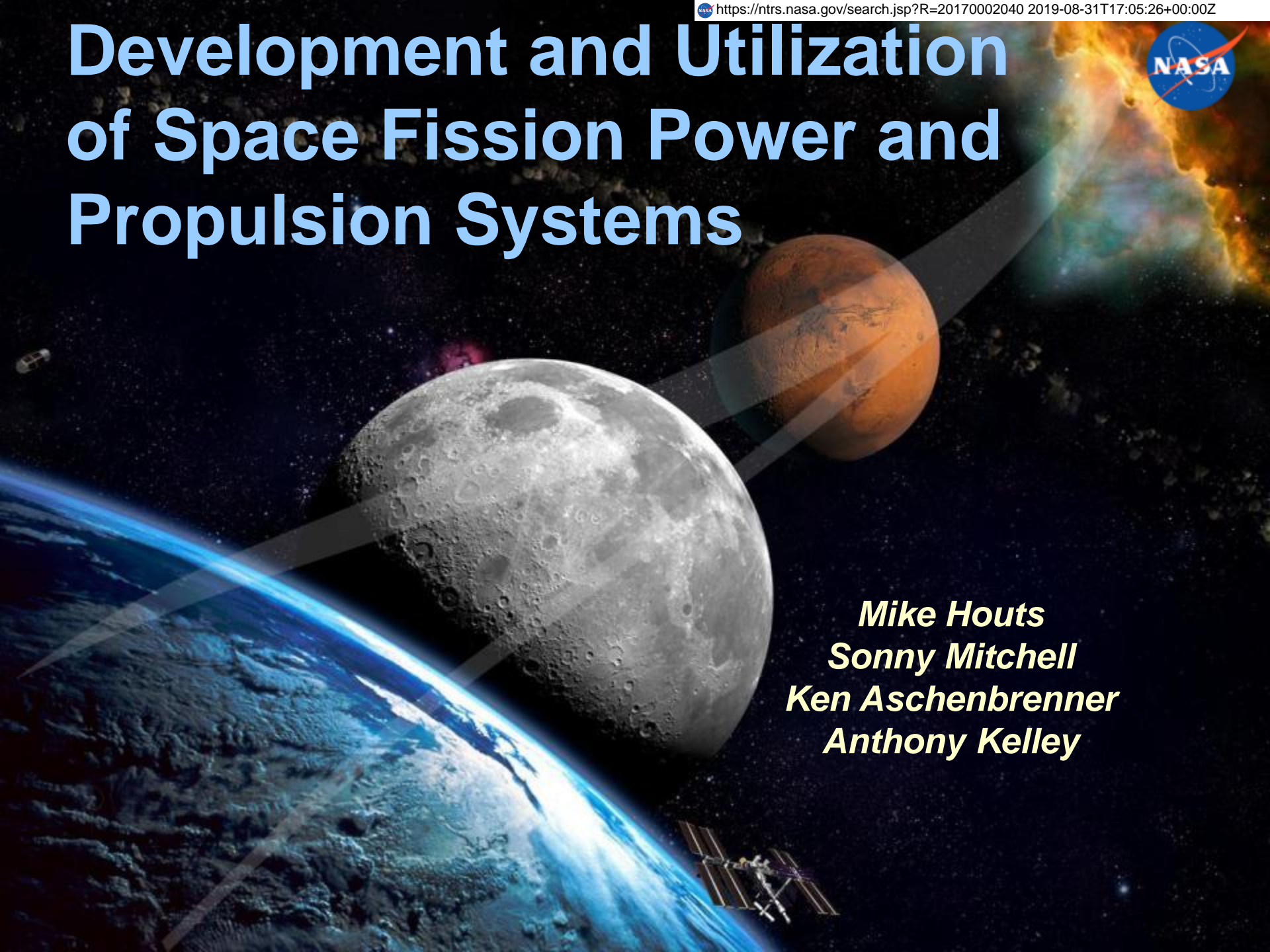




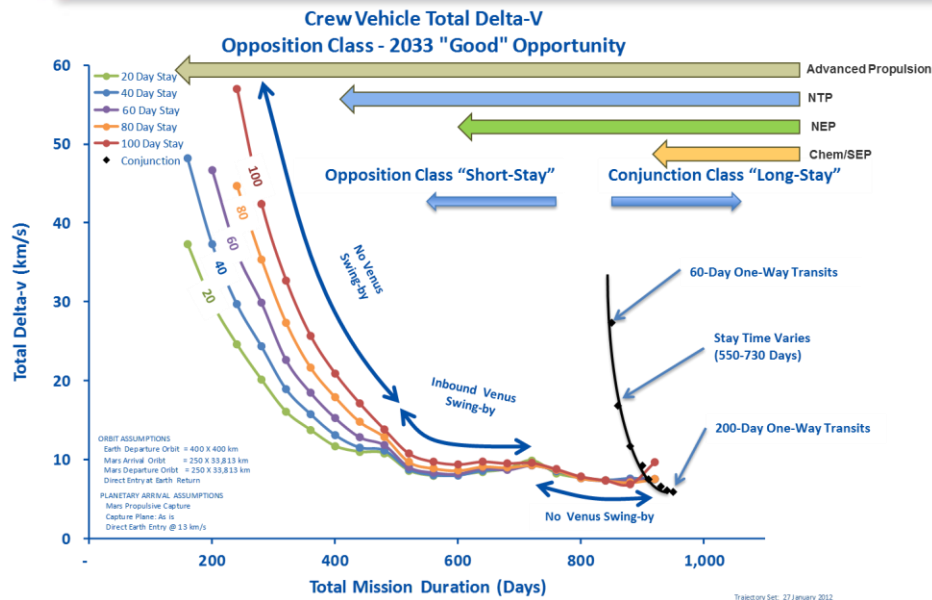
# Development and Utilization of Space Fission Power and Propulsion Systems

