

Russia Will Keep Space Lead at Least 2 Years, U.S. Officials Say

By Howard Simons

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America's top space officials told Congress yesterday that the Soviet Union will stay ahead of the United States in manned space flight spectaculars for at least two more years.

"It will be a stern chase," said James E. Webb, Administrator of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration on the opening day of NASA's budget defense before

the Senate Committee on Aeronautical and Space Sciences.

Webb said the continuing Russian lead was a result of five years of budget cuts at home and a year of intense Russian space activity, during which the U.S.S.R. launched twice as many satellites as the United States; sent two probes to Venus, one of which is due to fly by that planet any day now, and launched an entirely new rocket.

It is the Soviet Union's new

twice as powerful as the Saturn 1B, launched successfully Saturday from Cape Kennedy, Fla.

Saturn 1B develops 1.6 million pounds of thrust and can lift 35,000 to 40,000 pounds of payload into orbit. The new Proton rocket develops between 2.5 to 3 million pounds of thrust. When fitted with upper stages, Seamans said, the Proton rocket will be able to place 50,000 pounds into earth orbit.

With the Proton rocket, Webb said, the Soviet Union is in a commanding position to pick space spectaculars of political and propaganda value, almost at will. NASA will not be able to top Proton's thrust until 1967, when it flies the first Saturn V booster. This monster rocket, which will eventually boost the first Americans to the moon's surface, will generate 7.5 million pounds of thrust.

Almost every year over the last five years, NASA has faced one budgetary crisis or another. This year is no exception. If anything, in Webb's view, the situation is more acute. It amounts to this:

Even without the increased Russian space threat, NASA has had to postpone for a year a decision about what to do with its manpower, facilities and other resources after Americans get to the moon's surface.

At present, there is no other national manned space flight goal. Unless one is picked and money provided in next year's budget for a program to follow the manned lunar landing, there will be a serious, costly loss of momentum.