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AMERICA’S FAVORITE NAZI:
HOW VON BRAUN FORMED HIS MEMORY

by

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Introduction

The results of the space race are widely regarded as some of the proudest moments in American history. Names such as Neil Armstrong or Buzz Aldrin are taught in schools across the country. By reaching the moon, the United States asserted itself as the country in the lead with its cutting edge scientific advances. In the context of the Cold War, it set the country ahead of the Soviet Union, all the while achieving what was viewed as impossible just twenty years before. It is undeniable that humankind would not have set foot on the moon had it not been for the countless scientists and their remarkable developments in the decades preceding the lunar landing. From the advancements in missile technology to improving methods in aeronautics, the never-to-be-forgotten lunar landing of 1969 was built on the rapid progress of the preceding years. Although it took the combined efforts of hundreds of figures at the front of their fields, in the words of some, without “the unique experience and ingenuity and skills” of rocket engineer Wernher von Braun, the United States would not have reached the moon.¹

When Wernher von Braun came into the United States, it was not as an immigrant but rather in the custody of the U.S. Army. As one of the first former Nazi scientists taken out of Germany through the Central Intelligence Agency’s Operation Paperclip, he traded his loyalty and citizenship in exchange for lending his expertise in rocketry to his new country.² While working under the Nazi regime, von Braun made a name for himself as a leading expert in rocketry through his indispensable work on the V-1 and V-2 missiles. In the United States, he worked initially with missiles, before transitioning to the field where his true passions lay after Russia’s Sputnik satellite was successfully launched: space exploration.³ From there, von Braun

and his German team were tasked with a new mission – to send the United States into space. With the space race picking up pace, von Braun became an influential and essential player. In the media, he turned himself into a figurehead for the movement, with a weekly magazine column launched in 1963 credited as one of the things that kept morale for the space program running high. He continued working on the program and was there when NASA itself was founded, eventually filling the role of contract manager more so than rocket engineer. In death, he is remembered as one of the key figures who got the United States to the moon, as a pioneer of rocketry and space travel, and as an American hero.

It is undeniable that von Braun was a prolific figure. His name is almost synonymous with the space program, with success. In a time where countless figures were emerging as heroes of the Cold War, those major figures of the Space Race found themselves in positions of prominence, not just within NASA but within the public eye as well. It was up to these figures, and the seemingly always on-the-ball public relations teams, on how to present themselves, how to present their goals, and most importantly, who they should present. That a German – a former Nazi, even – became the “spokesperson of the space age” and a national hero is not as surprising as it initially appears. Though a prominent member of a hated enemy just ten years prior, in the Cold War era, anyone who could benefit the country in their plight against the Soviets was deemed essential. Likewise, by this point in time, Germans in the sciences were a popular minority. Figures such as Einstein had already experienced their prime, so a thick German accent was less shocking to the populace than it otherwise could have been. More than this, though, that

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4 Stuhlinger and Ordway, Crusader for Space.
5 Piszkiewicz, Wernher von Braun.
6 Ward, Dr. Space, 80.
Wernher von Braun himself became so well-known despite his ominous past is far from shocking.