*Mike Houts  
Sonny Mitchell  
Ken Aschenbrenner  
Anthony Kelley*

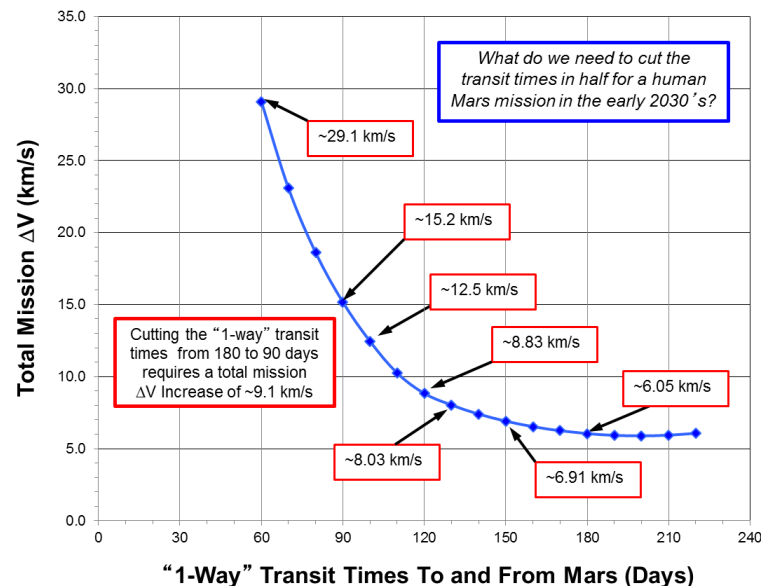




# Why is NTP Attractive for Human Missions to Mars?

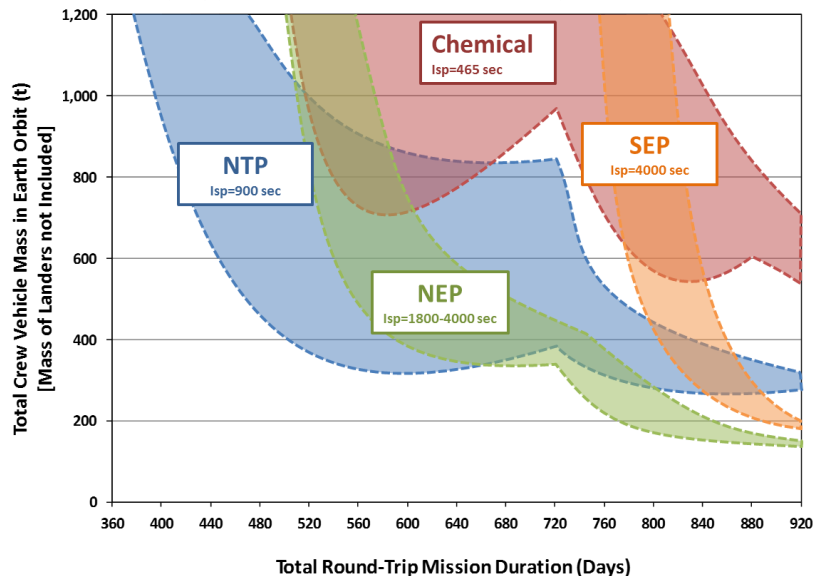


## 2033 "Fast Conjunction" Long Surface Stay Mars Mission: Total Mission $\Delta V$ vs. "1-Way" Transit Time To and From Mars

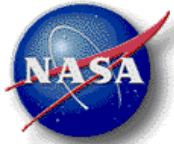


Ref: Borowski et al., Space 2013, AIAA-2013-5354

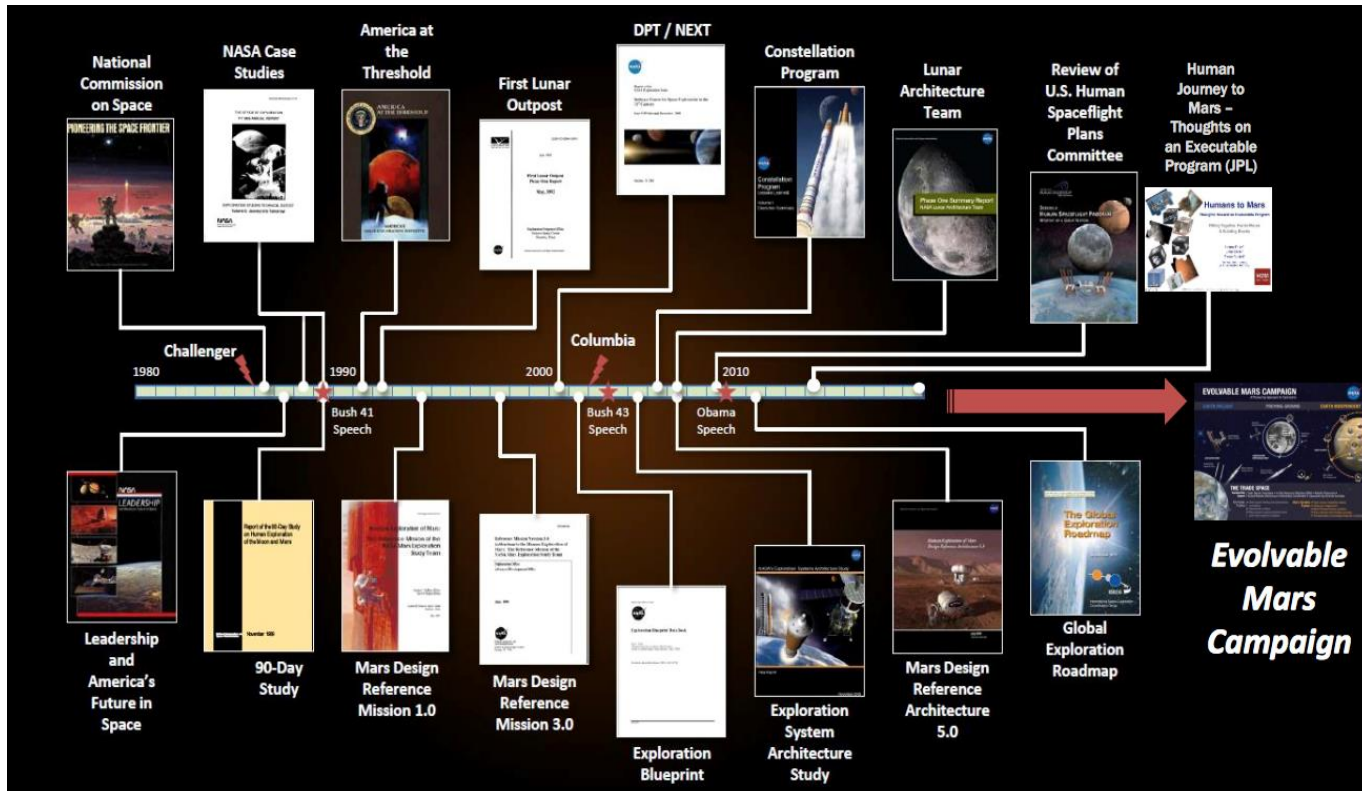
## Short Stay Opposition Mission with Earth Departure Dates 2028-2045



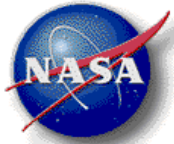
- NTP allows for shorter total mission time and shorter trip time (Less exposure to galactic cosmic radiation and zero-g)
- NTP allows mission robustness and potential abort scenarios
- Fewer SLS launches can save operation time, money, and reduce risk
- NTP is initial step towards advanced space nuclear power and propulsion, which could eventually help enable exploration and development of the solar system



