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YEARS OF TRANSITION FOR SPACE TECHNOLOGY AT NASA 1986-1993: THE END OF OART

Abstract

Embodying the legacy of the National Advisory Committee on Aeronautics (NASA), after the formation of NASA in 1958, the Office of Advanced Research and Technology (OART) served the goals of the US civil space program by pursuing transformational future space technologies ranging from space power and propulsion, to robotics and materials, and computing and avionics. During the mid-to-late 1980s and into the first years 1990s, a succession of sometimes traumatic changes overtook the organization, driven by changing national goals and policies, and changing personnel within NASA. These changes represented huge swings in public policy and priorities, in which advancing space technology moved from obscurity to prominence and back to obscurity.

This paper examines critically the seminal period from 1986 to 1993, during which there were rapid and dramatic changes in NASA leadership, in the Administration and in the US Congress, which led ultimately to the dissolution of OART after some thirty (30) years of accomplishment. The paper concludes with a brief recap of the events and a consideration of the continuing importance of a focused investment in revolutionary new space technologies if the goals of the US government, the international community, and of industry are to be realized as the 21st century unfolds.