As a young, attractive man, von Braun was a pleasing sight for the very interested masses. When he spoke, his clear expertise and ability to present complicated topics in layman’s terms was abundantly evident, even despite the accent. A charismatic personality paired with an almost unmatched knowledge of his subject and projects made him a clear candidate for his rise to prominence. And as much as the public eye loved him, von Braun loved the public eye. Requests for him to appear as a speaker in all corners of the country – or even the world – came constantly, for any variety of audience. There came a time where his public appearances were limited by his superiors, as he ended up spending nearly as much time on the road as he did in his Huntsville, Alabama headquarters. Von Braun seemed to be uniquely capable of crafting his messages towards his audiences. In an age before someone’s every word was projected to anyone who wanted to hear it, anywhere in the world, von Braun could say one thing to his audience of teachers, and another to a group of steel workers. International audiences in particular were the target of rousing, unifying speeches, while to his American followers he would call upon their American patriotism and speak of all this country had accomplished. By making himself such a common, public feature, to people in every walk of life, he was able to craft his image not just in a general sense, but for each individual demographic. Thus, his memory formed with minute differences between groups – but, most importantly, it formed the way he wanted it to. By speaking only of the valiant efforts of the everyday Americans, he kept the focus on patriotic pride. By informing teachers that they were shaping the minds of the astronauts of tomorrow, he filled them with a sense of purpose. This ability to control the focus of his audiences ensured that such focus was not on the darker aspects of his past.
Wernher von Braun worked hard to cultivate this public image, making himself into the “spokesman of the Space Age.”\(^7\) His regular appearances in the news and in public speeches earned him a celebrity status that bred jealousies throughout NASA. Close friendships with famous figures such as television news personality Walter Cronkite additionally aided in bolstering his image in the media. In official biographies, two of the main historians who have written biographies and articles on him were close friends, one even co-authoring several books with him before von Braun’s premature death.\(^8\) His weekly columns in magazines such as Popular Science and Colliers, combined with his numerous other works made both von Braun and the space race more accessible to the broader public. Journalists embraced his story and message with open arms. These factors combined to form an almost unanimously positive image of the scientist, particularly during his lifetime; the media as a whole appeared to simply ignore the negatives in his past. A search of Reader’s Guide Retrospective, a database of periodical and magazine articles from the past century, finds 13 articles mentioning Peenemünde, four of which also mention von Braun, though the slave labor used at the facility is ignored. There are two mentions of Mittelwerk, both condemning the heavy use of forced labor from concentration camps, though von Braun is not mentioned in either. Even his entry in the American National Biography pulls from this, stating that “however one assesses his character,” von Braun’s achievements are unparalleled.\(^9\)

In constructing this thesis, there is no intent to cast a moral judgement on Wernher von Braun. It is not within this work’s jurisdiction to determine if von Braun’s actions should be ignored in favor of his accomplishments, or if he should be vilified indiscriminately for his role

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\(^7\) Ward, Dr. Space, 80.
\(^8\) Piszkiewicz, Wernher von Braun, 160.
in atrocities during World War II. Undeniable facts are meant to be conveyed as just such: it is known that von Braun’s inventions took hundreds of lives; it is known that the V-2s were produced using forced labor from concentration camps, and it cannot be denied that von Braun, if nothing else, was aware of these situations. These facts must be noted and discussed in depth, as they are the main controversies of his life that von Braun constantly glossed over or covered up. Whether or not von Braun’s efforts to have his present, rather than the negatives of his past, as the main focal point in his image to the county was morally right or irrefrehensible should be left to the reader to judge. Instead, the main purpose is to determine the extent to which his methods in shaping this selective memory were effective. The focus instead is in the analysis and discussion of how von Braun constructed a memory that minimized his involvement in a despicable regime, making him out to be a hero rather than a figure who existed in a grey area. By taking an active role in this formation, von Braun proves to be a rather dynamic figure. The extent to which he personally played a role in the construction of his memory is crucial. In doing so, however, let it be noted that the majority of his American career took place during the Cold War, where anti-Communist propaganda and sentiment was rampant.

The methodology through which this thesis views its evidence falls into a relatively new field. Memory, as a field of study, is a recently developed one. Historians investigate how remembrance of the past is shaped by various forces and mediums. An example of this is John Bodnar’s The Good War in American Memory. Bodnar’s book examines how World War II was portrayed in a variety of mediums, paying close attention to the message being sent and the memory that the various influencers like the president, his opponents and congress, or the veterans themselves wished to put forth. It shows the dichotomy between how veterans remember the war and the memory created by government propaganda and official methods.
This is, similarly, what I intend to focus on – the various methods and mediums that von Braun interacted with to form his memory.