# Studies Completed or Underway

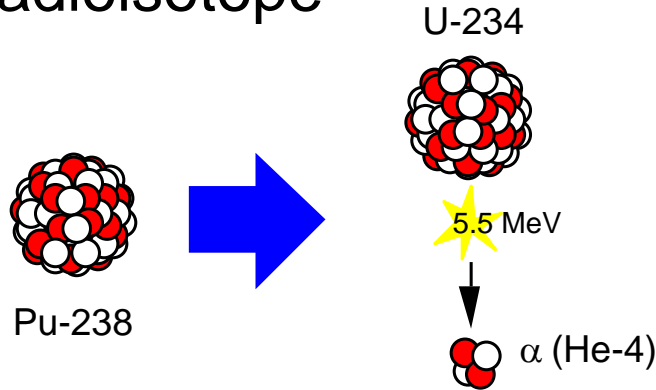


- Recent Studies include:
  - The Evolvable Mars Campaign (EMC) @ NASA HQ
  - The Mars Transportation Analysis of Alternatives (AoA) @ MSFC
  - The Mars NTP system study @ MSFC executed by Aerojet-Rocketdyne



# Fission is Different from Previous NASA “Nuclear”

## Radioisotope



*Heat Energy = 0.023 MeV/nucleon (0.558 W/g Pu-238)*  
*Natural decay rate (87.7-year half-life)*

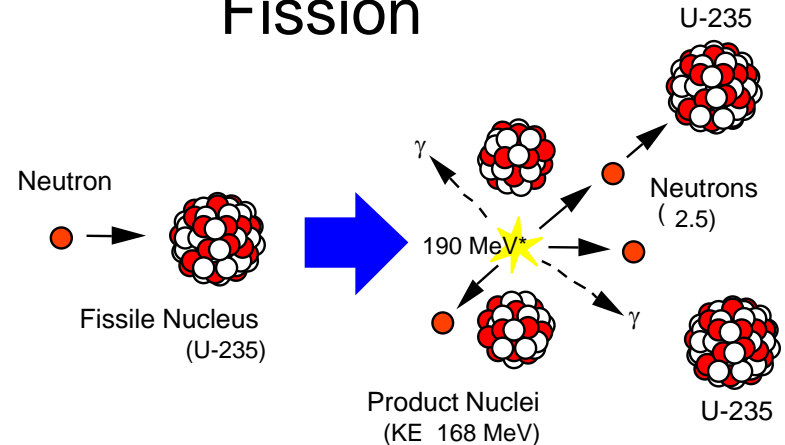
Long history of use on Apollo and space science missions

44 RTGs and hundreds of RHUs launched by U.S. during past 5 decades

Heat produced from natural alpha (α) particle decay of Plutonium (Pu-238)

Used for both thermal management and electricity production

## Fission



*Heat Energy = 0.851 MeV/nucleon*  
*Controllable reaction rate (variable power levels)*

Used terrestrially for over 70 years

Fissioning 1 kg of uranium yields as much energy as burning 2,700,000 kg of coal (>20 GW-hr)

One US space reactor (SNAP-10A) flown (1965)

Former U.S.S.R. flew 33 space reactors

Heat produced from neutron-induced splitting of a nucleus (e.g. U-235)

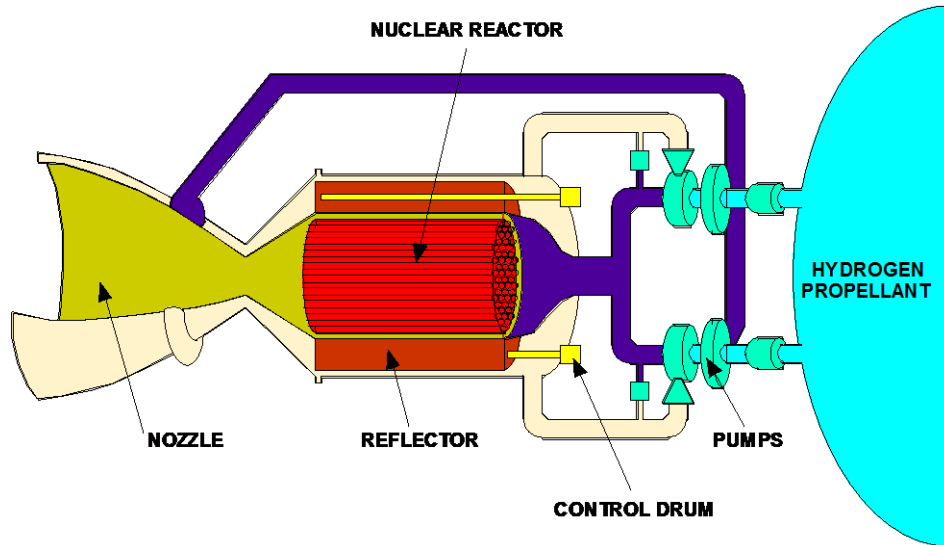
At steady-state, 1 of the 2 to 3 neutrons released in the reaction causes a subsequent fission in a “chain reaction” process

Heat converted to electricity, or used directly to heat a propellant

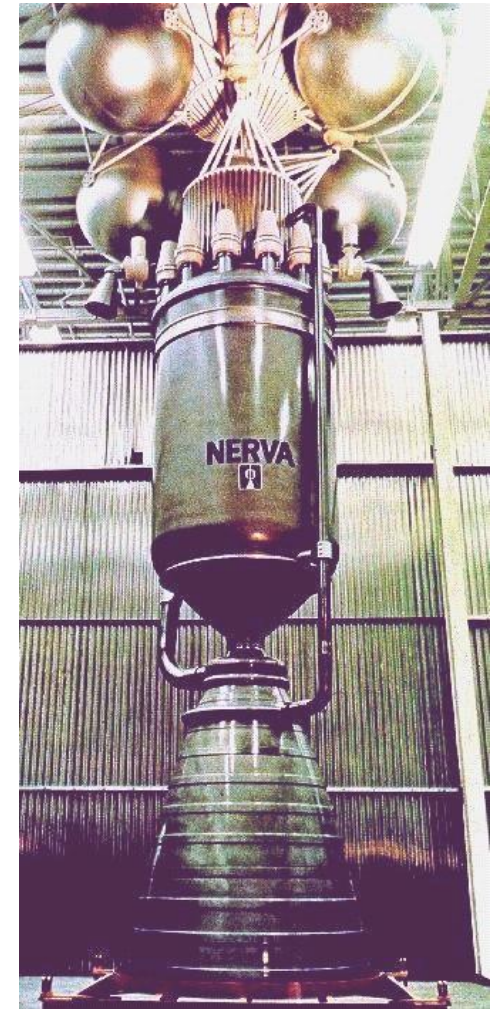


# How Does Nuclear Thermal Propulsion (NTP) Work?

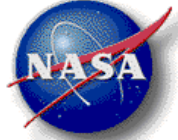
- Propellant heated directly by a nuclear reactor and thermally expanded/accelerated through a nozzle
- Low molecular weight propellant – typically Hydrogen
- Thrust directly related to thermal power of reactor:  
 $100,000 \text{ N} \approx 450 \text{ MW}_{\text{th}}$  at 900 sec
- Specific Impulse directly related to exhaust temperature:  
830 - 1000 sec (2300 - 3100K)
- Specific Impulse improvement over chemical rockets due to lower molecular weight of propellant (exhaust stream of  $\text{O}_2/\text{H}_2$  engine runs much hotter than NTP)



