

1970. Seaborg recalled that he was present by special invitation³¹ when the president, in a special message to Congress on 25 May 1961, announced:

Now it is time to take longer strides—time for a great new American enterprise—time for this nation to take a clearly leading role in space achievement, . . . I believe this nation should commit itself to achieving the goal, before this decade is out, of landing a man on the moon and returning him safely to earth.³²

Webb understood the significance of a “race” to put a man on the moon and he welcomed Kennedy’s introduction of this concept. “It meant we had a target. I kept reminding Congress that we were committed to putting a *man* on the Moon and to demonstrating our technical capabilities in that achievement. Getting to the Moon would be proof positive that we had developed our capabilities in a full range of disciplines. If we could get man to the Moon and back with our technology, we could do anything.” There were times, however, as NASA’s program and budget quickly grew, when President Kennedy would question whether the full range of NASA’s activities was necessary to carry out the landing on the Moon. “I told him we have to bring along the universities and the other institutions and push the total concept of development,”³³ Webb recalled. One NASA task was to orchestrate the combined efforts of many universities and other institutions whose common goal was to make the fantasies of centuries become a reality within a few short years.

It was in the first year of the race to the Moon that the quiet technology got its chance to take its steps into space. Its proponents were impatient, but they too were learning about the importance of the chemistry of national and international events combining with technology in a total environment.

First Success in Space

The first successful use of RTGs in space occurred in a Navy satellite program. The Navy’s Transit program had been underway for some time. It was a system for orbiting a navigation satellite that would provide accurate sightings for ships and planes in all weather conditions. The effort began at the Applied Physics Laboratory (APL) of Johns Hopkins University in 1957. The first link between the Transit developers and the isotope people at the AEC