My study of von Braun focuses on the popular memory that is the primary focus rather than governmental efforts to preserve or hide a legacy. My work examines less the specific frameworks through which the media and individuals portrayed von Braun, and instead places focus on his creation of his own personal image, the active choices that von Braun took in crafting his narrative. While the biographical details of Wernher von Braun’s life are well documented, there has been minimal research into the details of how he is remembered, and what mediums he used to construct this. The information necessary for determining this is abundant and wildly underutilized. As a major media figure, there are more articles, more speeches, more anecdotes and letters that von Braun penned or inspired than could possibly be covered in one thesis. Instead, examples covering a diverse range of topics and situations have been chosen, and at times samples have been chosen purely at random in an attempt to give a complete overview in order to grapple with this overabundance of information. While several forces played major roles in the construction of von Braun’s memory, the most influential of these was von Braun himself. He took an active role in shaping his memory, through various magazine and newspaper articles, as well as several books. NASA, adept at “selling space” to the general public, made him the face of the space program, and thus the media loved him. Magazines and newspapers supported von Braun and NASA’s effort to make von Braun into the leading architect of our efforts to win the space race. The roles of the various methods through which von Braun worked towards the formation of his memory are examined in this thesis, in order to form one proposition for how these mediums shaped how one thinks about von Braun.
a. Historiography

The field of historical memory considers a range of factors and evaluates how they have contributed to what is commonly recalled about the event, such as certain facts, moods, or feelings. While some events or people have been more extensively covered by this line of research, the overall scope of literature is, at present, rather small. The historians and researchers who have approached memory research have done so via a diverse array of approaches. Overall, though, the intent of this area of research is to look into the various perspectives that helped to form how individuals remember the past.

Historian John Bodnar took on the task of exploring the methods and narratives through which the memory of World War II was created in his book *The “Good War” in American Memory*. In this monograph, he examines the many influencers that appeared throughout the decades since the war, ultimately reaching the conclusion that the memory of World War II is diverse rather than unified. Wartime memory was heavily influenced by the official narrative – the nation was fighting for Roosevelt’s “four essential human freedoms,” with an end goal of creating a better world. The memory perpetrated by the soldiers themselves, particularly once they returned home, takes a much different tone than the one put forward by the nation’s leaders. Numerous famous literary works written by veterans showcase this as they decry any number of components of the war – from the officer structure to the rampant violence – with hardly a mention of Roosevelt’s four freedoms to be found. Instead, the optimism in the veterans’ literature can be found in the hopes for a better, more humanitarian and democratic tomorrow.

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Film followed a similar pattern in delivering their version of memory to the public. While scenes where actors such as John Wayne portrayed brave soldiers leading their troops to heroic victories were common, the often-liberal filmmakers were quick to insert pacifist rhetoric into their works – especially during later events such as the Vietnam War. And yet still, like the government’s official statements through memorials and speeches, filmmakers largely ignored the violence and inhumanity of the battlefield. The events of any given time period played their own role on how World War II memory was used. The Cold War, for example, marked a significant shift from the post-war years by turning the World War II victory into a means for propaganda. It inspired a huge increase in the defense budget as allusions to the communists as the new fascists who needed to be wiped out grew with anticommunist sentiments. The Vietnam War likewise marked shifts in memory, Bodnar noted. During this war, the rhetoric of old was reused, but the men and women who returned from overseas found themselves “sobered by the harsh realities” rather than anxious to fight again.

Emily Rosenburg attempted to approach memory from a narrower context. Rather than looking at World War II in its entirety, as Bodnar had, Rosenburg focused only on Pearl Harbor and the various components that had formed its memory in her book, A Date Which Will Live. Easily identifiable moves to shape the memory were immediate – President Roosevelt gave a speech the very next day, forming the basis of an infamy narrative that would be picked up by countless others. It is in this way that Rosenburg discusses the formation of memory – in terms of frameworks, with each “narrative structure [shaping] what is remembered.”

