

## Chapter VII

# Persistence Amid Change

### Years of Uncertainty

**O**n January 19 1975, the Atomic Energy Commission was abolished and most of its functions transferred to the new Energy Research and Development Administration (ERDA), except for regulatory functions which were transferred to the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC). Nuclear power, under increasing attacks from public interest groups, and losing favor on economic grounds among private developers, suffered further slippage through this loss of the AEC, chartered by Congress to promote its advancement. At ERDA, nuclear energy was reduced in status to an option in direct competition with such alternatives as fossil fuels, solar energy, energy conservation and a nascent synthetic fuels program. More than any of its competitors, nuclear energy became wrapped in controversy. The controversy led to uncertainty in the nuclear power space and RTG programs.

After Seaborg left the AEC, the RTG program lost its most visible advocate and the agency's public announcements on the RTG role in space missions became muted. Mission launches and anniversaries of successful RTG missions were no longer used as occasions to issue statements projecting future applications of nuclear energy. No voice from ERDA, nor later from the Department of Energy, would direct messages to the public about the accomplishments and promise of the quiet technology.

Critics of the AEC's dual mandate—to develop and promote nuclear power while protecting the public safety through regulation—argued that the AEC neglected nuclear safety research while encouraging commercial licensing. Seaborg's replacement, James R. Schlesinger, tried to change the agency's public image from that of an agent of the nuclear industry to that of a "referee serving the public interest."<sup>1</sup> His successor, Dixy Lee Ray, created a Division of Reactor Safety Research, and continued to expand the safety research program.<sup>2</sup> Throughout the RTG program, research and development in safety had always been combined with research and development in spacecraft and missions