end of the Eisenhower Administration, radioisotopic power stood on the threshhold of its first mission applications. The RTG technology was ready. Its proponents were looking for opportunities to put it to use. On Capitol Hill, in JCAE hearings, the pressure was on Project Rover. Committee members pressed for a flight schedule that would test nuclear propulsion in space.

The JCAE was also manifesting an interest in the SNAP program and its potential for providing long-lasting power to expensive satellite systems. In early 1961 hearings on "Development, Growth and State of the Atomic Energy Industry," JCAE Chairman Holifield told AEC officials that some committee members felt the SNAP program promised a payoff in continuing performance, perhaps for a year or two, from satellites costing hundreds of millions of dollars. Asked by Holifield if he was satisfied with the way the SNAP program was going, the Director of the Division of Reactor Development, Frank R. Pittman, replied: "As far as the technical aspects of the SNAP program are concerned, I am satisfied that it is...progressing quite well." Pressed, however, for information on whether progress had reached the establishment of requirements by user agencies, Pittman replied that such requirements had been established at that point only for certain even-numbered (reactor) SNAP systems. "We have requirements on the SNAP 2, the SNAP 10, and SNAP 8, with time requirements for testing."[10]

Potentials and Precautions

The SNAP-3, which was demonstrated to President Eisenhower in 1959, later came to be known as "the salesman of our working SNAP devices."[11] The first proof-of-principle SNAP was shown at several foreign capitals as part of the American "Atoms for Peace" exhibits. Reactions from academicians and students attending seminars held in conjunction with the exhibits were highly positive, although sometimes questions regarding safety were raised.[12]

In the U.S., one of the first public expressions of concern followed the demonstration in Eisenhower's Oval Office. According to George Dix, then responsible for safety at the Martin Company's isotope power project, and later head of the total space nuclear safety program under Finger at the AEC, nuclear critic Ralph Lapp complained that a highly lethal item had been placed on the President's desk. RTG engineers were attuned to reactions regarding safety and in a matter of days they developed a safety evaluation which