

Let Poland be Poland

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On the snowy Sunday morning of December 13, 1981, Poland awoke to the reality of military rule, as General Wojciech Jaruzelksi announced that martial law had been imposed. In a bid to stem the mounting opposition to the communist regime and the growing popularity of the independent labor union movement *Solidarnosc* (Solidarity), the Polish prime minister declared a “state of war,” and unleashed a wave of repression that shook the country. The martial law decree, enforced by the Council of National Salvation- a military junta headed by Gen. Jaruzelski and comprised of 20 army generals and colonels, declared all labor unions forbidden and prohibited domestic and foreign travel. Public meetings, strikes and all independent political activities were restricted, and hordes of special squads of the “Zomo” motorized riot police harassed any public protesters demonstrating against the move¹. Meanwhile, more than 6,000 people, including the leaders of Solidarity were rounded up and detained without charge.

In a bid to show support for Poland and the Polish trade union *Solidarnosc*, the Reagan administration announced a “Day of Solidarity with Poland.” Nearly 6 weeks later, Washington unveiled the program *Let Poland be Poland* in conjunction with the day of support, and struck back in a public diplomacy gambit unlike any program ever previously seen. Under the enigmatic direction of Charles Z. Wick, the U.S. International Communications Agency (USICA-the USIA’s a moniker at present) pulled off one of the

¹ John Dornberg, Central and Eastern Europe: International Government and Political Series, Arizona: Oryx Press 1995, p. 106

most audacious public diplomacy spectacles, in the form of an event that combined international politics with Hollywood glitz.

The program, *Let Poland be Poland* was unique in its scope for multiple reasons. Beyond the unusual pairing of entertainment and politics—Hollywood and Washington (as well as numerous other international capitals that offered support), it also marked one of the first successful uses of the new medium of satellite television. Furthermore, the program was a rare combination of public initiative funded with private donation. In addition, the program was unique in so far as it marked a rare case in which the Smith-Mundt act was suspended so that public diplomacy made for foreign consumption could also be viewed on America’s shores. In short, the program that Charles Wick dubbed, “probably the biggest show in the history of the world²,” was truly an enigma in the history of public diplomacy ventures.

Audiences around the globe tuned into a program that was greeted with a hail of varied reviews ranging from lavish praise to questions of the appropriateness of the broadcast to outright scorn and derision— and that was just in the Western press. As expected, the program brought a feverish response from Moscow and Warsaw in the form of vociferous denunciations. “Torrents of lies and slander,” were the invectives that one commentator in the Soviet Union’s TASS news service hurled at the program³.

In this paper, the author seeks to examine *Let Poland be Poland* and evaluate the program beyond the hyperbole that emanated— to sift through the opprobrium and

² “Propaganda; New ratings war,” *The Economist*, February 6, 1982 p. 26; Elisabeth Buhmiller, “The Wick Whirlwind; Reagan’s ICA Chief Brings Hollywood Hustle to Washington,” *Washington Post* May 11, 1982, B1

³ Yuriy Kornilov, “Poland not to Become a ‘Second Chile’,” *TASS* January 26, 1982

approbations, scrutinize the program on its merits as a public diplomacy venture and probe the elements that did indeed make the program unique.

Enter Stage Right: Ronald Reagan and Charlie Wick

In the waning days of the Carter administration, America's image abroad seemed to be on the decline. Professor Cull writes, "Carter left office amid images of weakness: Soviet tanks in Afghanistan; the charred wreckage of the failed hostage rescue; his own exhausted frame staggering into collapse while running a ten-kilometer road race in September 1979."⁴

Elected with a wide mandate for change, Ronald Reagan assumed the office of the presidency in January 1981 with a clear vision to project American might and American democratic values on the global stage. The new president, with his background in Hollywood, possessed a clear understanding of the relationship between image and power and quickly sought to reassert the perception of American dominance after a period of flagging opinion that beset the previous administration. While on the campaign stump, Reagan made this sentiment abundantly clear as he promised to strengthen America's public diplomacy instruments, USICA, the Voice of America (VOA) and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL)⁵. At an October 19, 1980 address, Reagan stated, "What we need most is conviction; the conviction that in carrying the American message abroad we strengthen the foundations of peace."⁶ Reagan descended on Washington with an eye to uplift America's global voice and the machinery for its message to be seen and heard.

