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Struggle of Ideas

Fearing Soviet Gains, U.S. Counterattacks In the Propaganda War

Secret Directive Authorizes 'Public Diplomacy' Units; Aid From KGB Defector Policies and Bad Candy Bars

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WASHINGTON—The Reagan administration has quietly gone to war with the Soviet Union.

This is a war of ideas, and the administration takes it just as seriously as it takes its military buildup against the Soviets. The war of ideas could become just as controversial.

The Reagan team is convinced that the Soviet Union has been effective in its own propaganda campaign to discredit American foreign policies and win the hearts and minds of people around the globe. Reaganites think that this Soviet campaign helps explain why U.S. arms-control and military policies are so heavily criticized in places like Western Europe.

So the administration is counterattacking across several fronts. A few examples:

—President Reagan recently signed a secret directive setting up four high-level administration committees to improve "public diplomacy" abroad.

—The Voice of America and Radio Free Europe will be modernized and expanded, and the administration is stepping up the use of satellite television broadcasts to send its message world-wide. Poland has officially protested to the U.S. that recent "aggressive" VOA and Radio Free Europe broadcasts are attempting to "destabilize" the country.

—A Soviet KGB defector is helping U.S. officials to spot and rebut Soviet distortions and disinformation.

—The administration has unveiled Project Democracy, a plan to promote American-style government abroad by funneling funds to programs like the AFL-CIO's overseas operations and setting up organizations like one to push democratic institutions in Latin America.

No 'Spectator Sport'

The counterattack "is needed because the Soviets obviously are winning the war of ideas," says Charles Wick, the director of

the U.S. Information Agency and the driving force behind much of the push. Mr. Wick is a fast-talking former band leader and a friend of President Reagan's. At a recent interview, he wore a necktie labeled "Democracy isn't a spectator sport" and fretted about keeping up with the Soviets' "enormous, monolithic communications empire."

At a time of budget cuts and pay freezes, the administration considers this public-relations drive important enough to warrant big increases in spending. The budget for foreign-information and similar activities is rising 23% this year, and the White House wants another 18% increase, to \$826 million, next year. But Congress is still tinkering with the funding.

Skeptics think the administration might be wiser to devise more-effective foreign policies rather than try so hard to sell the ones it has. "You can't sell a bad policy," warns John Reinhardt, who was the director of the USIA during the Carter administration. "You may sell a bad candy bar from Madison Avenue. You can't do it with a policy." Others fear that the administration is turning the American foreign-information machinery from an objective dispenser of fact into a mouthpiece for right-wing views.

But the president's conservative supporters are delighted. They have long argued that a vigorous American sales program is essential because the world has stopped taking for granted Washington's good intentions. The Reagan administration agrees. "What's happening?" Mr. Wick says. "The Soviets are characterizing themselves as the peace party, and we're the bad guys."

Short Term and Long

The new public-relations drive has both short-term and long-range goals. In the short run, the administration wants to use public diplomacy to sell American policies to skeptics abroad. At the moment, the GOP priority is to rebuild public support in Western Europe for American positions in European arms-control talks with the Soviet Union. Peter Dailey, a former advertising man who now is ambassador to Ireland, spent more than a month in Washington developing a strategy.

A few questionable ideas have sprung up. One official suggested having conservative fund-raiser Richard Viguerie conduct a direct-mail advertising campaign in Western Europe to support American arms-control stands and the planned deployment of new U.S. missiles if arms talks don't succeed.

The idea was rejected after other officials decided that Europeans wouldn't place much stock in a campaign run by a conservative American political operator.

But Mr. Dailey himself gets high marks from other aides for teaching the administration to simplify its often-muddled message to the European public and drive it home. For example, on his recent tour of Western Europe, Vice President George

Bush steered away from the technical-sounding phrase "zero option" to describe the American arms-control proposal; instead, he said over and over that the U.S. proposal seeks to ban "from the face of the earth" a whole new generation of American and Soviet medium-range missiles.

Mr. Dailey also told the White House that it needs to go beyond selling arms-control plans and combat a broader distrust of the U.S. among young Europeans.

In the long run, the administration's goal is to convince people in Latin America and the Third World, as well as Europe, that the American system is superior to the Soviets' Communist model. That is what the administration hopes to achieve in its Project Democracy; it is asking Congress for \$65 million to support institutions like free labor movements and political parties overseas.

With the same long-range goal in mind, the administration proposes to raise spending on the Voice of America, the government's international radio service, by 33% this year and 22% next year. Part of the money will go for stepping up broadcasts to sensitive spots like Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. Part will go for replacing antiquated equipment that leaves the VOA's signal hard to pick up in many places. The Voice still uses one transmitter captured from the Nazis in World War II.

In addition, the administration wants a 16% increase in funds for the separate Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty systems next year. Those radio networks, financed by the government but run by an independent board, beam pro-Western messages in 21 languages to countries in the Soviet bloc. U.S. officials say Soviet leaders have expressed outrage in private meetings over this American push in broadcasting to Soviet-bloc countries.

At the same time, the White House again will prod Congress to approve Radio Marti, a radio service that would beam "accurate information" to the Cuban people. The administration's request died in Congress last year, largely because of fears that Cuba would retaliate by jamming U.S. radio stations.

Mr. Wick wants the U.S. government to make more use of television as well. Last year, he helped arrange for Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger to appear via satellite on national television in Japan to explain why the administration thinks Japan should spend more on its own defense. Recently the administration beamed to 19 countries a live broadcast of President Reagan's announcement of his new European arms-control offer. "Satellite television is now in the forefront of our public diplomatic efforts in support of American policies," Mr. Wick recently told Congress.

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