Major Elements of a Nuclear Thermal Rocket

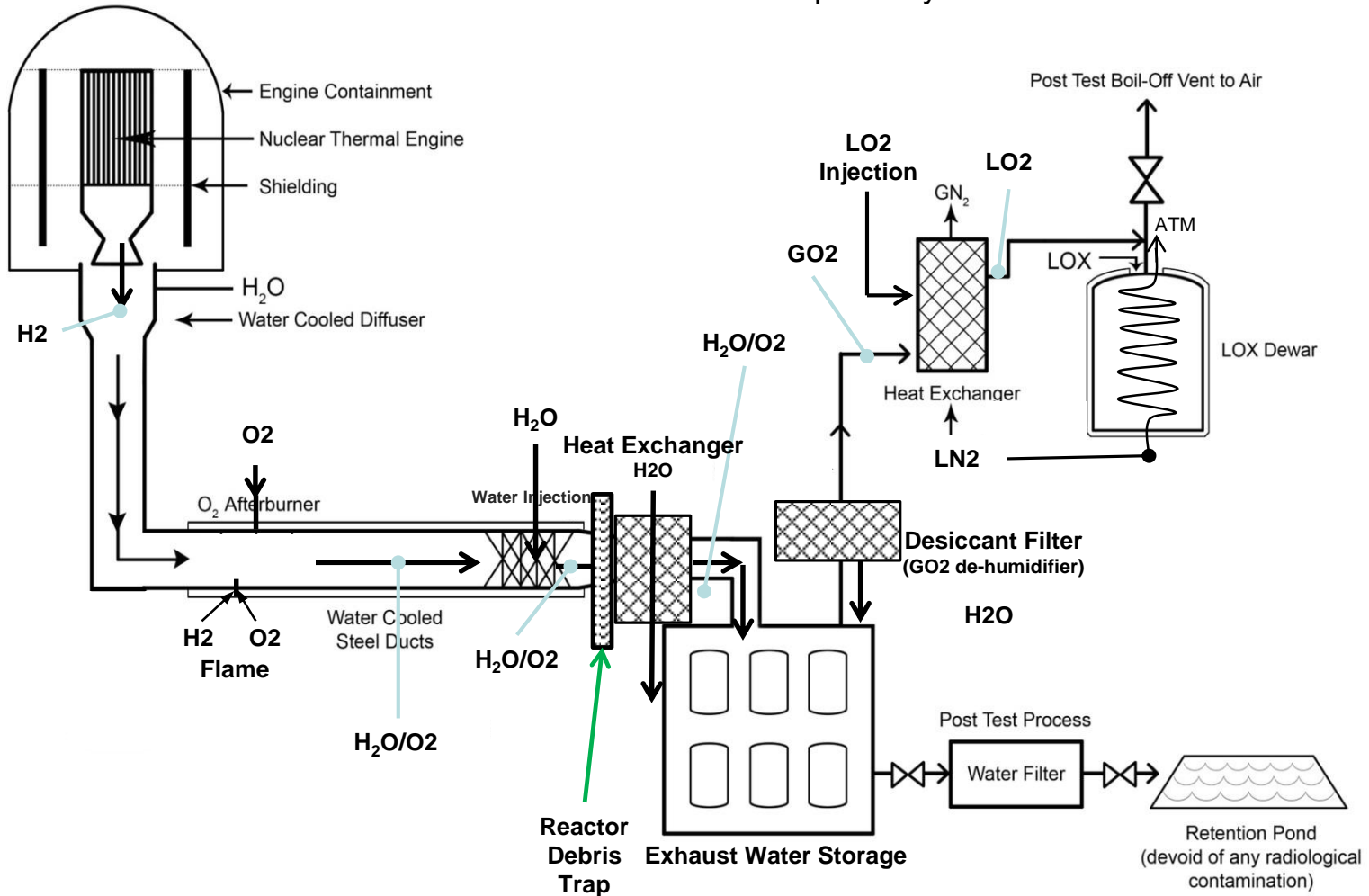


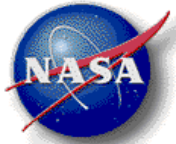
NERVA Nuclear Thermal Rocket Prototype



# Can NTP Exhaust Be Captured During a Ground Test?

## Ground Test Exhaust Capture System



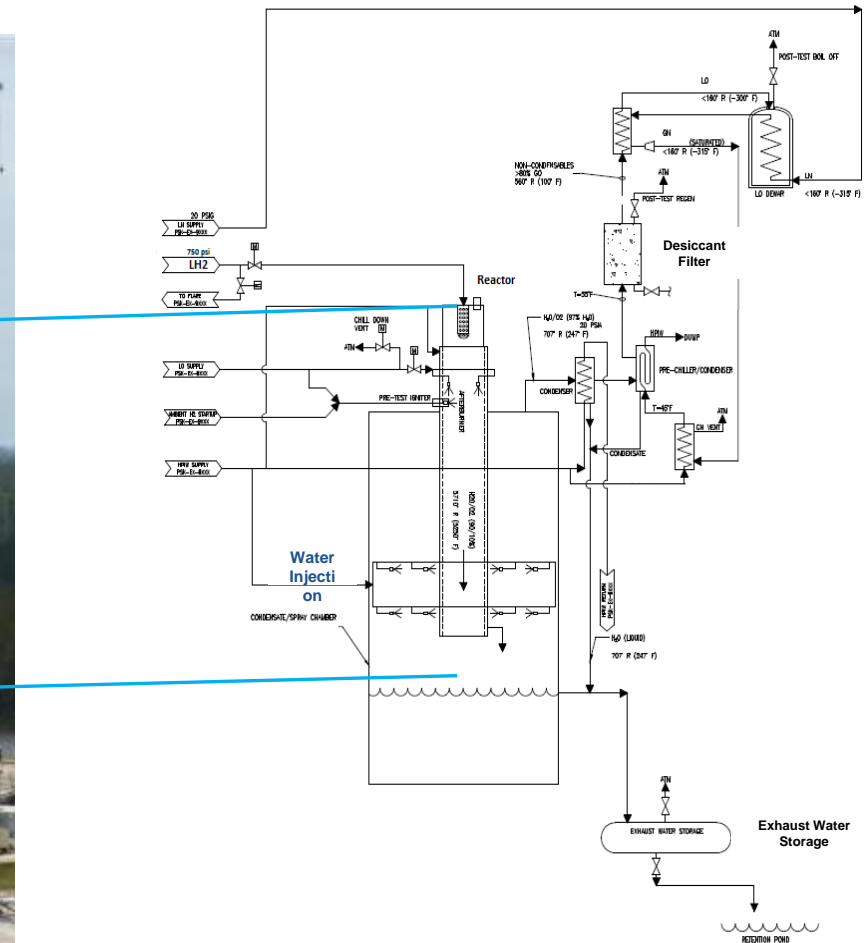
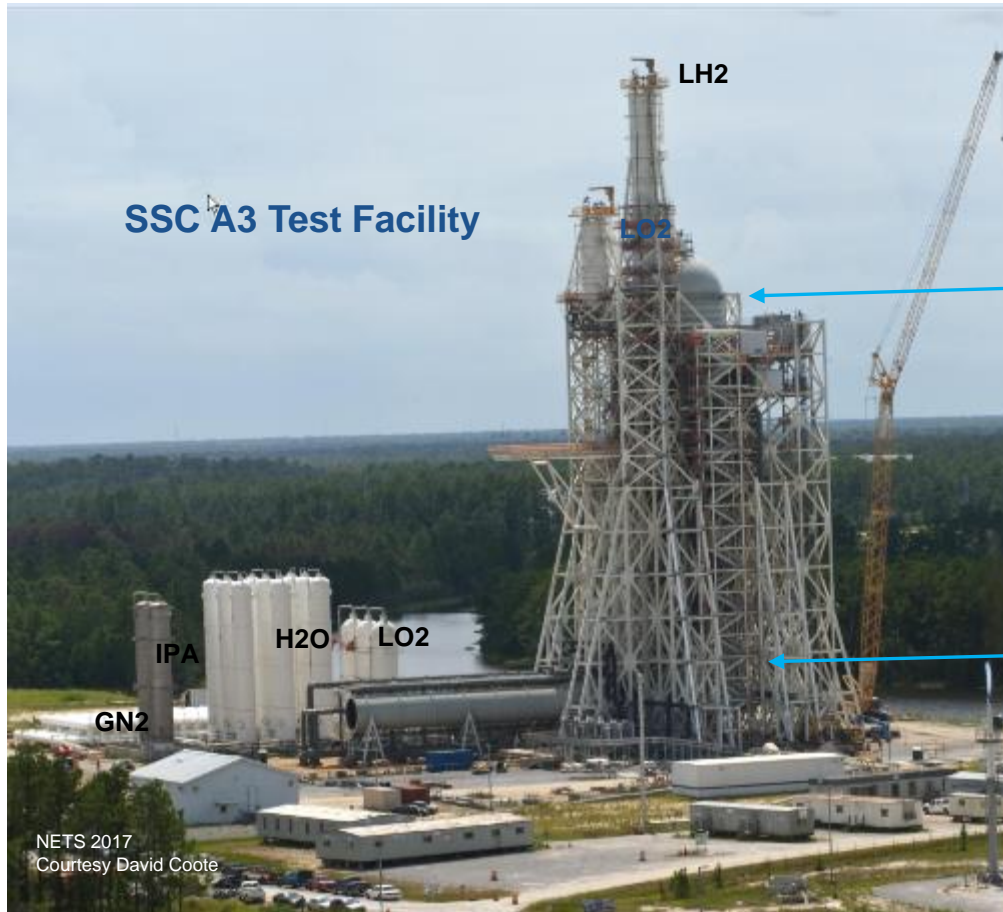


# NTP Ground Test Exhaust Capture System

## Conceptual System Design Layout

### Facility located at SSC's A3 Test Stand

- Most of the infrastructure required by ground test facility (including exhaust capture) is already in place:
