Maintaining Technical Excellence Requires a National Plan

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For Presentation at the NASA 1990 Symposium on Space Transportation Propulsion System Technology, Pennsylvania State University, 25–29 June 1990
MAINTAINING TECHNICAL EXCELLENCE 
REQUIRES A NATIONAL PLAN

by T. F. Davidson

"Where there is no vision, the people perish." (Proverbs 29:18)

Rocket propulsion is the cornerstone of every space transportation system. Since the late 
1950s, the United States has been the undisputed world rocket propulsion leader. 
However, the technical excellence and technology base that earned us such a reputation 
have been eroding. Foreign competition now threatens to overtake this country early in 
the next century.

In the 21st century, rocket propulsion will become an increasingly important part of 
international trade. Without a change in national policy and a commitment to a strong, 
continuing, broad-based rocket propulsion technology program, the United States' 
position will continue to erode, possibly to a point of no return. Without a commitment 
to technical excellence we will fail!

The Global Picture

- National position eroding
- Foreign competition increasing
- National technology imperative needed
- National commitment needed
- Commitment to technical excellence needed
- National plan needed

This was the picture visualized by the Aerospace Industries Association (AIA) in 
1987, and this is why it selected rocket propulsion as one of their 10 key technologies for 
the year 2000 (Figure 1).

ROCKET PROPULSION SYSTEMS

Advanced composites
Advanced sensors
Air-breathing propulsion systems
Artificial intelligence
Computational science
Optical information processing
Software development
Superconductivity
Ultrareliable electronic systems

Figure 1. AIA Key Technologies for the 1990s
To meet the challenge, AIA established a rocket propulsion committee (which I had the privilege of chairing until my retirement earlier this year) to develop the National Rocket Propulsion Strategic Plan. Developing such a plan required a broad spectrum of experience and disciplines. The Strategic Plan team needed the participation of industry, Government and academia. The list below tends to understate the number of participating organizations, since in many cases multiple divisions and centers participated.

The Strategic Plan Team

Industry
Aerojet
The Aerospace Corporation
Aerospace Industries Association
Atlantic Research
Boeing Company
General Dynamics Corporation
Hercules Inc.
LTV Corporation
The Marquardt Company
Martin Marietta Corporation
Rockwell International Corporation
Science Applications International Corp.
Sverdrup Technology
Thiokol Corporation
TRW, Inc.
United Technologies Corporation
Wyle Laboratories

Government
Department of Defense
Department of Energy
NASA
U.S. Air Force
U.S. Army
U.S. Navy

Academia
Brigham Young University
California Institute of Technology
Georgia Institute of Technology
Pennsylvania State University
Purdue University
University of Akron
University of Alabama
University of Delaware
University of Illinois
University of Texas

Six NASA organizations participated in developing and commenting on Strategic Plan drafts:
- NASA Headquarters
- Langley Research Center
- Lewis Research Center
- Marshall Space Flight Center
- Stennis Space Center
- Jet Propulsion Laboratory

All told, from March 1988 to the present, over 50 organizations and 200 people have participated in developing the Strategic Plan. Such participation was necessary to ensure a national consensus. It took basically two years, 10 meetings and a great deal of dedicated, hard work to reach a plan draft that was ready for comprehensive, detailed independent review. The review was accomplished in two phases. In the first phase (October 1989), draft copies of the plan were sent to 137 organizations for review and comment. These included industry, Government and university organizations, as well as selected AIA and American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics (AIAA) technical committees. The October review yielded some 250 pages of comments. In the second phase, a symposium was held in Washington on 15 February to brief the plan. The symposium was sponsored by the National Center for Advanced Technologies (NCAT), a nonprofit educational foundation established by AIA to coordinate and integrate its Key Technologies effort. Two hundred attendees participated in the symposium. They were briefed, given copies of a revised plan draft and invited to submit their comments to NCAT for incorporation into the final plan. At the symposium, 60 questions were raised, recorded and answered in writing.
Plan Chronology

- Team generates plan 1988-1989
- First independent review October 1989
- NCAT symposium February 1990
- Second independent review March 1990
- Issue plan July 1990

The plan was redrafted in May and will be distributed in July. The plan provides, if followed, a means for the U.S. to maintain technical excellence and world leadership in rocket propulsion. To implement the National Rocket Propulsion Strategic Plan is to invest in the social, economic and technological futures of America. It is the way to maintain TECHNICAL EXCELLENCE in rocket propulsion (Figure 2).