⁴ Nicholas Cull, *The Cold War and the United States Information Agency*, New York: Cambridge University Press 2008, p.398

⁵ *ibid*, p.399

⁶ "Excerpts from Reagan's Televised Speech," *New York Times*, October 20, 1980, p. D10 (CF Cull, op cit)

As Reagan arrived in Washington, he brought with him his longtime friend Charles Z. Wick to shake-up and manage America's public diplomacy arm, the USICA.

Born Charles Zwick in Cleveland, Ohio, and educated in the Midwest- first in music at the University of Michigan then later in law at Western Reserve University, he became involved in the music side of the entertainment industry as he worked for the preeminent bandleader Tommy Dorsey. The ebullient showman changed his name- to the anglicized aforementioned version, and his location, as he moved out west to Los Angeles, California to make his fortune on the West coast*.

Charles Wick and his wife Mary Jane were close, longtime friends of Ronald and Nancy Reagan. Later, as the Reagan campaign took off, Wick became a prolific fundraiser for the candidate. Then, as Reagan swept into office, Wick helped plan and coordinate the extravagant inaugural celebrations for his friend the new president. As reward for his labor and recognition of his showman talents, Charles Z. Wick was tapped by President Reagan to lead the USICA.

Immediately, Wick brought a new dynamism to the information agency, with “a box-office approach to the USI[C]A, transforming it from a rather stodgy bureaucracy to a Hollywood-style production in which Wick is unquestionably the star.⁷” He sought to raise the prominence of the sometimes-maligned agency, as Cull noted, “Once in office, Wick worked hard to raise awareness of the agency around Washington and in the country as a whole.⁸” Banking on his close relationship with the president, as he was termed “Reagan’s closest friend in Washington,” the new director was able to foster a

* For more on the life of Charles Z. Wick, see: Nicholas Cull, The Cold War and the United States Information Agency, New York: Cambridge University Press 2008, ch. 10.

⁷ Howard Kurtz and Pete Early, “Hollywood-style Diplomacy; Wick Adds Flair to U.S. Story,” *Washington Post*, July 13, 1983, p. A1

⁸ Cull, op cit., p.404

more direct working relationship with the administration's foreign policy and defense establishments, as well as with the White House press office⁹.

More importantly, Wick also brought a Hollywood panache to the information agency to reinvigorate it through the use of media as a weapon in the public diplomacy arsenal. According to Alvin Snyder, "Reagan and Wick had often discussed how media could be used to further foreign policy objectives."¹⁰ The crisis in Poland would offer the first opportunity to put the new media technology of satellite television to use in the information war.

Big Bang

With the crisis in Poland, Wick and confidants saw "a golden opportunity for Reagan to establish his credentials as the leading spokesman against totalitarian threats."¹¹ The new director sought to create a production spectacular to beam to audiences around the globe via television satellite technology. The program was intended to bolster pro-democracy forces in Poland as well as embarrass the Communist leadership there and in the Soviet Union. In an interview, Wick stated, "I realized that if we could get one focal point that we could organize, it would be a lightning rod for all of the diffused outrage and frustration concerning this repression of liberty."¹² As Cull notes, "Wick wanted to mark the escalation of the Polish crisis with a counterblow in the medium of satellite television."¹³ The USICA director's machination would be named

⁹ *ibid*

¹⁰ Alvin Snyder, *Warriors of Disinformation*, New York: Arcade Publishing 1995, p.6

¹¹ *ibid*, p.7

¹² Bernard Gwertzman, "Now, the Star of the Show: Poland," *New York Times*, January 20, 1982, p. A24

¹³ Cull, *op cit.*, p.410

Let Poland be Poland, in a nod to the translation of Solidarity's anthem, "Żeby Polska była Polską."

