

Power will sustain him there.”²

The story told here will show how the second part of that prophecy came to fruition through the use of radioisotopic power.* It will describe how the RTG program matured in the 1970s to deliver RTGs that were vital components of missions to distant planets and beyond. It will look at the human, organizational, political, and social factors contributing to the survival and continuing achievements of the space isotopic power effort throughout its history.

The history of the space isotopic power program is essentially one of opportunities, perseverance, and attentiveness to detail—especially regarding safety measures and public communications about them. In its ultimate measure, space isotopic power is a program sustained throughout its history by a team of people who, in spite of changes in the larger organizations surrounding them, were ready at the launch pads when opportunities arose to demonstrate the technology in which they believed.

The story begins with the first glimmerings of opportunities for this space and atomic age technology.

*The faltering of the nuclear propulsion and space nuclear reactor power efforts is a secondary theme in this history.