

LOS ALAMOS RESEARCH IN NOZZLE BASED COAXIAL PLASMA THRUSTERS

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**COAXIAL THRUSTER RESEARCH**

**Outline**

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- Research Approach
- Perspectives on efficient MPD operation
- NASA and DOE supported research
  - Ideal MHD plasma acceleration and flow
  - Electrode phenomena
  - Magnetic nozzles
- Future research directions and plans

**COAXIAL THRUSTER RESEARCH**

**Collaborators and Contributors**

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- Robin Gribble
- John Marshall
- Don Rej
- Blake Wood
- Tom Jarboe, U. Washington
- Robert Mayo, N.C. State

## COAXIAL THRUSTER RESEARCH

### Research Approach

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#### NEAR TERM FOCUS:

- Apply coaxial plasma gun research experience to optimizing thruster efficiency and specific impulse
- Ascertain scaling properties in terms of size and power
- Investigate performance and thruster design at power levels and sizes applicable to "near term" missions like orbital transfer
  - In steady-state
  - For adjustable duty-cycle (pulsed)
- Apply insights to the design of more efficient MPD thrusters

#### LONGER TERM FOCUS:

- Pursue MMWe coaxial thruster optimization for farther term propulsion missions and other applications

### Efficient MPD Operation

#### Perspectives

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In addition to frozen flow losses, efficiency is limited by two processes:

- Macro plasma acceleration and detachment
  - Efficient operation  $\Rightarrow$  High grade plasma
  - High grade plasma  $\Rightarrow$  Ideal MHD
  - Ideal MHD  $\Rightarrow$  Economy of scale
- Electrode phenomena
  - Electrode fall losses are strongly coupled to magnetic configuration

These processes are coupled by the Electrical Effort (Morozov Hall parameter) \*

$$\Xi \equiv \left( \frac{m_i}{e} \right) \frac{I}{\dot{M}} \approx \left( \frac{c}{\omega_{pi}} \right) \frac{1}{\Delta}$$

\* Schoenberg, et al., AIAA 91-3770 (1990)

## EFFICIENT MPD OPERATION

### Perspectives (continued)

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- Good MHD performance drives  $\Xi \ll 1$  (relevant to ion acceleration losses)
- Minimization of electrode phenomena also drives  $\Xi \ll 1$  (relevant to electrode losses)
- Plasma stability considerations places bounds on  $\Xi$ 
  - Upper bound set by Lower Hybrid Drift Instability
  - Lower bound set by beta limits (Raleigh-Taylor, Kelvin-Helmholtz) in high grade plasma systems

**These perspectives lead  
to an optimization approach**

## EFFICIENT OPERATION AND CONTROL

### Magnetic Nozzle

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Dominance of MHD leads to the efficacious use of magnetic nozzles for optimization of:

- Macro plasma acceleration and detachment
- Electrode phenomena
- Plasma stability

## NASA and DOE SUPPORTED RESEARCH

### Unoptimized "As-was" Experiments

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- Power range 10-40 MW
- Unoptimized gun
- Unoptimized 2.5 MJ capacitor bank
  - 1 ms, round-top discharges
- Unoptimized  $B_{r,z}$  (nozzle) field
  - Applied field coil in center electrode (cathode)
- Wide range of diagnostics
  - Multi-chord interferometry
  - Temporally and spatially resolved bolometry
  - Langmuir and magnetic probes
  - Temporally and spatially resolved IR calorimetry
  - Neutral particle spectroscopy

## NASA and DOE SUPPORTED RESEARCH

### Plasma Acceleration and Flow

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Previous work has derived parametric expressions for plasma acceleration, flow, and detachment\*

