

media soon ran pictures showing the Nimbus-B spacecraft resting on the channel floor under 300 feet of water and cited the recovery of the SNAP-19 nuclear generators near the spacecraft wreckage.<sup>30</sup> The capsule was sent back to Mound Laboratory and the fuel re-used.

The RTG safety program, although not truly tested in its new concept of intact re-entry through the atmosphere, had come through without a blemished record. Before the summer was over NASA announced publicly its plans for a launch in spring 1969 of a replacement Nimbus-B weather satellite with SNAP-19 power supplies.<sup>31</sup> Procedures for approval of this Nimbus-B-2 went forward smoothly. Even though the fuel inventory increased slightly in order to utilize a slightly less efficient, but more stable thermoelectric conversion material,<sup>32</sup> approval came quickly after requested because interdepartmental review of the nuclear safety aspects of the mission had already taken place in preparation for the unsuccessful flight of 18 May 1968.<sup>33</sup> The second Nimbus to fly with SNAP-19s was successfully launched on 14 April 1969.

Speaking from his perspective as the Nimbus project director who directed that NASA weather satellite project throughout the prior decade, Harry Press said: "It turned out that RTGs were really not well suited for near-Earth missions like Nimbus. But we had been having problems with solar cells, and the RTG people pressed those devices on me." Press had reservations because "the safety problems were so great, and even though all this was paid for by the AEC, it led to expenses for us. We hired some specialists to look over their shoulders. ...on the rest of the Nimbus missions, we decided RTGs weren't worth the trouble, the hassle, the approvals, the safety testing. Solar cells were much more suitable."<sup>34</sup>

Whatever the disappointments, negative reactions were not strong enough to retard the RTG program's forward motion with NASA. At least at top decision-making levels, the devices had proven themselves for space missions—and for the great technological feat that had been building for nearly a decade.

### **Riding the Thrust of Apollo**

Webb saw the thrust to get man out to the Moon and return him safely to Earth as a demonstration that America had developed capabilities for doing almost anything with its technology. New technological advances of the Apollo