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12 Bodnar, The “Good War”, 132 & 137.
13 Ibid., 62.
14 Ibid., 238.
16 Rosenberg, 17.
Pearl Harbor, Roosevelt’s infamy framework is the most successful, with public cries to not let the victims’ deaths be in vain common during the war. The infamy framework bases itself off of Roosevelt’s speech, his cry that the Pearl Harbor attack was “a date which will live in infamy.” This language is continuously used to describe the attack and the rationale for then proceeding to enter the second World War. The next most successful framework was one of “deceit,” with Roosevelt’s opponents’ intent on painting the White House as at fault for Pearl Harbor. With the anti-war sentiment rampant during this era, these rivals accused Roosevelt of “manipulat[ing] the country towards war,” and though any negligence was officially disproven, this narrative still influenced many minds. Ultimately, though, it was the infamy narrative that stuck. The unjust loss of life remains the primary focus. It is this framework rather than one of intranational blame that can be found principally in the various monuments erected – perhaps the most concrete way of determining memory. Rosenberg accredits this assessment to what she describes as the frontier narrative – Roosevelt relates the attack on Pearl Harbor to the legendary figures of frontier America, invoking the idea that “people remember events in ways that fit already familiar narratives.”

In his 2004 article, “Operation Enduring Analogy,” David Hoogland Noon approaches memory from a rhetorical literary perspective. Noon evaluates George W. Bush’s reshaping and weaponization of World War II memory in light of the September 11, 2001 attacks through the lens of the vocabulary used. Bush likewise shaped the way in which 9/11 is remembered – as “our” Pearl Harbor, “our” call to arms against the unjust enemies. Noon, like Rosenberg, brings

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17 Rosenberg, 34.
18 Ibid., 36.
19 Ibid., 12.
up the success of using historical analogies as a way to solidify memory. Bush, he says, painted himself as “the heir to the … greatest generation of American leaders,” erasing the horrors of war to derive motivation from the war efforts, much as leaders did during World War II.\(^\text{21}\) George W. Bush was the culmination of this “greatest generation,” as the son of a veteran, as someone who had grown up learning about the ideal of “humility in victory.”\(^\text{22}\) His repetition of this version of World War II memory transformed the history into myths beyond critique. These recurrent analogies “eroded the rough edges” and linked the events in memory – particularly useful, in this case, by tying what Noon calls the selective memory of the war to the realities of 9/11.\(^\text{23}\) The tragedy itself provided the perfect conclusion to the war nostalgia of Bush’s early administration. After years of cementing the nobility of the war generation, this new war on terrorism became the next logical step to allow this new generation to follow in their fathers’ and grandfathers’ footsteps.\(^\text{24}\)

While not nearly as widely invoked as World War II, the Cold War is present in the minds of the generations who lived through it. However, the staunch anticommunist fears and the air of hostility over the nation has been largely forgotten. While there has been heavy historical research into the various events constituting the Cold War era, there has been little research into the memory of the time. Historians such as Noon and Bodnar discuss the ways in which the Cold War influenced other memories, but neither discuss any components of the memory of the conflict itself. Maja Zehfuss is one of a select few who does discuss Cold War memory. In a short article, she offers a look at Cold War memory from the perspective of a German, someone

\(^{21}\) Noon, 340-341.
\(^{22}\) Ibid., 345.
\(^{23}\) Ibid., 343.
\(^{24}\) Ibid., 355.
who had grown up in a divided Berlin. A series of photographs by Angus Boulton is the primary subject. These pictures depict empty Soviet military bunkers, showing the remnants of the Cold War. These images, Zehfuss says, help solidify the memory of “intense military conflict,” though they effectively erase any nod to the human sufferings of the era.\textsuperscript{25} This, she says, is dangerously characteristic of the post-Cold War nostalgia.\textsuperscript{26}

The primary bulk of memory research relating to the Cold War looks at how we forgot the war – or, how the Cold War was erased from memory. Jon Wiener wrote a book, entitled How We Forgot the Cold War: A Historical Journey Across America, on this very subject. Though heavily and clearly skewed against what the author perceives as conservative efforts to preserve the Cold War memory, the author presents a sound overview of the trend of ‘forgetting’ the Cold War. The act of ignoring the Cold War was placed into official Pentagon policy in 2002, Wiener says, with the Department of Defense’s decision not to create a Cold War Service Medal. The medals that other organizations had issued were also denounced in one fell swoop.\textsuperscript{27}

