

COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS

CHAIRMAN MICHAEL McCAUL

Report on the Office of Labor and Employment Relations at the U.S. Agency for Global Media

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I. Introduction

As of 2023 only 16% of Americans trusted that the government would do what was right “most of the time” or “just about always.” [1] This near-record low [2] level of public trust stems in part from a prevailing sense that those in the highest echelons of government lack integrity and seek personal gain for themselves and those around them rather than the public writ large. This sense poses a grave threat to democracy, as it diminishes Americans’ faith in their government and the federal tax system that funds it. To avoid this outcome, those entrusted with public offices must do everything possible to restore confidence in, and root out genuine abuses of, the system. The American people have a right to trust that public servants will act honestly and, when notified of fraud or abuse, will promptly, in good faith, work to eliminate it. The public also rightly expects that suspected abuses will be investigated – and that, once suspicions are confirmed by solid evidence, wrongdoers will be held accountable.

Congress, which holds the power of the purse under Article I of the United States Constitution, has a right and duty to ensure that taxpayer dollars are well and appropriately spent. The abuses and institutional failings at the U.S. Agency for Global Media (USAGM) detailed in the following pages show why Congressional oversight is so essential. Though hardly a household name, USAGM occupies an important corner of the sprawling federal bureaucracy. USAGM is the agency that oversees Voice of America (VOA), an essential tool for providing real news to nations lacking press freedom, and a critical component of American soft power. [3] As we enter an era of great power competition, it is more important than ever that USAGM and VOA are run effectively, with integrity, and free from foreign influence. However, recent events have illustrated a stark failure of employee vetting – particularly when foreign credentials are involved – that confirms longstanding security concerns about the agency. [4] They have also shown that basic administrative and management functions can and have become tainted – and unduly influenced – by political biases and groupthink. As a result, top level executives at USAGM failed to acknowledge wrongdoing even after internal whistleblowers, Congress, and a foreign government not only cried foul, but exposed credible evidence of corruption.



II. Executive Summary

In early 2021, whistleblowers contacted Members of Congress regarding the reinstatement of Ms. Setareh Derakhshesh Sieg, then director of Voice of America's Persian News Network (VOA-Persia). The whistleblowers alleged several wide-ranging abuses on the part of Ms. Sieg, including that she used taxpayer funds for personal travel, falsified her educational credentials to obtain high-level employment, and engaged in a pattern of favoritism that materially benefitted some employees at the expense of the public.

The Committee's three-year investigation has confirmed that the allegations just described have merit and are supported by substantial evidence. While the Committee's investigation focused on only a subset of the accusations, it can conclude with high confidence that Ms. Sieg does not hold a Ph.D., or its equivalent, from the Sorbonne, despite her shifting claims to that effect. Similarly, the Committee can reasonably conclude that Ms. Sieg allowed favored employees to collect excessive overtime pay, in contradiction of agency policy, and authorized an unqualified producer with whom she was friendly to spend tens of thousands of taxpayer dollars on trips that did little, if anything, to benefit the agency or its mission to report the news to underserved and repressed communities. Sieg also faced persistent complaints from subordinates due to her abrasive leadership style, and mishandled a major programming contract, resulting in nearly a million dollars' worth of taxpayer funds being spent on shows that could have been (and previously were) produced in-house – for a fraction of the price, and with far greater effect.

These were among the allegations recounted in a January 5, 2021 letter from Elizabeth Robbins, then VOA's Deputy Director, suspending and proposing the removal of Ms. Sieg (hereinafter the "Robbins Report"). The Robbins Report, issued in the waning days of the Trump Administration, was detailed, specific, and contained formal findings that thoroughly justified Sieg's removal from her senior position.

Within hours after President Biden was sworn in, however, Sieg was abruptly reinstated. The agency has to date failed to adequately justify this decision, made when serious allegations against her remained pending. The Committee's investigation of Sieg's reinstatement has revealed absent and poor leadership at the highest levels of USAGM, evident from the Agency's poorly rationalized decision to reinstate Ms. Sieg, and by its unwillingness to reconsider that decision, and take serious disciplinary action, in light of new and damning evidence.

For more than three years, USAGM provided the Committee with incomplete, inaccurate, and delayed responses to its oversight efforts. The Agency appeared more than willing to close the books without further investigation. Indeed, USAGM's CEO lobbied Congress to relieve the pressure of its oversight. This intransigence is most charitably attributed to bureaucratic incompetence and disorganization. At worst, however, it reveals a deliberate effort to protect an insider who had personal relationships with, and was politically aligned with, the senior officials who should have been impartially supervising her.

It was only after years of Committee pressure that USAGM reopened its investigation into Sieg, albeit only in the narrow area of her academic credentials. Despite this limited scope, the results of the newest investigation have been disquieting: Sieg did not study, as she claimed, International Relations. She did not, as claimed, receive her degree from the Sorbonne, but from Université Paris 7 – a separate institution. There is no evidence that she filed a thesis with the French government, as required for a doctorate under national standards. In fact, the institution that granted her degree confirmed that it was neither (as Sieg had variously claimed) a Ph.D. nor a French “doctorat,” but rather an “advanced university research degree” that did not conform to those national standards. The French Embassy informed the Committee as early as 2021 that such a degree is not a doctorate of any kind, and not equivalent to an American Ph.D.; any French position requiring a doctorate would not accept Sieg's degree as sufficient.

In spite of all the evidence incriminating Ms. Sieg, and USAGM Human Resources' conclusion that she misrepresented her credentials, Agency management has decided to settle for the most minor of slaps on the wrist – a letter of reprimand. This only came after the Committee moved heaven and earth to get the agency officials to actually acknowledge the facts right in front of them. Sieg has, therefore, escaped accountability, aided and abetted by a gullible bureaucracy which seemed at all times to buy her questionable explanations and even go out of its way to assist her. A broken process has thus resulted in an unjustifiable outcome that hurts the Agency and the taxpayers that fund it.

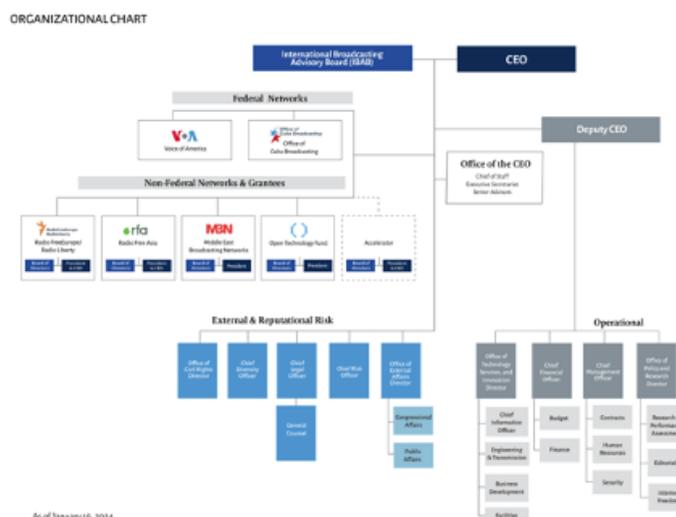
Perhaps worst of all, USAGM declined to make Ms. Sieg available to the Committee, despite the Chairman's explicit request for her to sit for a transcribed interview. Thus, the agency prevented her from providing her first person account to U.S. representatives, and by proxy, the American people.

III. Background – The Mission and Structure of USAGM

As stated on its public website, USAGM’s mission “is to inform, engage, and connect people around the world in support of freedom and democracy.” [5] In furtherance of that objective, USAGM oversees two other federal entities – VOA and the Office of Cuba Broadcasting – as well as a number of grantee broadcasters, such as Radio Free Europe. [6] In turn, USAGM is overseen by the International Broadcasting Advisory Board (“IBAB”) a seven-member panel nominated by the President and confirmed by the Senate, pursuant to the 2021 National Defense Authorization Act. [7] The IBAB, which includes the Secretary of State by force of statute, provides guidance and recommendations to USAGM’s CEO, periodically reports to Congress, and holds sole authority to remove the head of any USAGM network or grantee. [8]

Voice of America journalists “suppl[y] content that many people cannot get locally: objective news and information about the US, [consumers’] region and the world.” [9] Under the broader umbrella of Voice of America is VOA-Persia, oriented toward Iranian media consumers. VOA-Persia has operated a 24/7 Persian language news network “aimed at informing and engaging Iranian audiences and the Persian-speaking diaspora” since 2019. [10] Setareh Derakhshesh Sieg served as director of VOA-Persia from 2014 until her suspension on January 5, 2021 [11] and subsequent reassignment. [12]

USAGM’s structure is reflected in the chart below, courtesy of the agency: [13]



Organizational Chart of USAGM

IV. Timeline of Events

- **May 20, 1995:** Sieg defends her dissertation to a 2-person jury of professors (only one of whom was eligible) contrary to the 3-juror requirement for a French doctorate.
- **Nov. 20, 1995:** Sieg receives a postgraduate research degree (DRSU) from Université Paris 7 – Denise Diderot.
- **Jan. 2014:** Sieg is promoted to Director of VOA-Persia. The résumé she uses for this application claims she received a Ph.D. in International Relations from the Sorbonne.
- **Nov. 2017:** Sieg tells State Department Bureau of Diplomatic Security that she earned a “Ph.D. Political Science Comparative” from the University of Paris in 1993.
 - State Department learns from the University that she received a diploma from Université Paris 7 – Denise Diderot in Nov. 1995.
- **Sept. 2020:** State Department Office of Inspector General forwards whistleblower complaint concerning Sieg to USAGM OHR.
- **Fall, 2020:** Preliminary USAGM OHR report on Sieg is drafted.
 - Indicates that Sieg received her degree from Université Paris 7 – Denise Diderot, contrary to her representations.
- **Sept. 10, 2020:** Senior VOA official tells OHR that Sieg awarded unnecessary overtime to one favorite employee, and hired that employee’s brother for a senior position.
- **Oct. 27, 2020:** Memo circulated indicating that OHR had concluded Sieg inappropriately interfered with an employee’s performance review and approved unnecessary overtime.
- **Jan. 5, 2021:** VOA Deputy Director Elizabeth Robbins suspends Sieg and proposes that she be removed from employment with USAGM.
- **Jan. 14, 2021:** Sieg signs onto public letter criticizing Robbins and VOA Director Reilly for holding a “propaganda event” with Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and for reassigning Yolanda Lopez.

- **Jan. 20, 2021:** Joseph R. Biden sworn in as President of the United States.
- **Jan. 2021:** Yolanda Lopez takes Sieg off suspension with no loss of pay or seniority. Elizabeth Robbins and VOA Director Reilly are fired.
- **Feb. 21, 2021:** Whistleblowers first contact Congress regarding Sieg matter.
- **Mar. 1, 2021:** HFAC first contact USAGM Congressional Affairs concerning Sieg.
- **Apr. 23, 2021:** USAGM OHR issues first report, which fails to substantiate whistleblowers' accusations, but stated that there were "questions about how [Sieg] oversaw the Division's budget," and that she awarded some employees overtime contrary to agency directives. Indicates that Sieg may have lacked candor in interviews with OHR.
 - Falsely indicates that Sieg received her degree from Université Paris I – Pantheon Sorbonne.
- **June 22, 2021:** USAGM responds to Congressional inquiries, fails to correct prior mistake on Sieg's granting institution, equivocates on whether Sieg has a Ph.D.
- **Oct. 15, 2021:** University of Paris tells the French Embassy that Sieg holds a DRSU, which is an "establishment degree, not a state doctorate."
- **Jan. 19, 2022:** USAGM OHR report indicates that Sieg received her degree from Université Paris 7 – Denise Diderot, but that this institution was "associated with" the Sorbonne.
- **Feb. 16, 2022:** Université Paris 7 formally notifies French Embassy that Sieg holds a DRSU. French Embassy official emails HFAC that "[t]his is as official as can be and is perfectly clear: Mrs[.] [Sieg] DOES NOT hold a Ph.D. . . ."
- **July 12, 2023:** USAGM CEO Bennett writes letter directly to Chairman McCaul in attempt to persuade him to end HFAC's investigation.
- **Sept. 23, 2023:** USAGM OHR renews investigation into Sieg at HFAC's urging.
- **Dec. 19, 2023:** Chairman McCaul sends letter to USAGM CEO reminding her of her duty to preserve documents.

- **Jan. 13, 2023:** Chairman McCaul sends letter to USAGM CEO demanding documents to enable HFAC oversight.
- **June 14 – Oct. 4, 2023:** HFAC conducts transcribed interviews of USAGM witnesses.
- **Nov. 14, 2023:** Third-party credentialing service tells USAGM that Sieg holds a “Diplome de DOctorat” [sic] in “History and Civilization – Western Societies” from Université Paris 7, and that this is equivalent to an American Ph.D.
- **Jan. 9, 2024:** French Embassy issues final report, “superseding and cancel[ing]” all prior correspondence, stating that Sieg “does not hold a French doctorate degree,” but rather a has DRSU, and that “a DRSU differs from a national doctorate degree” because it does not comply with national standards. Further, the Embassy stated that it had “found no evidence of [Sieg] holding a PhD degree in France[.]”
- **Feb. 5, 2024:** HFAC staff note that Sieg’s current resume, posted to her website, claims a “Ph.D., Political History” from “University of Paris VII.”
- **Mar. 6, 2024:** USAGM OHR issues third report, concluding that Sieg did not attend the Sorbonne or study International Relations as she had claimed, and that she had not filed a thesis with the French thesis database as required for a doctorate. This report and supporting documentation is sent to a VOA management official to determine discipline.
- **Mar. 18, 2024:** Université Paris Cité provides Sieg with letter confirming that she received a DRSU, but opining that a DRSU is equivalent to an American Ph.D.
- **Mar. 25, 2024:** USAGM briefs HFAC, states that no disciplinary action is planned.
- **Mar. 28, 2024:** Chairman McCaul requests transcribed interview of Ms. Sieg.
- **Mar. 28, 2024:** French university administrators who previously told USAGM Sieg’s degree was the equivalent of a Ph.D. tell the Committee they “cannot claim to have an informed overview of the French higher education system” and recommend HFAC contact the French Embassy in the U.S. (which, of course, had already happened).
- **Apr. 12, 2024:** Third party credentialing service sends a revised evaluation of Sieg’s education documents to USAGM.
- **May 31, 2024:** USAGM notifies the Committee that, after a review of “updated information,” the agency decided to issue a letter of reprimand to Sieg.

V. The Committee is Alerted

In early 2021, whistleblowers contacted members of Congress regarding the reinstatement of Ms. Setareh Sieg, then the former director of VOA-Persia. In the closing days of the Trump administration, Ms. Sieg was issued a Notice of Proposed Removal, [14] resulting in her suspension. However, she was restored to duty with no loss of pay shortly after President Biden was inaugurated. [15] Citing the previous attempt to terminate her employment for misconduct, whistleblowers alleged that USAGM's decision to bring Ms. Sieg back was improper given "a long laundry list of waste, fraud and abuse [that] was exposed by [...] human resources." [16] These whistleblowers had previously submitted a complaint regarding Ms. Sieg to the State Department's Office of Inspector General (State OIG), [17] which has authority to "conduct[] independent audits, inspections, evaluations, and investigations to promote economy and efficiency and to prevent and detect waste, fraud, abuse, and mismanagement in the programs and operations of...the U.S. Agency for Global Media (USAGM)." [18] In addition to investigations, State OIG's "mandate is broad and comprehensive, involving oversight of the full scope of [the State Department] and USAGM programs and operations, including more than 76,000 employees...". [19] When they initially reached out to Congress, whistleblowers accused Ms. Sieg of "falsifying [her own] academic credentials, taking personal trips and asking [the] agency to foot the bill, and giving excessive overtime [pay] to her sycophants for little or no work." [20] These claims corresponded to what was alleged in the State OIG complaint. [21] The State OIG complaint specifically stated that Ms. Sieg made personal trips to Israel and Paris on multiple occasions at government expense, even though the trips served no public purpose, and also took trips to Cannes, France for expensive conferences that returned little if any value to the agency. [22] The complaint further alleged that she authorized similar trips for favored employees, approved disproportionate overtime (and thereby pay) for such employees, and overrode supervisors in order to secure them high employment review ratings. [23]

After early Committee investigations unearthed relevant documents, at least some of the whistleblowers' claims appeared to have merit. For example, Ms. Sieg still claims to hold a Ph.D. [24] The agency also trumpeted in internal announcements and on its website that Sieg had received such an honor from the Sorbonne, which the Committee also now understands to be incorrect.

From: IBB Notices Admin <HouseAnnouncements@bbg.gov>
Sent: Friday, January 10, 2014 7:59 PM
To: IBB Notices Administration <House@bbg.gov>
Subject: From the VOA Director

I am pleased to announce that Setareh Derakhshesh has been selected to be the new Director of VOA's Persian Division.

An award winning journalist, Setareh has been Acting Director of VOA Persian since September of 2013. Prior to this, she was Deputy Director, Executive Editor, and Managing Editor of the Division. Setareh played a key role in the launching of VOA Persian television to Iran, serving as the lead anchor and managing editor of its flagship news show. Earlier in her career, she worked as an editor, reporter and airshow talent for our radio broadcasts to Iran, as well as a news writer in Central News and broadcaster for the former VOA English News Now program.

During her 20-year career at VOA, Setareh has traveled extensively to cover U.S. presidential trips and news events throughout the world. She has also interviewed a number of world leaders, newsmakers, and politicians, including former President George W. Bush, former First Lady Laura Bush, and Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Setareh graduated summa cum laude from the Sorbonne in Paris, with a Ph.D. in political science and a Master's degree in law and political science. She is fluent in Persian, French and English, and has taught at Georgetown University and American University in Washington, D.C.