With his Hollywood background, Wick was a proponent of the "'big bang' theory of public relations. The size of a TV spectacular and the hoopla surrounding it were as important as the program itself.¹⁴" With a flair for the dramatic, Wick borrowed a page from PT Barnum and pushed for a spectacular that would meld entertainment and politics. To create such a spectacular, the bombastic Wick would bring in the equally bombastic Marty Pasetta from Hollywood to direct the extravaganza. Dubbed "Chains" by the USICA staff for the considerable gold accouterments that he wore, Marty Pasetta was famous for his annual direction of the Academy Awards show; he signed on to direct the 90-minute show, and agreed to donate his services. With Wick producing, and Pasetta directing, the next task was to recruit the cast of characters.

As a former Hollywood agent, Wick began reaching out to celebrities like Frank Sinatra, Bob Hope and other Hollywood notables who agreed to take part and donate their services. Meanwhile, Wick secured President Reagan's agreement to make a statement for the show, while Secretary of State Alexander Haig sent cables to major American embassies to have the respective ambassadors solicit statements from heads of state¹⁵.

To fund the auspicious program, Wick then turned to the private sector to help publicize the event and raise the necessary budget. To cover the \$350,000 production and \$150,000 transmission costs for the program, Wick procured private donations, with the lions' share coming from the Carthage Foundation, Mobil Oil and Rockwell

¹⁴ *ibid*, p.7

¹⁵ Gwertzman, *op cit*.

International each pledging \$100,000¹⁶. As well, the various world leaders who would make statements in support of Poland would pay the cost of recording and transmission of their respective messages¹⁷.

Wick's plan met some considerable internal backlash, as some U.S. officials and even members of the ICA staff were concerned that the program would be an embarrassment stemming from its Hollywood kitsch nature and propagandistic style. According to Alvin Snyder, "Career foreign service diplomats within the Agency [USICA] and State Department were aghast at the idea that Glenda Jackson and Frank Sinatra were hired to carry diplomatic water for the United States.¹⁸" One career foreign service officer exclaimed in a panic, "We've got to stop him [Wick].¹⁹" Meanwhile, Wick sparred with National Security Council staff member Richard Pipes, who felt that the program's Hollywood cast made it resemble the Academy Awards. In a heated argument, Wick told Pipes to stick to producing policy, while he would produce the television show²⁰. In deference to Wick's bond with Reagan, Pipes stood down.

Moreover, the program stirred considerable controversy abroad. As expected there were knee-jerk denunciations by Poland's military rulers, who condemned the program as "'propaganda aggression' that violates 'generally approved and practiced principles of international coexistence.'²¹" However, there was also criticism among Western allies, as Dennis Healey—the leader of Britain's opposition Labor Party, stated that the program would be, "intensely embarrassing to everyone outside the United

¹⁶ *ibid*

¹⁷ Paul Montgomery, "Day of Protest on the Polish Crisis get modest response worldwide," *New York Times* January 31, 1982

¹⁸ Snyder, *op cit.*, p.9

¹⁹ Buhmiller, *op cit.*

²⁰ Snyder, *op cit.*, p.8

²¹ Michael Getler, "ICA Plans Poland Spectacular," *Washington Post*, January 28, 1982, p.A20

States. I think it is absolutely wrong to treat the Polish tragedy as Hollywood razzmatazz.²² Similar sentiments rang out from an unidentified aide to French President Francois Mitterrand, who stated, “It is pure show business and demeans the whole idea of showing solidarity with the Polish people.”²³

But Wick stood defiant in the face of criticism, remarking, “To remain passive is a bummer.” He shot back at the criticism, stating, “We’ve been taken aback by some of these characterizations of the program as razzmatazz. Not one of them took the trouble to find out the content of the film. It would be nice if somebody did try to find out the true facts.”²⁴ He went on to defend Hollywood’s role, adding, “‘Why not actors?’ ... ‘They represent a constituency and have great visibility when they articulate their support... ‘Show people have always been a vanguard to causes. When you want to convey a message, you’d better have an audience.’”²⁵

