

Failure Dims Chance Of an Early Release

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When President Carter terminated the troubled U.S. rescue operation in Iran with a terse telephoned instruction at 4:57 p.m. last Thursday, he also spelled an end to any substantial prospect of early release for the 53 Americans being held in Tehran.

The failure of last week's risky mission, followed by the dispersal of the hostages to places of captivity throughout Iran, makes it even more difficult than before to retrieve the Americans by military means, administration officials conceded yesterday. At the same time, according to a high White House official, the United States will not publicly or formally give up the option of trying a rescue again.

The chosen path of American policy at the present moment, as explained at the White House yesterday, is a return to the policy of "collective sanctions" designed to convince Iran of its national in-

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terest in giving up the hostages. To this end, new consultations with America's allies are under way and new presidential statements are being prepared. Carter may speak about his future policy in the crisis Monday in an address to the United States Chamber of Commerce.

At best, the path of persuasion through U.S. and allied sanctions of an economic and political nature is a tortuous one, with little prospect of early success. This is all the more so because the spectacular failure of the U.S. rescue effort undercuts the position of those forces within Iran that would like to find a negotiated settlement of the hostage crisis, and tends to confirm the ayatollahs, militant students and Islamic masses in the determined belief that Allah as well as right is on their side.

Long-term U.S. military options of exerting pressure through a naval blockade or mining of Iranian harbors have not been given up, but the failure of the short-term military rescue and other recent developments have made such a high-risk program even more difficult, in several ways.

To make the retrospective case for the rescue effort, high administration officials brought to the surface their own doubts and fears about the more draconian blockade-mining plan. Secretary of Defense Harold Brown, for example, said Friday that a plan to interrupt Iranian commerce through military means "internationalizes the conflict, widens it, and

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might not have the desired effect." This is a terse but telling summary of the objections within the administration councils—as well as in allied capitals—to such a U.S. military plan.

Senior members of Congress have made it increasingly clear that they insist on being consulted well in advance of any such far-reaching military effort. Last Wednesday, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee formally demanded that consultations begin under the War Powers Act.

Following the news of Thursday's abortive raid, several of the lawmakers drew a distinction between a partly covert rescue mission, where consultations might be impractical, and a more extensive program of escalating military pressures in the vital Persian Gulf, which in legislative eyes demands full consultation.

There is substantial opposition on Capitol Hill to a blockade-mining plan, especially among military-minded lawmakers who remain to be convinced that the United States has the muscle to make such a program stick if the Soviets should mount a challenge.

Other lawmakers oppose such a plan because of the probable dangers to the world oil supply. Carter's domestic affairs adviser, Stuart E. Eizenstat, is reported to have voiced doubts because of the petroleum danger at a White House meeting last Tuesday.

Despite the dangers and doubts,

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some officials believe that a more confrontational U.S. policy toward Iran is probable in the months ahead because of the lack of any viable alternative with promise of early success. The contention that the president has "no other choice" was the main argument for quick action before Thursday's raid, and may become again the argument for military measures in days to come.

Senior White House officials have dismissed the suggestion that the United States shift to a low-key waiting game that allows time for the political process within Iran to produce a government capable of negotiating and carrying through on release of the hostages. Such a patient procedure in 1968 brought about release of the crew of the USS Pueblo after 11 months of confinement in North Korea.

One vast difference from the Pueblo case, in the view of White House officials, is that the Iranian crisis is the continuing national preoccupation here, while the Pueblo faded into the background of other events. Among the reasons for this was the inaccessibility of North Korea to American television cameras and reporters.

"A drumfire of publicity from Tehran, with the U.S. press acting as an echo," was blamed by a high official for the U.S. inability to reduce the tension and attention level.

It is also true, however, that the president has declared (most recently April 19 in an interview with Pennsylvania reporters) that as a matter of

policy he is determined to keep national and international attention focused on the hostages in Iran. Carter said it is "important to me" to show that "this is just as much a crisis as it was first week they were captured."

Another vital difference from 1968 is that President Johnson decided, two months after the Pueblo crew was seized, not to seek reelection. But Carter is running for office. The Pueblo route of quiet and persistent negotiations holds little prospect of release in the short run, even though specialists on Iran say it holds the greatest prospect for safe release in the longer run.

In the meantime, continued captivity for the hostages could be disastrous for Carter at the polls. By a quirk of fate, the first anniversary of the hostage taking in Tehran will be Nov. 4, 1980—presidential election day in the United States.

Carter's decision to begin planning for a military rescue option, even

while proceeding on the sanctions and then the negotiations track with Iran, was traced by a senior White House official yesterday to the early morning of last Nov. 9. At that point, the president reportedly asked for development of a wide range of options of a military nature—work which continued in a meeting later that day involving Vice President Mondale, presidential assistant Zbigniew Brzezinski, Secretary of Defense Harold Brown and Gen. D. David Jones, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

The military rescue option was put aside because of the risks to the hostages and the risks of pushing Iran into the Soviet orbit. But planning and preparations continued just in case, and the plan was resurrected early this month after the failure of the Iranian government to carry out its negotiated commitments.

According to the official chronology, Carter decided to proceed toward implementation of the rescue plan at

a National Security Council meeting at 11:30 a.m. April 11. The decision was first made at 12:45 p.m. and "after further discussion," reaffirmed at 1:20 p.m. There was no explanation for the additional discussion.

Officials confirmed yesterday that, contrary to earlier reports, Secretary of State Cyrus R. Vance did not attend this crucial meeting. He was in Florida on a long-planned vacation weekend. Deputy Secretary of State Warren Christopher represented the State Department in his absence.

Preparations and reviews of the plan continued on an almost daily basis among senior policymakers from April 11 through the final steps last Thursday. It was at 4:45 p.m. that day that Carter learned from Defense Secretary Brown through Brzezinski that the rescue team had run into "a serious situation involving perhaps the necessity to abort the mission."

According to a senior official, the "serious situation" was primarily the

helicopter failures. There was also a problem of security because of the busload of Iranians who had been taken into custody and several Iranians in a pickup truck who had gotten away. The high official denied that a Soviet threat—as reported by campaign operatives for GOP contender Ronald Reagan—was part of the troubles of the mission.

Faced with the request for an urgent decision, the president, sitting in his small study off the Oval Office, asked for additional information about the situation from the field commander.

Then at 4:57 p.m., according to the official chronology, he telephoned Brown with the terse decision that "I approve the recommendation" to abort the rescue mission.

An hour later he learned that a helicopter and a transport plane collided during the withdrawal process, killing eight men and leaving the rescue effort a fiasco as well as a failure.