

Third VOA chief in three years resigns

Tomlinson to leave agency in September after year and a half in post to return to 'Reader's Digest,' where he worked before joining VOA

The revolving door through which Voice of America directors come and go was in operation again last week. Kenneth Y. Tomlinson, the third person to hold the post since the Reagan administration came into office in January 1981, last week announced his resignation. In September, he will return to *Reader's Digest*, where he served for 14 years before joining the Voice in December 1982, to become an assistant managing editor. But Tomlinson, who was credited with stressing high journalistic standards at the Voice and was a strong advocate of the Reagan administration's \$1-billion VOA modernization program, said he will remain active as a private citizen to advance those causes (see "Fifth Estater," page 79).

Tomlinson, 39, said that on his return to private life he plans to establish a bipartisan foundation "to gather support for the VOA."

VIP's. Public Broadcasting Service President Bruce Christensen addressed representatives from 21 companies last Tuesday at Washington's Mayflower hotel. The "VIP's" (very important partners) of WETA-TV-FM Washington paid \$150 a plate to attend a luncheon honoring their contributions of at least \$2,500 each to the stations. Christensen told the contributors that WETA-TV-FM have the highest percentage of viewers who are donors (25%) of the major-market public stations. He said that the FCC changes in underwriting rules (See "Where Things Stand," July 9) will give the companies increased public recognition since underwriter products and services can now be identified on the air (as long as the identification is not promotional). He added that the rule change is a "difficult line" to walk, however, and that PBS could appear to be commercial "without ever intending to be."

He said such an effort is required because VOA lacks a constituency in the U.S. Americans, he noted, do not listen to America's foreign broadcast service to learn the news. Indeed, the law prohibits the Voice from broadcasting in the U.S. Tomlinson said the foundation "will have nothing to do with internal matters at the Voice." He said he will seek both Democrats and Republicans to serve on the foundation's board, with a view to seeing to it the VOA is "properly recognized." Tomlinson hopes to secure the necessary financing from foundations.

Tomlinson became aware of what he regards as the need for a constituency among the American public as Congress began considering the Reagan administration's request

for \$113.7 million for an initial phase of the VOA's modernization program. The measure lacks public support, and Congress seems likely to cut the request to some \$90 million. In Tomlinson's view, "the biggest thing we need is the bipartisan support of the American people." He said "it's no accident" that the VOA physical plant has been allowed to deteriorate over the past couple of decades.

Tomlinson, who had been a senior editor at *Reader's Digest* before joining the Voice, said he had planned to remain in government two years. And six months ago, he said, "I loved the job so much I couldn't imagine leaving." However, the offer to return to the *Digest*, he said, was too good to turn down. He made up his mind about a month ago but had planned to withhold his announcement regarding a September departure until August. He wanted to continue pushing causes he favored without the burden of a lame duck status for as long as possible. He finally decided it would be "better for the institution" if he took the time to reassure the staff the upgrading of VOA "will continue" under the staff that remains in place.

Tomlinson feels his time at the Voice has been well spent. "It's been a remarkable time," he said. There has been "no controversy" within the Voice (which is more remarkable than it sounds), the modernization program is going forward, "new standards of journalism" have been established. And last week, the Voice received word of a victory over the Department of Health and Human Services with which it shares a building in southwest Washington. The Voice will take over 58,000 square feet of space now occupied by HHS and will become the building's principal occupant.

The Reagan administration has had trouble finding someone with staying power to direct the VOA. James Conkling, who is a friend of Director Charles Z. Wick of the VOA's parent organization, the U.S. Information Agency, and who had had an extensive background in records and broadcasting, left in March 1982, after 10 months on the job. He had been criticized from the right and left over the VOA's news policy, but he said he quit because of the frustrations he encountered in working for government. His successor, John Hughes, a former associate director of the International Communication

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