

NEW OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE PRIVATE SECTOR IN SPACE TECHNOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

The proposed transfer of the Landsat operational system to the private sector is certain to create many new opportunities and a few problems for those entrepreneurs willing to invest in the future of this program. There are those who look upon this as a fiscal blessing; a chance to off-load an expensive hardware program from the back of the federal government, and some view it as an unnecessary program or at least unaffordable. There is vigorous conflict of opinion over the "worth" of the program. We, on the other hand, believe the assets of the program are unique in several respects. First; no other resource of the federal government can acquire the same objective information about the natural resources of the earth, and we include both the human and technology resources of the government. Second; that the revenue potential of the sale of the data is orders of magnitude smaller than the revenue potential of resource investment decisions enabled by early access to the raw data. Finally - we find it ironic in the extreme that because the system was designed and administered jointly by and for the resource agencies of the government, that it has become an albatross around the neck of the single "responsible" agency. If logic were used as a criteria, the program was a model of how to conduct cost-effective research in the government. On the other hand hindsight shows one just how vulnerable a multi-agency program is to the current attack on federal programs.

We find it professionally very rewarding that the early encouragement that we gave to our foreign colleagues has resulted in mature programs in many countries including some with planned and funded space segments. We find it very distressing to look at the disarray in our country especially in our universities and national laboratories.

The GEOSAT test site program proved that private industry could work together on a joint R&D project. There was not the slightest altruism in the project but it worked. It is our thesis that this joint effort could be a useful model for a private sector venture provided that the same care and attention to planning and management was exercised. In view of the technology failures that have been experienced in the Landsat IV vehicle it is hardly prudent to consider it a candidate as an operational prototype but Landsat D prime may dispel that doubt. The paper will discuss the opportunities, the issue of commercial overflight of a foreign country and alternative strategies for private sector involvement.

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