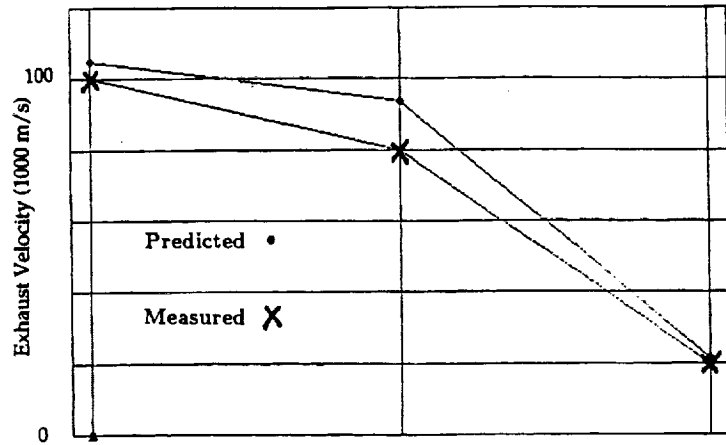
- Experiments have shown that plasma flow is accelerated to the magnetosonic velocity in agreement with theory
- High grade plasma observed
  - Magnetic Reynolds number  $\approx 1000$
  - $\Xi < 0.5$
- Coaxial gun research shows remarkable agreement between MHD flow predictions and experiment over a wide range of size and power

\* Gerwin, et al., AFOSR Report AL-TR-89-092, (1990),

Schoenberg, et al., AIAA 91-3770 (1990), and

Moses, et al., Proceedings of 9th Symposium on Space Nuclear Power Systems (1992).

## COAXIAL GUN FLOW VELOCITY



CTX @ 40 MW  
 $r_0 = 24$  cm  
 $l_0 = 100$  cm  
 Deuterium

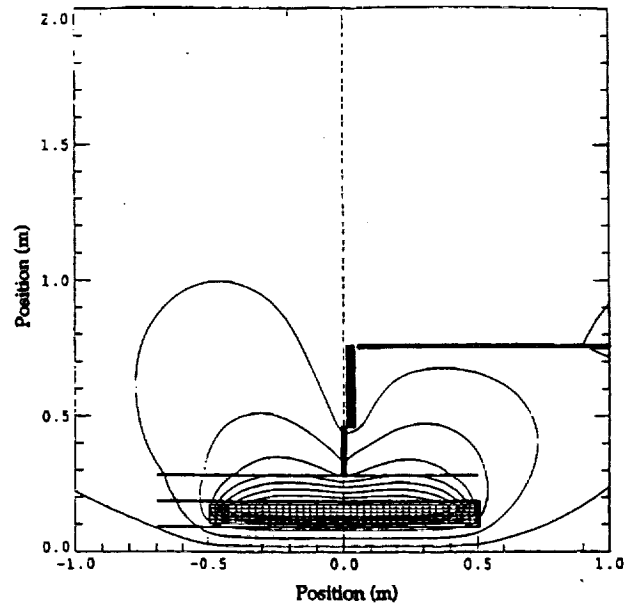
CTX @ 10 MW  
 $r_0 = 24$  cm  
 $l_0 = 100$  cm  
 Deuterium

Ioffe Gun\*  
 @ 40 MW  
 $r_0 = 2$  cm  
 $l_0 = 10$  cm  
 Hydrogen

\* Afanas'ev et al., Sov. Phys. Tech. Phys., 36, 505 (1991)