  - Tower, test cell, propellant, HPIW & data and controls infrastructure, the Test Control Center, electric power, etc.
  - Major modifications, procurements, and construction work will be required and are captured in the ROM estimate.





# SSC's Acoustic Buffer Zone

## Illustration of Comparable NRC-Designated Planning Zones

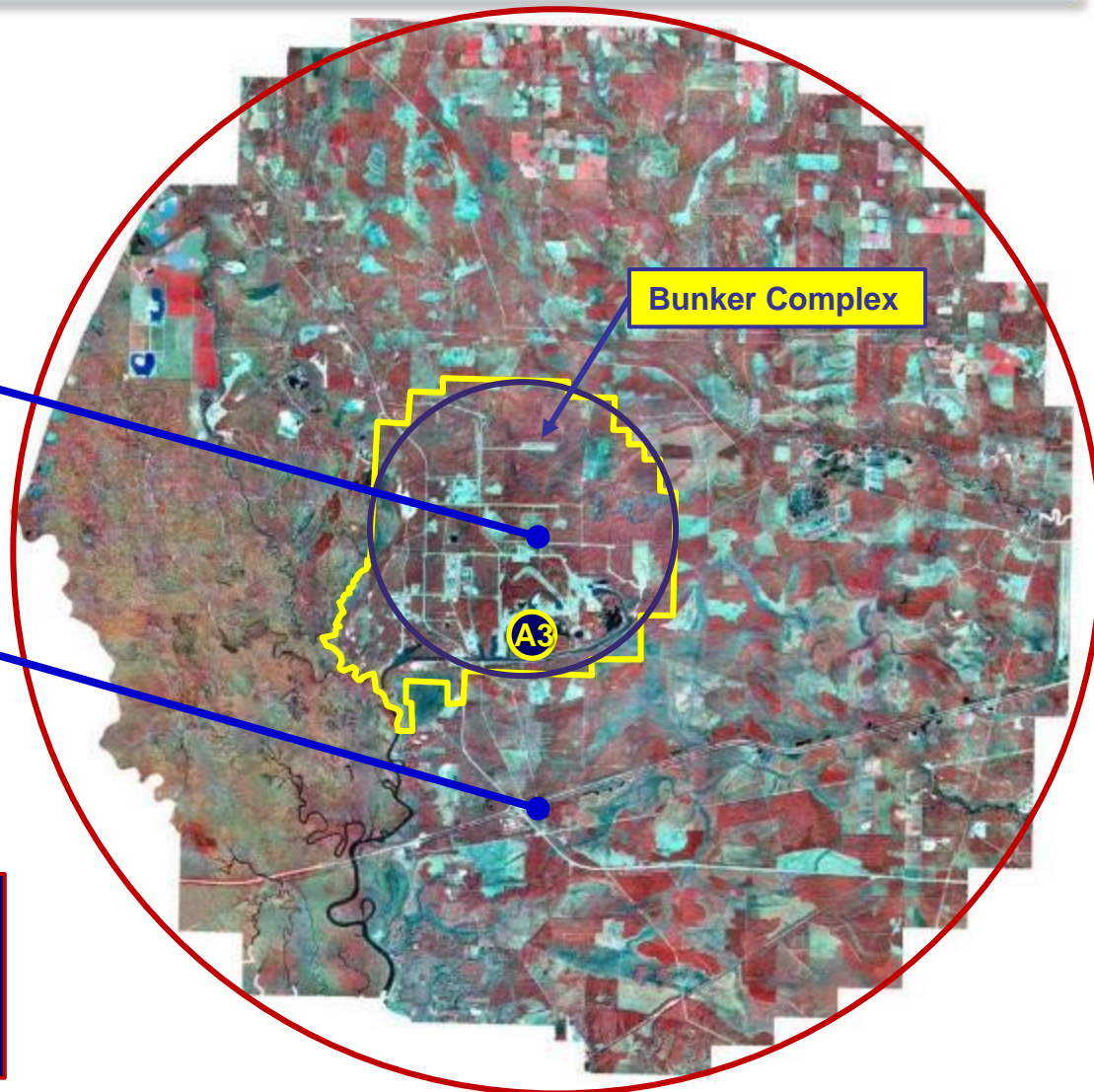
13,800 Acre  
Fee Area/"Exclusion Area"  
(20 mi<sup>2</sup>)

