

# ■ Smith-Mundt Act

**Date:** January 27, 1948

**Authors:** H. Alexander Smith and Karl E. Mundt

**Genre:** Legislation

## Summary Overview

The Smith-Mundt Act, or, to give it its formal name, the United States Information and Educational Exchange Act of 1948, would be a key element of American foreign policy and public diplomacy during the Cold War. The Smith-Mundt Act authorized the U.S. Department of State (the cabinet-level department responsible for American diplomacy and foreign relations) to use a variety of means (including broadcasting, personal visits, and educational exchange programs) to promote American interests to an international audience. To cynical observers, the Smith-Mundt Act represented an open, governmental sanction of propaganda efforts. Media and programing created under the Smith-Mundt Act would provide an officially sanctioned American point-of-view to persuade people around the world of the rightness of American policies and practices. The Smith-Mundt Act is only fully understandable within the context of the Cold War. As noted below (in the Defining Moment section), the creation of a State Department propaganda and international public relations effort was mired in Cold War anti-Communism and political paranoia. Entities developed, managed, or supported by the State Department under the Smith-Mundt Act would include Radio Free Europe and *Radio y Televisión Martí*, which broadcasts to Cuba.

## Defining Moment

The U.S. Information and Educational Exchange Act had a long road to passage into law and its legislative journey is best understood within the broader contexts of both the developing Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union as well as the rising fears of Communist subversion within the U.S. government.

In 1945, Representative Karl E. Mundt, Republican from South Dakota, introduced the earliest form of the law, known at the time as the Bloom Bill. This was partially in response to the closure of the Office of War Information—which the Roosevelt administration had created in 1942 as a conduit for radio broadcasts and publications to support the US efforts in the Second World War. There were also other existing programs that authorized the State Department to engage

in information programs in the Western Hemisphere. Despite numerous revisions, the bill failed to gain traction in 1946 and met further resistance in 1946.

One of the key objections coming from both Republicans and Democrats was concern about the State Department's policy stances, citing concerns about possible "communist infiltration" in the State Department. The bill contained no provision for Congressional oversight of the content of the material that the State Department would be distributing around the world. At the same time that there were concerns about the State Department as an institution, there was also suspicion of individuals the Department might recruit to take part in the proposed international exchange and education programs.

Mundt reintroduced the bill in March 1947 and throughout the year Congress saw debate and testimony over the bill take place featuring Secretary of State George Marshall and other officials. By this point, tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union had begun to intensify, and concerns began to emerge about Soviet propaganda having an effect in Europe. In the same year, George Kennan's anonymous article "The Sources of Soviet Conduct" appeared in *Foreign Affairs*, recommending a policy of "containment" of Soviet expansion and influence. The types of broadcasts and educational efforts proposed by the State Department and encompassed by Mundt's bill could serve as a tool of containment and serve to promote American interests on the ideological battlefields of the Cold War.