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The National Rocket Propulsion Strategic Plan is a roadmap of technologies and strategies designed to maintain America's technical excellence and global competitive posture.

ROCKET PROPULSION BASE TECHNOLOGIES

- Propellants
- Materials and Manufacturing Processes
- System Health Monitoring and Control
- Nondestructive Evaluation Processes
- Advanced Propulsion
- Inensitive Munitions
- Computational Methods

TECHNOLOGY DEMONSTRATION, VALIDATION AND TEST PROGRAMS

- Component Demonstration
- Technology Validation
- Test Technology

ENCOMPASSING PROGRAMS

- Education Program
- Environmental Health and Safety Program
- Database Program

Figure 2. The Plan

I encourage you to read the plan.* In my opinion, this plan represents a national consensus of what needs to be done to maintain technical excellence in the 21st century. I would like to take this opportunity to express my appreciation to the over 200 people who helped prepare the plan and the approximately 600 people who reviewed it.

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* Distribution is authorized only to U.S. Government agencies and their contractors. Attendees at the February 1990 symposium will automatically receive copies. Additional copies ($100 each/$50 for universities and libraries) may be obtained by contacting Mr. R. H. Hartke, National Center for Advanced Technologies, 1250 Eye Street N.W., Washington, D.C. 20005
The following is a synopsis of the Strategic Plan's major parts:

- The challenge
- Base technology programs
- Technology demonstration, validation and test programs
- Encompassing programs
- Implementation

The executive summary presents the basic challenge and explains why maintaining rocket propulsion leadership must be a national technology imperative, the theme of the February NCAT symposium. The Strategic Plan lays the basis for upgrading existing propulsion systems and a firm base for future full-scale development, production and operation of rocket propulsion systems for space, defense and commercial applications.

The challenge simply stated is: National supremacy is fading, foreign competition is real and increasing, current full-scale development cycles take too long and cost too much and technology support has been declining.

Table 1 shows the growth of foreign competition and capability since 1968. In many areas of both liquid and solid rocket propulsion technology, foreign competition has already overtaken the United States. Four examples come to mind: 1) the French are ahead of us in carbon/carbon composites and a basic understanding of electrostatic discharge, 2) the British are ahead on plume tailoring fundamentals and 3) the Japanese are ahead in the use of ceramic bearings. The National Science Foundation's (NSF) evaluation of Japanese liquid rocket technology and plans last fall left little doubt that Japan intends to have a completely autonomous rocket and launch capability by the end of this decade.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. The Reality of Foreign Competition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1968 Liquid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Argentina</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Australia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Canada</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Egypt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. France</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. India</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Israel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Italy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. South Africa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. South Korea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. Switzerland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. Taiwan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. Turkey</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

X—Viable foreign competition
Figure 3 shows a typical development schedule for a new propulsion system over the last 20 years and what the key goals of the plan are: increased reliability, lower risk, shorter time and less costly development.

During the 1950s and 1960s, technology support, as a percent of total rocket propulsion expenditures, averaged approximately 10 percent. The results of such technology investment were applied to many propulsion systems, e.g., Scout, Apollo and Space Transportation System (STS). In the early 1970s, technology support declined rapidly and has never regained the position it enjoyed earlier. We have coined this era the Rocket Technology Drought (Figure 4). The drought, which applies equally to all Department of Defense (DoD) systems, was a contributor to several space propulsion failures.

In the 1990s and beyond, reliability, safety (which includes health and environmental concerns) and cost reduction must be accepted as technical goals on the same basis as performance goals have been in the past. Rocket propulsion must be a national technology imperative. Figure 5 sums up the problem, the challenge and the solution.
The basic technology improvement areas are shown in Figure 6. The Strategic Plan was developed to support perceived military and space objectives and schedules. Space objectives through the year 2020 are shown in Figure 7. Rocket propulsion technology must be developed and validated during the 1990s to support future needs because of the severe environments that are unique to propulsion technology.

