

A Mailgram from a Different America

This weekend, while cleaning out my garage, I discovered a forgotten piece of family history: a Western Union Mailgram dated April 25, 1980. It was addressed to President Jimmy Carter and sent by my parents, George and Dottie Hensler, from our home on Pickway Drive in Cincinnati.

The message was simple:

“Dear Mr. President, sorry the mission failed. May God bless you and guide you in your decisions. Keep trying.”

At first glance, it seems like a small and ordinary gesture. But in the context of the moment, it was anything but ordinary.

America in April 1980

The United States was in the middle of one of the most painful foreign policy crises of the twentieth century. On November 4, 1979, Iranian revolutionaries seized the American Embassy in Tehran and took dozens of Americans hostage. What began as a political protest became a 444-day national ordeal.

Night after night, Americans watched the hostage count on television. Yellow ribbons appeared on trees. Families prayed. The nation felt humiliated and powerless.

By April 1980, after months of failed negotiations, President Carter authorized a daring military rescue mission known as Operation Eagle Claw. The plan required helicopters, transport aircraft, special operations forces, and extraordinary coordination deep inside Iran.

The mission never reached the hostages. Mechanical failures and severe dust storms forced the operation to be aborted. During the withdrawal, a helicopter collided with a transport aircraft at Desert One. Eight American servicemen were killed.

A Different Kind of Message

In the days following the failure, criticism of President Carter was intense. Yet my parents chose a different response. They did not send blame or anger. Instead, they sent encouragement.

“Sorry the mission failed. May God bless you. Keep trying.”

Looking back, I am struck by the humanity of those words. They recognized that behind the office of the presidency was a man carrying an enormous burden. Fifty-three Americans remained in captivity. Eight servicemen had died. The entire world was watching.

The Long Shadow of a National Scar

The hostages would not be released for another nine months. They finally returned home on January 20, 1981—the day Ronald Reagan was inaugurated. For many Americans, the Iran hostage crisis became a lasting scar. Sanctions, proxy conflicts, military confrontations, terrorism concerns, nuclear disputes, and recurring diplomatic crises followed for decades.

Forty-Seven Years Later

That is what makes this discovery feel so remarkable. A 47-year-old Mailgram surfaced in my garage during the same weekend that news reports described a new diplomatic agreement intended to end the latest round of U.S.–Iran hostilities in 2026.

History rarely moves in a straight line. The wounds of nations often take decades to heal. Yet every peace agreement, ceasefire, and diplomatic breakthrough represents an attempt to move beyond old grievances.

When I read my father's words today, they seem to speak across the decades: "*Keep trying.*"

Keep trying to resolve conflict.
Keep trying to build understanding.
Keep trying to choose dialogue over violence.
Keep trying to find a path forward.

A Family Lesson

The Mailgram is more than a historical artifact. It is a reminder of the values my parents lived by. When others were angry, they offered encouragement. When a national effort failed, they did not abandon hope. When leadership faced criticism, they responded with grace.

As I held that faded Mailgram in my hands, I realized it was not really about Jimmy Carter or even the Iran hostage crisis. It was about hope.

Sorry the mission failed.
May God bless you.
Keep trying.