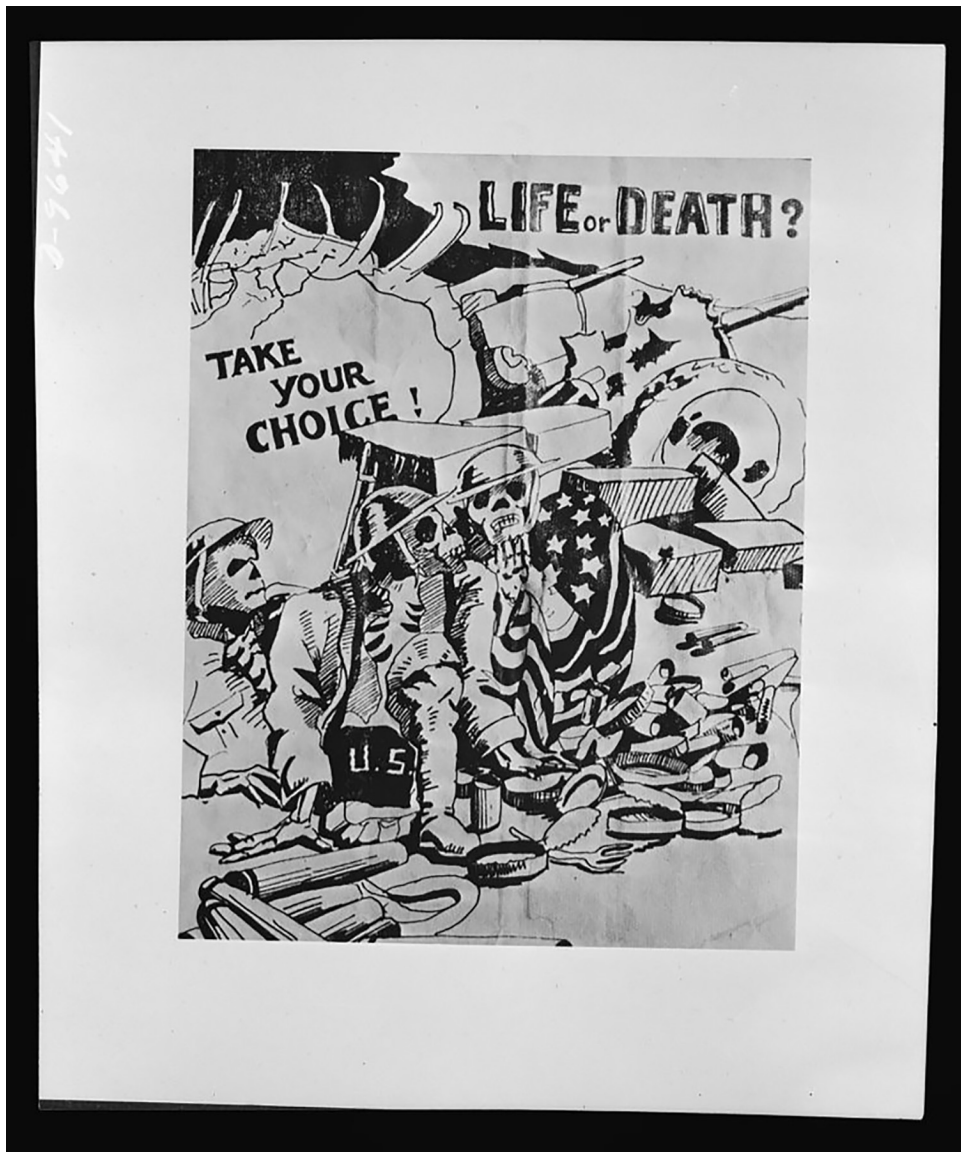
## Author Biographies

Howard Alexander Smith (1880–1966) was the Senate coauthor of the Smith-Mundt Act. Smith was a lawyer and political operative who served as the chair of the Republican State Committee of New Jersey and a member of the Republican national committee. In 1944, Smith won a special election to fill a vacant seat in the U.S. Senate. He was reelected in 1946, and again in 1959. While in the Senate, in addition to cosponsoring the Smith-Mundt Act, he chaired the Committee

on Labor and Public Welfare. After leaving the Senate, he worked as a foreign policy consultant.

Karl E. Mundt (1900–1974) was an educator who represented South Dakota in the House of Representatives from 1939 to 1948 and in the Senate from 1948–1973. While in the House, in addition to shepherding the Smith-Mundt Act to passage for a number of years (see Defining Moment, above), Mundt served on the House

Un-American Activities Committee where he tried—but failed—to persuade the committee to more thoroughly monitor and investigate the Ku Klux Klan. In the Senate, he chaired the Senate Subcommittee on Investigations, overseeing the Army-McCarthy Hearings. Outside of politics, Mundt served as the president of the National Forensic League, which promotes speech and debate in American high schools, from 1932 to 1971.



*The Smith-Mundt Act encouraged communications efforts outside the United States such as this anti-Japanese leaflet from Office of War Information (OWI), aimed at assuring that the Filipino people threw their entire resources and manpower into the struggle on the side of the United States.*

## HISTORICAL DOCUMENT

### TITLE I

#### SECTION 1

This Act may be cited as the “United States Information and Educational Exchange Act of 1948.”