Why Propulsion Technologies Must Be Developed Early
- Propulsion systems have the most severe:
  - Forces
  - Pressures
  - Temperatures
  - Heat fluxes
  - Material environments
  - Energy densities
  - Vibration levels
- 21st century improvements, therefore, must start in the 1990s
Figure 7. The Plan Supports Future National Space Objectives

Figure 8 charts the technical sections and basic phases of the plan. Under Base Technologies, objectives, overall approach, schedule and costs have been defined for chemical rocket propulsion (solid rocket, liquid rocket, hybrid rocket and advanced concepts) in the following areas, which encompass 258 individual programs:

- Propellants
- Materials and manufacturing processes
- Health monitoring and control
- Nondestructive evaluation
- Computational methods
- Insensitive munitions
- Advanced propulsion concepts

Figure 8. The Plan Addresses the Key Areas in Rocket Propulsion Technology
Base technology will flow into propulsion component development and demonstration, then into the prototype system validation phase, as illustrated in Figure 9. There is also a need to first develop, then validate new testing techniques, instrumentation, diagnostic approaches and automated expert test data analysis systems.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component Demonstration</th>
<th>Technology Validation</th>
<th>Test Technology</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Component demonstration ensures that each part functions as a single entity prior to becoming a system</td>
<td>System validation provides technology for future propulsion needs</td>
<td>A well-designed and comprehensive test program aids designers in assessing risks associated with critical component development, and thereby enhances reliability predictions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 9. Technology Validation Process**

The third area covered in the plan comprises Encompassing Programs. Encompassing programs are needed to ensure technical excellence. They fall into three categories:

- Databases
- Environmental health and safety
- Education

Only those programs needed to support rocket propulsion technology are presented, but in most cases these should fit into required larger, across-the-board national efforts.

Accurate storage, retrieval and rapid dispersion of data, as shown below, are essential for the future of rocket propulsion technology.

### Database Elements

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Database Management</th>
<th>Materials Properties</th>
<th>Design/Processing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Select and specify hardware and software for centralized data management and maintenance</td>
<td>Provide standardized material properties for use in probabilistic design techniques</td>
<td>Maintain documentation of analytical methods and lessons learned. Databases will affect the formulation of industry-wide standards</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Environmental health and safety (EHS) impacts must be considered and minimized in all future propulsion efforts. Industry-wide standards for risk assessment and management of design and process characteristics that address human health and preservation of the environment must be developed.

- Establish aerospace safety and environmental center
- Create environmental working group
- Identify new hazards and failure prediction and detection technologies
- Improve computer simulation and modeling techniques

An area of increasing concern, education is a prerequisite for the U.S. to maintain technical excellence and global competitiveness. The problem is summarized below:

- Education
- Aerospace needs and industry will grow in 21st century
- U.S. rocket scientists and engineers retiring
- Must attract students to technical fields
- Must train students for technical fields
- Rocket community must do its share

Figure 10 illustrates the types of programs we think necessary. Efforts such as those currently being undertaken at the Penn State Space Propulsion Engineering Research Center are an excellent example of what needs to be done. These should be expanded whenever feasible.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Primary and Secondary Schools</th>
<th>Technical Schools and Teaching Universities</th>
<th>Research Universities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Science fairs</td>
<td>- Technical assistance</td>
<td>- Summer employment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Science competition</td>
<td>- Teaching awards</td>
<td>- Co-op programs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Adopt-A-School programs</td>
<td></td>
<td>- Sabbaticals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Summer jobs</td>
<td></td>
<td>- Centers of excellence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- School presentations</td>
<td></td>
<td>- Design courses, competitions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Teacher interest programs</td>
<td></td>
<td>- Research funding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Speakers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Sponsored textbooks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Industry affiliates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Funded chairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Grants</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 10. Education Programs

If implemented, the plan will provide a host of technical payoffs to the country, some of which are shown in Figure 11.

The 303 programs detailed in the plan will cost approximately $5.3 billion (a significant financial investment) over the next 10 years (Table 2).
ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH AND SAFETY
Develop Industry Standards for Risk Assessment and Mitigation Techniques

RELIABILITY
Increase Mission Success by a Factor of 10

COST
Reduce Propulsion and Production Costs by a Factor of 10

WEAPON DENSITY
Increase Weapons Loading by 50%

PAYLOAD
Increase Payload-to-Orbit Capability by 200%

GREATER MISSION CAPABILITY
Launches on Demand With Airline-Type Operations

CAPABILITY
Increase Thrust-to-Weight Ratios by a Factor of 10

NATIONAL ROCKET PROPULSION STRATEGIC PLAN

TECHNOLOGICAL SPINOFFS
- Environmental preservation programs
- Medical technology
- Robotics
- Advanced materials
- Advanced manufacturing techniques
- Large composite structures