To ensure that there was indeed an audience for Wick’s project, the USICA worked with Congress to obtain a waiver to bypass the prohibitions on broadcasting programs made for overseas consumption by the government’s information agency to domestic audiences. Days before the broadcast, USICA secured special permission based on House and Senate resolutions²⁶ to circumvent the Smith-Mundt Act- the legislation passed in 1948 that bars the broadcasting of information agency material to domestic audiences. Although not the first time such a waiver had been issued, as the law had been waived twice before— first for a program about a tour of India by then-First Lady

²² Getler, *ibid*

²³ *ibid*

²⁴ Betty Cuniberti, “Critics Aim Barbs at U.S. TV Spectacular on Poland,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 29, 1982, p. B11

²⁵ *ibid*

²⁶ See: CIS-No: 82-P.L97-146

Jacqueline Kennedy and again for a documentary about the assassination of President John Kennedy²⁷, the program marked the first time that a USICA production would be aired simultaneously at home and abroad.

Once the Congressional waiver was secured, the conservative think tank Heritage Foundation purchased time on the Public Broadcasting Service's (PBS) satellite transponder so that the program could be aired. Despite congressional approval, PBS wrestled with the decision to broadcast the program over fears of being perceived as "arms of the government by broadcasting domestically a program that may be seen as propaganda."²⁸ PBS President Larry Grossman stressed the sensitivity of the issue and tried to distance public television from the program. He stated, "But realistically, nobody understands the difference between a program that is being aired on a PBS station and a PBS program. We want everybody to know, however, that this is not a PBS program, that we are not a propaganda arm of the government."²⁹ Ultimately, PBS left the decision to air the program up to the discretion of the individual PBS member stations.

Showtime

On the designated "Day of Solidarity with Poland," held on January 30, 1982, rallies were held across the United States, with the A.F.L.-C.I.O. and Polish-American groups offering sponsorship. The largest rally took place in Chicago, with Secretary of State Haig and A.F.L.-C.I.O. President Lane Kirkland addressing a crowd of nearly 8,000; the rally in New York topped out around 2,500 and was addressed by civil rights

²⁷ Tony Schwartz, "WNET Wary on Televising, U.S. 'Poland' Program," *New York Times*, January 30, 1982, p.48

²⁸ Arthur Unger, "US Tribute to Poland: Suitable for Home TV?," *Christian Science Monitor*, January 29, 1982, p.4

²⁹ *ibid*

leader Bayard Rustin and various union leaders. Other rallies were held in Boston, Dallas and Columbus, while rallies abroad took place in West Germany, Belgium, Japan, Denmark, Italy, Portugal and the United Kingdom. Footage from these pro-Solidarity rallies was then incorporated into the crown jewel event, the *Let Poland be Poland* program.

Amid iconic imagery of Poland, and with Chopin's Polonaise melodically filling the screen, *Let Poland be Poland* dramatically began. Then suddenly the music became discordant as images of repression replaced the previous jovial imagery. From the darkness, host Charlton Heston's voice filled the screen as he proclaimed, "The light of freedom has been extinguished in Poland. It continues to burn in the hearts of Polish people." In continued dramatic effect, Heston then lit a candle and stated, "Tonight we are lighting a candle for the people of Poland...."³⁰ Heston set the tone, as he was joined in hosting the program by the urbane Glenda Jackson and debonair Max von Sydow. The 90-minute special would combine political rhetoric with music and poetry as it alternated between statements of solidarity from world leaders to performances from musicians, entertainers, actors and poets.

As Charlton Heston stated, "what's happening tonight is historic. Never before has such an array of world leaders gathered together under one electronic umbrella." From the Oval Office, President Reagan shined as the star of the show, offering a statement of support for Poland and a warning to its leaders if the situation continued to deteriorate. In addition, House Speaker Tip O'Neill and Senate Majority Leader Howard Baker offered their own messages. As well, leaders such as Britain's Margaret Thatcher, West Germany's Helmut Schmidt and France's Francois Mitterrand made cameo

³⁰ Cull, op cit., p. 411

appearances. In total, 16 heads of state made statements in support of Poland and Polish freedom, ranging from tiny Luxembourg to various NATO allies like Norway to Japan in the East. Ironically, even Turkey's leadership made a statement of support, notwithstanding that it too was under martial law³¹.