#### OBJECTIVES

SEC. 2. The Congress hereby declares that the objectives of this Act are to enable the Government of the United States to promote a better understanding of the United States in other countries, and to increase mutual understanding between the people of the United States and the people of other countries. Among the means to be used in achieving these objectives are—

- (1) an information service to disseminate abroad information about the United States, its people, and policies promulgated by the Congress, the President, the Secretary of State and other responsible officials of Government having to do with matters affecting foreign affairs;
- (2) an educational exchange service to cooperate with other nations in—
  - (a) the interchange of persons, knowledge, and skills; (b) the rendering of technical and other services; (c) the interchange of developments in the field of education, the arts, and sciences.

SEC. 3. In carrying out the objectives of this Act, information concerning the participation of the United States in the United Nations, its organizations and functions, shall be emphasized.

### TITLE II-INTERCHANGE OF PERSONS, KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS

#### PERSONS

SEC. 201 The Secretary is authorized to provide for interchanges on a reciprocal basis between the United States and other countries of students,

trainees, teachers, guest instructors, professors, and leaders in fields of specialized knowledge or skill and shall wherever possible provide these interchanges by using the services of existing reputable agencies which are successfully engaged in such activity. The Secretary may provide for orientation courses and other appropriate services for such persons from other countries upon their arrival in the United States, and for such persons going to other countries from the United States. When any country fails or refuses to cooperate in such program on a basis of reciprocity the Secretary shall terminate or limit such program, with respect to such country, to the extent he deems to be advisable in the interests of the United States. The persons specified in this section shall be admitted as nonimmigrant visitors for business under clause 2 of section 3 of the Immigration Act of 1924, as amended, for such time and under such conditions as may be prescribed by regulations promulgated by the Secretary of State and the Attorney General. A person admitted under this section who fails to maintain the status under which he was admitted or who fails to depart from the United States at the expiration of the time for which he was admitted, or who engages in activities of a political nature detrimental to the interests of the United States, or in activities not consistent with the security of the United States, shall, upon the warrant of the Attorney General, be taken into custody and promptly deported pursuant to section 14 of the Immigration Act of 1924...

Deportation proceedings under this section shall be summary and the findings of the Attorney General as to matters of fact shall be conclusive...

#### BOOKS AND MATERIALS

SEC. 202. The Secretary is authorized to provide for interchanges between the United States and other countries of books and periodicals, including government publications, for the translation of such writings, and for the preparation, distribution, and interchange of other educational materials...

## INSTITUTIONS

SEC. 203. The Secretary is authorized to provide for assistance to schools, libraries, and community centers abroad, founded or sponsored by citizens of the United States, and serving as demonstration centers for methods and practices employed in the United States. In assisting any such schools, however, the Secretary shall exercise no control over their educational policies and shall in no case furnish assistance of any character which is not in keeping with the free democratic principles and the established foreign policy of the United States...

## TITLE V-DISSEMINATING INFORMATION ABOUT THE UNITED STATES ABROAD

### GENERAL AUTHORIZATION

SEC. 501. The Secretary is authorized, when he finds it appropriate, to provide for the preparation, and dissemination abroad, of information about the United States, its people, and its policies, through press, publications, radio, motion pictures, and other information media, and through information centers and instructors abroad. Any such press release or radio script, on request, shall be available in the English language at the Department of State, at all reasonable times following its release as information abroad, for examination by representatives of United States press associations, newspapers, magazines, radio systems, and stations, and, on request, shall be made available to Members of Congress...

## POLICIES GOVERNING INFORMATION ACTIVITIES

SEC. 502. In authorizing international information activities under this Act, it is the sense of the Congress (1) that the Secretary shall reduce such Government information activities whenever corresponding private information dissemination is found to be adequate; (2) that nothing in this Act shall be construed to give the Department a monopoly in the production or sponsorship on the air of short-wave broadcasting programs, or a monopoly in any other medium of information...

## TITLE X-MISCELLANEOUS

### LOYALTY CHECK ON PERSONNEL

SEC. 1001. No citizen or resident of the United States, whether or not now in the employ of the Government, may be employed or assigned to duties by the Government under this Act until such individual has been investigated by the Federal Bureau of Investigation and a report thereon has been made to the Secretary of State. Provided, however, That any present employee of the Government, pending the report as to such employee by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, may be employed or assigned to duties under this Act for the period of six months from the date of its enactment. This section shall not apply in the case of any officer appointed by the President by and with the advice and consent of the Senate...

Approved January 27, 1948.