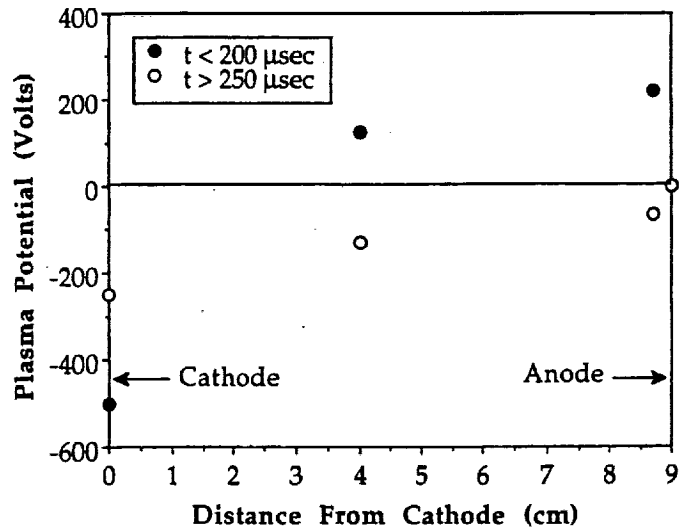
## NASA AND DOE SUPPORTED RESEARCH

### Electrode Phenomena



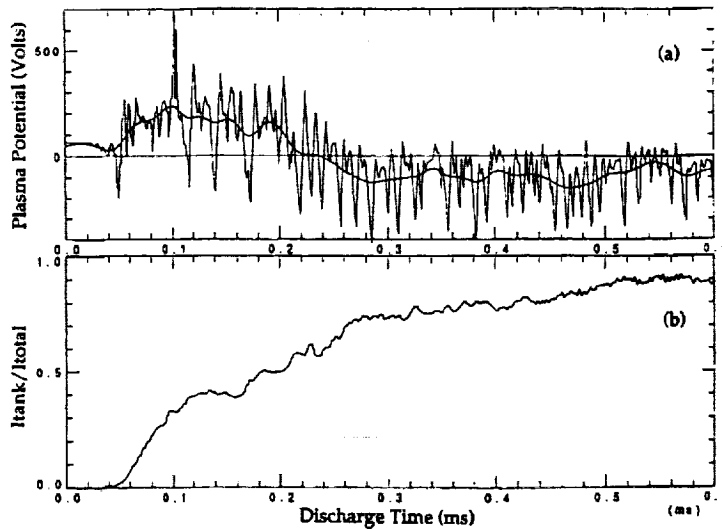
- Calculation of vacuum field at time of shot
- Field lines connect anode to cathode
- Field lines distort due to plasma flow

**ANODE FALL**  
Plasma Potential Measurements



- 40 MW shots
- Floating Langmuir probe measurements
- Anode fall reversed for  $t < 200 \mu\text{s}$

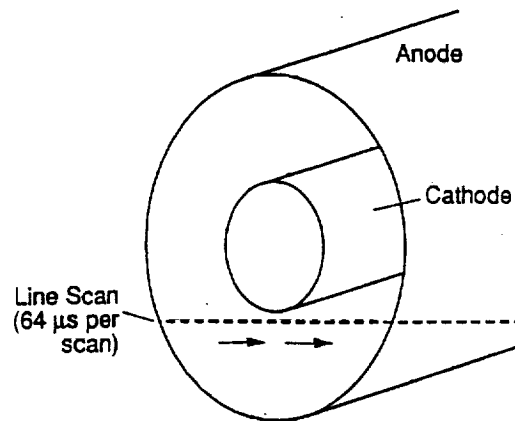
**ANODE FALL**  
Evolution of Magnetic Field Structure



- Field lines connect cathode to anode at early times
- As discharge evolves, plasma stretches field lines thereby connecting cathode to tank wall

# INFRARED ELECTRODE CALORIMETRY

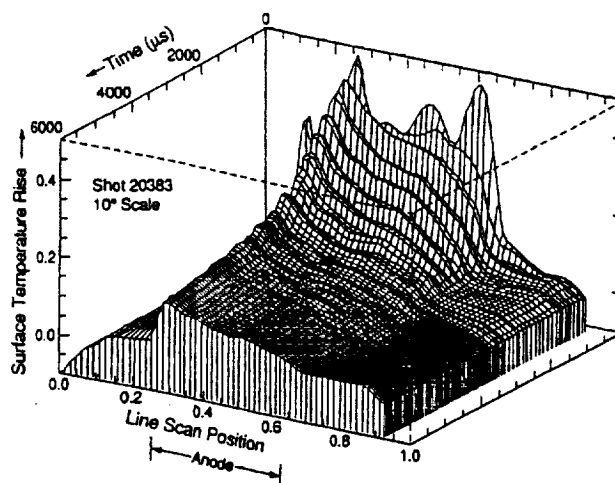
## Experimental Setup



- Infrared video camera in line scan mode used to measure electrode temperature
- Temperature rise converted to energy flux