"Fee Area" Avg. Radius ~ 2.5 mi

125,000 Acre  
Buffer Zone/"Low-Population Zone"  
(195 mi<sup>2</sup>)

"Buffer Zone" Avg. Radius ~ 7.9 mi

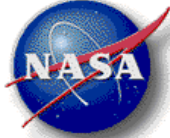
•Slidell, LA  
•Population ~ 27,000  
•PCD from A3 ~ 8 miles  
=> LPZ < 6 miles



PCD (Population Center Distance ~8 miles) > 1.333 x LPZ ~ 1.333 x 6 miles ~ 8.0 miles

Ref.: NRC Regulatory Guide 4.7



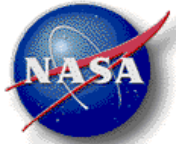


# Can NTP systems using Low-Enriched Uranium (LEU) be Developed?

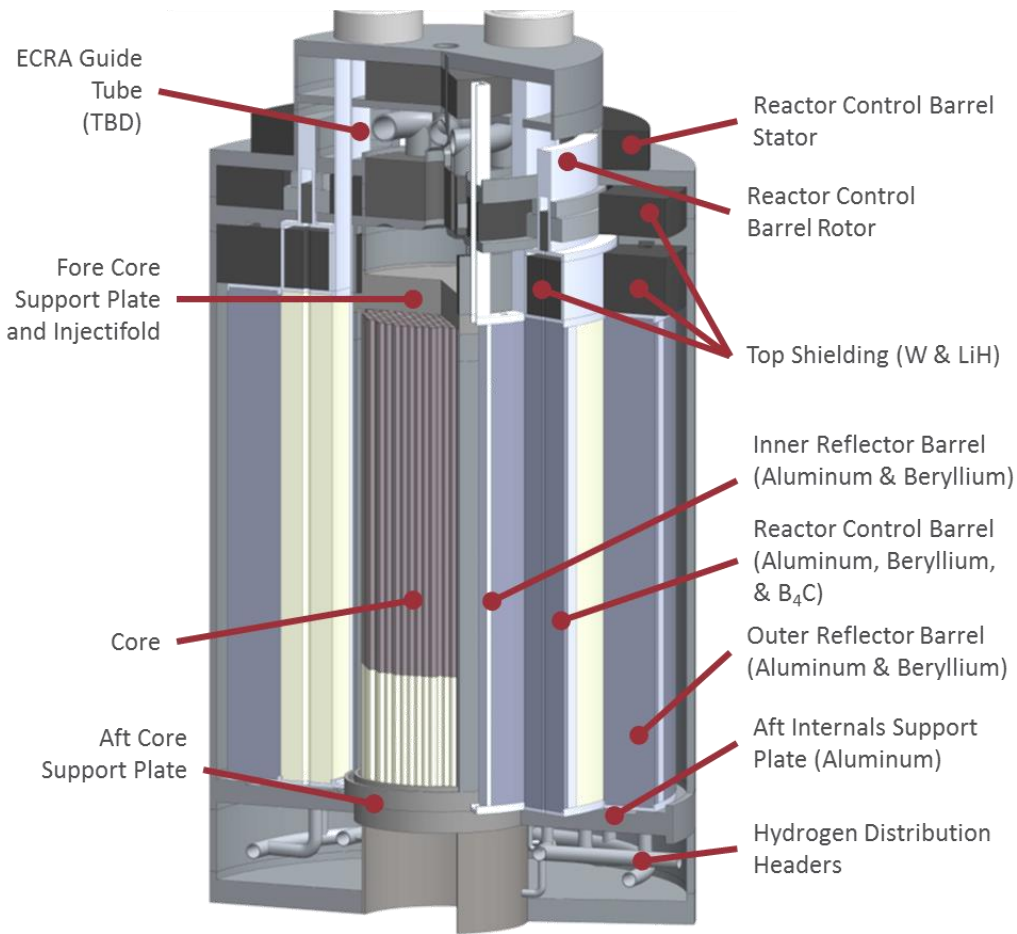
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- Directly reduce cost through savings related to safeguards and security
- Indirectly (and more significantly) reduced cost through enabling use of an optimal development approach and team
- Consistent with ongoing programs to convert operational Highly Enriched Uranium (HEU) systems to LEU
- Consistent with US policy. “The United States is committed to eliminating the use of HEU in all civilian applications, including in the production of medical radioisotopes, because of its direct significance for potential use in nuclear weapons, acts of nuclear terrorism, or other malevolent purposes.” (2012 White House “Fact Sheet”)

**Initial LEU Conceptual Designs Very Promising**



# Evolving LEU Designs Have Significant Potential Advantages



- Graded Mo to Mo/W approach reduces engine mass and need for W-184.
- Multiple potential cermet fuel fabrication options. Optimize for performance and affordability.
- Potential for dual-use core design. Optimize for NTP, but close derivatives potentially applicable to high performance space fission power systems.

Courtesy BWXT

# Nuclear Thermal Propulsion



Project Manager: Sonny Mitchell

## Objective:

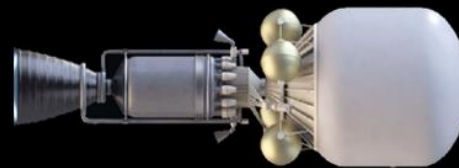
The overall goal of this three-year GCD technology project is to determine the feasibility and affordability of a Low Enriched Uranium (LEU)-based NTP engine with solid cost and schedule confidence.

## Approach:

Leverages government, industry and academic expertise to achieve project objectives.

## Success Criteria:

1. Demonstrate the ability to purify tungsten to 90 percent purity and determine the cost to produce a kilogram at that level of purity.
2. Determine the technical and programmatic feasibility of an NTP engine in the thrust range of interest for a human Mars mission.
3. Determine the program cost of a LEU NTP system and the confidence level of each major cost element.