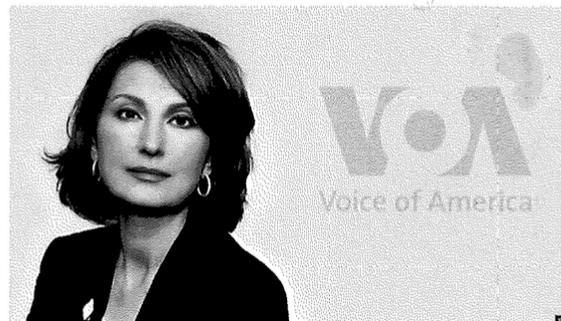
Please join me congratulating Setareh on her new role.

David Ensor

Above: an internal email announcing Sieg's hiring, referencing her graduation summa cum laude "from the Sorbonne in Paris, with a Ph.D. in political science."

Setareh Derakhshesh, Persian Division

May 12, 2016



Setareh Derakhshesh VOA Expert Persian
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An award winning journalist, Setareh Derakhshesh has been Director of Voice of America Persian since January of 2014. Prior to this, she was Deputy Director, Executive Editor, and Managing Editor of the Division.

Setareh played a key role in the launching of VOA Persian television to Iran, serving as the lead anchor and managing editor of its flagship news show. Earlier in her career, she worked as an editor, reporter and on air talent for VOA radio broadcasts to Iran, as well as a news reporter in VOA Central News and broadcaster for the former VOA English News Now program.

During her 20-year career at VOA, Setareh has traveled extensively to cover U.S. presidential trips and major international news events throughout the world. She has also interviewed a number of world leaders, newsmakers, and politicians, including former President George W. Bush, former First Lady Laura Bush, Secretary John Kerry and Russian President Vladimir Putin, among others.

Setareh Derakhshesh graduated summa cum laude from the Sorbonne in Paris, with a Ph.D. in political science and a Master's degree in law and political science. She is fluent in Persian, French and English, and has taught at Georgetown University and American University in Washington, D.C.



Above: Sieg's bio on the Voice of America website, also referencing her "Ph.D. in political science" "from the Sorbonne in Paris."

Representative John Curtis (R-UT), one of the congressmen initially contacted by whistleblowers, took the allegations seriously and informed Republican staff members of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, which is responsible for Congressional oversight of USAGM. At the time, current Chairman Michael T. McCaul was Ranking Member of the Committee, and Republicans were in the Minority.

Whistleblowers, who identified themselves as registered Democrats, were less successful in getting the attention of Democrat leaders, even though they happened to be their own constituents. In the House, the office of Representative Gerald E. Connolly of Virginia informed whistleblowers that it had chosen to “pass” on signing onto any official letters regarding Ms. Sieg. Although Connolly’s office communicated that it was “pursuing other ways to monitor this situation at USAGM,” [26] whistleblowers told HFAC staff that Rep. Connolly – and other Democrats in the House – never followed up. [27]

Similarly, in the Senate, then-Chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee (SFRC) Robert Menendez (D-NJ) did not respond to whistleblowers’ pleas. [28] Nor did Virginian Senators Kaine or Warner, who, like Connolly, represented the whistleblowers. [29] Though Senator Klobuchar’s office showed some initial interest in the issue, her staff ultimately declined to take on a more active role, attributing the allegations against Ms. Sieg to a political vendetta under former CEO Michael Pack. [30]

Meanwhile, certain media outlets had taken interest in the Sieg affair as well. On January 14, 2021, nine days after the Robbins Report recommended her removal, Sieg signed onto a letter accusing the Trump Administration of laundering political propaganda through the network by interviewing then-Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on the air. [31] The letter criticized Elizabeth Robbins by name, and called for VOA Director Robert Reilly to be fired. [32] This accusation of political bias was picked up by the left-leaning Guardian shortly thereafter. [33] As reported in the Washington Free Beacon, this prompted Sieg and the other signatories to become a “cause célèbre among Democrats.” [34] In February 2021, the Washington Times and The Federalist publicly reported that she had been rehired by USAGM. [35]

Following whistleblowers’ outreach and various media accounts of Sieg’s rehiring, Republican committee staff saw it appropriate to learn more about what had transpired with Ms. Sieg in the years prior, when she had been accused of misconduct and was investigated by career agency Human Resources staff during the Trump administration. The following section of this report outlines that period.

VI. The Trump Administration: The First Internal Investigation and the Proposal to Remove Sieg

During the second half of 2020, following the whistleblower allegations against Ms. Sieg that were initially submitted to State OIG, authority for conducting the investigation was transferred from the State Department to USAGM. [36] USAGM's Office of Human Resources, Labor and Employee Relations ("LER") conducted an administrative investigation into complaints about Ms. Sieg's performance. In particular, the investigation considered claims related to her waste of government funds, dishonesty, improperly awarded contracts, and pattern of rewarding favorite subordinates with excessive overtime pay and unnecessary travel.

LER's investigation led to the interview of multiple agency employees, including Ms. Sieg, and the examination of numerous pieces of documentary evidence. [37] By January 2021, the investigation uncovered evidence that Sieg misspent over one million federal dollars and falsified her educational credentials. [38]

Elizabeth Robbins, then VOA's Deputy Director, detailed the specific allegations – and her findings regarding each one – in a January 5, 2021 "Notice of Proposal to Suspend/Remove" that she sent to Ms. Sieg. Although styled as a letter, this proposal is better considered a management report on the improprieties that justified the decision to terminate Ms. Sieg. Because Sieg, like many federal officials, enjoyed civil service protection, this recommendation was subject to review – first, by another management official, who would decide whether or not to act upon it; and, second, if Sieg appealed her removal, by administrative law judges. Consequently, Robbins' justification was detailed, specific, and thorough.

First, the Robbins Report alleged that Sieg mishandled \$950,000 of government funds by awarding a sole source contract to the company Abstraction Media – largely for TV programs that had either been produced at VOA in the past or which could have been produced by VOA personnel for a fraction of the cost. [39] For instance, the variety show that VOA broadcast to mark the Iranian New Year had previously been produced in-house with far greater success than Abstraction Media's output, as reflected in viewership on YouTube. [40]



The Robbins Report further alleged that Ms. Sieg approved excessive overtime for several favored employees, which resulted in increased pay for those employees. [41] This not only wasted government funds, but also violated VOA's Negotiated Labor Management Agreement: by Sieg's actions, the agency failed to assign other, equally-qualified employees to overtime shifts, and failed to "make reasonable efforts to schedule overtime so that the [relevant] employee [did] not work in excess of 12 consecutive calendar days." [42]

In addition to wasting funds on bad contracts and excess overtime, the report noted that Sieg also wasted federal dollars on unnecessary and/or fruitless employee travel. Sieg authorized one employee to spend over \$6,000 visiting various college campuses in California and the American Southwest, but this travel resulted in no programming for the network. Ms. Sieg deflected responsibility for this poor use of resources onto a consultant, who she said was responsible for the decision – but the consultant denied making any such decision and placed the blame squarely on Ms. Sieg. [43] Indeed, as a consultant, she had no authority to make such a decision, even had she wanted to. [44]

Sieg later assigned the same employee who made the wasteful campus road trip to a six-month posting in London – at the cost of over \$52,000 – even though he lacked any journalistic credentials and had self-evidently failed in his previous expedition. [45] Over his six months in London, this unqualified reporter produced "little, if any, original, on-site reporting." Every indication was that he did little work, [46] and what he did produce was "amateurish and riddled with inaccuracies." [47] Most importantly Robbins concluded, the employee's work could have easily been done in Washington, DC at far less taxpayer expense.[48] Consequently, the Robbins Report concluded that sending an unqualified employee who produced no meaningful content to London was a serious waste of resources. [49]

In addition, Ms. Robbins highlighted serious concerns about Ms. Sieg's honesty and forthrightness. Robbins noted Ms. Sieg's lack of candor with respect to questions about her use of funds, as well as her false claim to have earned a Ph.D. in International Relations from the prestigious Sorbonne. [50] Although Ms. Sieg claimed to have received that degree in her employment application and on various government forms, she was unable to prove it by means of a diploma or other documentation. Instead, Ms. Sieg provided evidence that she obtained another, lesser degree from a different institution, University of Paris 7 Diderot, in 1995. [51]

The Robbins Report then discussed the appropriate penalty for Ms. Sieg's misconduct. In making a penalty determination, Robbins considered "the nature and seriousness of the offenses, and their relation to [Sieg's] duties;" Sieg's "distinct responsibility" as VOA-Persia's Director to ensure funds were not wasted; that Sieg had "clearly failed" to "exercise good judgment with the employees and contracts" that she supervised; that the length of her service suggested she should have been well-aware of her duties and responsibilities; the impact of her misfeasance on the reputation of the Agency; that she was clearly on notice of the rules she violated; and her "minimal" potential for rehabilitation. [52] Accounting for all these factors, Robbins proposed that Sieg be removed from federal service, and placed her on administrative leave pending further action. [53]

VII. Blunders and Blinders Post-Inauguration: Sieg Reinstated, Questions Abound

Upon further investigation, HFAC majority staff learned that – just as the whistleblowers had originally alleged – no further action was ever taken to effectuate Ms. Sieg’s removal. Quite the opposite: Around the time of President Biden’s inauguration, and just before Sieg’s removal was to go through, Ms. Robbins and VOA Director Robert Reilly were instead fired from VOA, [54] the latter in violation of the National Defense Authorization Act of 2021. [55] They were replaced with Mr. John Lippman and Ms. Yolanda Lopez, respectively. Ms. Sieg, meanwhile, was briefly re-instated as Persian News Director at the behest of USAGM’s Office of General Counsel and Department of Human Resources – then moved to a new position because Ms. Lopez did not want to disrupt the “harmony” created at VOA-Persia in Sieg’s absence, and because she had personal concerns about Sieg’s management style based on employee reports. [56]

Ms. Sieg’s lawyers touted her reinstatement as a victory for VOA’s political independence: “The investigation was based entirely on frivolous allegations [such as] that Dr. Sieg did not earn a Ph.D. from the Sorbonne,” the “Government Accountability Project” which assisted in her administrative claim of whistleblower reprisal, wrote in a press release. [57] The group’s senior counsel was quoted as saying that “[former USAGM CEO Michael] Pack’s willingness to authorize and permit the continuation of this investigation of Dr. Sieg, a known whistleblower, was politically motivated and a gross waste of resources,” and went on to “applaud” her “courage.” [58] Attorney Mark Zaid, who also represented Sieg, claimed that “Dr. Sieg was inappropriately targeted for political reasons” and “wrongfully attacked.” [59] Zaid proclaimed that Sieg was “ultimately [and] completely vindicated!” [60]

He was badly mistaken.

VIII. McCaul Queries USAGM and Debunks Sieg's Qualifications via French Government and University Officials

On March 1, 2021, HFAC staff emailed USAGM's Director of Congressional Affairs, requesting to know why Sieg was reinstated "when such serious allegations ha[d] been made regarding her previous tenure at VOA." [61] USAGM responded, on March 8, with a written response totaling only three paragraphs. [62] In its response, USAGM stated that Sieg's suspension was revoked, and her proposed removal "rescinded in . . . late January." [63] As a consequence, Sieg went back to work, albeit in a different role, with "no loss of pay." [64] USAGM attributed Sieg's reinstatement to Office of Special Counsel ("OSC") concerns about the process that led to her proposed firing, and noted that she was "recused from any matters involving the Persian Service indefinitely." [65] The agency refused to take any further action concerning Ms. Sieg's employment before its investigation of unspecified "new allegations" was complete. [66]

On April 23, 2021, USAGM's LER office created a report summarizing its conclusions in relation to six of the allegations against Ms. Sieg. [67] Among these allegations, raised in "numerous complaints," were that: (1) she did not earn a Ph.D. from the Sorbonne, though she claimed to have done so; (2) she allowed someone who was neither an employee nor a contractor to deliver reports on camera; (3) several employees were favored by her and received excessive compensatory and overtime hours; (4) she misused government funds by improperly entering into a sole source contact with a relative; (5) she wasted government funds for a personal trip to California; and (6) she also wasted government funds by dispatching a producer – first to various America universities, and then to live and work in London – when he was not qualified to produce on-location reporting. [68] Though LER found significant evidence incriminating Sieg, as outlined above, it declined to formally find that any allegation had been "substantiated." [69] With regard to Ms. Sieg's education, LER stated that she had "earned the equivalent of a Ph.D. from the University of Paris I Pantheon – Sorbonne in France." [70]

Though the LER report stated that there were "questions about how Ms. Sieg oversaw the Division's budget" regarding overtime, it stopped short of finding "any violation of policies or procedures." [71]

However, this conclusion was undermined by the report's own recitation of the facts. It noted that "several employees did receive substantial . . . compensatory and overtime hours," [72] that this "deviated from the normal approval process," [73] and that employees "sought secondary approval from Ms. Sieg as the amounts and nature of the compensatory overtime contradicted both the agency and Ms. Sieg's own directive and instructions regarding the approval of overtime pay." [74] Specifically, the report highlighted that Ms. Sieg personally approved the conversion of compensatory time to overtime, even though, per policy, that time should have been used before it expired; allowing its expiration resulted in conversion to overtime pay. [75] Regarding the allegations of favoritism, the report also noted that Sieg approved \$18,450.92 in overtime for one employee over the course of seven months, though it shed no light on her relationship with the employee in question. [76] This report therefore omitted the testimony of another senior VOA employee, who stated that the subordinate in question was, indeed, Sieg's favorite, and that the work performed was duplicative. [77] Also omitted from the report was the allegation that Sieg hired the "favorite" employee's brother for a high-level position for which he was unqualified. [78]

Similarly, though LER "did not substantiate improper conduct" with regard to Ms. Sieg's California trip, it concluded that she "may have lacked candor in the course of the . . . administrative investigation." [79] Once again, the underlying facts were more concerning than the top-line conclusion implied: In an email, Ms. Sieg indicated that she visited California "to attend a conference where '[her sister would] be going too [sic] get an award.'" [80] When asked about this by investigators, Ms. Sieg nonetheless denied that her sister had any association with the organization holding the conference, and further denied attending the conference in order to see her sister receive honors. [81]

Finally, LER found evidence indicating that Sieg may have mismanaged, and been less than forthcoming about, her employee's sojourns to England and American campuses, but declined to substantiate the allegations against her – in part because it could not conclude that the employee was unqualified for the assignments. [82] Again, though, the facts told a different story: LER found that the U.S. campus trips cost the agency \$6,423.69 in travel expenses, but that the trips generated no programming for the network. [83] Despite this evident failure on the part of the employee in question, Ms. Sieg later authorized the expenditure of \$52,811.10 of taxpayer funds for the same employee's England residency. [84] She did so even though, echoing the Robbins Report, "all the content [the employee] provided could have been done in Washington, DC." [85]

This content amounted to stories filmed in front of a green screen, which were produced from materials emailed to the employee, rather than any original reporting that would necessitate an overseas posting. [86] On average, the employee produced less than one such segment per day – never more than five segments per week. [87] Per LER, as of the writing of the report, “there remain[ed] questions about how Ms. Sieg managed this particular assignment and about the accuracy of her answers in her [administrative investigation] interview.” [88]

In sum, therefore, the LER report bore all the hallmarks of an incomplete investigation manipulated to reach conclusions that would be palatable to the new leadership of USAGM, who had reinstated Sieg months before it was released. Though, per the report, “significant questions remained,” the agency apparently lacked any interest in digging further. The Committee, however, continued to ask those questions. [89]

On June 22, 2021, USAGM submitted written responses to a number of additional questions posed by HFAC majority staff. [90] In these responses, USAGM was less than forthcoming. For instance, when asked whether there was any evidence indicating that Sieg was, as her lawyers contended, a “whistleblower,” the agency punted – noting only that OSC requested a “stay of proceedings against Ms. Sieg,” without detailing what concerns OSC had, or any communications between OSC and USAGM management. [91] Similarly, when the Committee requested to know whether Acting Chief Executive Kelo Chao had been recused from handling Sieg’s employment matters, the agency did not respond. [92] It only stated that, “[a]s a general matter, having an amicable relationship with a colleague is not a standard basis for recusal.” [93] Likewise, when asked whether the earlier LER investigation substantiated, at least in part, the allegation that Ms. Sieg mishandled her budgetary responsibilities, the agency refused to clarify. [94]

To the extent that the agency did attempt to respond to the Committee’s questions on June 22, its answers were often muddled. In particular, the agency did little to clarify whether Sieg had, as she claimed, received a Ph.D. (or its equivalent) from the Sorbonne, despite a request to do so. [95] Per the agency, “LER ha[d] in its possession several documents attesting to various degrees Ms. Sieg received from the University of Paris Pantheon Sorbonne and University Paris 7.” [96] As to which of these institutions purportedly conferred Sieg’s doctorate, the agency was entirely vague. However, it did not-so-helpfully point out that “The University of Paris Pantheon Sorbonne has the word ‘Sorbonne’ in its title[.]” [97] Even on this issue, though, the agency lacked candor. As stated previously, the April 23, 2021 LER report described Ms. Sieg as receiving a Ph.D.-equivalent degree from this institution. One of the Committee’s questions related to this earlier conclusion; though the agency had developed a contrary understanding even well before the April 23 report, [98] it did nothing to correct the record. [99]