Meanwhile, Hollywood's contributions came from actors like Kirk Douglas, who waxed nostalgically about his previous visits to Poland and his Polish roots. Bob Hope gave a less-than-comedic talk about signal jamming, while Orson Welles offered a dramatic baritone reading of John Donne's poem, "No Man is an Island." A frail Henry Fonda read from an introductory page written by Engels in the Communist Manifesto on the need for Poland's independence. Yet it was Frank Sinatra who stole the show with a performance of the Polish folk song, "Ever Homeward," which he crooned in both English and Polish to a moving display of images of Poland.

Other cultural contributions came from the likes of author James Michener and Russian émigré Mstislav Rostropovich, who would conduct a symphony orchestra. Exiled Polish intellectuals also made their mark on the program, with a poetry reading by Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz and illustrations by artist Jan Sawka. Added to the mix were clips from the previous day's rallies in America and abroad, as well as statements from recently defected Polish Ambassadors to America and Japan. The program ended with a choir singing the anthem namesake of the program with scenes from the various solidarity rallies around the globe³².

³¹ "Propaganda; New ratings war," *The Economist*, February 6, 1982, p. 26

³² Ronald Reagan Presidential Library audio visual: *Let Poland be Poland*

Let Poland be Poland was broadcast via satellite and made available to 50 counties, while an hour-long version was offered on Voice of America in 39 languages³³. Member of the US diplomatic corps were under heavy pressure from the higher-ups to ensure that the program would be broadcast in their respective locations. Public Diplomat in Residence Mark Smith, who was serving as a Press Officer in Portugal, noted that the Press Attaché in Portugal literally sat in the local television station to ensure that the program would be broadcast. The hard-charging Charlie Wick was determined to have the program shown, and Smith noted, “Nobody wanted to explain to Wick why their embassy didn’t get the program on the air.³⁴” Smith also noted, “This was the first time we did anything like this. Technically it was not possible before the launch of the television satellites. But once the satellite were up, it became a matter of convincing the stations to air the program.”

Domestically, it was carried on 142 PBS stations, nearly 80% of the total number of the public broadcasting stations³⁵. There were also many other PBS stations that broadcast the show at later dates. According to USICA estimates, more than 184 million people saw at least part of the broadcast³⁶, plus another 100 million heard the VOA transmission.

Let Poland had to walk a fine line between being tasteful, hard-hitting, while not coming across as overly propagandistic, one that critic Arthur Unger elucidates:

“As a critic, I recognize that the show was in a ‘no win’ situation. If it had been a delightful entertainment, most critics would have deplored its lightheartedness and tastelessness in

³³ *The Economist*, op cit.

³⁴ Interview with Mark Smith, December 3, 2008

³⁵ Snyder, op cit., p.9; Arthur Unger, “‘Let Poland Be Poland’ - is the program really that bad?.” *Christian Science Monitor*, February 5, 1982, p.19

³⁶ Cull, op cit., p.411

the face of tragedy. If it was straightforward and informative rather than entertaining, it was bound to be criticized for its dullness, as it has been.³⁷

The show itself received rather mixed reviews. In West Germany, *Die Welt* applauded American “spontaneity and verve in coping with things recognized as right,” while in Canada, the *Montreal Gazette* noted, “Though Poles can no longer speak for themselves, in the West we can at least speak for them.³⁸” However, on more mundane technical and stylistic levels the program was criticized for being tedious, repetitious and long. *Washington Post* Television critic Tom Shales wrote, “Perhaps a bit more Hollywood tastelessness would actually have helped; 90 minutes of repetitious rhetoric does not exactly make scintillating TV.³⁹” Arthur Unger of the *Christian Science Monitor* was a little kinder in praise, stating, “It was certainly not an Emmy-winning entertainment. But it proved an informative, effective and tasteful mix of statements by US and world leaders, with mostly introductory remarks by the performers.⁴⁰” Others were not so kind, as one BBC television commentator dismissed the program as “the American propaganda machine in top gear,” while the *London Daily Mail* stated, “Only in the United States would quite such a vulgar spectacle be mounted.”⁴¹

