

Chapter V

Momentum from the Lunar Race

Memorable Achievements in Tumultuous Years

Sharp contrasts in events marked the last half of the decade of the 1960s. Fantastic space achievements—the astronauts of Apollo 8 orbited the Moon and sent back spectacular pictures,¹ lunar landings tested many assumptions, the near-disaster of Apollo 13 demonstrated the effectiveness of fall-back support systems—shared the spotlight with recurring national tragedies and growing civil unrest.

The RTG program, although it gathered momentum from its association with space triumphs, could not remain completely unaffected by the civil strife and the growing dissension over the nation's entanglements in the war in Vietnam. The war began to dominate not only coverage in the print media and television, but also the allocation of federal funding. The space program suffered as a result.

In 1966 *Aviation Week*, commenting on yet another lull in the fighting in Vietnam, saw it as a pause “that hopefully might lead to meaningful negotiations but more likely [it] is simply a prelude to greater escalation of that conflict.”² This proved to be the case, and the government's apportionment of funds reflected a shift in priorities. NASA budgets began a steady decline even as technical developments, although slowed by the Apollo fire at Cape Kennedy in January 1967, progressed towards a manned lunar landing.

AEC budgets for space nuclear applications came under ever closer scrutiny as well. Eventually, it was the more highly touted nuclear propulsion effort, followed by the space power reactor program, that felt the budget crunch most strongly. The RTG program, modestly funded at the start, received a boost from NASA contracts at the beginning of this period, and held its ground through the decade primarily by remaining anchored in defined missions while constantly seeking new roles for its devices.