At least one of the agency's answers also revealed that it relied on assumptions and misconceptions in clearing Ms. Sieg, rather than on a fact-based and thorough investigation. In its June 22 responses, the agency stated that it used "[c]opies of Ms. Sieg's transcripts and degree certificates" to determine that her degree was equivalent to a Ph.D. The agency claimed, apparently on the basis of independent internet research, that "in France there is no degree called a 'PhD,'" but that Ms. Sieg's degree was interchangeable with one. [100] As a simple factual matter, the agency's understanding was wrong. [101] In France, Sieg's degree would not allow her to qualify for an employment opportunity requiring a Ph.D. [102]

HFAC majority staff investigated the matter of Ms. Sieg's degree independently. In response to Committee inquiries, Sieg's actual alma mater, Université Paris 7, twice confirmed that she had not obtained a Ph.D. [103] The French embassy noted that, even if Sieg had been enrolled in a Ph.D. program, her dissertation defense would not have been valid, because too few professors sat on the panel. [104] Indeed, the Embassy emphasized, due to the inadequacy of the panel, Sieg's dissertation defense could not have qualified her for any doctoral degree. [105]

After months of incomplete and unsatisfactory responses to Committee inquiries, and following the input of the French Embassy, the Committee expanded its inquiry. On October 27, 2021, the Chairman [106] sent a letter, cosigned by six members of the Committee, urging Acting CEO Chao to provide additional information concerning her role in Sieg's reinstatement and illuminating the underlying facts of the case. [107] Chairman McCaul stated that the Committee's own investigation had revealed that there were significant questions concerning the validity of Sieg's degree, that the document the agency likely used to confirm it was not a diploma or transcript, and that, even if the degree were valid, it was "not a doctorate of any kind." [108] Chairman McCaul emphasized that these were not merely his opinions. Rather, these conclusions were supported by correspondence with the French Embassy's Higher Education Office and French university officials. [109] Further, "the relative ease by which our staff obtained this information," Chairman McCaul wrote, "calls into question the honesty, competency, and investigative integrity at the agency." [110] These questions were also heightened, per the Chairman, by the agency's refusal to disclose Chao's potential involvement in the investigation into Sieg, which was "incomplete, rife with factual omissions and abbreviated explanations that [did] not hold water when read alongside the longer and more detailed December 2020 notice for proposed removal." [111] Chairman McCaul's letter specifically requested production, on or before November 17, of eighteen tranches of documents. [112] No documents were produced on or before this deadline. [113]

Thus, on December 17, 2021, HFAC staff again emailed the USAGM Director of Congressional Affairs, highlighting numerous issues that the agency had failed to resolve. [114] These were, first, what role Acting CEO Chao played in Sieg's reinstatement; second, what recommendations Michelle Stewart, one of the agency's investigators, provided to LER; third, how LER came to believe that Sieg had the equivalent of a Ph.D. when this was untrue; fourth, the agency's insistence on conducting an internal review of the matter, when previous intra-agency investigations had proven inadequate; and, finally, the process by which Sieg had obtained, as well as the status of, her security clearance. [115]

On March 31, 2022 – more than one year after Ms. Sieg's case was first raised by HFAC Republican staff – Acting CEO Chao disclosed the existence of yet another USAGM internal investigation report. [116] The agency had failed to provide the Committee with this report for approximately six weeks after it was created.

The report, dated January 19, 2022, obliquely confirmed the veracity of at least one allegation against Sieg. Specifically, her 2013 resume, with which she obtained her post atop VOA-Persia, stated that she earned a "Ph.D. in International Relations Summa cum laude, Sorbonne, Paris, France in 1995." [117] By contrast, the report indicated that she instead studied "Third World Knowledge: Social Dynamics 043" at "Université Paris 7," the same institution that had informed the Committee it had not awarded Sieg a doctorate. [118]

Despite confirming that Sieg did not graduate from the Sorbonne as claimed, the January 19 report attempted to obfuscate this fact. The report concluded, on the basis of the preparer's own online research (primarily Wikipedia) that Université Paris 7 had been, since 2010, a member of the "Sorbonne Paris University Group." [119] The report thus stated that "both institutions from which Ms. Sieg received her degrees were associated with the Sorbonne," [120] but failed to recognize the categorical difference between this claim and that of graduating from the Sorbonne, the falsehood Sieg actually listed on her resume. Though the report stated that Université Paris 7 is commonly referred to with two alternative names ("Paris 7" and "Universite [sic] Paris 7 – Denis Diderot"), the agency never even suggested that the school was referred to as "the Sorbonne" either by graduates or the general public (either in France or the United States). [121]

Given the obvious inadequacy of the above logic, it is not surprising that the agency attempted to rely on other authorities to bolster it. In doing so, though, the agency only further revealed its lack of understanding of the allegations against Sieg. In justifying its conclusion that the investigation into Sieg should be closed, the report relied on the State Department's finding that she had not misrepresented her education during her 2017 security clearance investigation. [122] However, in the context of this investigation, Sieg did not, as on her resume, claim to receive a doctorate from the Sorbonne, or that she studied foreign relations. Rather, Sieg indicated that she earned a "Ph.D. Political Science Comparative" from the University of Paris in 1993. [123] Thus, the State Department report did nothing to validate either the subject matter or the granting institution of Sieg's degree, [124] and if anything cast further doubt on her 2013 resume's conflicting claims.

As to the equivalency of Ms. Sieg's degree to a Ph.D., the January 19 report made strained arguments on the basis of little evidence. Though the agency had no reason to believe that Ms. Sieg's degree was a Ph.D.-equivalent "national degree," it concluded that it was, because there was "no indication on [the] documents [the agency reviewed]" that it was not, and "several of [the documents] contain[ed] references on the top [of the page] . . . to the French "Minister of National Education" and French "Minister of Higher Education and Research." [125] On these shaky grounds, the report dismissed any "irregularities," which it concluded would be "difficult, if not impossible" to resolve. [126] In other words, rather than conduct a further investigation, or to make any additional effort to interpret the documents it had been provided, the agency deferred to Ms. Sieg's self-interested representations.

This most recent report also failed to fully resolve the question of Acting CEO Chao's involvement in the decision to rehire Ms. Sieg. The report concluded that Chao and Sieg did not have a "close personal relationship" that would require recusal, because the two did not meet one another's spouses, visit each other's homes, have social lunches or dinners, or travel together socially. [127] However, whether this conclusion was based on anything more than the statements of the two individuals was left unspecified, which is concerning, as both parties clearly had a motive to downplay any relationship. More importantly, the report never indicated what role, if any, Acting CEO Chao had in the decision to revoke Ms. Sieg's suspension, despite the Committee's repeated questions on this front. In other words, this section of the report was designed not to inform the Committee or further its oversight, but to deflect any criticism that would result from it.

Yet more weeks passed with little resolution. On April 20, 2022, HFAC staff again emailed the agency's Congressional Affairs Director, outlining a series of inconsistencies and ambiguities that the agency had failed to resolve in its many responses:

1. What institution purportedly granted Sieg a doctorate? Both Sieg and the agency had provided conflicting and evolving representations of this simple fact.
2. What field did Sieg receive her "doctorate" in? Although Sieg claimed to receive a Ph.D. in "International Relations," USAGM indicated support for the conclusion that she studied "Third Word [sic] Studies," [I28] and Sieg told the State Department that she studied "Political Science." [I29]
3. When did Sieg receive her degrees? Sieg had provided conflicting accounts of her bachelor's degree (1980 vs. 1981); master's degree (1981 vs. 1982); and "doctorate" (1993 vs. 1995).
4. What degrees did Sieg actually hold? Was any one of them actually equivalent to a Ph.D.?
5. Why did the agency withhold its January 19, 2022 report from the Committee for approximately six weeks, given the high level of interest Congress had expressed in oversight of this matter?
6. What was Acting CEO Chao's role in the Sieg matter? Did Chao order Sieg's reinstatement? If Chao was not recused, was she granted an ethics waiver?

Even more weeks later, the agency responded to these detailed questions with no answer – only the statement that it "[stood] by the results of [its earlier] investigations" and "[did] not have additional information to provide[.]" [I30] This lackadaisical response to Congressional oversight signaled that the agency's primary goal was to put the matter to bed before it attracted more attention.

IX. USAGM Doubles Down: Refuses to Take Action, Impedes the Committee

As described above, despite the Committee's repeated requests, USAGM produced no documents concerning the Sieg inquiry for the entirety of 2021 and 2022. Similarly, despite the Committee's urging, the agency also refused to contact officials at the French Embassy in Washington, D.C., who had confirmed (also as described above) that Ms. Sieg did not possess the credentials she claimed to have.

After the November 2022 election, Chairman McCaul once again renewed his requests. On December 19, 2022, he formally reminded Amanda Bennett, the new CEO of USAGM, of her obligation to preserve the requested documents, given the impending transition in power in the House. [131] The letter, once again, was ignored by the agency.

At the beginning of the 118th Congress, on January 13, 2023, Chairman McCaul sent a new letter to USAGM head Amanda Bennett, reminding her of the agency's obligation to provide all requested documents related to USAGM's rehiring of Setareh Derakhshesh Sieg, which by then had been pending for almost eighteen months. [132]

On April 15, 2023, the agency's Director of Congressional Affairs informed HFAC staff that the agency would not provide the documents underlying LER's first investigation as hard copies. [133] They would instead be available only for in camera review (limited viewing at USAGM's headquarters). [134] HFAC immediately notified the agency that this was insufficient, and that the Committee required hard copy production. [135] In camera review would not be adequate, and such unilateral restrictions would not be permitted. [136]

Nonetheless, the agency continued to impose restrictions on the Committee's access to the documents. [137]

Even upon providing links to electronic copies of the documents supporting the April 23, 2021, and January 19, 2022 Reports of Investigation, USAGM continued to impose deliberately onerous restrictions on the Committee's access thereto. Specifically, the agency required that anyone given access be pre-approved, and that the review be in camera. [138]

Following a conversation between agency and Committee counsel, USAGM agreed to provide hard copies, subject to limitations on disclosure and a requirement of destruction. [139] Even once this agreement had been reached, however, USAGM failed to deliver the documents for an additional week, with no explanation, [140] despite the fact that the Committee required the documents in order to prepare its first scheduled transcribed interview.

X. Chairman McCaul Notices Oddities in Documents Produced by Agency

Once the agency finally provided the Committee with the required documents, HFAC staff discovered a number of issues with Ms. Sieg's educational records. These errors, inconsistencies, and omissions cast further doubt on the validity of her credentials, and on the wisdom of the agency's decision to declare "case closed."

The minutes of Ms. Sieg's dissertation defense contained a number of such irregularities. [I41] Only two professors were listed as sitting on the jury. Of these, one was both Sieg's advisor and a professor emeritus (in essence, a retired academic). [I42] While emeritus professors may sit on dissertation defense juries in France, they may only do so if there is already an adequately sized panel, because they do not count toward the required number of jurors (three, at the time). [I43] Additionally, the minutes as provided by Ms. Sieg appear to reflect a photograph of a partial document, rather than a full page. Given the importance of this record to the validity of Ms. Sieg's credential, it seems odd that she would not produce it in its entirety, as she did with other documents. [I44]

Although the dissertation defense jury report and the letter convening the jury both referenced a doctorate in the offing, [I45] Sieg's certified diploma, noting a dissertation defense on the same date, refers to the degree earned as a "Diplome de Recherche Specialisee de L'Universite," (DRSU) or "university specialized research degree," [I46] rather than a doctorate. It also lists, consistent with the minutes of her dissertation defense, only two jurors, as would be inadequate for a doctorate. [I47]

In addition, though doctoral theses since 1985 are filed with a national database in France, there is no evidence that Sieg ever did so, as her thesis is not accessible on that database. [I48] The agency evidently did not find these (or related [I49]) issues material, if they were aware of them.

In sum, the Committee cannot draw any firm conclusions from these documents. Some may be inauthentic, or they may have merely been poorly prepared, unfiled, or incorrectly filed. The documents alone simply cannot provide that certainty without greater analysis and investigation that the Agency never performed. What is certain, however, is that they raised sufficient doubts that the Agency, once alerted by whistleblowers, should have taken the necessary steps to determine whether Ms. Sieg lied for personal gain, including her promotion to Director of VOA-Persia.

Since the suspicions expressed in the Robbins Report were supported by these documents, and given the agency's inadequate response to Congressional oversight, the Committee began to suspect that the agency intentionally tried to bury the issue.

XI. The Coverup Fails: Congress Takes Notice.

Despite USAGM’s best efforts to tamp down interest in Ms. Sieg’s case, several members of Congress actively conducted oversight. At a hearing of the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Appropriations on March 9, 2023, Congressman Guy Reschenthaler (R-PA) questioned USAGM CEO Bennett at some length about Sieg’s case. [150] Under this questioning, Bennett claimed that Ms. Sieg had been “cleared” of any “charges,” and that she was powerless to oversee Voice of America’s hiring and firing decisions with respect to their “journalists.” [161] Ms. Bennett also stopped short of promising to provide all of the documents requested by Chairman McCaul, stating that she would only “commit to responding in whatever way [her agency was] required to and appropriate . . . to do.” [152]

Congress has also weighed partially defunding USAGM in response to the administration’s mishandling of the Sieg case. When Congress was debating an appropriations bill, Representative Tim Burchett (R-TN) proposed reducing Sieg’s, Bennett’s, and Chao’s salaries to one dollar each, consistent with the Holman Rule. [152] In a statement to National Review, Burchett explained his proposal thusly: “Setareh Sieg was fired under the Trump administration because she lied on her résumé and wasted taxpayer dollars. The Biden administration was quick to hire her back for no good reason. There’s no reason Americans should continue funding her salary or the salaries of the people who hired her back. Let’s cut out the corruption and waste where we see it.” [154]

XII. Chairman Conducts Transcribed Interviews of Senior Agency Officials.

Given the deficiencies of USAGM’s investigation and the many unanswered questions, Chairman McCaul had no choice but to continue to press for more information. In the Summer of 2023, he requested that Committee staff conduct transcribed interviews (TIs) of agency personnel involved in the Sieg affair. [I55] The information obtained via these interviews informs and forms a partial basis for this report.

Transcribed Interview of David Kotz

On June 14, 2023, Committee staff conducted its first TI of the USAGM investigation. Mr. Kotz served as the Deputy Director of USAGM’s Office of Human Resources (OHR) from October 2018 to August 2020. [I56] He was then promoted to Director of OHR, and served in that capacity until March 2023, when he was promoted to Chief Management Officer of the agency. [I57] Prior to his time at USAGM, Mr. Kotz had years of government investigation experience, including as the Inspector General for the SEC from 2007-2012. [I58] In 2012, an Inspector General report found that Kotz conducted an investigation in “violation of CIGIE’s investigative standards and the Standards of Ethical Conduct for Employees of the Executive Branch.” [I59] In 2013, the SEC reached a \$580,000 settlement with the employee whose complaint triggered the Inspector General’s investigation – a fact covered by the national media at the time. [I60] Nonetheless, Mr. Kotz claimed that he could not recall having any “employee-related concerns formally lodged against [him] as related to [his] investigative abilities.” [I61]

In his role as the Director of OHR, Mr. Kotz oversaw the agency’s investigations into Ms. Sieg’s educational credentials and alleged misuse of taxpayer dollars. [I62] There were two such investigations, both overseen by Mr. Kotz, and both undertaken by Ms. Michelle Stewart and Ms. Jenessa Coleman, employees in OHR’s Labor and Employee Relations (LER) division. Ms. Coleman, under the direct supervision of Ms. Stewart, conducted the initial investigation into the allegations. [I63] Mr. Kotz frequently discussed the investigations with both Ms. Stewart and Ms. Coleman. [I64]

Mr. Kotz stated that LER's first investigation began after the State Department Office of Inspector General referred a whistleblower complaint to USAGM, which was around the beginning of September, 2020. [I65] State OIG conducted no investigation of its own, [I66] and instead delegated the investigation to the agency, which Kotz reported was unusual. [I67] He could not recall if any other employees had raised concerns to him about Ms. Sieg or the investigation, or whether USAGM received any whistleblower complaints directly. [I68] However, he affirmed that both may have occurred, and that it was "likely" he had received employee complaints about Ms. Sieg. [I69] He was aware that USAGM's "front office" had received such complaints, [I70] and that there were persistent grumbings about her leadership. [I71]

Although Ms. Sieg was placed on administrative leave before the conclusion of the LER investigation, this decision was founded on information investigators uncovered over the course of several months, and the investigators were not ordered to conclude their work to justify a removal prior to a change in administration. LER did not complete the final report on its first investigation until April 23, 2021. [I72] Per Mr. Kotz, he, Ms. Stewart, and Ms. Coleman all participated in the decision to end the initial investigation and issue the report on that date. [I73] On the one occasion that Mr. Kotz discussed the report's timeline with Trump-era CEO Michael Pack, he was told to take the time necessary to do a thorough job. [I74] During this time, however, various drafts of the report were circulated, and he believed some parts had been finalized as early as December of 2020. [I75] VOA Deputy Director Robbins made the decision to place Ms. Sieg on administrative leave pending her removal on January 5, 2021. [I76] The factual findings of the Robbins Report were based on the information collected by the LER investigators to that point. [I77]

Mr. Kotz confirmed that Ms. Sieg's removal was aborted in January 2021, shortly after President Biden's inauguration. [I78] "When the new administration came in . . . they asked . . . for all the previous [political appointees] to resign – or terminated them, I guess," Kotz recalled. [I79] Nonetheless, he believed that Ms. Sieg's suspension was not rescinded as a result of a changing of the guard, but at the behest of the Office of Special Counsel. [I80] However, the report that prompted OSC's stay was not drafted by that office, [I81] and Kotz was admittedly "a little fuzzy on the details." [I82] Kotz did remember that OSC recommended rescinding the removal order for due process reasons. [I83] However, Kotz pushed back on the OSC claim that this was due to the LER investigation being incomplete. [I84] Indeed, he stated that no agency rule or regulation precluded management from proposing removal before LER provided a final report on its investigation or otherwise signed off on the proposal. [I85] According to Kotz, the process issue was instead that Elizabeth Robbins, the official proposing Sieg's removal, remained involved after issuing her report. [I86]

“Remaining involved” did not mean that Robbins was the one adjudicating the merits of her own proposal, however. Rather, she merely contacted Sieg’s attorney to request a response to the proposal. [187] It is at best unclear how inviting the feedback of Ms. Sieg would have violated her due process in any meaningful way.