# INFRARED ELECTRODE CALORIMETRY

## Results for 15 MW Shot

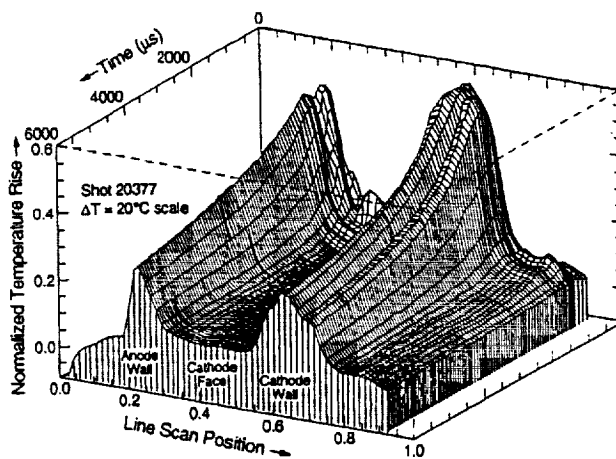


- Energy flux  $\approx 13 \text{ MW/m}^2$  deposited on anode for 15 MW shot

## INFRARED ELECTRODE CALORIMETRY

### Results for 40 MW Shot

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- Energy flux  $\approx 30 \text{ MW/m}^2$  deposited on anode for 40 MW shot

## INFRARED ELECTRODE CALORIMETRY

### Interpretation of Results

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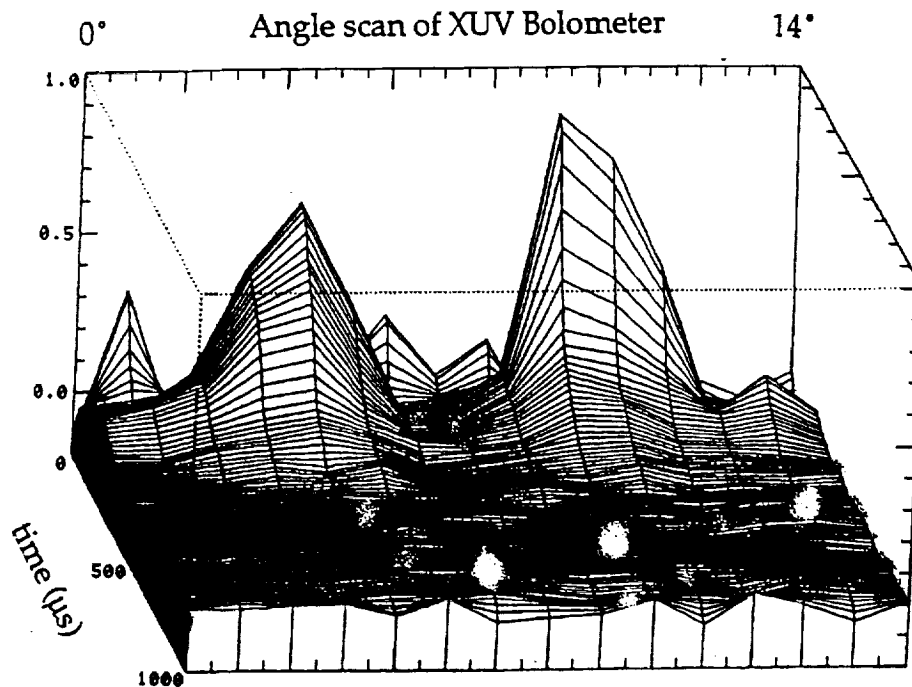
A comparison of measured energy flux to that predicted by the anode fall data has been made.

- For 40 MW discharge  $P_{\text{anode}} \approx \Gamma_{\text{thi}} \times 200 \text{ eV} = 40 \text{ MW/m}^2$
- Reasonable agreement with IR data



## BOLOMETRY

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- XUV photodiode used to measure absolute radiation losses \*
  - Radiative power loss of 3-6% for 10-40 MW shots
- \* Maqueda and Wurden, to be published in Rev. Sci. Inst.

## ELECTRODE PHENOMENA

### Conclusions

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- Magnetic configuration can affect/control anode fall
- Temporally and spatially resolved electrode calorimetry in reasonable agreement with power loss to anode from ion flux
- Radiative losses small (less than 10%)
- Global power balance estimates in progress

## COAXIAL THRUSTER RESEARCH

### Future Research Directions and Plans

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- New facility design for 10 MW, 10 ms, flat-top (quasi-steady state) operation with mass flow control
- Electrically isolate anode from tank wall
- Repeat electrode loss, plasma flow, power balance, and spatial magnetic field measurements on unoptimized gun under quasi-steady-state operation
- Theory/modeling support to evolve capabilities
- Design and test of an optimized gun with new magnetic nozzle
- Apply research conclusions to MPD thruster design