



One Hundred Seventeenth Congress
U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Foreign Affairs
2170 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515
www.foreignaffairs.house.gov

June 9, 2022

Senator James Risch
Chairman
Senate Foreign Relations Committee
Russell Senate Office Building – SR-483
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Risch,

I write in reference to this week's hearing on Amanda Bennett's nomination to be Chief Executive Officer of the U.S. Agency on Global Media. As I understand, there was not a robust round of questioning at the hearing due to various time conflicts, and that is understandable given the nature of legislative duties. Regardless, I believe that Bennett warrants closer scrutiny and appreciate your attention to this letter. As the window to submit questions to the record (QFRs) remains open, I respectfully ask you and other members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to consider submitting inquiries regarding the following:

1. Constitutionality of the USAGM firewall, executive control, and the separation of powers.

Everyone agrees that journalistic independence is important, but the fact remains that USAGM is a public, rather than private, news organization. Based on previous statements she made in the context of a lawsuit, it appears Bennett's view is that there can be no political control whatsoever of USAGM broadcast network's content or even operations that impact content. But that position was repudiated by the Department of Justice (and Office of Legal Counsel). *See Repeal of Regulation Entitle Firewall and Highest Standards of Professional Journalism*, 85 Fed. Reg. 79, 427 (Dec. 10, 2020; enforcement date Oct. 26, 2020). Bennett should be asked to explain her views, especially how they would apply in national security situations. For example, if the President orders the agency not to run a story because lives might be endangered, does she believe USAGM can ignore the President's directive?

2. Mismanagement of public funds and VOA personnel.

It appears that Bennett may have been involved in the agency's botched attempt to institute a new content management system called Voltron, the corporate maker of which her husband Don Graham allegedly was then linked to. Because of a variety of problems that happened during the attempted rollout, Voltron was ultimately abandoned, resulting in a waste of millions of dollars in

taxpayer funds. Bennett should be asked about her role in the Voltron debacle, and furthermore why she should be trusted as a responsible steward of public funds, given her allegedly questionable judgment in the past.

Additionally, Bennett was repeatedly made aware of improprieties in the functioning of the Voice of America's (VOA) Persian Service and allegedly did nothing to correct them. Improprieties included reports of biased coverage, fiscal mismanagement, and instances of employee harassment and intimidation. Bennett was also allegedly obstructionist in reviews of VOA functioning (multiple services) by both external institutes and the State Department's Policy Planning Staff. These matters, too, should be probed.

3. Security lapses during her previous tenure.

In 2020, the private law firm McGuire Woods conducted a thorough analysis of security lapses at USAGM and found that many of them happened under Bennett's tenure. Bennett should be asked why she did nothing to prevent the lapses, what her general views of the McGuire Woods report are, and why lawmakers should not expect that additional lapses will not continue to happen if she is confirmed. After the Office of Personnel Management and the Office of the Director of National Intelligence issued reports regarding serious failings in the agency's security clearance and classified access procedures, the agency's security vetting capacity was transferred to another federal entity. Bennett should be pressed on her responsibility for causing this transfer and asked what concrete steps she will take to fix the problems.

4. Issuance of J-1 visas.

Whistleblowers have come forward with information detailing that J-1 cultural "exchange" visas were being used at USAGM to allow foreign nationals to take jobs that American citizens with cultural and language expertise could have filled. Bennett should be asked whether she supports the issuance of J-1 visas and, if so, why the normal I visas for journalists would not be more appropriate.

5. Biased news coverage, lack of consequences, and agency morale.

Given that the agency ran what amounted to Biden campaign endorsements in the past (see <https://www.politico.com/video/2020/07/30/voas-urdu-service-biden-video-082274>), how will Bennett ensure objective reporting moving forward? When reporters sued the former USAGM CEO for investigating that egregious conduct, it was Bennett's position that USAGM could not investigate it. Her view was that the political leadership of the agency had to defer to the same reporters whose editorial process failed to stop the agency from putting out a campaign ad. When something that egregious happens at CNN or FOX, though, the corporate legal department would almost certainly handle and address the issue. Bennett should be asked why a similar division of labor shouldn't exist at the agency she wants to lead.

Additionally, Bennett hired contractors to undertake a deep dive into VOA operations in 2016. The full report has never been made public, but a summary indicates the perception of biased news coverage exists among agency employees. Morale has been a perpetual problem, with USAGM ranking "[worst government agency to work for](#)" in 2022. Bennett should be pressed on what specific actions she will take to address this problem.

6. Advisory board

In the FY21 NDAA, a new oversight mechanism was created to ensure USAGM maintained high standards and was not unduly influenced by political bias. A new advisory board was supposed to be put into place, with names submitted by ranking Republicans and Democrats in the relevant House and Senate committees and then nominated by the President. President Biden has failed to fill this board. Bennett should be asked whether she will press the White House on this issue and whether she agrees that organizational dysfunction characterized the agency under her tenure and is a reason why the board is necessary.

Thank you for your consideration of this matter.

Best regards,



MICHAEL T. McCAUL
Ranking Member

CC:

Senator Marco Rubio

Senator Ron Johnson

Senator Mitt Romney

Senator Rob Portman

Senator Rand Paul

Senator Todd Young

Senator John Barrasso

Senator Ted Cruz

Senator Mike Rounds

Senator Bill Hagerty