Mr. Kotz confirmed to the Committee that termination would be among the appropriate disciplinary actions for a USAGM employee found to have lied on his or her employment application, although he stated that this would depend on the judgment of the official making the recommendation. [188] He noted that Sieg’s potential lack of candor and poor management could also form the basis for disciplinary action, [189] though he acknowledged that such decisions were made by management, rather than Human Resources. [190] For instance, his office raised its conclusion that Sieg may have lacked candor with management so that they could “take disciplinary action potentially, or more closely scrutinize [her], or give [her] a bad performance rating” in her annual review. [191] Apparently, management chose to look the other way.

Mr. Kotz acknowledged that LER’s investigation into Sieg contained at least one serious error. Specifically, he noted that the April 23, 2021 Report of Investigation erroneously stated Ms. Sieg received her most advanced degree from University of Paris I – Pantheon Sorbonne. [192] Nonetheless, Kotz asserted, the rest of the April 23 report was the product of a “thorough and comprehensive investigation.” [193] “Sometimes errors happen. You know, they shouldn’t happen. They did happen in this case.” [194] This lack of attention to important details raises serious questions about the reliability of the conclusions reached by Kotz’s staff and the processes by which they were reached.

The investigation was only reopened after the Committee raised questions about Ms. Sieg’s reinstatement, [195] but then, Kotz’s testimony indicated, it was swiftly closed again. In the course of this renewed investigation, initiated at the tail end of 2021, Mr. Kotz’s team did not learn of the existence of France’s freely-searchable thesis database, nor look for Ms. Sieg’s thesis. [196] Nor, indeed, did Mr. Kotz reach out to the French Embassy for more information about Sieg’s credentials or the French system, [197] despite the Committee’s urging to do so. This is the investigation that resulted in the January 19, 2022 report that concluded, on little evidence, that Sieg received a “Ph.D. equivalent” “national degree” from an institution “associated with” the Sorbonne.

Kotz’s testimony paints a picture of management pushing investigators to conduct a speedy, but fact-bound and complete, investigation into a controversial senior employee with an obvious difficulty telling the truth.

Though CEO Michael Pack assured Kotz that his team would have the time necessary to reach solid conclusions, it appears that Kotz himself did not know the questions to ask, and that his team lacked critical investigative skills. This is evident from their failure to confirm Sieg’s educational credentials, and their inaccurate report of April 23, 2021. Given the serious allegations against Sieg, Robbins could hardly be blamed for wanting to remove her from a position of such great trust and authority before this final report issued, especially after the investigation dragged on for months. It is worth emphasizing that the Robbins Report did not terminate Sieg – it merely suspended her, pending an ultimate decision by another official.

Transcribed Interview of Michelle Stewart

On August 28, 2023, Committee staff interviewed Michelle Stewart, chief of the Labor and Employee Relations branch of USAGM’s Office of Human Resources. Ms. Stewart has served in that role since March of 2022, and has worked in a human-resources role at USAGM since 2008. [198] Ms. Stewart directly supervised Jenessa Coleman during the first investigation into Ms. Sieg, but was “not involved intimately” in the second investigation. [199] By her telling, therefore, Ms. Stewart was not involved in the decision to close the second investigation. [200]

Ms. Stewart’s testimony made clear that she harbored reservations about Ms. Sieg after interviewing her, but felt an obligation to avoid reaching any condemnatory conclusions that could be challenged by management, Ms. Sieg, or Ms. Sieg’s attorney. Thus, while Ms. Stewart and her team uncovered evidence damaging to Ms. Sieg, and Ms. Sieg’s behavior cast doubts on her credibility, Ms. Stewart nonetheless drew every inference in her favor, particularly where she lacked the knowledge and/or experience to contradict Sieg’s version of events. However, evidence uncovered by the Committee has revealed that Ms. Stewart was less careful, and her opinions more unvarnished, when they were not compiled into a final report.

Although the report that resulted from the first investigation failed to substantiate many of the charges against Ms. Sieg, Ms. Stewart made clear that it did not clear her of those charges – rather, the investigators “were not willing to draw conclusions” about them. [201] At the time that Ms. Sieg was reinstated, the investigation was still not complete, in Ms. Stewart’s eyes. [202] However, as early as December, 2020, the investigators had determined that Sieg lacked candor in her interviews. [203] At the very least, they had decided that Ms. Sieg was evasive about her government-funded travel, and possibly about the provision of overtime pay to favored employees. [204]

Documents obtained by the Committee indicate that Ms. Stewart substantiated some of the accusations of favoritism against Ms. Sieg as early as September, 2020. LER had learned from a senior VOA official that Sieg ordered duplicative work to give her “favorite” employee overtime, and that she had likely intervened to hire that employee’s brother for a prestigious position – even though he was arguably unqualified for that position. [205]

Person Y NO, NO, WE CAN WORK THAT WAY. WE CAN ON THE WEEKENDS, ANOTHER EMPLOYEE WAS IN CHARGE OF THE WEB BUT **Person A** WOULD MAKE **Person D** WORK FROM HOME TO MONITOR THE WEB AS WELL.

Person J OKAY, YOU ARE SAYING IT JUST DID NOT MAKE SENSE AND WAS REDUNDANT FOR **Person D** TO WORK COMP TIME TO COVER THE WEB WHEN AN EMPLOYEE WAS ALREADY WORKING THAT SHIFT TO COMPLETE THAT TASK?

Person Y YES BECAUSE SHE DID NOT NEED AN EDITOR, IT DID NOT MAKE SENSE FOR **Person A** TO SCHEDULE TWO MANAGERS OVERLAPPING WITH EACH OTHER - USING TWO RESOURCES, TWO GS-13'S TO DO THE SAME JOB.

Above: A senior VOA official describes Sieg (“Person A”) as approving duplicative work for one of her employees (“Person D”), resulting in paid overtime.

Person J SO DO YOU THINK THAT **Person D** HAD AN INFLUENCE ON HIS BROTHER BEING HIRED?

Person Y I CANNOT SAY THAT BUT HE **Person D** WAS HER FAVORITE. HE WAS THE ONE THAT DEFINITELY SUGGESTED THAT HIS BROTHER BE BROUGHT IN AS A CONTRACTOR TO BEGIN WITH **Person F** WAS THE LEAST EXPERIECED, LEAST EDUCATED HOST WE HAD. HE HAD REALLY NO BACKLOG COMPARED TO OTHER POSTS THAT WE HAD. THEN WHEN THEY INCEPTED TO DO A 365 SHOW, SHE PUT HIM AS THE ANCHOR OF THE FLAGSHIP NEWS PROGRAM. I LET ME SEE, I

Above: A senior VOA official states that the same favored employee’s brother was hired for a high-profile position despite questionable qualifications.

As early as October, 2020, Ms. Stewart was circulating the opinion that Sieg interfered with one employee's performance review and approved unnecessary overtime for another. [206]

Allegation: Abuse of Power by VOA Persian Director Setareh Derakshesh related to the performance appraisal of [REDACTED] even though Mrs Derakshesh was neither [REDACTED] nor approving official.

According to Ms. Stewart, USAGM's lead of performance management issues, this allegation is substantiated. It is accurate that [REDACTED]'s first-level supervisor (his rating official) and his second-level supervisor (his reviewing official) wanted to rate [REDACTED]'s performance at the "fully successful" level. However, according to Ms. Stewart, Mrs. Derakshesh inappropriately intervened, in a manner inconsistent with the agency's performance management policies, and required that the performance appraisal be upgraded to "highly successful." This resulted in a performance award being paid to [REDACTED]

Allegation: Mismanagement and potential fraud related to VOA Persian Division Director Setareh Derakshesh allowing unnecessary overtime payment to [REDACTED]

According to Ms. Stewart, this allegation is largely substantiated. USAGM policy requires that employees above a certain GS level, including all GS-13 and GS-14 positions, receive compensatory time off in lieu of overtime payment ("comp time"). However, if unused for one year, the Agency's payroll system will liquidate the unused comp time and pay the employee their applicable overtime rate. In part because of this, Agency policy requires that employees use compensatory time to their credit in advance of using annual leave. However, this is not a rule enforced by USAGM's time and attendance or payroll systems. The Agency relies on individual managers to enforce this rule with respect to their staffs. According to Ms. Stewart, Mrs. Derakshesh approved comp time for [REDACTED] including to monitor certain social media websites when other employees were also available to do this. Then, according to Mrs. Stewart, Mrs. Derakshesh allowed [REDACTED] to retain that comp time for long enough that he received payment, while other employees were required to schedule their comp time before scheduling annual leave.

Above: excerpts of an email from USAGM counsel to the Department of State Office of Inspector General.

Ms. Stewart repeatedly confirmed that she found Ms. Sieg evasive during interviews, and that this was a cause for concern. [207] This assessment was evidently shared by Jenessa Coleman, who during Sieg's administrative interview remarked: "She's not answering none of these questions." [208] Stewart immediately agreed. [209]

Additionally, Stewart said, she had “documents that proved [Sieg] was being evasive.” [210] Although not directly addressed in the TI, this is an apparent reference to Ms. Sieg’s agency-funded trip to California. Though the trip pre-textually served the agency’s goal of connecting with the Iranian diaspora, Sieg likely took it in order to attend an event honoring her sister. Though Ms. Sieg denied that her sister had any association with the organization hosting that event, LER uncovered emails confirming that she was aware of that association, and that it motivated her travel plans. [211]

10 JENESSA COLEMAN: Okay. Okay. So the
11 email says I have to fly to California for a
12 conference on February 25th. Dee will be going too to
13 get an awarded. Apologies for the change. Looking
14 forward to seeing you both.
15 SETAREH SIEG: Mh hm.
16 JENESSA COLEMAN: Okay. So you're
17 aware of that email. So it appears that, I guess,
18 your sister is referred to as Dee, was going to get an
19 award. Do you know, was that award related to the
20 knight -- the knighting, the award that she got in
21 D.C.?

Above: Jenessa Coleman, with Michelle Stewart present, confronts Sieg about her misrepresentation of the California trip’s purposes.

As a result of Sieg’s evasiveness in her administrative interviews, Ms. Stewart did not feel that she was able to obtain the sort of information she was looking for via those interviews. [212] For instance, investigators were not able to determine why Ms. Sieg travelled to Paris to interview one subject, when that individual lived in Maryland for half of the year. The typical justification for flying to a foreign country, rather than waiting for the subject to return, Ms. Stewart said, would be covering something “newsworthy.” [213] However, she conceded, there was no time-sensitive breaking news concerning that subject – and Stewart did not know how Sieg justified the trip, only that her superiors had signed off on it. [214] And, of course, as with the California trip, Sieg’s sister was in town, [215] though she initially tried to conceal this fact. [216]

Ms. Stewart also confirmed that an employee lying about his or her credentials on government paperwork or on an agency website would be cause for concern. [217] However, Ms. Stewart did not even know that Ms. Sieg claimed to have a Ph.D. on the agency website. [218] As for Sieg's claim to have graduated from the Sorbonne, Ms. Stewart expressed uncertainty that belied the seeming confidence of the agency's responses on the subject: "It was all very confusing. Some websites say one thing. Some websites say something different." [219] Contrary to the representations made to Congress months later, the LER team knew that Ms. Sieg did not earn her most recent degree from the Sorbonne (or Pantheon Sorbonne) early in their investigation, as indicated in the excerpt below. [220]

★ **Allegation 9: Ms. Sieg claims that she received a doctoral degree from the Sorbonne in Paris France.**

Investigative Background: On Ms. Sieg's application for employment for the position of Director of PNN dated 12/09/2013, it indicates that she obtained a doctoral degree in International Relations from the Sorbonne Paris.

Findings: Copies of Ms. Sieg's transcripts and degree certificates were obtained from the USAGM Office of Security. The documents provided show that she received her doctoral degree

in Political Science from the University of Paris 7 and not the Sorbonne. Ms. Sieg will be asked about this in her interview. ****Area of Concern****

Above: excerpt from an undated LER report prepared in advance of Sieg's first administrative interview, likely in the fall of 2020.

Ms. Stewart and her team did little to validate Ms. Sieg's educational background, despite recognizing it as an "area of concern." "The Office of Human Resources does not . . . verify education," Ms. Stewart told Committee staff, [221] even though the office does verify the validity of other sorts of documents. [222] Consequently, she did not request any educational documents that had not already been provided to the State Department or USAGM's own security office. [223] She never, for example, saw a copy of Ms. Sieg's dissertation. [224] As for the documents that she did have, Ms. Stewart was seemingly credulous. She stated that she would accept any documents provided to her at face value unless they were "blatant[ly] wrong." [225] In the case of Ms. Sieg's dissertation defense minutes, Ms. Stewart acknowledged that she would likely have needed a "better copy" in order to confirm Ms. Sieg's degree, because what she had been given was only a partial photograph. [226] Nonetheless, she did not request one, because she did not view doing so as her job. [227]

Ms. Stewart was also excessively credulous with regards to the OSC report that halted Ms. Sieg's removal. Ms. Stewart had no knowledge of the process OSC followed in compiling that report. [228] Therefore, she "could not speak to" the credibility of that investigation. [229] Nonetheless, she asserted, the findings of the investigation (whatever its form) were credible. [230]

Undercutting any allegations of political interference in Sieg's suspension was LER's own recommendation early in the course of its investigation. [231] Though Ms. Stewart's name was not on it, and she made no mention of it in her interview, it is hard to imagine that she was not at least aware of it, given that she and Ms. Coleman led the investigation:

Conclusion

Assuming all of the information included in this investigation are factual, LER recommends a proposed removal for Lack of Candor, Waste Fraud and Abuse and Misconduct.

Above: excerpt from an undated LER report prepared in advance of Sieg's first administrative interview, likely in the fall of 2020.

Transcribed Interview of Yolanda Lopez

On Friday, September 29, 2023, the Committee conducted a TI of Ms. Yolanda Lopez, then Acting Director of Voice of America. The interview raised serious questions about Ms. Lopez's due diligence concerning the decision to bring Sieg back aboard, particularly given her own serious reservations about Ms. Sieg's quality as an employee.

Ms. Lopez testified that she was told [232] that she [233] "had to bring [Sieg] back" from administrative leave because "it was the right thing to do to protect the agency." [234] She did little to nothing to confirm this assessment, which she attributed to USAGM's Office of General Counsel and OHR (of which LER is a part). [235] Lopez stated that she did not even see the results of OHR's investigation into Sieg until after she had returned to VOA in January 2021. [236] In fact, Lopez was not provided with this report until the spring or summer of that year. [237] As of her September 29, 2023 interview with the Committee, she still had a "limited knowledge" of the case, [238] and did not know if OHR had found any evidence against Ms. Sieg – she only knew that the allegations had been "unsubstantiated." [239] Although she was only vaguely aware of the controversy about Sieg's degree, she for some reason "assumed that [LER] got the diploma or whatever they were looking for." [240]

One reason that Ms. Lopez may have been amenable to bringing Sieg back, without asking many questions, is that she was at odds with Elizabeth Robbins, the management official who placed Sieg on leave, whereas Sieg had come to Lopez's defense. Lopez had herself been reassigned by Ms. Robbins, which she attributed to politics. [241] Ms. Sieg signed onto a public letter criticizing Robbins for reassigning Lopez, mentioning both by name. [242] She assumed that she was reassigned because political appointees "didn't want [her] close to any editorial decisions." [243] Despite alleging political interference in editorial affairs, though, she demurred on the suggestion that she was ever "directed to report [news stories] one way or another." [244] "I wasn't – I don't know if I was or wasn't. I can say that we didn't." [245]

While Ms. Lopez can charitably be described as "hands-off" with the decision to take Sieg off administrative leave, she was more hands-on regarding her reassignment. Lopez stated that she was heavily involved in the decision not to bring Sieg back to VOA-Persia. [246] Lopez had concerns about Sieg's job performance, and particularly with her management style. [247] She had received complaints about Sieg's management from Sieg's subordinates, [248] and was generally aware of Sieg's reputation as someone who was "very tough, very strict." [249] Lopez herself was unconvinced that Sieg was capable of adequately "collaborating" and "being a team player." [250] When Lopez orally counseled Ms. Sieg about these concerns, "[s]he was upset," complained about other senior officials, [251] did not acknowledge that any complaints about her were legitimate, and did not promise to make any changes. [252] Due to these concerns, and because of the "very good job" done by Ms. Sieg's replacement, Leili Soltani, Ms. Lopez decided to transfer to Ms. Sieg to a different position in VOA; she was concerned that reinstalling Sieg at VOA-Persia would disrupt the "harmony" the network experienced during Sieg's absence. [253]

How can Lopez's concerns about Sieg's quality as an employee be reconciled with her willingness to bring her back into the fold? The most charitable explanation is that Lopez believed the agency faced legal liability if it terminated Sieg, and was willing to defer to the agency attorneys' risk-averse assessment. If this is true, then Sieg's rehiring is an indictment of a civil service system that protects dishonest and troublesome employees. An equally likely explanation, however, is that Lopez viewed Sieg as an ally – whether against past and future Republican administrations, or against political involvement in VOA's editorial process generally. Whether Lopez was a partisan, an institutionalist, a journalistic idealist, or merely protective of her own perceived prerogative is outside the scope of this report – however, it is troubling that such questions can be raised without easy answer.