The very basis of a lack of Cold War memory can be found in the lack of personal identity tied to the events – unlike in the Civil War or World War II, there was no lasting sense of self created from the era.\textsuperscript{28} Whereas those who lived through World War II identify with this fact, those who survived the Cold War do not. Perhaps, Weiner suggests, this is due to a lack of “tragedy and trauma.” While certainly this conflict led to loss of life in the proxy wars in Korea, Vietnam, and Afghanistan, the memory of these events has separated itself from the Cold War as a whole.\textsuperscript{29}

\textsuperscript{25} Maha Zehfuss. “Remember the Cold War?” Review of International Studies 35, no. 4 (2009), 869.
\textsuperscript{26} Zehfuss, 870.
\textsuperscript{27} Jon Wiener, How We Forgot the Cold War: A Historical Journey Across America (Berkeley: Univ Of California Press, 2014), 225.
\textsuperscript{28} Wiener, 228.
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 229-230.
Despite the boom in memory studies, no scholar has directly examined the memory of von Braun. The closest investigation into von Braun’s memory can be found in Dennis Piszkiewicz’s Wernher von Braun: The Man Who Sold the Moon. In his biography, Piszkiewicz condemns those who glossed over the negative aspects of von Braun’s life as ignoring obvious truths. Likewise, he questions why the United States allowed von Braun to become such a public face, concluding simply that he was good publicity. Von Braun was intelligent, well spoken, and very skilled at making convincing arguments. He was adept at making the country look good, and thus, Piszkiewicz claimed, he was allowed to shape his own memory. Notably, he discusses an interview von Braun gave with The American Weekly, which he called instrumental as “a piece of revisionist history.” This article reshaped the image of von Braun, seeking to cast him as an average American. Piszkiewicz mentions some of the journalists who tried to reshape von Braun’s memory by shifting away from the unfailing praise as well. Those who attempted to paint him in a less positive light were unsuccessful, he says, due to von Braun’s constant charm and imposing legacy. However, outside of this biography, literature on von Braun’s memory is reduced to side notes in other scholarly works. In an article on the controversy surrounding the exhibition of Enola Gay in the National Air and Space Museum, the reshaping of memory is discussed briefly in relation to the rebranding of the V-2 exhibit. The exhibit, after some blowback, was modified so that the mentions of von Braun in relation to this bomb did not gloss over the atrocities that went into creating it. Instead, an entire panel of the display is dedicated to

31 Ibid., 122.
32 Ibid., 162.
the slave labor that was used in the production of the bomb and the massive loss of life that resulted from it.

My study of the memory of von Braun is informed by a case study focusing on Albert Speer’s memory. In a book entitled Albert Speer: His Battle with Truth, written by Gitta Sereny, the author examines the memory of “the Nazi who said sorry,” who was prosecuted during the Nuremberg War Crime Trials. Though his image remains negative unlike von Braun’s overwhelmingly positive one, he managed to essentially talk his way out of the death penalty or even a life sentence. Speer took an active role in shaping his memory, much as von Braun did. His efforts to downplay his crimes and distance himself from his actions and those of his close associates echo von Braun’s, though Speer’s far more extensive list of crimes against humanity and high rank within the Reich made his involvement undeniable. Sereny discusses how Speer played upon his tragedies in order to gain the empathy of others. His famous books detailing his experiences within the Reich capitalize on the monstrosities he witnessed and committed, yet still placed him in a far less damning spotlight than was arguably deserved. In penning these works, Speer was able to paint his role in Hitler’s regime however he chose to, distancing himself as needed, making himself a voice of reason where it suited him; whatever would serve him best. His expressed shame for his actions served to portray him in a forgivable light for what he could not shy away from.34