## GLOSSARY

**construe(d):** to interpret someone's words or acts in a particular way, sometimes incorrectly or for self-serving purposes

**disseminate:** to spread information widely and to as many people as possible

**loyalty check:** a background check common in the Cold War era to determine if the subject had prior connections or sympathy to the Soviet Union or to communist ideology

**promulgate(d):** the act of creating law or policy

## Document Analysis

The excerpt begins with the standard statement of the formal name of the law and moves into Section 2, which outlines the objectives of the U.S. Information and Educational Exchange Act. As discussed above, the State Department's goal was to gain authorization to engage in officially sanctioned "positive" propaganda efforts to bolster support for American policies and actions in parts of the world thought to be vulnerable to Soviet influence and to serve as a counterbalance to Soviet propaganda. Within the text of the law, this very practical and realist goal is rhetorically softened into a desire to promote a "better understanding"—not of American policy and the ways that policy might be implemented—but a "better understanding" of the United States itself. This is a subtle distinction, but plays into a common assumption held by many Americans throughout the Cold War that if nations around the world simply understood America, they would seek to emulate it and shun rivals like the Soviet Union or the People's Republic of China. Another distinction drawn in Section 2 is that between promoting an understanding of the United States and the goal of increasing "mutual understanding between the *people* of the United States and the *people* of other countries" [emphasis added]. These two closely related, but distinct goals, are reflected in the law through the "means to be used" by the State Department. The first means is an "information service" which will present information directly from the government of the United States that will focus on "matters affecting foreign affairs." This will fulfill the goal of building support for American policies abroad. The second is an "educational exchange service," which will provide American experts in a variety of fields ranging from technology to artistic endeavors. This portion of the law aims to involve the citizens of nations directly.

Section 3, the last section excerpted in Title I, establishes that one of the goals of the State Department is to emphasize the leading role the United States plays in the United Nations. While the legislation does not expand on the reasons for this, identifying American goals with the broader goals of the United Nations would give the impression of American policy as being less monolithic than it really was.

Title II addresses the personnel exchange program between the United States and other countries. The law specifies international exchanges of both students and teachers in "fields of specialized knowledge or skill." It also mandates that existing organizations be

used to manage such programs, although the State Department is to provide any specialized "orientation courses and other appropriate services" for people who arrive in the United States from other nations and provides guidance for how to classify exchange visitors under immigration law. Significantly, the language in this section about deportation of foreign exchange personnel place the determination solely in the hand of the Justice Department—the State Department has no role here. This addresses concerns from the Justice Department—particularly the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI)—about the danger of foreign nationals being at large in the United States.

Sections 202 and 203 establish the ability of the State Department to provide assistance and support in a number of ways including translation and dissemination of printed materials, including government publications.

Title V of the Smith-Mundt Act addresses the goal of "disseminating information about the United States abroad." Title V authorizes the use of every form of media, from print to film, popular at the time, but with language that is open enough ("other information media") that emerging technologies such as television were included. Section 502 requires the State Department to use private materials wherever appropriate rather than using public resources to create similar materials. Section 502, in many ways, prevents the State Department from monopolizing or dominating the field.

Title X, like Title II, addresses concerns held by the Justice Department as well as members of Congress about the political suitability of those involved in conducting "public diplomacy" on behalf of the United States. The implementation of a "loyalty check"—which would, in the 1950s, be required of nearly all federal employees—would, it was hoped, uncover those who were potentially politically subversive.

## Essential Themes

The Smith-Mundt Act and the initiatives taken under its authority raise questions about the compatibility of a "state media" with a free press, the access Americans had to what was being broadcast under the authority of the American government, and the role of propaganda during the Cold War. The Smith-Mundt Act, with its long road from when the State Department saw a need to engage in public diplomacy to its eventual signing into law, had to cope with the burgeoning anti-Communism of the Cold War as well as concerns from the federal law enforcement community.

As the State Department established radio and television networks, such as Voice of America and *Radio y Televisión Martí*, broadcast programming to Latin America, Asia, and the Middle East, and promoted countless cultural exchanges. The mission and role would change as the Cold War waned, but the Smith-Mundt Act provides a valuable snapshot of an era where the American government itself wielded the power of the press to promote its interests and policies around the world.

—Aaron Gulyas

### **Bibliography and Additional Reading**

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