Transcribed Interview of Kelu Chao

On Wednesday, October 4, 2023, HFAC staff conducted a transcribed interview of Ms. Kelu Chao, the deputy director of USAGM. [254] Ms. Chao served as the Chief Executive Officer of USAGM from January 21, 2021, until March 2023. Ms. Chao therefore occupied USAGM's highest position when Chairman McCaul formally inquired about Ms. Sieg's reinstatement on October 27, 2021. [255] Ms. Chao's interview made clear that the agency's inadequate response to Committee oversight was not an aberration, but a manifestation of a broader failure of leadership and institutional incentives that discouraged strong management. Although she was quite affable during the interview, Ms. Chao's responses painted a picture of an absent, incurious, and inattentive executive with a weak grasp of both the laws and regulations governing her agency, and of the actions of her subordinates – up to and including Ms. Sieg, who led one of Voice of America's most consequential networks.

At Voice of America, Ms. Sieg directly reported to Ms. Chao, and the two spoke “often.” [256] However, Ms. Chao repeatedly professed ignorance of the investigation into Ms. Sieg until after receiving Chairman McCaul's October 2021 letter. [257] Chao stated that she was uninvolved [258] because (unknown) “people did not involve her,” [259] that she did not even know the investigation was ongoing, [260] and that she played no role in the decision to take Sieg off suspension. [261] Ms. Chao never read the Robbins Report proposing Sieg's removal, and did not know who made the decision to reinstate her. [262] Yolanda Lopez made the call, she “assume[d],” but Chao “never really checked,” [263] even in preparation for her transcribed interview by Committee staff. At the time of her interview, Chao still did not know why she had not been involved in the investigation into Sieg. [264] After learning of the Committee's interest, she never communicated with Ms. Stewart or Ms. Coleman, who conducted the LER investigation. [265] Chao was unaware of the OSC report that paused Sieg's termination. [266] Even in light of all this ignorance, Chao still appeared to have a misplaced confidence in her grasp of agency affairs: she “would be surprised if . . . there are more investigation [sic] [into Sieg] without [her] involvement,” expressly “because she work [sic] directly under me and she report [sic] directly to me.” [267]

Chao's ignorance extended to the 2020 State Department OIG report filed concerning Sieg, and the handling of it. At the time of her interview, Chao had yet to see the State OIG report. [268] Nor was she familiar with the process for responding to whistleblower complaints filed with the Inspector General. [269] This lack of familiarity bred a general disregard for the rules of recusal. Chao appeared to allow her deputy, Brian Conniff, to handle “most” internal complaints “because he [was] more impartial” rather than going through a “formal recusal.” [270]

This disregard for the formalities of recusal is particularly troubling because Chao had at least a close working relationship with Ms. Sieg, even if it had never expanded into a personal friendship outside the workplace. As Sieg's direct supervisor, Chao consistently rated her "outstanding" on performance reviews. [271] When Committee staff asked Ms. Chao what Sieg could have done better as an employee, she spoke not about Ms. Sieg, but about the difficulty of finding someone to replace her – appearing reluctant to level any criticism whatsoever. [272] This may be understandable given their years of working together, and the fact that Sieg was one of only a "half dozen" people to visit Ms. Chao in the hospital after she injured herself at work five years prior. [273] It is perhaps by reason of this shared loyalty that, on January 21, 2021 Elizabeth Robbins told John Lippman (who was to replace her) that Chao had been "conflicted out of any dealings with [Ms. Sieg]." [274] Of this, too, Ms. Chao professed ignorance. [275]

In some regards, Ms. Chao appears to have remained willfully ignorant, or at least to unquestioningly accept the word of others. Most relevant to this report, Ms. Chao, as Ms. Sieg's supervisor, was responsible for approving her travel expenses. [276] However, she never reviewed the details before doing so. [277] This is, again, troubling, because LER failed to examine Sieg's justifications for her travel expenses on the assumption that her supervisor had done so and found those justifications adequate. [278]

Ms. Chao's "trust and don't verify" approach extended even to major personnel decisions, which Chao seemed not to afford the appropriate weight or consideration. The firing of Robert Reilly is illustrative. Chao could not remember if, when she was offered the role of Acting CEO of USAGM, she was told Reilly would be fired. [279] She certainly never appeared to doubt her authority to fire him once she took the job, which she did on her first day. [280] Somebody (she "couldn't remember who") told her that she had such authority, [281] and she apparently never did anything to verify that this was correct. "I'm not a legal expert," she protested, when questioned by Committee staff. [282] Ms. Chao was aware that the Independent Broadcasting Advisory Board had not yet been convened, [283] but did not seem to realize that its assent was required to remove Reilly. Of course, Ms. Chao likely had little incentive to second-guess her authority in this regard, when promising to fire Reilly would cement her ascension to a higher post – not to mention remove an official affiliated with former CEO Michael Pack. After all, Ms. Chao had retained counsel, sued the agency, and testified against Pack in order to undermine his authority over USAGM. [284]

XIII. Agency Tries to End Investigation by Bypassing Committee

On July 12, 2023, USAGM CEO Amanda Bennett took the unusual step of bypassing Committee staff by corresponding directly with Chairman McCaul. On this date, Bennett sent an unnamed subordinate to hand deliver a letter to Chairman McCaul’s personal (as opposed to Committee) office. In her letter, Bennett requested a personal meeting, and dubiously claimed that the agency had “cooperated in good faith [with the] Committee’s oversight requests[.]” [285] As a result of Committee pressure, she wrote, “this . . . investigation of a single . . . employee is draining agency resources and constraining its ability to conduct USAGM’s critical foreign policy mission” [286] She urged the Chairman to “bring [the investigation] to a conclusion.” [287] Bennett included an appendix of contacts between the agency and Committee staff, apparently to impress on the Chairman what a heavy burden HFAC oversight had been since March of 2021. [288] The Chairman was not deterred, and Committee staff continued to diligently pursue answers and accountability.

Even so, Bennett’s urging that the investigation of a single employee was a waste of resources misses several points. First, Sieg was not a low-level bureaucrat, but the head of VOA-Persia, a critically important component of the agency, and one key to American soft-power interests in the Middle East. Second, to the extent that Ms. Sieg was able to dupe the State Department background investigators and USAGM’s security and human resources professionals, diagnosing what went wrong is key to preventing further such abuses by others, including potential widespread abuses. Third, the highly-publicized nature of this case presents an opportunity for deterrence, but also creates a risk of moral hazard: if Sieg is held accountable, those who would also lie and waste government funds may hesitate; if, however, she escapes responsibility, they may be emboldened. And, finally, identifying the USAGM officials who failed to ask the right questions is key to holding them accountable as well. For example, given her errant and absent leadership, agencies should hesitate before elevating former Acting CEO Chao to a position of similar responsibility and complexity in the future.

XIV. Agency Reopens Investigation due to Chairman Pressure

On September 22, 2023, nine months after the Chairman renewed his original inquiry, one of USAGM's Associate General Counsels for Litigation informed the Committee that the "[OHR] had decided to seek out additional information concerning Ms. Sieg's academic credentials," and requested that "any scheduled or requested Transcribed Interviews be put on hold until that process conclude[d]." [289] This came only days before the outstanding TIs were scheduled. An email a month later, dated October 20, 2023, confirmed the details of this inquiry, noting that this was USAGM's third investigation into the matter and further confirming that USAGM OHR had taken the following actions: requesting a copy of Ms. Sieg's diploma; conducting searches on theses.fr, the open-source French repository for all doctoral theses; retaining an external entity to evaluate her credentials; requesting another administrative interview; and planning to contact the French Embassy to seek independent verification as to the status of her diploma. [290]

In the end, USAGM's third investigation was launched only after the first round of transcribed interviews was complete, even though the Committee had urged the agency to reopen its books for more than two years. Prior to this third investigation, USAGM made no effort to independently reach out to the French Embassy via its publicly available contact information, and instead insisted that this Committee provide privileged communications to support the claims.

It appears that USAGM agreed to conduct a genuine investigation only after it became clear that the truth would surface regardless of its efforts at delay and obfuscation. In other words, the agency did so based entirely on a desire to avoid further scrutiny and backlash. Chairman McCaul's persistent inquiry forced USAGM to consider the consequence of its decision to stop looking into Sieg and forced the agency to decide whether exposure of a coverup would be more dangerous than continuing to look into Sieg. Surprisingly, after years of doing otherwise, it appears that USAGM has at last chosen the latter.

Since reopening its investigation, USAGM finally took some of the steps HFAC staff have long advocated. It has requested that Ms. Sieg provide a copy of her diploma. [291] It has searched for Ms. Sieg's thesis on France's freely accessible internet database. [292] It engaged external entities to evaluate Ms. Sieg's academic credentials. [293] And USAGM staff have met with the French Embassy for the same purpose. [294]

USAGM's most recent burst of investigative activity cannot erase the fact that the agency has sought to impede, delay, and obstruct the Committee's oversight at every juncture. It has acquiesced to Congress only when threatened with adverse action or when failure to do so would confirm the Committee's suspicions. When this Committee asked to conduct transcribed interviews, USAGM demanded the prerogative to impose a myriad of terms and conditions, even though the scope of the investigation would have limited the breadth of questions that would be asked regardless. When asked to provide all relevant documents, USAGM, after missing clearly expressed deadlines, only produced a small subset of the documents requested. The agency then falsely claimed to have fully complied with the document requests. [295] When told not to share certain exhibits with Ms. Sieg, or anyone else, agency staff nonetheless likely disseminated them. [296] USAGM has done all it can to protect Ms. Sieg and itself. It continues to defend Ms. Sieg even as her lies, fraud, and abuse of her privileged position have been thrown into stark relief. When the agency has felt confident in its ability to cover up the Sieg affair, as when it deleted a reference to it from VOA reporting after Sieg complained, it has done so. [297]

XV. Chairman Demands Formal Update on Investigation

On March 1, 2024, Chairman McCaul wrote a letter to USAGM CEO Amanda Bennett, requesting an update on the renewed investigation into Sieg’s academic credentials. [298] “Although I appreciate the Agency’s desire to conduct a thorough investigation before rendering any conclusions of its own,” the Chairman wrote, “the Committee needs regular updates in order to perform meaningful oversight,” and the Agency had not provided such an update since January 19. [299] Therefore, the Chairman made three requests: (1) a transcript of any additional interviews of Ms. Sieg; (2) a copy of the assessment performed by the independent credentialing service hired by USAGM; and (3) a copy of Ms. Sieg’s diploma, if it had been provided to the Agency. [300] The Chairman set a one-week deadline for these documents to be produced. [301]

Within one day, Bennett responded to the Chairman’s request with a brief letter. [302] Bennett requested an additional week to produce the documents requested. [303] “We are confident that the investigation will be completed no later than March 15, 2024. As a result, we request to submit the full investigative report with supporting documentation – including those documents requested in your letter – to the Committee, no later than March 15, 2024.” [304] The Committee allowed this additional time, and the report was furnished after close of business on March 14. [305]

XVI. USAGM's Final Report on Sieg's Credentials

The report furnished to the Committee on March 14 (completed on March 6) summarized the renewed investigation performed by David Kotz and others at OHR. It also reached conclusions, and reversed the Agency's position, on several key points. First, OHR conducted multiple searches for Sieg's thesis on France's public database, but "there were no findings of [Sieg's] thesis." [306] Second, "the degree [Sieg] obtained in 1995 was from Université Paris 7 – Denise Diderot not the Sorbonne" as she had claimed. [307] Finally, "the FCSA [Foreign Credential Service of America] assessment did not find that [Sieg's] degree was in 'international relations' as she stated in her resume or in 'Political Science Comparative' as she stated in her security questionnaire." [308] Rather, Sieg studied "History and Civilization." [309]

However, OHR avoided reaching conclusions about whether Sieg intentionally misrepresented her credentials. [310] In some regards, this was the result of Sieg's efforts to impede their investigation. Notably, OHR was not able to obtain any information directly from Université Paris 7 because Ms. Sieg refused to give her consent to request such information, even though OHR asked for this consent repeatedly. [311] Although Sieg promised to contact the university herself and forward any documentation to the Agency, she has been unable to provide such documentation. [312] Indeed, because the university was unable to find a thesis in Ms. Sieg's name, it declined to provide her a certificate showing that she validly received a degree. [313] Since this information was not available, the report summarized and attached assessments from four sources: (1) a letter from a French higher education attaché following a meeting with Sieg herself; (2) a memorandum from the French embassy "cancelling and superseding" that letter; (3) an opinion from a professor at West Chester University contacted by Ms. Sieg; and (4) a report from the Foreign Credentials Services of America. The report merely referred this information for a management decision on whether to find Sieg "committed misconduct," because the question "involve[d] technical matters of which OHR [did] not have expertise." [314]

As they had done consistently, the French Embassy confirmed definitively that Ms. Sieg had not proven she had a Ph.D.-equivalent degree. [315] "After contacting [Sieg's] university directly, and based on the documents she shared with us, this Embassy is in a position to confirm that she does not hold a French doctorate degree." [316]

Instead, Sieg held a “Diplome de Recherche Specialisee de L’Universite,” or “University Diploma in Specialized Research.” [317] Such diplomas, which are no longer issued, “were awarded by universities according to their own criteria,” rather than according to “standards set at the national level,” as with doctorates. [318]

[W]e have found no evidence of [Ms. Sieg] holding a PhD degree in France: [She] has not produced a certified copy of a diploma that bears the title of doctorate; we have not been able to find [her] PhD dissertation in the national, freely searchable, database of PhD dissertations; [and she] has not produced the “rapport de soutenance” (defense report) signed by all members of the jury. [319]

By contrast, OHR received two opinions stating that Ms. Sieg’s degree was Ph.D.-equivalent. Each, however, was either deficient or lacking sufficient indicia of reliability to rebut the French embassy’s conclusion. First, OHR provided the Foreign Credentials Service of America (FCSA) with a long list of documents to review, and believed that FCSA had used all of those documents in rendering its decision. [320] However, the FCSA report in reality seems to have perhaps relied on only one document, listed as “Photocopy of a diploma.” [321] Moreover, while the OHR report purports to list the methodology used by FCSA, this information was merely copied and pasted from the last page of the FCSA report, and was quite vague – for instance, that the evaluation was “based on standards and practices . . . adopted by one of America’s largest universities.” [322] Further, although OHR reached out to the Defense Counterintelligence and Security Agency (DCSA) for recommendations for foreign credentialing services, and their contact provided such recommendations, FCSA was not among them. [323] Although the Committee cannot speak to the rigor or quality of FCSA’s evaluation, the lack of details the company has provided about the process employed, combined with the fact that FCSA was not specifically recommended to the Agency, raises questions about how OHR selected its vendor, and on what basis it can weigh the relative credibility of conflicting reports. Finally, since FCSA apparently rendered its decision solely on the basis of Sieg’s diploma, its conclusion cannot be treated as addressing the other procedural deficiencies identified by the French Embassy and elsewhere in this report, such as the inadequately sized jury panel, failure to file her dissertation in the national database, etc. In short, FCSA seems to have assumed the veracity of all materials the agency passed along and then rendered an equivalency decision based on those materials. It is not clear that FCSA understands the totality of documents that are required in order to prove the existence of a French doctorate, much less that it is in the business of making forensic determinations regarding whether educational documents (or copies of them) are “real”. (Note: The FCSA evaluation is further discussed in Section XVII below.)

The second opinion OHR obtained alleging Ms. Sieg possessed the equivalent of a Ph.D. was a letter that Ms. Sieg obtained from a professor at West Chester University. It likewise has credibility problems. First and foremost, the professor in question appears to be a friend of Sieg's, doing a favor on her behalf. Far from striving to give an unbiased, objective opinion, the professor opens the letter by expressing that "it is an honor to bring my support to [Ms. Sieg]." [324] Similarly, the professor closes the letter by heaping praise, stating that, "Given [Ms. Sieg's] impressive academic record, professional experience and multicultural background and wide interests, I support her fully in her wish to have this equivalency honored and recognized." [325] To the Committee's knowledge, a "multicultural background and wide interests" are not commonly recognized factors in the validity of a postgraduate degree, but their mention certainly speaks to the professor's state of mind. Moreover, in establishing expertise in the French system, this professor could only muster that he obtained a doctorate from a French university and a Ph.D. from Berkeley (neither, apparently, in education). [326] Nor, from this professor's faculty page, is any interest, much less expertise, in foreign credentialing evident. [327] This individual's lack of expertise is evidenced by a simple and obvious error: the assertion that Sieg earned a degree "with a 'summa cum laude'" rating. [328] This is neither an honor given in the French system, nor one supported by any documentation save for Sieg's fraudulent 2013 resume.