Figure 11. Technical Payoffs

Table 2. Program Summary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Propellants</th>
<th>Cost of Programs ($M)</th>
<th>Number of Programs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>538.20</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Materials and</td>
<td>561.20</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacturing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Processes</td>
<td>275.40</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computational</td>
<td>125.00</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methods</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health Monitoring</td>
<td>144.00</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and Control</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nondestructive</td>
<td>159.10</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inert Munitions</td>
<td>145.30</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental Health</td>
<td>325.00</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and Safety</td>
<td>Solid Rocket</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Components</td>
<td>273.70</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advanced Propulsion</td>
<td>457.50</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concepts</td>
<td>Test Technology</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>333.50</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Propulsion Validations</td>
<td>1,821.00</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Databases</td>
<td>106.60</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>5,265.90</td>
<td>303</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td></td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
On an average annual basis ($527 million/year), this represents an increase of 160 percent over FY89 levels ($202 million estimated). Such an increase will require a national commitment and “ramp up” of approximately 18 percent per year from FY89 year levels through the mid-1990s. Of the total funding, approximately 30 percent should come from industry (IR&D, capital expenditures, etc.) and the remainder from the Government (DoD and NASA).

Figures 12, 13, and 14 present projected annual costs, benefit distribution by mission (including DoD) and benefit distribution by end item user, respectively.

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**Figure 12. Projected Annual Costs**

Department of Defense (51%)

NASA (43%)

Commercial (6%)

Each sector will benefit directly as the objectives of the Strategic Plan are met.

**Figure 13. Benefit Distribution**

Lunar Mission (6%)

Mars Mission (18%)

Space Station (2%)

Space Launches (33%)

ICBMs (16%)

Tactical Systems (8%)

NASP (6%)

Strategic Defense Initiative (13%)

Developed technologies will coincide with national goals.

**Figure 14. Benefits by Mission (including Department of Defense)**

Such a national financial commitment cannot be short term. It must be renewed and sustained into the next century to meet future space and defense rocket propulsion needs (Figure 15).
The Strategic Plan has a great deal of national leverage. When implemented it will power America into the future, as illustrated in Figure 16. To maintain technical excellence and global competitiveness, we must adopt the conclusion of the AIA Rocket Propulsion Committee and the planning team—PROPULSION TECHNOLOGY ISN'T EXPENSIVE: IT'S PRICELESS.
How can the plan be implemented? First, it will take unprecedented cooperation within the rocket community. Generating the plan has shown that it can be done. Second, the plan must be sold to decision makers in Congress, Government and industry. Starting last month and continuing through the summer, AIA has been briefing the Strategic Plan to Congressional and Government decision makers. Third, Government, industry and academia organizations must use the Strategic Plan as a basis, as applicable, for their own plans. Fourth, a mechanism must be established to coordinate industry, Government and university plans with the AIA Strategic Plan. A possible approach could be to use the JANNAF Executive Committee with industry participation.

Today rocket propulsion and technical excellence are at a crossroads. The comparison of our current position with that of the steel industry in the 1960s is frightening (Table 3). Rocket propulsion must not suffer the same fate as the steel industry.

Table 3. The Nation Is at a Rocket Propulsion Crossroads

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1960 Steel Industry</th>
<th>1990 Rocket Industry</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aging Work Force</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aging Facilities</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Declining Technological Base</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The implementation of the Strategic Plan will require:

- Rocket community cooperation
- Decision maker participation
- Inclusion in organization plans
- National coordination mechanism

Rocket propulsion must be a NATIONAL TECHNOLOGY IMPERATIVE. The time to act is now. The choice is decline or progress! For the first time, we now have a national rocket propulsion strategy. It needs your support and commitment. I am reminded of a quotation from C. J. Grayson’s Productivity, A New Scenario that applies to rocket propulsion, technical excellence and global competitiveness:

“The crisis is real. For any leader, the time to worry is when your speed is slower than the horses coming up behind. The time to worry is not after but before they pass you by.”
OPERATIONAL EFFICIENCY -
NEW APPROACHES TO FUTURE
PROPULSION SYSTEMS