrating this?

Mike Blinder: I spent 25 years as a media consultant traveling worldwide. I gave workshops in Russia. I worked in some of the places where you were VOA's bureau chief.

Steve Herman: They invite you to Russia right now, Mike? I don't think so.

Mike Blinder: No, I wouldn't go now. When I was there, it was a long time ago.

Steve Herman: Different situation, yes.

Mike Blinder: I've done workshops in South Korea, I've trained media reps in Thailand, and I've been around the world—even Saudi Arabia, where the women were in a separate room and had to pass their questions to me. You like me, have seen the world as a media person. Correct me if I'm wrong, but as you were working in South Korea or anywhere in Asia, America was respected, right? I mean, I always felt, no matter if they didn't like our politics or what have you, people were always just feeling good about where America was.

Steve Herman: Yeah. I'll give you a perfect example. We would know of these politicians in these various countries—some were allied, perhaps with the United States, some were not. But even those who were most critical of the United States and would tell us so in interviews, a lot of them were sending their kids to college in the United States. So, what does that tell you?

Mike Blinder: I used to have people, you know, I remember when George W. Bush was president, there was like this negative feeling. I'd travel and they would comment and say, "How did he become president?" By the way, do you know of any jobs there? You know, it's in the same conversation. Do you feel that there's a... I mean, I have to ask you, as an international media person who's been around the world and won those beats, do you feel that our brand is diminished in the world at all?

Steve Herman: Well, I can tell you something. I have a friend, he's an immigration lawyer. He's on vacation outside of the United States right now. He says that anytime he tells people he's an immigration lawyer in the United States, they want his advice on how to get a visa, how to get a green card. He said on this trip, nobody's asking him that.

Mike Blinder: Yeah. One way to cut back on immigration. It's awful. Sorry for... because it, it's a weird time. So let's go back to 50,000 feet as we bring our dialogue to the end. There has been a massive amount of media support for VOA. I mean, even the recent editorial from the Lenfest Institute was amazing. I don't know if you saw it. That they put out at the Philadelphia Inquirer. The feeling is that this is the beginning of even more suppression of free speech. At least that's what I'm hearing and that's what we're reporting on at E&P. What concerns would you... You've got the microphone now, you're there, you're talking to thousands of media executives. What concerns do you see being raised now in our industry by the reduction of publicly funded media? Do you see something that cracks in the wall? What is your opinion on what's going on?

Steve Herman: Well, first of all, we're very, very grateful for the outside support from journalism organizations, from the public at large, from some on Capitol Hill. At this point, my caveat in giving these interviews is I'm speaking for myself. Right now, I'm still employed—although not allowed to work—by the Voice of America, which may or may not exist anymore. I'm still a journalist, although I've been under investigation for speculation and analysis before the shutdown of the Voice of America. So I do try to choose my words carefully, although I was not saying anything different on VOA broadcasts than I've said for 20 years. So, make of that what you will.

I'm leaving the larger macro arguments and connecting the dots—what does this mean overall for our freedom of the press and society—to others who are more schooled and skilled in talking credibly about the subject that you raised. I will probably, at some point in the future, be writing an op-ed or delivering some lectures about this very subject. But I'm kind of staying in my lane for right now.

Mike Blinder: Any path forward for you guys at VOA? Do you see any light right now, or is it still just a big question mark at the time of this recording, sir?

Steve Herman: Well, as you've seen with other federal agencies that have been dogged, the legal battles have begun. Initially, there have been some favorable rulings for some of the people who work at those agencies. In other cases, the judges are not issuing restraining orders or injunctions. But that's a legal fight that will probably go on for some time.

There is an expectation that some of these cases will go up to the Supreme Court, and if the Supreme Court gets to hear them, it will set a precedent one way or the other. But as you know, those things take a long time. As far as VOA right now, it's, at best, in a deep coma on life support—if there's any life left there. I would hope that the judicial system would look at the situation with US International Broadcasting—RFERL, for instance, has already filed suit because they're a grantee and not technically part of the federal government. I would hope that the courts consider these cases the same way that they would consider a death penalty case—something that needs to be decided very quickly.

Mike Blinder: Of course. I mean, if E&P, which has been publishing for over 140 years, were to be shut down for a month or two, I can't guarantee my audience will return instantly if I say, "Yeah, come on back, we're back now. Sorry about that." I mean, I can't guarantee that.

Steve Herman: Right. In this case, we're talking about hundreds of millions of people who are used to receiving their news and information in almost 50 languages.

Mike Blinder: Steve Herman, veteran journalist, respected, award-winning veteran journalist, currently listed as the Chief National Correspondent for VOA. Steve, thank you so much for your time. Please, on behalf of E&P, give our best in support to your brethren, coworkers, and more importantly, keep up the good fight, sir. We're behind you.

Steve Herman: We will, Mike. We appreciate the attention and the support.