

JOEL ALPER- RIP 4/26/2026
In Memoriam

1938 was a good year, when Joel was born. So was his dear friend and mentor: Irving Goldstein, who predeceased him. At his funeral, Joel memorably recalled Irv as a “*Mench*”. I too was born that year, so I’m acutely aware of my own mortality.

“*What's past is prologue*,” so I’m impelled to recall my personal association with these two Comsat leaders, as extended to me in Intelsat and Inmarsat. To avoid controversy, I’ve deliberately avoided citing other names.

I joined Comsat in 1975 to work on the abortive Aerosat project. During the 1970s, when Comsat’s dominance of Intelsat affairs started to fade, it created the World Systems Division (to be headed eventually by Irv, followed by Joel) to focus on its Signatory role within Intelsat. Joel recruited me to that Division in a role he informally called “techno politics.” I’m still not sure whether he meant this admiringly or derisively!

I immediately engaged in the techno-politics involved in the procurement of Intelsat-V satellites and their launchers, as well as in the introduction of TDMA technology. It proved uncomfortable for me to assert the interests of the US Signatory (i.e. World Systems Division) over those of my colleagues at Comsat Labs.

During the 1980s and 90s, Irv was elected CEO of Intelsat when that position fell vacant. When the parallel Comsat CEO position fell vacant, Joel was passed over. Comsat was then bent on replacing its top leadership with an Apple Computer Co. castoff and former real-estate executives. Joel then retired and moved on to found Comtech Corporation.

Inmarsat was coming into being during the late 70s and early 80s. Its structure was patterned largely on that of Intelsat, which had a plausible claim to the mobile-satellite telecommunications franchise. Both Irv and Joel attempted to promote that franchise, but to no avail. Being accustomed to playing a dominant role, Comsat struggled to reconcile its roles in the two organizations.

Key differences existed between Intelsat's fixed-telecommunications and Inmarsat's maritime- telecommunications business models. Access to Intelsat services was held exclusively by Intelsat signatories (mostly national telecoms entities), whereas maritime customers could access Inmarsat services through any Inmarsat signatory (or even non-signatory), thus open to competition.

Furthermore, the signatory structures of the two international organizations were vastly different: For instance Norway, with its comparatively massive maritime interest, held much more influence in Inmarsat than in Intelsat. The opposite was true of the relatively modest US commercial maritime interest.

Importantly, the entire Soviet block, with their massive maritime interests, wouldn't entrust them to an Intelsat that they had declined to join in the first place. Even the UK, an otherwise staunch Intelsat supporter, preferred to keep mobile and fixed satellite organizations separate, and managed to locate the new Inmarsat Headquarters in London.

After my own retirement from Inmarsat, I played a small part in assisting Joel's Comtech Corp. to gain direct access to Inmarsat's space segment capacity.

The rest is no longer prologue; it's history. Wider political headwinds of deregulation, privatization and commercialization, emanating principally from conservative US and UK governments, overwhelmed Comsat, Intelsat and Inmarsat. They struggled to survive the vagaries of international finance, stock listing, acquisitions, etc. They are no more; succeeded by the likes of SES, Viacom, and notably by Elon Musk's StarLink.

I suppose we belong to Comsat alumni that were derisively referred to at the time as "the Dinosaurs". So be it. But I'm disinclined to bask in Comsat's glory, lost so long ago.

Rest In Peace, Joel.

Your admirer,
Ahmad Ghais