Not surprisingly, the Soviet and Polish press roundly criticized the program. Tass, the official Soviet press agency, termed the “subversive television program” to be a “complete failure.⁴²” The Soviets also highlighted any criticism that the program received, pointing to claims of tastelessness by the Western press. Meanwhile, the Polish government denounced the American broadcast as internal interference and full of

³⁷ Unger, “Let Poland,” op cit., p.19

³⁸ “Better to Let Poland Be?,” *Time Magazine*, February 8, 1982

³⁹ Shales, op cit.

⁴⁰ Unger, “Let Poland,” op cit.

⁴¹ “TV Program on Poland is Criticized by Many,” *Reuters* February 2, 1982; Snyder, op cit., p. 9

⁴² “TV Program,” ibid

deceit⁴³. Soviet TV also responded with a program entitled, *The Hypocrisy of Washington* about American espionage efforts behind the Iron Curtain.

Conclusion

One component of the program that cannot be overlooked is the domestic component to the program. The Economist noted, “Indeed many people believed that the Reagan administration cared more about the film’s impact at home than abroad; it seemed an ideal opportunity to demonstrate international and celebrity endorsement of the American approach to the Polish crisis.”⁴⁴

Picking through the hyperbole surrounding *Let Poland be Poland*, the program can indeed be counted as a success, more in part for its symbolism of things to come. Years later, the USIA still listed the program as one of its greatest achievements⁴⁵. Perhaps the greatest success of the program came with its widespread notoriety. Snyder notes, “The point was that *people all over were talking about it*. Who cares if it wasn’t Shakespeare in the Park? It achieved its purpose by focusing attention worldwide on the plight of Poland’s free labor movement and, according to USIA research, had generated some support for it.”⁴⁶ While Wick might not have accomplished his stated goal of creating “a reverberation that will loosen the fetters that suppress Poland,”⁴⁷ the program was indeed a success for two other major reasons: *Let Poland* laid the foundations for future satellite projects it helped rally and sustain the Polish dissident movement.

⁴³ Snyder, op cit., p. 10

⁴⁴ *The Economist*, op cit.

⁴⁵ Hans Tuch, Communicating with the World: U.S. Public Diplomacy Overseas, New York: Macmillan 1990, p.114

⁴⁶ *ibid*

⁴⁷ Shales, op cit.

Let Poland marked the first time that satellite television was used as a weapon in the public diplomacy battle. Prior to *Let Poland*, the mainstay of the information war was carried out over radio waves; this program marked a departure point that heralded the use of a new technology, one that absolutely petrified the Soviets⁴⁸. The program illustrated that the medium of satellite television was a viable medium to conduct information campaigns, and ushered in a new era in the public diplomacy battle. Buoyed by the results of *Let Poland be Poland* and the capabilities the new medium of satellite television offered, Charlie Wick would go on to craft the technology for future ventures such as Worldnet, the satellite television network that the U.S would deftly employ in the years to come.

Although the program was not broadcast in Poland, word of the program did reach members of Solidarity and lifted their flagging morale in the face of the repressive crackdown. Mark Smith comments, “There was a carryover effect to Poland. Although they didn’t see the program, they heard about it. It was a signal to them that Reagan would take the issue seriously and not ignore what was going on.⁴⁹” Years later, Lech Walesa would validate Wick’s project by personally telling him how much the broadcast had meant to him and the Solidarity movement⁵⁰.

At the very least, *Let Poland be Poland* heralded a new era in the American public diplomacy battle, one that contained new ideas and a new cast of characters to battle out the information war. Through the program, Charlie Wick proffered a booming announcement that there was a new director and a new direction in the public diplomacy

⁴⁸ Snyder, op cit., p.24

⁴⁹ Interview: Mark Smith

⁵⁰ Cull, op cit. p.411

corner, and helped cement the notion that the Reagan-era approach to public diplomacy would be unlike anything previously seen.

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