No Go for Satellite Sanctions Against Iran

A Presidential proposal to cut off Iran's access to the satellites of Intelsat has been quietly shelved

As part of a package of sanctions against Iran, President Carter on 17 April proposed an interruption in the Iranian's use of the ten communication satellites that make up the Intelsat system. A cutoff of this sort would play havoc with Iran's international banking and electronic funds transfers, with its airline scheduling, and with its telephone and television service. In all, 70 percent of Iran's international telecommunication needs are served by the satellites of Intelsat. The cutoff of communications, Carter noted at the time, was stipulated in the United Nations Charter as a legitimate sanction.

This is indeed the case, but the suggestion nonetheless put the Intelsat people on edge. Never before had one Intelsat member proposed that another be kicked out. Intelsat officials, based in Washington, felt it would set a bad precedent, one with unforeseeable outcomes. What, for instance, would keep an Arab country from proposing that Israel be booted out of the telecommunications union? They also felt it would be politically impossible for the President to carry out his threat. The Intelsat charter does not have a provision for cutting off service to any of its 103 member nations, and the rallying of political support needed to create such a provision was considered by high-level Intelsat officials to be far beyond the ability of the United States.

Why then raise the threat in the first place? The White House now has no comment, and seems to have quietly shelved the proposal. No mention of it, for example, was made when the return to a policy of "collective sanctions" was announced by the Carter Administration 2 days after the failure of the 24 April rescue attempt.

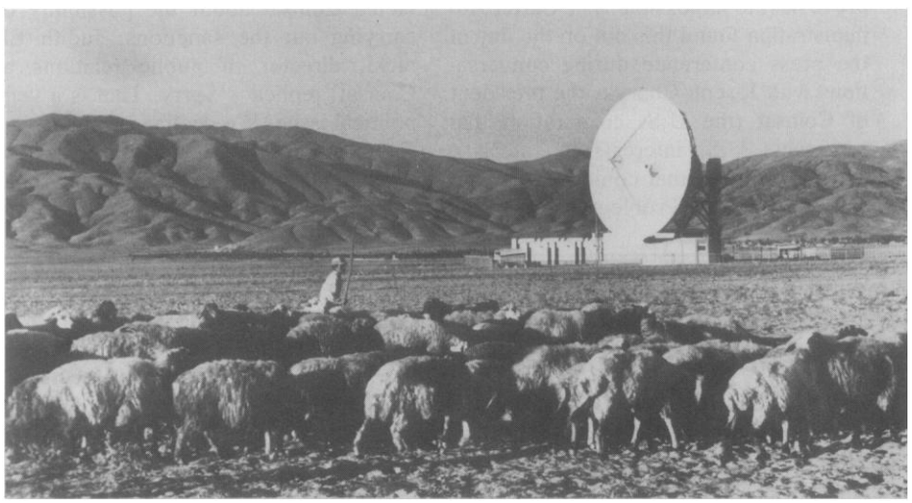
Despite this official silence, two explanations have gained some currency in the Washington-area telecommunications community. One maintains that the threat was a ploy to keep the Iranians preoccupied with the thought of losing their international communications—preoccupied and thus less likely to anticipate the ill-fated rescue attempt, which was then just 1 week away. The other suggests that the Administration had no idea that carrying out the threat was next to impossible.

Evidence favors an explanation somewhere between these two extremes, making the threat look like neither a deft ploy nor a foreign policy fiasco. For months, the Administration seriously considered a cutoff. The decision to inquire about the feasibility of the satellite sanctions, however, was kept until the last minute, officials at the National Security Council (NSC) contacting Intelsat officials only hours before the President's 17 April press conference. Said one Intelsat official who asked not to be named: "The people on the [NSC] Iranian task force were certainly knowledgeable enough about the procedural aspects of how one might approach this issue, but they knew little about the probability of success." By the time of the press conference, Carter could have well changed his view of the threat, seeing it more as a psychological means of unnerving the Iranians.

Whatever the reasoning, it is now clear the the Administration has one less card in its pack of diplomatic options. It is also clear that the incident has raised several important questions, one being the international political fallout among Intelsat members. Another concerns domestic politics. If the Administration was at one point serious about a cutoff, a cutoff that would black out satellite-mediated television coverage of Iran, it raises a host of questions about reporter's rights to use the technology, and the relation of television coverage to the President's desire to bring an abrupt end to the hostage crisis.

The threat made on 17 April came in the context of economic and political sanctions, no direct mention being made of television. "If a constructive response is not forthcoming soon," said Carter in a prepared statement, "the United States should and will proceed with other measures. We will legally forbid shipment of food and medicine, and the United Nations Charter, as you know, stipulates interruption of communications as a legitimate sanction. Accordingly, I am prepared to initiate consultations with the member nations of Intelsat to bar Iran's use of international communications facilities." In answer to a reporter's question, Carter later reiterated and strengthened his stance. "Unless there is immediate action on the part of Iran, these items and the interruption of communications are still available to us. . . ."

To make good on this threat, the Ad-



The Iranian earth station, built in 1969, is located 200 miles west of Teheran at Asadabad. In 1975, a second dish antenna was added, allowing simultaneous use of satellites positioned over the Atlantic and Indian oceans.