USAGM's renewed investigation of Sieg also revealed serious gaps and incapacities in the federal government's employee vetting procedure. The Department of State Bureau of Diplomatic Security was unable, due to French privacy laws, to obtain a copy of any of Sieg's academic records. [329] As a result, the Bureau was forced to rely on a certificate summarizing her credentials. [330] The DCSA, which is the "primary investigative service provider . . . for the federal government [and] conduct[s] 95% of all background investigations for more than 100 agencies" [331] reported that it could neither evaluate foreign educational credentials, nor submit them to a third-party service. [332] As related by DCSA staff, "This goes beyond our capabilities. We can conduct domestic education records and we can conduct source interviews only." [333]

It should also be mentioned that, on March 20, 2024, USAGM furnished an "addendum" to its March 6 report. In this addendum, USAGM stated that it had received a letter from the Université Paris Cité. [334] Signed by the "Co-Directors" of Doctoral School 624 at the university, the letter confirmed that Sieg's degree was "Diplome de Recherche Specialisee de L'Universite" (DRSU). The letter continued, however, by opining that this institutional diploma was the "equivalent of a Doctoral degree in History" and the "equivalent to a Ph.D. in the United States."

This addendum provided further confirmation that Sieg misrepresented both what she studied (not International Relations) and where she earned her degree (not the Sorbonne). Though the addendum was received while this report's drafting was nearing completion, it changes none of the conclusions and criticisms contained herein, as HFAC had already learned that Sieg earned a DRSU in October 2021. [335] The French Embassy has also explicitly and repeatedly rejected the suggestion that a DRSU is equivalent to a Ph.D. [336]

Secondarily, it should be noted that Sieg never acknowledged holding a DRSU or made the argument that it was equivalent to a Ph.D. On the contrary, Sieg claimed to hold a doctorate under the "Nouveau Regime," [337] which would be a Doctorat d'université, [338] issued pursuant to national standards. [339] As the French Embassy has emphasized, a DRSU is not equivalent to a Doctorat d'université, because it does not meet those national standards. [340] Simply put, French university administrators do not have the authority to say that a DRSU is equivalent either to their nation's doctorate, or to an American Ph.D. (Note: This addendum to the March 6 report is further addressed in Section XVII below.)

Finally, the University had no record of Sieg's dissertation, [341] and the co-directors' letter relied on documentation she provided them, [342] without detailing what documents they reviewed, or providing copies. HFAC is therefore unable to verify that the documents reviewed by the university were authentic, or that they were provided with a complete file. However, Sieg has asserted that she has provided all documentation she has to USAGM, [343] so HFAC is confident in its own conclusion on the basis of that documentation. [344]

Even if Sieg's degree were valid, and even if it were equivalent to a Ph.D., this would do nothing to excuse USAGM's failure to adequately investigate these matters, once they were credibly put in question. If the Sieg affair were about one person, it would scarcely merit the investigation of a Congressional committee, despite her seniority. The focus of this report should be understood as the leadership and institutional failures that allowed Sieg to attain and abuse her senior position, then to retain it, and finally to continue her employment, albeit in a different position, with no loss of pay or other discipline.

XVII. USAGM Management Declines to Take Action, Then Changes its Mind

On March 25, 2024, HFAC majority and minority staff were briefed by USAGM’s David Kotz and the senior management official responsible for recommending discipline in the Sieg case. This latter official reported that he would not recommend discipline of any kind for Sieg – not a termination, nor a less severe warning or reprimand or suspension – on the basis of the evidence presented to him, which included only the March 6 report, its supporting documentation, and the March 20 addendum. This official reported that Sieg was a problem employee – even going so far as to say the official had done everything in his power to avoid Sieg throughout his career – but that he did not “have discretion to fire her for having a bad personality” or because she was “not a nice person.” In his role, the official reported, he often dealt with the “repercussions of being sued” for firing employees, and he felt that the evidence was sufficiently mixed that a termination decision or other disciplinary action would not survive a resulting lawsuit. Kotz indicated that, while Sieg had not threatened litigation with respect to the most recent investigation, he “didn’t think [there was] any doubt” that she would sue if she were to be fired. LER did, however, promise to further consider whether Sieg had perjured herself in her testimony under oath – specifically regarding the name of the degree-granting institution in France, and the subject matter of her degree (both of which USAGM has acknowledged Sieg lied about). [345]

The agency’s refusal to recommend discipline of any kind is especially galling given late-breaking developments regarding two key pieces of evidence it relied upon when assessing that Ms. Sieg perhaps was telling the truth. Discussed in Section XVI above, these are (1) the FCSA evaluation, and (2) the French university administrators’ equivalency determination referenced in the March 6, 2024 addendum.

HFAC majority staff reached out to both FCSA and the French university administrators. Upon hearing that members of Congress and internal whistleblowers were skeptical that some of the materials Sieg submitted to USAGM were authentic, FCSA conducted a “reevaluation” and sent its revised findings to USAGM. To date, USAGM has not shared what FCSA’s amended findings stated, or what qualifications of its earlier work FCSA saw fit to include.

When HFAC majority staff spoke to French university administrators, meanwhile, the professors initially (and bizarrely) stated that they “cannot claim to have an informed overview of the French higher education system” and referred committee staff to “turn to the relevant departments/services, at the Ministry of Higher Education in particular or at the French embassy in the US.” [346] HFAC majority staff had, of course, already corresponded many times with the French Ministry of Higher Education (through the French Embassy in the U.S.). When committee staff sent the French university administrators various pieces of correspondence from the French Ministry, including the Embassy’s requirements for a French doctorate and its own internal evaluation of Ms. Sieg’s credentials, the administrators changed tack, acknowledging for the first time that the documentation Sieg had provided was an insufficient basis for the university to come to any definitive conclusion as to whether Ms. Sieg obtained the equivalent, under the French system, of U.S. doctorate degree and therefore that a formal attestation regarding equivalency could not be made. In addition, they acknowledged that no formal thesis manuscript being found in, or provided to, the national database was problematic. In short, the administrators essentially retracted their entire assessment, at least implicitly, by indicating the ill-informed and errant bases upon which it was made.

It also bears mention that in the spring of 2024, the Committee requested a transcribed interview of Ms. Sieg herself. [347] As of the time this report was published, the Agency has never responded to that request, despite close to three months having elapsed.

Instead, the Agency – perhaps in response to the FCSA’s updated evaluation mentioned above – informed the Committee on May 31, 2024 that it had decided to issue Ms. Sieg a “letter of reprimand.” Because, as of the time this report went to print, the Agency had provided no details regarding such letter, its basis, or the consequences of it for Sieg’s employment, the Committee continues to have concerns the Agency is not acting in good faith.

XVIII. Lessons Learned & Recommendations

If the Sieg affair has shown anything, it is that USAGM has been credulous and uncritical regarding credentialing claims made by employees and prospective employees. Rather than verifying their credentials or establishing proper vetting standards and practices, USAGM has been asleep at the wheel. The recommendations listed below are intended to assure that USAGM institutes proper management and personnel practices, so that the American people can reasonably trust that their tax dollars are well-spent on people and projects that further their interests.

Oversight Recommendations

- USAGM should, within 90 days, deliver a comprehensive report to Congress addressing the following:
 - How are foreign credentials and foreign nationals vetted for prospective employment at the Agency? What aspects of this vetting process are handled internally, as opposed to being outsourced to other federal agencies or private contractors?
 - This explanation should identify deficiencies in the existing process and propose ways to improve it.
 - What role does the State Department play in the handling of personnel matters, including hiring, background checks, and whistleblower complaints? In particular:
 - Under what circumstances does the State Department Office of the Inspector General refer whistleblower reports to the agency without conducting its own investigation? What formal criteria, if any, guide this decision? What safeguards are in place to protect such decisions from political or bureaucratic pressure?
 - How does the State Department Bureau of Diplomatic Security (DS) confirm foreign credentials? What measures are taken to ensure that DS agents are familiar with foreign education systems and have a firm grasp of the relevant terminology in foreign languages, if any?

- Through what process do USAGM staff obtain security clearances? Are clearance investigations handled by the State Department, USAGM itself, the Office of Personnel Management, the Defense Counterintelligence and Security Agency, some combination thereof, or some other entity? Are these clearances subject to continuous vetting or periodic review? If the latter, on what schedule? What information is collected after hiring an employee to ensure that he/she should retain eligibility for, and access to, sensitive or classified information? Are there plans for USAGM to handle security clearances “in house” in the future?

Legislative Recommendations

- Those applying for agency positions above the GS-II level, including SES or SES-equivalent positions, who claim to have foreign-conferred graduate degrees, should be required to provide a digital copy of their diploma or an official transcript, as well as a letter, from the granting institution or state governing body regulating that institution, stating the date the degree was awarded, the title thereof, and any disciplinary action taken against the recipient. In the event that prospective or current employees are unable to provide this documentation themselves, the State Department should establish a regularized process with the embassies of foreign states to obtain it. If possible, said process should procure the underlying documents, rather than any summary or abstract of them.
- USAGM’s time and payroll system should track employee overtime pay, and the Office of Human Resources should require written justification from the supervisors of any employees claiming abnormally high overtime hours. The system should automatically flag overtime pay redeemed as a result of expiring compensatory time off, and OHR staff should provide meaningful oversight of this process, rather than relying on employees’ supervisors to do so.
- USAGM should consider the potential costs (both fiscal and administrative) and benefits of establishing its own Office of Inspector General independent of State OIG. In particular, the agency should evaluate whether the agency has been well served by its reliance on the Department of State, and whether the agency has adequately coordinated with the Department regarding personnel and whistleblower issues.

XIX. Conclusion

It is troubling that, faced with clear evidence of corruption and mismanagement, USAGM management failed to follow through on Elizabeth Robbins' decision to terminate Ms. Sieg, which has since been vindicated. James Madison famously remarked that "if men were angels, no government would be needed." Government employees are not angels either. That is why effective management and oversight of government agencies is crucial. Although political interference in government agencies is frequently decried, our nation has struck an uneasy balance between political leadership and nonpartisan staff for several obvious reasons. Most relevantly, a sprawling, unchecked and entrenched bureaucracy paid for by strangers inevitably turns to the benefit of its insiders. This can take many forms, from padded expense accounts and government funded "work" vacations to inflated performance reviews, undeserved jobs, unearned benefits, unmerited and promotions for friends, family, and allies.

USAGM performs an important job. Doubtless many of its employees are committed and serious professionals. However, maintaining an agency culture committed to integrity requires identifying and dealing with bad apples. In the case of Setareh Sieg, one of the agency's top officials, USAGM was either unwilling or unable to perform that function, if not both. What is more troubling, though, is the agency's unwillingness to reflect upon or fully acknowledge that failure. In order to meaningfully reform itself, the agency must be willing to confront the questions raised by the Sieg affair, which have far greater implications than the resolution of any individual personnel matter: What went wrong? What processes were broken or ill-conceived? Where did leadership fail, and where was it absent? What failures were driven by incompetence? What failures were driven by self-interest, political bias, groupthink, and the protection of bureaucratic fiefdoms? Perhaps the Sieg affair is at heart an indictment of our civil service system, too often paralyzed by the threat of lawsuits – by purported whistleblowers and victims of discrimination – that lack any merit and are too frequently settled without contest. Even when the agency decides to fight such complaints, employees are retained with full benefits – frequently, as with Sieg, for years at a time, and sometimes without doing any, or doing relatively little, work.

The Committee's work to expose this sort of corruption at USAGM does not end with this report. Even as it pertains to Ms. Sieg, the investigation is not complete, because neither Human Resources nor USAGM management has indicated whether the only reprimand that has been issued to Ms. Sieg has any real teeth. HFAC staff will therefore carefully scrutinize what the Agency does next.

Hopefully the Agency will choose accountability, and provide prompt and thorough updates to the Committee as it works through the process of removing Ms. Sieg. However, if the Agency's recent efforts are fleeting, and the Committee continues to face intransigence and deception, we will not be deterred. Congress created USAGM, and it controls its budget. Even if the Agency decides that its insiders' interests are paramount, we will continue to represent those of the American people.

Appendix

- [1] Public Trust in Government: 1958-2023, Pew Rsch. Ctr. (Feb. 19, 2023), <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2023/09/19/public-trust-in-government-1958-2023/>.
- [2] Id.
- [3] See generally Matthew C. Weed, Cong. Rsch. Serv., R46968 U.S. Agency for Global Media: Background, Governance, and Issues for Congress (2021).
- [4] See James S. Robbins, More Rot at America’s Public Diplomacy Mouthpiece, The Hill (Nov. 11, 2020), <https://thehill.com/opinion/national-security/524924-more-rot-at-americas-public-diplomacy-mouthpiece/> (summarizing a 2020 report by the Office of Personnel Management and Office of the Director of National Intelligence that was critical of USAGM’s handling of background checks, and which is no longer available on the agency’s website); Press Release, Rep. Andy Biggs, OPM Report: U.S. Agency for Global Media Put America’s National Security in ‘Grave Danger’ (Aug. 4, 2020) (same); see also U.S. Agency for Global Media, FY 2020 Performance and Accountability Report 2-3, <https://www.usagm.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/USAGM-FY2020-PAR.pdf> (stating that 1,500 agency personnel were invalidly granted security clearances between 2010 and 2020).
- [5] Mission, U.S. Agency for Global Media, <https://www.usagm.gov/who-we-are/mission/> (last visited Mar. 1, 2024).
- [6] Matthew C. Weed, Cong. Rsch. Serv., R46968 U.S. Agency for Global Media: Background, Governance, and Issues for Congress 7 (2021).
- [7] William M. (Mac) Thornberry National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2021, Pub. L. No. 116-223, § 1299(Q)(e), 134 Stat. 4024.
- [8] Id.
- [9] Voice of America, U.S. Agency for Global Media, U.S. Agency for Global Media, <https://www.usagm.gov/networks/voa/> (last visited Mar. 1, 2024).
- [10] Press Release, Voice of America Public Relations, Voice of America Launches VOA 365, a 24/7 Persian Language Network (Mar. 5, 2019) (available at <https://www.insidevoa.com/a/voice-of-america-launches-voa-365-a-24-7-persian-language-network/4814792.html>).
- [11] Letter from Elizabeth Robbins, Deputy Director, Voice of America to Setareh Sieg (Jan. 5, 2021) (hereinafter “Robbins Report”).
- [12] Transcribed Interview of Yolanda Lopez (Sept. 29, 2023), 72-73.
- [13] Structure, U.S. Agency for Global Media, <https://www.usagm.gov/who-we-are/organizational-chart/> (last visited Mar. 1, 2024).
- [14] See generally Robbins Report, supra note 11.
- [15] Question from HFAC – Rehiring by VOA of Setareh Sieg, U.S. Agency for Global Media (Mar. 8, 2021).
- [16] Email from whistleblower to member of Congress (Feb. 25, 2021).
- [17] Id.
- [18] See About OIG, Office of Inspector General, United States Dep’t of State, <https://www.stateoig.gov/about-oig/> (last visited Mar. 22, 2024).
- [19] Id.
- [20] Email from whistleblower to member of Congress (Feb. 25, 2021).

[21] Hotline Summary, Office of Inspector General, U.S. Dep’t of State I-9 (2020).

[22] Id. at 2, 7.

[23] Id. at 3-8.

[24] Interestingly, though she still claims to possess a Ph.D., Sieg’s current resume acknowledges that it is not from the Sorbonne, but from University of Paris 7, and claims that she studied “Political History.” See Resume of Setareh Sieg (first visited Feb. 5, 2024) (available at <https://setarehsieg.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/CV-Sieg-2023-a.pdf>).

[25] E-mail from Legislative Assistant, Office of Rep. Gerald Connolly, to Whistleblower (Oct. 25, 2021).

[26] Id.

[27] E-mail from Whistleblower to H. Comm. on Foreign Affairs Staff (Jan. 22, 2024).

[28] Id.

[29] Id.

[30] Id.; E-mail from Staff, Office of Sen. Amy Klobuchar, to Whistleblower (May 26, 2021) (“It is my understanding that the USAGM Office of Labor and Human Relations was not able to substantiate the allegations after further investigation after Mr. Pack’s removal and that [Sieg] was rehired [T]he larger concern about Mr. Pack’s removal of multiple senior managers in a very short period of time has raised significant concern about how allegations were investigated and ultimately adjudicated during his tenure. It is critical that proper processes respecting the rights of all involved were followed. I will continue to follow up”)

[31] Victoria Bekiempis, VOA Journalists Call on Director to Resign over ‘Propaganda Event’ for Pompeo, The Guardian (Jan. 17, 2021), <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2021/jan/17/voa-journalists-call-director-resign-over-pompeo-propaganda-event>.

[32] Id.

[33] Id.

[34] Alana Goodman, VOA ‘Whistleblower’ Misrepresented Academic Credentials, Washington Free Beacon (Oct. 28, 2021), <https://freebeacon.com/biden-administration/voa-whistleblower-misrepresented-academic-credentials/>.

[35] Jordan Boyd, VOA Exec Fired for Reports of Misconduct, Fraud, and False Credentials Quickly Rehired Under Biden, The Federalist (Feb. 25, 2021), <https://thefederalist.com/2021/02/25/voa-exec-fired-for-reports-of-misconduct-fraud-and-false-credentials-quickly-rehired-under-biden/>.

[36] USAGM does not have its own Inspector General. Because of that, it appears that whistleblowers at USAGM must submit their complaints to State OIG, which then decides whether to conduct follow up itself or assign/transfer investigative work to USAGM’s Human Resources office.

[37] See Robbins Report, *supra* note 10, at 15.

[38] Id. at 2-II.

[39] Id. at 2-5.

