

NEWS AND VIEWS

COMSAT's High Hopes

COMSAT, the United States Communications Satellite Corporation, may be pushing its luck too far. In four years, it has done better than anyone could have expected when Congress patched it together in a series of compromises between the advocates of public and private ownership. (Half of COMSAT's shares are owned by public shareholders, the other half by the American communications industry.) Even COMSAT's purpose was two-headed—the corporation was told to set up a global network of communications by satellite as soon as possible, and at the same time to enlist international partners willing to join in a system dominated by Americans.

Yet all this has been done. And quickly too. At home the corporation is a constant favourite with small investors, to the surprise of experts in Wall Street, yet it keeps cordial relations with the American Telephone and Telegraph Company, its biggest corporate shareholder. Abroad, it has set up the International Telecommunications Consortium which fifty-two countries have joined: the Philippines and Indonesia are recent recruits, and Yugoslavia is thinking about it—the first communist country to do so. (The consortium, INTELSAT, is the actual owner of the *Early Bird* satellite; COMSAT is the manager.) *Early Bird*, while by no means working to full capacity, has been successful enough for the transatlantic rates to be reduced. By the end of this year, COMSAT will be able to offer satellite communication over most of the world, as it launches a bigger version of *Early Bird*, capable of reaching ground stations in South America, and a satellite for the National Space and Aeronautics Administration which will provide circuits to the Far East. And by 1968, it will have put into orbit four advanced synchronous satellites for INTELSAT, making a full global network a reality.

But COMSAT is not content to have built so much on the ambiguities of the Communications Satellite Act of 1962. It is now arguing righteously to the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) that Congress gave it a mandate to have a monopoly over satellite communication at home as well as abroad. There is a rich prize at stake: the right to provide communication by satellites between the east and west coasts of the United States, and the country's far-flung hinterlands as well. The issue was raised when the American Broadcasting Company, one of the United States three major television networks, asked the FCC for permission to put up its own satellite, so that it could relay its own programmes. (The three networks now pay the American Telephone and Telegraph Company about \$65 million a year from transmitting their shows around the country.) Most likely the FCC would not like to rule in favour of the crowded sky—with every newspaper, television network and wire services allowed to have its own satellite. But COMSAT's claim that Congress had domestic satellites in mind in 1962 is laughable.

This has been politely pointed out by the Ford Foundation, in a brilliant brief prepared for the FCC

which says, in effect, that COMSAT has had enough favours from the Federal Government to satisfy any corporation and that it should stick to its international business. What the foundation wants is an American satellite system to be run by a private—non-profit, non-governmental—corporation. That would relay *Batman*, *Peyton Place* and other staples for the commercial networks at a cheaper rate than they now pay; with its revenues, the corporation could provide, on five channels in each time zone, a mixture of public affairs and education.

There is no sign that the FCC will be tempted by such an adventure. The pressure from COMSAT is strong; it wants to be as powerful as possible by 1969 when the international agreement which the consortium's members have signed comes up for permanent ratification, so that its partners will not be tempted to join any rival system, and that hold-outs, notably the Soviet Union, will be tempted in. The FCC is in an unenviable spot—it must do what Congress could not do four years ago: make decisions about the future of a technology which is only just coming into existence. Along with its utopian plan, the Ford Foundation gave the FCC some wise advice: do not grant any hasty monopoly before the Carnegie Corporation's enquiry into the future of non-commercial television in the United States comes out. COMSAT could use the time to think whether the international perspective that it will need in 1969 to attract communist partners into a permanent relationship would be helped by its alliance with American commercial television.

Industrial Training

THE first clutch of the reports from the industrial training boards is an unsurprising demonstration that a lot will have to be done before the Industrial Training Act of 1964 brings all the benefits that its sponsors were hoping for. In particular, it is plain that the boards have not yet moved far into the field where most is expected of them—the training of adults, as distinct from juvenile workers, in the techniques of modern industry. Indeed, the three reports which are available, for the engineering, iron and steel and ship-building industries (*H.C.* 122, 123 and 124 respectively, *H.M.S.O.*, 1s. 9d.), show that the past year has been something of a rush for all of them, with the occupying of new premises and the recruitment of staff dominating everything. (The board for the engineering industry has also been able to run up an overdraft of close on half a million pounds.)

The fourteen boards so far established have a right to collect a levy from all except the smallest industrial companies, and a duty to return some of what they collect to those companies with adequate training schemes. The funds thus available will enable the boards to arrange for training facilities for employees not otherwise catered for, either on premises of its own or elsewhere. It is also intended that each of the boards should recruit and train officers who will, in turn, help companies with their training plans. This is where the three boards whose reports have so far appeared seem to have done most in the past twelve months.

This, however, is only a beginning. The scale on which they will be operating in the future can be told from the estimate of the engineering training board—