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ministration would have to write a letter to the Director General of Intelsat, requesting an extraordinary meeting of the Intelsat Assembly of Parties. If at least one third of the 103 member nations agreed, a meeting would be called. Once convened, with a quorum of 52 members, the support of two-thirds of the representatives present would be needed in a vote first to amend the Intelsat Agreement to allow a freeze out, and then to suspend Iran's access to Intelsat satellites. If so agreed, each country would have to change certain equipment at its earth station. This is because satellites of the current generation are basically passive devices that transmit whatever is beamed up to them, and a cutoff could not be carried out at the satellites themselves.

While on paper this sounds complicated but plausible, in real life it would prove next to impossible. The Carter Administration found this out on the day of the press conference during conversations with Joseph Charyk, the president of Comsat (the U.S. corporation that represents U.S. interests in Intelsat), and through informal contacts with officials at Intelsat. Problems brought up were diverse. For one thing, Iran, by having combined its Intelsat investment share with those of Turkey, Pakistan, and South Korea, is on the Intelsat Board of Governors—a position that enhances its clout within the organization.

And given the large representation of the Third World in the Assembly of Parties, Intelsat officials doubted if the necessary votes to convene an extraordinary meeting could be gathered. Even if the votes came in, a meeting opened to the topic of cutting off service to Iran could roll on to other issues, countries with political axes to grind undoubtedly making a fuss. Once the use of commercial satellite networks for political purposes got started, moreover, it might prove difficult to stop. This could be increasingly true in the future because of the evolution of satellite technology. Today, equipment at each earth station must be modified in order to cut off the signal from another country's earth station. Future generations of satellites, however, will be increasingly able to switch and reroute signals from one earth station to another, or to ignore them completely, thus opening up unseemly visions of space wars and easier-to-achieve communication blackouts.

Private reactions of Intelsat and Comsat officials to the President's 17 April announcement included shock and disbelief. On the record, however, officials are prone to understatement. Typical was the reaction of Santiago Astrain, Director General of Intelsat, who in a carefully worded statement said in effect that they would have nothing to do with the cutoff. "Our stance," he said, "is that Intelsat provides the space segment of the international system, and the conduct and establishment of links using the satellites are matters for the particular countries concerned." Asked whether the Administration had formally contacted Comsat about the possibility of carrying out the sanctions, Judith Elnicki, director of public relations at Comsat, replied: "Sorry. That is a very political issue. We decline comment."

Officials at Intelsat and Comsat say the satellite cutoff was at least initially considered by the Carter Administration to be a serious sanction, an economic sanction of sorts that, interestingly enough, would also have done away with live television coverage of the Iranian crisis. That television had become a key issue is beyond dispute, and some observers suggest that the Administration's push was in part motivated by the prospect of ending the long-running U.S. living room crisis. In the past, for instance, Administration officials have said the television coverage of the Iranian crisis made it impossible to switch to a low-key waiting game. Such a patient procedure in 1968 brought about the release of the crew of the U.S.S. *Pueblo* after 11 months of confinement in North Korea. The difference, in the view of Administration officials, is that the Iranian crisis is the continuing national preoccupation here, while the *Pueblo* faded into the background of other events for want of cameras, satellites, and reporters.

Cynics see this formula as self-serving in the extreme, saying it was Carter's declared policy to keep national and international attention focused on the hostages. Some suggest he used this issue to undercut his political rivals. In a 19 April interview with Pennsylvania reporters, for example, he said: it is "important to me" to show that "this is just as much a crisis as it was the first week they were captured."

Just who controlled or was controlled by the media is much clearer in the case of the Iranians themselves. From the outset, cameras transmitted jarring images of shrieking mobs, images often staged by Iranians unusually wise to the higher theology of using the media. And it was Sadegh Ghotbzadeh, after all, who before being appointed Iranian Foreign Minister was head of State Broadcasting.

Early on in the crisis, the Carter Administration protested that the U.S. media were becoming mere tools for the militants. In the case of William Gallegos, the hostage interviewed in December by NBC television, White House Press Secretary Jody Powell said the interview was "a cruel and cynical" attempt on the part of the Iranian captors to exert pressure directly on the American public. Picking up the beat, an editorial in the Washington *Star* said: "It might make sense—though it would be no service to the First Amendment—drastically to recast the American policy of unfettered television."

As things now stand, such coverage is no longer a problem. In the aftermath of the spectacular failure at Desert One, the hostages have been scattered, and, for want of a focal point, U.S. television coverage of Iran has now fallen off. The President is out campaigning.

Satellite sanctions would also have killed Iranian coverage, but whether or not the Carter Administration was after such an outcome will probably never be known. In any event, such speculations are beside the point to many, including Intelsat officials. They see the issue surrounding the U.S. proposal to cut Iran out of the satellite network not so much in terms of complex motivation as poor execution. The fact that the feasibility of the sanctions was assessed only hours before they were announced has left at least one Intelsat official with lingering doubts about the process of foreign policy making in general. "I am far less knowledgeable about the other sanctions that have been invoked," he says, "and how effective they have been. But I'd sure like to think that the process is a lot more professional and a lot more informed than would seem to be the case in this particular instance."

—WILLIAM J. BROAD

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