

apparently satisfied Lapp. The report, which covered handling procedures and all other matters regarding the safety of RTGs, thereafter accompanied SNAP-3 when on display in foreign capitals.¹³

Dix also pointed out that it was President Eisenhower who pressed for the use of the new technology in space satellites as soon as possible. According to Dix: “This successful demonstration came along about the time we had lost a Vanguard on the pad. Ike said, ‘Let’s fly this thing. [The Russians are] beating us on other things. Let’s beat them on power.’”¹⁴

During 1960, technical journals continued to make a case for nuclear auxiliary power in space, but they also expressed reservations over the safety factor.¹⁵ Despite the president’s enthusiasm, the first RTG flight came two and a half years after the White House demonstration. The prevailing attitude was summed up by *Nucleonics*: “Isotopic Power Ready for Space But Caution Delays Use.” Describing the comprehensive safety program of the Martin Company for SNAP-3, the journal noted that the “devices are being designed so they will remain sealed in any abort prior to leaving the earth’s atmosphere but...will disintegrate to molecular-size particles on re-entry.” These particles were described as so small they “will reside in space until long after the contained radioactivity has decayed to meaningless levels.”¹⁶

Despite the conscientious safety programs at AEC and NASA, the Defense Department continued its preference for solar devices over isotopic power because the former presented no radiation problem. A series of solar device failures, attributed to leakage of storage batteries, forced a reconsideration of this policy. A need was seen to rely on isotopic power while industry worked at perfecting solar cell batteries. One unmanned source at DOD’s Advanced Research Project Agency was quoted as saying RTGs could be “here to stay, particularly for missions where there is no sunlight.”¹⁷

The AEC approach was to face the safety issue head on and to take steps to systemize safety reviews and safety procedures shaped to criteria that left no apparent margin for error. These criteria were developed in June 1960 at a three-day meeting of the AEC’s Aerospace Nuclear Safety Board,¹⁸ and spelled out in a September 1960 report to McCone. The criteria for the safe use of radioisotopic units, according to the report, provided that:

The isotope material should be contained and the capsule present no hazard in the event of a launch abort.