[40] Id. at 3-4. While produced by Abstraction Media, VOA's Iranian New Year show averaged 2,560 views per video on YouTube. Id. at 3. By contrast, when produced by only five agency contractors and one VOA supervising producer, the Iranian New Year show averaged 835,822 views per video. Id. at 40. In other words, the production company that Ms. Sieg awarded a contract to presided over a YouTube-viewership decline of approximately 99.7 percent. Although YouTube is banned in Iran, this was true during both periods. See Sayeh Isfahani, Iran Aims to End Online Freedoms "for Good," *Slate* (Aug. 9, 2021), <https://slate.com/technology/2021/08/iran-protection-bill-internet-censorship.html>.

[41] Id. at 5-7.

[42] Id. at 7.

[43] Id. at 8.

[44] See Administrative interview of former consultant – VOA-Persia IO (Nov. 3, 2020) (“[The decision] was made with [Sieg’s] understanding and approval because she . . . was head of PNN. There is no way, even, that I could make a decision without her approval, because nothing could get done unless she signed things or put things in motion, because she was a full-time employee. I was just a contractor-consultant, so I couldn’t even put things in motion, if you know what I mean.”) (cleaned up).

[45] See Robbins Report, *supra* note II, at 7.

[46] Id. at 7 (“[H]e did little, if any, original, on-site reporting [Y]ou did not require that he make efficient use of his time. . . . [His] reports were about two minutes each, which he would re-read during his 8-hour day schedule.”).

[47] Id.

[48] Id. at 7-8. The only noted exceptions were “one stand up shot outside of the London studio and two on set interviews.” Id.

[49] Id. at 8.

[50] Id. at 10-11 (“your egregious lack of candor causes me to question your truthfulness from the very start of your position as [VOA-Persia] Director, as well as the truthfulness of your other statements and assertions ever since.”).

[51] Id. at 11.

[52] Id. at 12-13.

[53] Id. at 13.

[54] Jordan Boyd, VOA Exec Fired for Reports of Misconduct, Fraud, and False Credentials Quickly Rehired Under Biden, *The Federalist* (Feb. 25, 2021), <https://thefederalist.com/2021/02/25/voa-exec-fired-for-reports-of-misconduct-fraud-and-false-credentials-quickly-rehired-under-biden>.

[55] William M. (Mac) Thornberry National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2021, Pub. L. No. 116-223, § 1299(Q)(e), 134 Stat. 4024.

[56] Bill Gertz, VOA executive Setareh Derakhshesh Sieg fired under Trump rehired by Biden, *Washington Times*, (Feb. 18, 2021) <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2021/feb/18/voa-executive-setareh-derakhshesh-sieg-fired-under/>; Transcribed Interview of Yolanda Lopez (Sept. 29, 2023), 72-73.

[57] Press Release, Government Accountability Project, Voice of America Oversight Agency Finds Charges Against Whistleblower Unsubstantiated (Apr. 20, 2021) (available at <https://whistleblower.org/press-release/press-release-voice-of-america-oversight-agency-finds-charges-against-whistleblower-unsubstantiated/>).

[58] Id.

[59] Id.

[60] Id.

[61] E-mail from H. Comm. on Foreign Affairs Staff to Director of Congressional Affairs, U.S. Agency for Global Media (Mar. 1, 2021).

[62] Question from HFAC – Rehiring by VOA of Setareh Sieg, U.S. Agency for Global Media (Mar. 8, 2021).

[63] Id.

[64] Id.

[65] Id.; see also Jan. 14, 2021 email from Ofc. of Special Counsel Retaliation and Disclosure Unit to U.S. Agency for Global Media Ofc. of General Counsel (stating, “OSC is conducting a law enforcement investigation into the proposed removal of Voice of America employee Setareh Sieg. We are investigating it as a potential prohibited personnel practice under 5 U.S.C. § 2302 (b). OSC requests that the agency stay its decision on this action pending our investigation. Please let us know the agency’s response to this request no later than close of business tomorrow (EST).”) (emphasis and italics in original).

[66] Id.

[67] See generally U.S. Agency for Global Media, Report of Investigation: Persian News Network Division Director, Setareh Derakhshesh Sieg (Apr. 23, 2021).

[68] Id.

[69] Id.

[70] Id. at 1.

[71] Id. at 2.

[72] Id. at 1.

[73] Id.

[74] Id. at 2. (emphasis added).

[75] Id.

[76] Id.

[77] Administrative Interview of Senior Employee, VOA-Persia (Sept. 10, 2020).

[78] Id.

[79] Id. at 3.

[80] Id.

[81] Id.

[82] Id. at 4.

[83] Id.

[84] Id.

[85] Id.

[86] Id.

[87] Id.

[88] Id.

[89] E-mail from H. Comm. on Foreign Affairs Staff to Director of Congressional Affairs, U.S. Agency for Global Media (Apr. 30, 2021).

[90] U.S. Agency for Global Media, Responses to Question on Setareh Sieg Investigation HFAC Staff (Apr. 30, 2021).

[91] Id. at 1-2. The agency's response did state that OSC was concerned that the "process used by prior leadership against her was compromised [sic] solely to reach an intended result" but did not indicate the reason such motivation could have arisen or any basis the agency had for believing such motivation existed, beyond the purported existence of an OSC investigation. Id.

[92] Id. at 2-3.

[93] Id. at 3 (emphasis added).

[94] Id. at 4. Rather than expanding on or explaining the conclusions of the April 23 report, the agency merely "[stood] by the contents of the report." Id.

[95] Id. at 4 ("LER is not alleging any particular fact.").

[96] Id.

[97] Id.

[98] Office of Human Resources, Labor and Employee Relations, U.S. Agency for Global Media, Report of Investigation: Persian News Network (PNN) Division Director, Setareh Derakhshesh Sieg 20-21 (undated). Though this report is undated, its content shows that it was created prior to Sieg's first administrative interview on Dec. 29, 2020. Thus, for approximately four months, if not longer, LER was aware that Ms. Sieg had received her degree from University Paris 7, not University of Paris I – Pantheon Sorbonne.

[99] See U.S. Agency for Global Media, Responses to Question on Setareh Sieg Investigation HFAC Staff 3 (Apr. 30, 2021) (asking what the agency meant "when it [said] that Ms. Sieg did not earn a Ph.D. from University of Paris I Pantheon – Sorbonne, but rather earned the 'equivalent' of such degree"). Subsequent correspondence with the French Embassy has confirmed that Sieg instead received her purportedly "Ph.D.-equivalent" degree from Université Paris 7. Memorandum from Attaché for Higher Education, Embassy of France in the United States (Jan. 9, 2024).

[100] Id. at 3.

[101] See e-mail from Attaché for Higher Education, Embassy of France in the United States, to H. Comm. on Foreign Affairs Staff (Apr. 8, 2022) ("[I]t pains me as an academic and holder of a PhD myself to see that someone can claim to hold a doctorate despite hard evidence that she does not. Ms[.] Sieg's elaborate equivocation might impress someone not familiar with our higher-education system. With 35 years' experience in higher education in France . . . I can say with absolute certitude: the degree Ms[.] Sieg holds is not a PhD. As a consequence, she could not apply for a position in France which would require a PhD. If a US agency decides that she does, so be it. They are at full liberty to be abused.").

[102] Id.

[103] E-mail from Director, College of Doctoral Schools, Université de Paris, to Attaché for Higher Education, Embassy of France in the United States (Oct. 15, 2021) (“Le diplôme obtenu par Mme DERAKCHECHE en 1995 à l’Université Paris Diderot est un Diplôme de Recherche Spécialisé d’Université (DRSU). Le diplôme est un diplôme d’établissement et non un doctorat d’Etat. Le dossier de Mme DERAKCHECHE est en traitement à la Présidence de l’université et au service juridique.”). Similarly to the language reproduced above, this email roughly translates as, “Ms. Derakcheche obtained a specialized university research diploma in 1995. This is an establishment degree, not a state doctorate. Ms. Derakcheche’s file is being reviewed by the University’s president and legal services.” See also e-mail from Attaché for Higher Education, Embassy of France in the United States, to H. Comm. on Foreign Affairs Staff (Feb. 16, 2022) (“The University of Paris has finally answered . . . they officially confirmed the information they conveyed to me back in the fall. The message reads: The degree obtained by Mrs DERAKCHECHE en 1995 à l’Université Paris Diderot is an Advanced (read graduate level) Research Degree. This degree is an in-house degree and not a doctorate (read PhD).Mrs DERAKCHECHE’s case is presently being reviewed by the legal services of our university. This is as official as can be and is perfectly clear: Mrs DERAKCHECHE DOES NOT hold a PhD from Université Paris Diderot.”) (alterations and emphasis in original).

[104] E-mail from Attaché for Higher Education, Embassy of France in the United States, to H. Comm. on Foreign Affairs Staff (Oct. 16, 2021). Today, it is required that four members sit on a French dissertation defense panel, which must be chaired by a full professor.Memorandum of Higher Education Attaché, Embassy of France in the United States (May 11, 2023). Sieg has since claimed that a third professor from the United States sat on her panel. Administrative Interview of Setareh Sieg 72, 83 (Jan. 3, 2022). However, since her advisor was an emeritus professor his presence on the panel would not have counted toward the required three jurors.E-mail from Attaché for Higher Education, Embassy of France in the United States, to H. Comm. on Foreign Affairs Staff (Oct. 16, 2021). Even if the American professor were a valid member of Sieg’s panel, therefore, it still would have been inadequate to confer a doctorate.

[105] E-mail from Attaché for Higher Education, Embassy of France in the United States, to H. Comm. on Foreign Affairs Staff (Oct. 18, 2021).Subsequent correspondence with the French Embassy has confirmed these facts. See Memorandum of Attaché for Higher Education, Embassy of France in the United States (Jan. 9, 2024) (noting that Ms. Sieg’s degree did not meet the national standard for a doctorate, and that “[the Embassy had] found no evidence of Ms. [Sieg] holding a PhD degree in France: Ms. [Sieg had] not produced a certified copy of a diploma that bears the title of doctorate; [the embassy had] not been able to find [her] PhD dissertation in the national, freely researchable, database of PhD dissertations; [and she had] not produced the ‘rapport de soutenance’ (defense report) signed by all members of the jury.”).

[106] At this time, Chairman McCaul served as Ranking Member of the Committee, but he is referred to consistently as “Chairman” in this report to avoid confusion.

[107] Letter from Rep. Michael McCaul, Ranking Member, H. Comm. on Foreign Affairs, to Kelu Chao, Acting CEO, U.S. Agency for Global Media (Oct. 27, 2021).

[108] Id. at 2; see also id. at n.2.

[109] Id. at 2.

[110] Id.

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- [111] Id.
- [112] Id. at 3-4.
- [113] On the contrary, Chao’s response letter merely indicated that the agency’s Office of Human Resources would “consider the content” of the Chairman’s request, and “take any appropriate investigative and other actions, in accordance with all applicable law and regulations.” Letter from Kelu Chao, Acting CEO, U.S. Agency for Global Media to Rep. Michael McCaul, Ranking Member, H. Comm. on Foreign Affairs (Nov. 16, 2021).
- [114] E-mail from H. Comm. on Foreign Affairs Staff, to Director of Congressional Affairs, U.S. Agency for Global Media (Dec. 17, 2021).
- [115] Id.
- [116] Letter from Kelu Chao, Acting CEO, U.S. Agency for Global Media to Rep. Michael McCaul, Ranking Member, H. Comm. on Foreign Affairs (Mar. 31, 2021).
- [117] U.S. Agency for Global Media, Report of Investigation – Setareh Sieg, (Jan. 19, 2022).
- [118] Id. at 3.
- [119] Id. at 4.
- [120] Id. at 5.
- [121] Id.
- [122] Id. at 3.
- [123] Id.
- [124] In fact, documents subsequently obtained by the Committee show that the State Department concluded Sieg obtained her degree from “University of Paris-Diderot,” and did not make mention of her field of study. U.S. Dep’t of State, Bureau of Diplomatic Security, Report of Investigation (Dec. 13, 2017).
- [125] Id. at 4.
- [126] Id.
- [127] Id. at 5.
- [128] Id. at 3.
- [129] Id. at 2.
- [130] E-mail from Director of Congressional Affairs, U.S. Agency for Global Media, to H. Comm. on Foreign Affairs Staff (May 11, 2022).
- [131] Letter from Michael T. McCaul, Chairman, H. Comm. on Foreign Affs. (HFAC), to Amanda Bennett, CEO, U.S. Agency for Global Media (December 19, 2022).
- [132] Letter from Michael T. McCaul, Chairman, H. Comm. on Foreign Affs. (HFAC), to Amanda Bennett, CEO, U.S. Agency for Global Media (January 13, 2023).
- [133] E-Mail from Director of Congressional Affairs, U.S. Agency for Global Media, to H. Comm. on Foreign Affairs Staff (Apr. 25, 2023).
- [134] Id.
- [135] E-mail from H. Comm. on Foreign Affairs Staff to Director of Congressional Affairs, U.S. Agency for Global Media (Apr. 27, 2023).
- [136] Id.
- [137] E-Mail from Director of Congressional Affairs, U.S. Agency for Global Media, to H. Comm. on Foreign Affairs Staff (Apr. 28, 2023).

[138] E-Mail from Director of Congressional Affairs, U.S. Agency for Global Media, to H. Comm. on Foreign Affairs Staff (May 1, 2023).

[139] E-mail from Assistant Gen. Counsel, U.S. Agency for Global Media, to H. Comm. on Foreign Affairs Staff (May 4, 2023).

[140] E-mail from H. Comm. on Foreign Affairs Staff to Assistant Gen. Counsel, U.S. Agency for Global Media (May 8, 2023) (“USAGM was provided with mutually discussed delivery language last week, and the Committee continues to wait on USAGM’s compliance. As you are aware, the Committee engaged in several good faith discussions last week as a courtesy to arrange for the binders’ delivery, even waiting late into Friday until after 7pm to receive them – which never occurred, and with no courtesy notice that they would not be delivered by the evening, even as USAGM promised ‘someone was on standby’ and that you had the binders available to deliver. What is going on here?”).

[141] Université Paris 7 – Denis Diderot, Procès-Verbal Relatif Aux Ouvrages ou Ensemble Des Travaux Présentés Par Madame Derakheche Setareh (1995).

[142] Documents 001856-57 produced to H. Comm. on Foreign Affairs by U.S. Agency for Global Media. Strangely, the minutes misspelled “emeritus” (“émérit,” as opposed to “émérite”), which could imply preparation by a non-native French speaker, such as Ms. Sieg herself.

[143] E-mail from Attaché for Higher Education, Embassy of France in the United States, to H. Comm. on Foreign Affairs Staff (Oct. 16, 2021).

[144] A subsequently-obtained copy of this document shows that Sieg’s image cropped out a “UNIVERSITE PARIS 7 – DENIS DIDEROT” header and a footer reading (in French) “Important: the subject of the thesis, the names and grades as well as the establishments of the jury members must be indicated on the form delivered to the student. It is therefore necessary that you check, and, if needed, correct the information given above.” (emphasis added). See document No. 002298 Provided to H. Comm on Foreign Affairs. It is possible that Sieg omitted this information to distract from the facts that she did not receive her degree from the Sorbonne, and that the list of jurors was likely exhaustive.

[145] Letter from the Head of Postgraduate Studies, Université Paris 7 to an unnamed professor (Apr. 12, 1995) (specifying a defense date of April 20).

[146] Documents 001863-64 produced to H. Comm. on Foreign Affairs by U.S. Agency for Global Media.

[147] Id.

[148] E-mail from Attaché for Higher Education, Embassy of France in the United States, to H. Comm. on Foreign Affairs Staff (Oct. 14, 2021).

[149] For example, there is some question as to the honors Ms. Sieg received from her dissertation defense. On her 2013 resume, Ms. Sieg reported receiving a Ph.D. “Summa cum laude.” By contrast, both Ms. Sieg’s dissertation defense minutes and diploma list her honors as “Très Honorable avec felicitations.” Though arguably an equivalent honor, this would typically require a unanimous verdict, rather than a simple majority (one reason that a two-person jury is not permitted, as any majority would be unanimous by definition, eliminating this distinction). Puzzlingly, though, the handwritten note on Sieg’s defense minutes nonetheless appears to state that the award was given by a decision “à la majorité” (of the majority) rather than by a unanimous panel. This is especially odd, considering the jury was only two people. Additionally, an unaddressed 1998 letter of recommendation by Sieg’s advisor reported that she received only a “très honorable” award, which is a meaningfully lower standard. Though this professor reported that Ms. Sieg received a doctorate under his guidance, the lack of care with regard to the honors granted, combined with the evidence to the contrary, casts some doubt on his account – even if the letter is authentic, which cannot be assumed given Sieg’s lack of candor in other areas.

[150] Oversight hearing – United States Agency for Global Media, Before the Subcomm. On State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs, H. Comm. on Appropriations, 118th Cong. (2023).

[151] Id. (statement of Amanda Bennett, CEO, U.S. Agency for Global Media) (“[T]his took place before I arrived here. She was, as I understand it, she was placed on leave and that she was returned to duty in another place after subsequent investigations cleared her of those charges.”).

[152] Id. (“I will commit to responding in whatever way we are required to do and is appropriate for us to do and I can ask my colleagues back here how many times we’ve responded if you’d like me to. . . . We will follow any kind of oversight that is, that is required to do, that is legitimate for us to do, and we’ll follow any kind of habits and requirements that- that are appropriate.”).

