

CARTER SENT WARNING TO IRAN
ATLANTA

Former President Jimmy Carter, in a series of interviews, said he warned Iran the United States would launch a military attack if any of 52 Americans hostages in Tehran were killed.

Carter also said he told Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini that if any of the hostages were tried as spies, the United States would cut off all commerce between Iran and the rest of the world, the Atlanta Constitution reported.

The former president was interviewed Monday and Tuesday in Washington.

In an interview with Independent Network News, Carter said he warned the Ayatollah that if any of the Americans were put on trial "we would interrupt all commerce between Iran and the outside world and if any of them were killed, we would attack Iran militarily."

Carter said the decision to issue the warning was made early in the crisis, which began Nov. 4, 1979, and ended with the release of all of the hostages Jan. 20, 1981, the day Ronald Reagan took office.

Carter cited "the despair and sense of impotency in our country" stemming from the hostage taking as a major reason he lost the presidential election to Reagan.

"There is always a political benefit in incisive action, even involving military force," Carter said. "There is obviously a possibility that Americans would have responded better had we attacked Iran."

The decision to send the two-pronged warning came at a meeting at Camp David, the presidential retreat, attended by the Joint Chiefs of Staff, CIA Director Stansfield Turner and Vice President Walter Mondale.

The message was sent via the Swiss Embassy in Tehran and through the leaders of Britain, West Germany, France, Italy and Japan, Carter said.

"We were not averse to using military action if necessary to protect the lives of the hostages," Carter said. "I have never yet seen a way I could have handled it better. Obviously, I would have liked to have sent one more helicopter to the desert site (for the failed 1980 rescue mission) if I could do it all over again.

"But I think it was well-handled. You know, I had a dual responsibility that I never saw as being in direct conflict. One was to protect the safety and lives of the hostages and bring them back to freedom and the other was to protect American interests and the stature of our country. I think I did both of those things," he said.