

Chapter IV

Golden Days at the AEC

A Close Community

Many of the original RTG team thought of the early years after Seaborg came to the AEC as the “golden days” of the AEC—before the big and costly space systems and missions of NASA involved increasingly large numbers of people and organizations in the RTG program.

From 1962 to 1965, the antinuclear movement was not yet vociferous, the future of nuclear power and its widespread uses looked promising, and the chairman of the AEC was a scientist who believed strongly in nuclear power and its wedding to space ventures. Moreover, Seaborg inspired loyalties and a sense of common purpose in the people of the AEC.

Carpenter* recalled that it was common to meet the top man in the halls at AEC’s Germantown building and to be greeted by name and asked questions about the program: “We had a personal relationship with Seaborg, and we also had a close arrangement with the Commissioners.” He added that problems on the Hill were few and that the program received support from both the AEC and the Congress, whose members pressed for a flight schedule on space nuclear propulsion, eager to see the SNAP-isotope technology get its chances to fly. In those years, according to Carpenter, the AEC allowed engineers to do everything from start to finish on their programs—at least on the small isotopic power program. The RTG group chose to have just a few hands holding all the reins. Carpenter recalled: “I prepared budget documents, defended them before Congress, ran my program and participated in the launches.”¹

Carpenter explained that few contractors were involved in the early days because the program was small and there wasn’t a great deal of money available for space-isotopic power development. He indicated that SNAP-3 was built on a purchase order from the Martin Company to the 3M Company

*At that time head of the isotope office of the SNAP program under Armstrong, who reported to Pittman, director of the Reactor Division at AEC.