System  
Feasibility  
Analysis

Fuel Element  
Development and  
Testing



Exhaust Capture  
Analysis and  
Testing

## Project Status

### Team:

MSFC (Lead), GRC, SSC, DoE, industry partners, academia

### Milestones:

Tungsten purified to 50% (APR17); 70% (SEP17);  
90% (SEP18)

Testing of Surrogate Cermet FE in CFEET (SEP17)

Testing of the DU Cermet FE in NTREES/CFEET (SEP18)

**Green:** On schedule / In budget



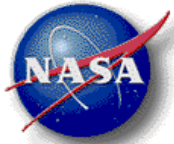
# Observations

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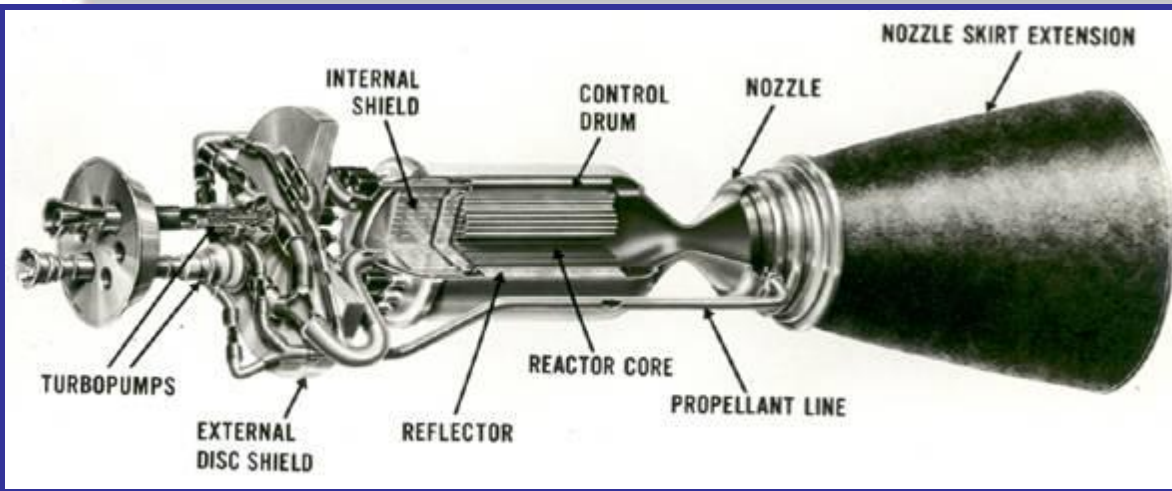
- Space fission power and propulsion systems are game changing technologies for space exploration.
- First generation NTP systems could provide significant benefits to sustained human Mars exploration and other missions.
  - Imagine Earth-Mars transit times of 120 days; imagine 540 day total Mars mission times; imagine reduced crew health effects from cosmic radiation and exposure to microgravity; imagine robust architectures including abort capability.
- Advanced space fission power and propulsion systems could enable extremely ambitious space exploration and development.

# Beyond the Decadal Study: Horizons for Nuclear-Powered Space Exploration

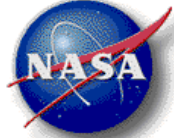




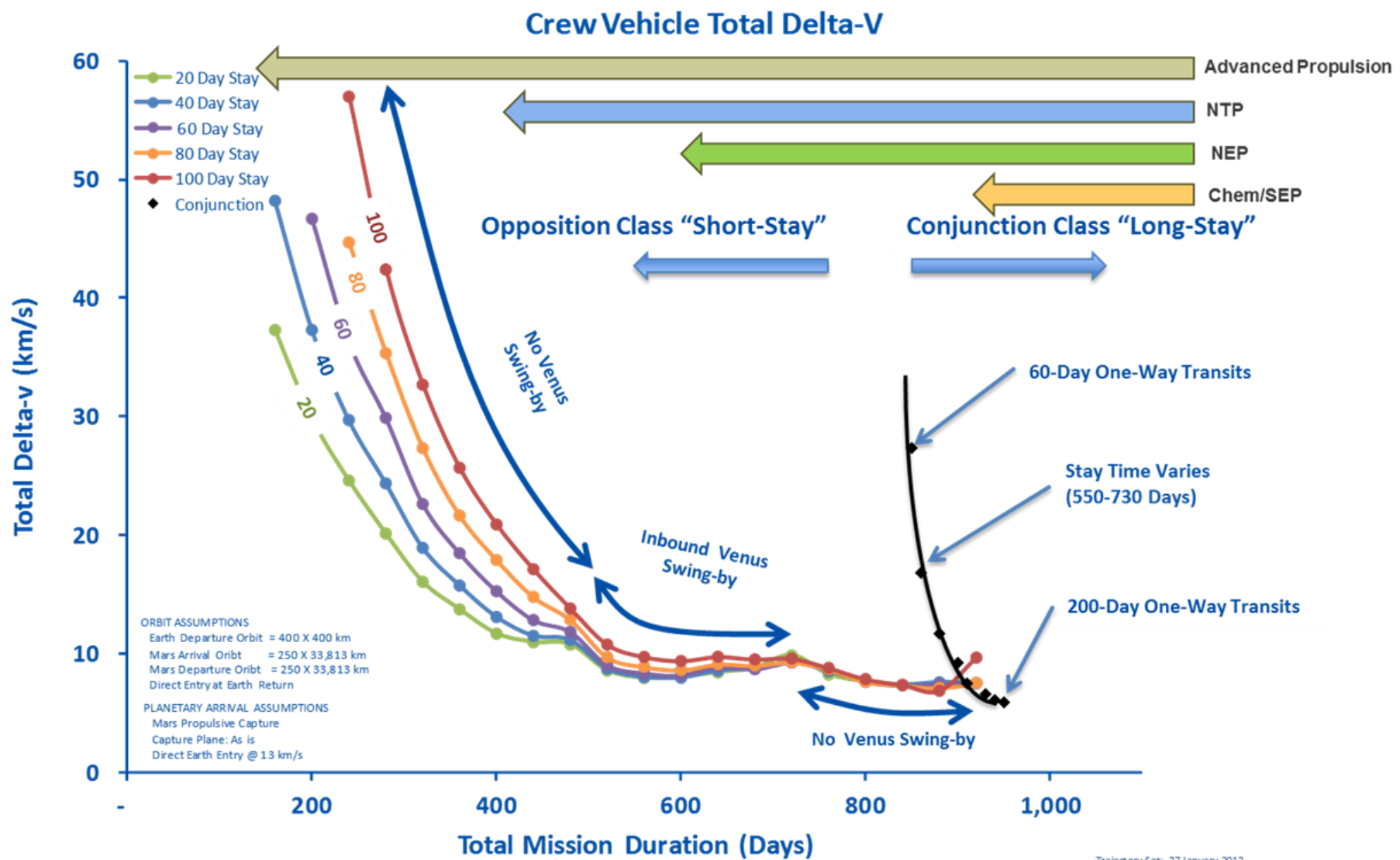
# Nuclear Thermal Propulsion (NTP)

