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Tue, Feb 9 2010

## UNITED STATES 9 Feb 2009 Launch of Sun-watching spacecraft a milestone

When NASA launches its Solar Dynamics Observatory, a new Sun-watching spacecraft that is part of the agency's Living with a Star project, from Cape Canaveral in Florida, it will be the 20th launch of the Atlas V. The milestone raises the question of whether the days are numbered for both the Atlas V and Delta IV rockets if NASA's Ares rocket is developed. Ares I, an element of NASA's Constellation Program, is envisioned as the rocket that will carry astronauts back to the Moon.

The SDO launch wraps up a busy year for Atlas V launches. The Lunar Reconnaissance Orbiter blasted into space on top of an Atlas V rocket on 18 Jun on a year-long mapping enterprise. Atlas V sends off a classified military payload called PAN in August, a weather satellite in September, and an Intelsat 13 commercial communications satellite in October.

The Atlas V launch vehicle system, introduced in 2002, was a completely new design that succeeded the earlier Atlas series. Atlas V vehicles were based on the 3.8-m (12.5-ft) diameter Common Core Booster (CCB) powered by a single Russian RD-180 engine. These could be clustered together, and complemented by a Centaur upper stage, and up to five solid rocket boosters, to achieve a wide range of performance.

The Heavy variant of the Atlas V, which uses three common core boosters, can place over 13,000 lb directly into a geostationary orbit. UPDATED Jan/10

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