[153] Jimmy Quinn, House GOP Bill Seeks Targeted Cuts to Voice of America over Mismanagement Allegations, National Review (Sept. 18, 2023), <https://www.nationalreview.com/corner/house-gop-bill-seeks-targeted-cuts-to-voice-of-america-over-mismanagement-allegations/>.

[154] Id.

[155] These took place despite repeated dilatory and disruptive actions by USAGM officials. USAGM first refused to produce the officials requested by the Committee. Later, USAGM ignored the Committee’s directive that only one agency lawyer would be allowed to be present during the transcribed interview. Thus, when David Kotz arrived for his interview, the first scheduled, he had two attorneys in tow.

[156] Transcribed Interview of David Kotz (June 14, 2023), 9.

[157] Id.

[158] Id. at 8.

[159] Offc. of the Inspector Gen., U.S. Postal Serv., Securities and Exchange Commission Office of Inspector General, Washington, DC 20549 - Executive Misconduct 4 (2012).

[160] See, e.g., Josh Hicks, SEC Settles Whistleblower Case with \$580k Payment to Assistant IG, Wash. Post (June 11, 2013), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/federal-eye/wp/2013/06/11/sec-settles-whistleblower-case-with-580k-payment-to-assistant-ig/>; Matt Taibi, SEC Rocked by Lurid Sex-and-Corruption Lawsuit, Rolling Stone (Nov. 19, 2013), <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/sec-rocked-by-lurid-sex-and-corruption-lawsuit-235045/>.

[161] Id. at 40.

[162] Transcribed Interview of David Kotz (June 14, 2023), 28.

[163] Id. at 26, 28, 29.

[164] Id. at 16 (“We had lots of discussions, I mean, lots of discussions between me and Janessa Coleman about the investigation of Setareh Sieg. [As to Michelle Stewart] [a]lso the same, lots of discussions. Many of those discussions were the three of us together in one conversation.”).

[165] Id. at 24, 44, 49.

[166] Id. at 28.

[167] Id. at 27 (“[I]t’s rare that the OIG comes back to us and says, ‘We didn’t do anything. You do everything.’”).

[168] Id. at 26.

[169] Id. at 26-27.

[170] Id. at 46.

[171] Id. at 80 (“There was more chatter about people being unhappy with the management style of Setareh than in other units.”).

[172] U.S. Agency for Global Media, Report of Investigation: Persian News Network Division Director, Setareh Derakhshesh Sieg (Apr. 23, 2021).

[173] Transcribed Interview of David Kotz (June 14, 2023), 22.

[174] Id. at 47 (“I explained to Michael Pack that investigations take time. They need to be thorough. We cannot necessarily do things as fast as [one of Pack’s deputies] wants us to do them. And my recollection is that he agreed with me, and said, you know, I understand, you know, finish your investigation.”). Id. at 81 (“I recall that Michael Pack sort of alleviated the pressure by saying to [his deputy] . . . take your time.”). This fact negates the allegation that the first investigation was rushed as part of a partisan purge at the end of the Trump administration.

[175] Id. at 83.

[176] See Robbins Report, *supra* note 11.

[177] Transcribed Interview of David Kotz (June 14, 2023), 86.

[178] Id. at 52.

[179] Id. at 63.

[180] Id. at 52.

[181] Id. at 71-72.

[182] Id. at 52.

[183] Transcribed Interview of David Kotz (June 14, 2023), 63.

[184] Id. at 63-64.

[185] Id. at 75.

[186] Id. at 64.

[187] Id.

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- [188] Id. at 20.
- [189] Id. at 96.
- [190] Id. at 50.
- [191] Id. at 95-96.
- [192] Id. 92-93.
- [193] Id. at 93.
- [194] Id.
- [195] Id. at 22, 74
- [196] Id. at 149.
- [197] Id. at 102.
- [198] Transcribed interview of Michelle Stewart (Aug. 8, 2023), 7.
- [199] Id. at 13; see also id. at 30 (stating that she “was not involved as much in . . . the second investigation at all.”).
- [200] Id. at 15.
- [201] Id. at 65.
- [202] Id. at 90 “I knew that if they were going to move forward, that they would have to reach out to us . . . [t]o conclude the investigations. They wouldn’t be able to do it without reaching out to us.”
- [203] Id. at 68,
- [204] Id. at 82.
- [205] Administrative Interview of Senior Employee, VOA-Persia (Sept. 10, 2020).
- [206] Memorandum from Attorney-Advisor, U.S. Agency for Global Media, to Assistant Special Agent in Charge, Office of Inspector General, U.S. Dep’t of State (Oct. 27, 2020).
- [207] Transcribed interview of Michelle Stewart (Aug. 8, 2023), 22, 44-45.
- [208] Administrative Interview of Setareh Sieg 20 (Nov. 17, 2020).
- [209] Id.
- [210] Transcribed interview of Michelle Stewart 98 (Aug. 8, 2023).
- [211] Administrative Interview of Setareh Derakhshesh Sieg 15-25 (Dec. 19, 2020).
- [212] Transcribed interview of Michelle Stewart 25 (Aug. 8, 2023).
- [213] Id. at 23.
- [214] Id. at 24.
- [215] Administrative Interview of Setareh Derakhshesh Sieg 29 (Dec. 19, 2020).
- [216] Administrative Interview of Setareh Sieg 43-44 (Nov. 17, 2020) (“Well, I thank you for giving me this explanation, so I can volunteer the explanation that my sister lives in Washington, D.C. and she is a professor at Howard University. She does not live in France.”).
- [217] Transcribed interview of Michelle Stewart (Aug. 8, 2023), 82.
- [218] Id. at 81.
- [219] Id. at 33.
- [220] Office of Human Resources, Labor and Employee Relations, U.S. Agency for Global Media, Report of Investigation: Persian News Network (PNN) Division Director, Setareh Derakhshesh Sieg 20-21 (undated).
- [221] Transcribed interview of Michelle Stewart (Aug. 8, 2023), 18.
- [222] Id. at 101.

[223] Id. at 80.
[224] Id. at 79.
[225] Id. at 107.
[226] Id. at 91-92.
[227] Id.
[228] Id. at 116.
[229] Id.
[230] Id.
[231] Office of Human Resources, Labor and Employee Relations, U.S. Agency for Global Media, Report of Investigation: Persian News Network (PNN) Division Director, Setareh Derakhshesh Sieg 20-21 (undated).
[232] Ms. Lopez professed no recollection about who instructed her to rehire Sieg. Transcribed interview of Yolanda Lopez (Sept. 29, 2023), 10-11.
[233] Id. at 10-11 (“I was informed that I had to bring her back from admin leave because that was the right thing to do for the agency.”) Id. (emphasis added).
[234] Id.
[235] Id. at 10.
[236] Id. at 15-16.
[237] Id. at 27.
[238] Id. at 53.
[239] Id. at 52.
[240] Id. at 83.
[241] Id. at 55.
[242] Victoria Bekiempis, VOA Journalists Call on Director to Resign over ‘Propaganda Event’ for Pompeo, The Guardian (Jan. 17, 2021), <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2021/jan/17/voa-journalists-call-director-resign-over-pompeo-propaganda-event>.
[243] Transcribed interview of Yolanda Lopez (Sept. 29, 2023), 56.
[244] Id. at 77 (Q: “At any juncture[,] were you directed to report one way or another?” A: “I wasn’t – I don’t know if I was or wasn’t. I can say that we didn’t.”).
[245] Id.
[246] Id. at 23.
[247] Id. at 24.
[248] Id. at 26.
[249] Id. at 84.
[250] Id. at 25.
[251] Specifically, Sieg complained about John Lippman, who was not one of the political appointees removed under the Biden Administration. Id. at 82. In fact, Lippman was elevated to Elizabeth Robbins’ former post following Biden’s inauguration, and now serves as VOA’s Acting Director. John Lippman, Acting VOA Director, Voice of America (Sept. 29, 2023), <https://www.insidevoa.com/a/7280112.html>.
[252] Id. 82.
[253] Id. at 72.

[254] Transcribed interview of Kelu Chao (Oct. 4, 2023), 3.

[255] Letter from Rep. Michael McCaul, Ranking Member, H. Comm. on Foreign Affairs, to Kelu Chao, Acting CEO, U.S. Agency for Global Media (Oct. 27, 2021).

[256] Transcribed interview of Kelu Chao (Oct. 4, 2023), 28.

[257] *Id.* at 15-16.

[258] There are, however, reasons to doubt this account. Ms. Chao later in her interview asserted that she may have referred the issue of Ms. Sieg’s academic credentials to OHR following complaints. This confusion contradicts her apparent certainty that she was unaware of any investigation into Ms. Sieg. *Id.* at 71.

[259] *Id.* at 14-15.

[260] *Id.* at 15.

[261] *Id.* at 14, 26.

[262] *Id.* at 80.

[263] *Id.*

[264] *Id.* at 41.

[265] *Id.* at 25.

[266] *Id.* at 46.

[267] *Id.* at 40.

[268] *Id.* at 19-20.

[269] *Id.* at 20.

[270] *Id.*

[271] *Id.* at 24.

[272] *Id.*

[273] *Id.* at 64.

[274] E-mail from Elizabeth Robbins to John Lippman (Jan. 21, 2021).

[275] Transcribed interview of Kelu Chao (Oct. 4, 2023), 21 (claiming that she was never conflicted out for any reason).

[276] *Id.* at 85-86.

[277] *Id.*

[278] Transcribed interview of Michelle Stewart (Aug. 8, 2023), 24.

[279] Transcribed interview of Kelu Chao (Oct. 4, 2023), 68.

[280] *Id.* at 27-28, 31 (“It was my first day. I – a lot of things, you know, that we don’t have – we don’t have a lot of advices [sic] and so forth. I did talk to transition team [sic] but, you know . . .”).

[281] *Id.* at 68.

[282] *Id.* at 69.

[283] *Id.* at 29-30.

[284] *Id.* at 93-95. See generally *Turner v. U.S. Agency for Glob. Media*, 502 F.Supp. 3d 333 (D.D.C. 2020) (in which Chao was a plaintiff, and Pack a defendant).

[285] Letter from Amanda Bennett, CEO, U.S. Agency for Global Media, to Rep. Michael McCaul, Chairman, H. Comm. on Foreign Affairs (July 12, 2023).

[286] *Id.*

[287] *Id.*

[288] *Id.*

[289] See E-mail Associate General Counsel for Litigation, U.S. Agency for Global Media, to H. Comm. on Foreign Affairs staff (Sep. 22, 2023).

[290] See E-mail Associate General Counsel for Litigation, U.S. Agency for Global Media, to H. Comm. on Foreign Affairs staff.

[291] E-Mail from Assoc. Gen. Counsel, U.S. Agency for Global Media to H. Comm. on Foreign Affairs Staff (Oct. 20, 2023).

[292] Id.

[293] Id.

[294] E-Mail from Assistant Gen. Counsel, U.S. Agency for Global Media to H. Comm. on Foreign Affairs Staff (Nov. 28, 2023).

[295] See E-mail from U.S. Agency for Global Media Associate General Counsel to H. Comm. on Foreign Affairs Staff (May 11, 2022).

[296] HFAC staff was made aware that one of Sieg's attorneys was clued into the existence and details of exhibits. The only possible way the attorney could have learned this is from USAGM officials, or from Democrat Committee staff.

[297] See Letter from John Lippman & Carol Guensburg to Amanda Bennett, CEO, U.S. Agency for Global Media (May 2, 2023) (noting that Sieg called her inclusion in the story "outrageous" in an email circulated to Bennett and Acting VOA Director Yolanda Lopez days before it was taken down).

[298] Letter from Michael T. McCaul, Chairman, H. Comm. on Foreign Affs. (HFAC), to Amanda Bennett, CEO, U.S. Agency for Global Media (Mar. 1, 2024).

[299] Id.

[300] Id.

[301] Id.

[302] Letter from Amanda Bennett, CEO, U.S. Agency for Global Media (Mar. 1, 2024).

[303] Id.

[304] Id.

[305] E-mail from Assistant General Counsel, U.S. Agency for Global Media, to H. Comm. on Foreign Affs. Staff (Mar. 14, 2024).

[306] Id. at 2 (emphasis omitted).

[307] Id. at 8 (emphasis added).

[308] Id.

[309] Academic Credentials Report, Foreign Credentials Service of America 3 (Nov. 14, 2023).

[310] U.S. Agency for Global Media, Report of Investigation – Setareh Sieg 7 (Mar. 6, 2024).

[311] U.S. Agency for Global Media, Report of Investigation – Setareh Sieg 7 (Mar. 6, 2024).

[312] Id.

[313] E-mail from Director, College of Doctoral Schools and HDR, Université Paris Cité, to Setareh Sieg (June 29, 2023) ([A]fter discussion with the [University's] common documentation service . . . it turns out that there is no thesis manuscript submitted to the University concerning you. It is therefore not possible to provide you with a certificate." (translated from French).

[314] Id. See also Administrative Interview of Setareh Sieg 19 (Jan. 19, 2024) (statement of David Kotz that “I had to go testify on the Hill for a whole day over stuff I don’t even know about.”).

[315] As noted, Sieg independently obtained an opinion from a French higher education attaché in New York. However, because there is some ambiguity as to the circumstances under which that opinion was obtained – e.g., which documents were reviewed by that individual – and the opinion has been cancelled and superseded, it is not detailed in this report.

[316] Memorandum from Attaché for Higher Education, Embassy of France in the United States (Jan. 9, 2024).

[317] Id.

[318] Id.

[319] Id.

[320] U.S. Agency for Global Media, Report of Investigation – Setareh Sieg 4 (Mar. 6, 2024) (listing 16 such documents related to Sieg’s undergraduate and graduate studies).

[321] Academic Credentials Report, Foreign Credentials Service of America 3 (Nov. 14, 2023).

[322] Id.

[323] E-mail from Investigations Case Analyst, Defense Counterintelligence and Security Agency, to Chief, Personal Security Division, U.S. Agency for Global Media (Nov. 2, 2023) (“[George Washington University] require students to have their foreign credentials independently evaluated by a third party agency – either National Association of Credential Evaluation Services (NACES) or Association of International Credential Evaluators (AICE), and they must be certified in English prior to submitting them for the evaluation.”). Though FCSA is a member of AICE, OHR gave no indication of how FCSA was selected from these members. U.S. Agency for Global Media, Report of Investigation – Setareh Sieg n.l.

[324] Letter from Professor of French, Linguistics, & International Business, West Chester University (Jan. 29, 2024).

[325] Id.

[326] Id.

[327] HFAC staff has reviewed this professor’s biography and publications, but decided not to provide additional identifying information in a publicly-disseminated report.

[328] Id.

[329] U.S. Dep’t of State, Bureau of Diplomatic Security, Report of Investigation (Dec. 13, 2017).

[330] Id.

[331] Personnel Security, Defense Counterintelligence and Security Agency (last visited Mar. 15, 2024), <https://www.dcsa.mil/About-Us/Directorates/Personnel-Security/dod-security-clearances/>.

[332] E-mail from Investigations Case Analyst, Defense Counterintelligence and Security Agency, to Chief, Personal Security Division, U.S. Agency for Global Media (Nov. 2, 2023)

[333] Id.

[334] Created by the merger of Université Paris 5 and Université Paris 7, Sieg’s alma mater.

[335] See text accompanying note 98, supra; see also e-mail from Director, College of Doctoral Schools, Université de Paris, to Attaché for Higher Education, Embassy of France in the United States (Oct. 15, 2021).

[336] See, e.g., E-mail from Attaché for Higher Education, Embassy of France in the United States, to H. Comm. on Foreign Affairs Staff (Feb. 16, 2022) (“[A]n Advanced (read graduate level) Research Degree . . . is an in-house degree and not a doctorate (read PhD). . . . This is as official as can be and is perfectly clear: Mrs DERAKCHECHE DOES NOT hold a PhD from Université Paris Diderot.”) (alterations and emphasis in original).

[337] Administrative Interview of Setareh Sieg 48 (Jan. 3, 2022).

[338] “Nouveau Regime” is not a type of doctorate, but rather the reform that consolidated the two previously-available degrees, Doctorat d’Etat and Doctorat de troisième cycle, into the Doctorat d’université. Email from Attaché for Higher Education, Embassy of France in the United States, to H. Comm. on Foreign Affairs Staff (Mar. 21, 2023).

[339] Memorandum from Attaché for Higher Education, Embassy of France in the United States (Jan. 9, 2024).

[340] Id. (“[A] DRSU differs from a national doctorate degree which corresponds to standards set at the national level, whereas DRSU were awarded by universities according to their own criteria.”).

[341] E-mail from the Director of the College of Doctoral Schools and HDR to Setareh Sieg (June 29, 2023) (stating that the University was unable to provide Sieg with a certificate that Sieg had successfully defended her dissertation or that the thesis was registered, because no manuscript was ever submitted to the school).

[342] Letter from the Co-Directors of Doctoral School 624, Université Paris Cité (Mar. 18, 2024).

[343] Administrative interview of Setareh Sieg 6, 10 (Jan. 19, 2024).

[344] It is concerning that Sieg was able to persuade a French consular official in New York and administrators at Université Paris Cité of her point of view, which in the latter instance required retraction by those more familiar with her case. Far from exculpating her, this raises questions about what she told and showed them, and whether either was accurate.

[345] Despite making this promise, neither Kotz nor anyone else from USAGM followed up with the Committee regarding the potential perjury.

[346] Email from French university administrators to H. Comm. on Foreign Affairs Staff, March 28, 2024 (emphasis added).

[347] Letter from Chairman Michael T. McCaul, H. Comm. on Foreign Affairs, to U.S. Agency for Global Media, March 28, 2024.

