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Officials say crippled satellite won't

By Warren Strobel
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Problems aboard a Soviet reactor-powered spy satellite should not affect U.S. efforts to develop new sources of nuclear power for the Strategic Defense Initiative and other space programs, Reagan administration officials and a key senator said yesterday.

The officials indicated they will

oppose proposals for a joint U.S.-Soviet ban on putting nuclear reactors in orbit. Those proposals were made in the wake of Moscow's revelation in May that it had lost radio contact with the satellite, which is used to track U.S. naval fleets and is expected to re-enter the Earth's atmosphere this fall.

Rep. George Brown, California Democrat, introduced legislation yesterday that would prohibit the

United States from launching nuclear-powered spacecraft, except those used on planetary probes or lunar missions, if the president certifies that the Soviets will do likewise.

But a fellow Democrat, Sen. J. Bennett Johnston of Louisiana, said the legislation would "throw the good out with the bad." He added that "there are some very attractive, far-term potential applications of space nuclear reactors, applications

11 12 88

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that I don't believe any of us are wise enough to dismiss before the 21st century even begins.

"There is also a marked contrast between current Soviet safety practices and those we will follow with space nuclear reactors," said Mr. Johnston, chairman of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee.

The Senate committee yesterday convened a hearing on the fate of

Cosmos 1900, as the Soviet satellite is designated, and its impact on U.S. space nuclear power research.

Col. Henry Culbertson, an official of the U.S. Space Command in Colorado Springs, Colo., which tracks some 7,200 objects in orbit, said the satellite is expected to return to Earth some time late this month or early next month.

The command will not know even approximately where Cosmos 1900,

which carries about 110 pounds of uranium, will fall until two days before re-entry, Col. Culbertson said. He said there are two automatic safety systems on board — one which would boost the reactor to a higher, long-term orbit and another that would jettison it toward the Earth, where it should be consumed by the heat of re-entry.

The United States has not launched a nuclear-powered spacecraft since 1977, but the Energy Department is studying at least five different space nuclear power sources.

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