

The Big Picture

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What Is the Larger Importance of COMSAT and COMSAT Labs in American and World History

Roger Cochetti, February 2024

Before joining COMSAT in 1981, my background had been primarily in foreign policy and international relations. My undergraduate degree was from Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service and my graduate degree from Johns Hopkins' School of Advanced International Studies/SAIS. My first job out of school was Director of the Washington Office of the United Nations Association of the USA, after which I served as Assistant Director for Legislative & Public Affairs of the US International Development Cooperation Agency (the short-lived, super-agency for foreign aid created by President Jimmy Carter.) So, when I was first approached about joining COMSAT, my view of the company was founded on its role in world affairs, geopolitics and American foreign policy. I knew little about telecommunications technology and regulation or space-based technology...but I knew that COMSAT was one of the most important geopolitical success stories of the Kennedy/Johnson administration and I felt it would be an honor to be part of that success story.

I was actually surprised to learn that most COMSAT employees had little idea of the larger importance of COMSAT since they tended to focus on either space or telecommunications technology, business or regulation. Nonetheless, political leaders around the world understood COMSAT's larger role in history quite well.

When President Kennedy delivered his historic speech on "[Urgent National Needs](#)" to the [US Congress on May 25, 1961](#) he famously said "I believe that this nation should commit itself to achieving the goal, before this decade is out, of landing a man on the moon and returning him safely to the earth." And that commitment has been highly publicized ever since. More important, however, was Kennedy's explanation of why, which came before his proposed "Moonshot" commitment: "...if we are to win the battle that is now going on around the world between freedom and tyranny, the dramatic achievements in space which occurred in recent weeks should have made clear to us all, as did the Sputnik in 1957, the impact of this adventure on the minds of men everywhere, who are attempting to make a determination of which road they should take." Everyone at that time understood that Kennedy's initiatives in the space race were all about influencing the views of elites and everyday people around the world as to whether the United States or the Soviet Union would prevail in their global geopolitical/ideological struggle; and that the Soviets were clearly well ahead in the space technology.

What is often forgotten, however, is that -in addition to calling for a Moonshot- Kennedy also called in this speech for the creation of some type of international communications satellite

system: “Third, an additional 50 million dollars will make the most of our present leadership, by accelerating the use of space satellites for world-wide communications.” This was the conception of COMSAT and later COMSAT Labs and INTELSAT. (you might also say INMARSAT, EUTELSAT, ARABSAT, etc.)

However, keeping in mind the basic goal of winning “...the battle that is now going on around the world...on the minds of men...”, the Kennedy/Johnson administration’s approach was to differentiate the US from the USSR by casting the US in the role of the sharing and generous superpower; as opposed to the Soviet selfish, greedy superpower. This approach reflected the one successfully taken years earlier by the Eisenhower administration in its “Atoms for Peace” initiative, in which the US committed to share its knowledge of atomic power with other countries for peaceful uses like generating electricity. More relevant, perhaps, was the parallel between COMSAT and other contemporaneous international sharing initiatives like the Peace Corps and the Alliance for Progress, which were designed to portray the US as the noble superpower.

To be effective in swaying global elite and public opinion, these noble superpower programs had to have substance; and the substance of Kennedy’s “space satellites for world-wide communications” was COMSAT, through which (unlike the USSR) the United States actually shared its space technologies with other countries for peaceful uses and for their advancement. To help sway global public and elite opinion, Kennedy’s COMSAT had to have three things: 1) not just talk, but real, workable, space technology that could be used for peaceful communications (that’s where COMSAT Labs came in); 2) not just talk, but enough money to pay for satellites and ground equipment to make global satellite communications work (that’s where COMSAT Corporate came in); and 3) Other countries—especially in ideological battlegrounds like Europe, Latin America and more advanced Asia—cooperating with the US so they could enjoy the benefits of America’s generous and cooperative spirit (that’s where INTELSAT, and later INMARSAT, came in.)

The Kennedy/Johnson administration’s plan basically worked: through COMSAT/INTELSAT, the Alliance for Progress, the Peace Corps and other comparable programs, from the mid-1960’s onward, the US successfully cast itself in the eyes of hundreds of millions of elites and everyday people in every country as the sharing and noble superpower, as opposed to its adversary, the selfish superpower. Even during the Vietnam War, America’s successful positioning itself as a noble and sharing superpower prevailed (in fact much of the opposition to the US military involvement in Vietnam was based on shock at the idea that such a noble superpower could act in this way.)

America’s success, partly enabled by the success of COMSAT, COMSAT Labs and INTELSAT, as the noble and generous superpower was far more valuable than any number of military bases, warplanes, warships and nuclear weapons in making the US admired...even within the Soviet Union and among Soviet allies in Eastern Europe. Often, when elites and everyday people in these regions were left free to choose America or the Soviet Union, they chose to affiliate with the noble and generous superpower.

What made Kennedy's commitment to "space satellites for global communications" different from most other comparable US international sharing commitments was that COMSAT involved the most advanced, stunning and militarily frightening technology of the mid-20th century...outer space. Other countries could share their medical, agricultural or financial successes with the world; but only the US and the USSR could share their outer space successes with the rest of the world. And only the US did, successfully.

So, when I look back at COMSAT, I don't see a small telecommunications business that tried to diversify by buying a pro basketball team. I see a unique American initiative that did a lot to shape the global identity of the United States and in doing so, contributed to the epochal international geopolitical changes of the early 1990's.