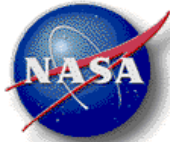


- Nuclear thermal propulsion (NTP) is a fundamentally new capability
  - Energy comes from fission, not chemical reactions
  - Virtually unlimited energy density
- Even first generation NTP offers significant benefits:
  - Shorter total mission time and shorter trip time (Less crew exposure to galactic cosmic radiation and zero-g)
  - Architectural robustness and potential abort scenarios
  - Fewer SLS launches can save operation time, money, and reduce risk
- Advanced nuclear propulsion systems could have extremely high performance and unique capabilities
- First generation NTP could serve as the “DC-3” of space nuclear power and propulsion

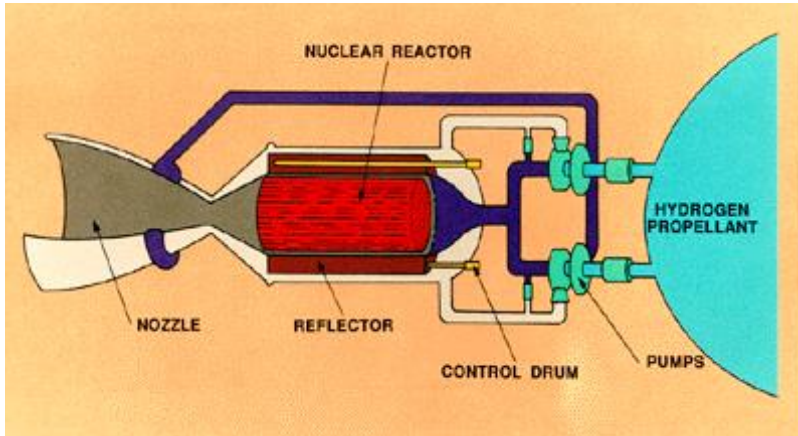


# Why is NTP Attractive for Human Missions to Mars?

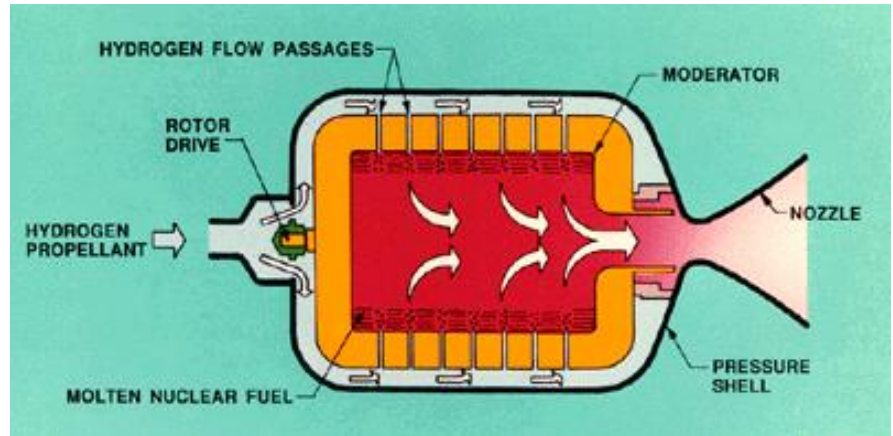




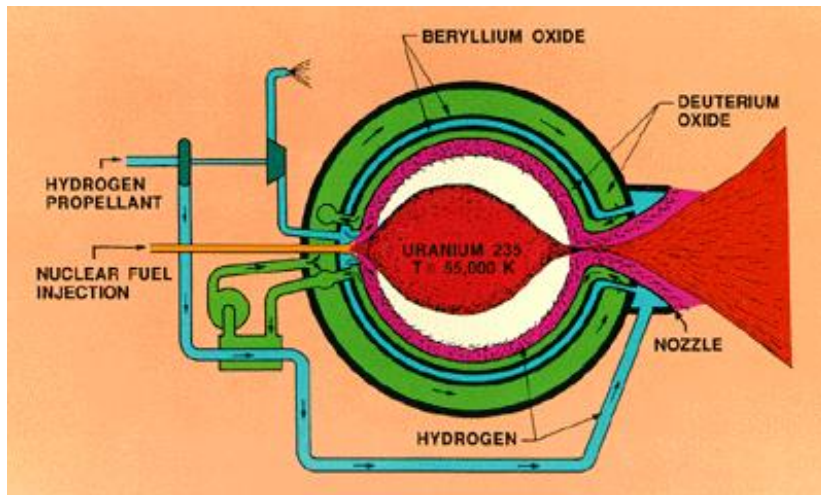
# Proposed Types of Nuclear Thermal Propulsion



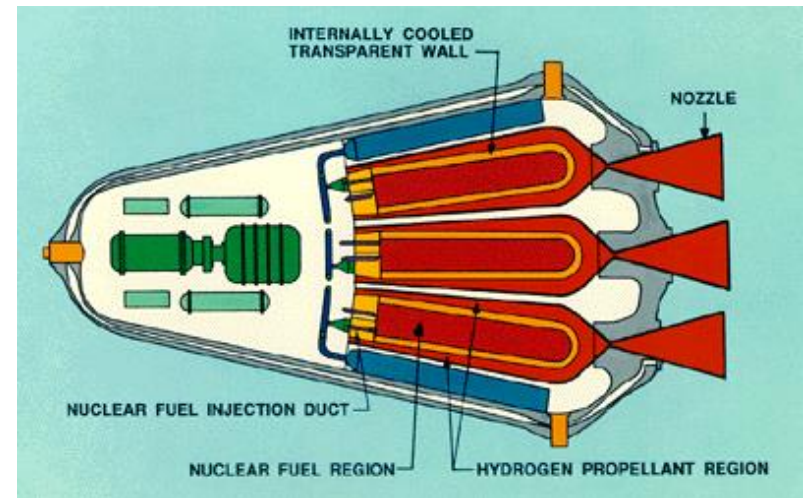
SOLID CORE NUCLEAR ROCKET



LIQUID CORE NUCLEAR ROCKET

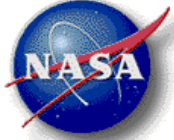


Open-Cycle Gas Core Nuclear Rocket



Closed-Cycle Gas Core Nuclear Rocket





# Potential Long-Term “Nuclear” Goals

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- **Radioisotope Power Systems and the RPS Program**
  - are reengineered to be affordable, higher efficiency than those of the past, have a modular offering (e.g. 10W, 100W and 300W) and hence are used in both competed and directed missions at a regular cadence
- **Space Fission Power Systems**
  - with high specific power and high reliability are developed which address power needs from a few hundred watts to 100s of Kilowatts, can be packaged/scaled to both Science and Exploration missions, and are transferable to industry partners.
- **Nuclear Thermal Propulsion (NTP)**
  - demonstrated in space, and qualified for use on human Mars and other advanced space missions.