Although it offers detailed looks into some topics, the field of historical memory research is far from complete. Bodnar discusses the many variations in World War II memory, from one of brutal bloodshed put forth by the veterans, to the basis of which the Cold War was built on –

the endurance of liberty. Rosenberg takes a narrower approach to memory by examining just the legacy of Pearl Harbor, looking at the varying frameworks that worked to create it. She discusses what is deemed the “infamy framework” and the “inquiry framework” as the two main contributors and plays up the need for public narratives. Noon places memory into a rhetorical framework and discusses the way memory of one event can be used in the formation of another – in this case, how George W. Bush used the memory of World War II in cultivating the memory of 9/11. Cold War memory research is largely underwhelming, but there has been some work done in relations to Cold War nostalgia, and more on how the Cold War was largely erased from memory. Research into the memory of Wernher von Braun is even more limited, though some biographers such as Piszkiewicz and Ward discuss how a Nazi sought to construct a memory of wartime involvement that was benign. Albert Speer presents a comparable figure in terms of active control of memory; Sereny discusses the methods through which Speer attempted to whitewash his actions, and the extent to which this was truthful and successful.

I: Who was Wernher von Braun? A Biographical Overview

On March 23, 1912, a second son was born to Baron Magnus von Braun and his wife, Baroness Emmy von Braun, in northeast Germany. The family did not know then that young Wernher von Braun, their middle child, would one day change the face of rocket science, but time would prove it so. Although low on the aristocratic scale as a young baron, Wernher was taught to take his station seriously and to lead an honorable life.35 Magnus von Braun’s keen

35 Bob Ward, Dr. Space: The Life of Wernher von Braun (New York: Naval Institute Press, 2013), Ch.2 To the Manor Born.
mind secured the family a status above that of even their noble birth, as he climbed the ranks of government in the ill-fated Weimar Republic, eventually becoming the Minister of Agriculture until the Third Reich took over in 1933.\textsuperscript{36} Through this, Wernher was entitled to an excellent education, and he proved from a young age to be a step beyond even his intelligent brothers, Sigismund and Magnus. This excellence came at least in part from his mother. Baroness von Braun "was a compassionate, well-educated woman, who spoke six languages, was well traveled, loved great music and fine art, and was a serious amateur ornithologist and astronomer."\textsuperscript{37} Wernher inherited his mother’s brilliant mind, her ease with languages, and particularly her love of music. For a time, the family even believed this would be the path he would pursue, as he was a talented pianist from an early age. After all, his grades were merely average. His performance in math and physics were even worse, and rocket science was not even a considered field. It took a blooming interest in rocketry to convince Wernher of the importance of such subjects.\textsuperscript{38}

While his first experiment with rockets occurred as a boy of 12 when, with the help of his older brother Sigismund, he strapped rockets to a wagon and rode it down his street - and straight into police custody, Wernher von Braun was 18 before he received his first serious training.\textsuperscript{39} Many events of his childhood contributed to his passion for space and rockets. One was the rather unorthodox confirmation gift he received from his mother. Instead of the standard present of a watch, Wernher was given a telescope, setting him on the road to the stars.\textsuperscript{40} Biographers have differing opinions on what other factors contributed to his life-long love. His

\textsuperscript{37} Ward, \textit{Dr. Space}, Ch. 2.
\textsuperscript{38} Bergaust, \textit{Wernher von Braun}, 36.
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 34 & 40.
\textsuperscript{40} Ward, \textit{Dr. Space}, Ch. 2.
mother’s hobby as an amateur astronomer is often cited as at minimum playing a role, and some, such as Ward and Bergaust, cite Hermann Oberth’s book on rocketry as the source of his interest. Popular novels like Jules Verne’s From the Earth to the Moon had an early influence on von Braun as well, some biographers claim.\(^{41}\) When he was fifteen Wernher had his first encounter with the figure who would become his mentor and kickstart his career. After reading Oberth’s book on rocketry, young Wernher turned his grades around in his Berlin school, and a few years later began working for Oberth himself while simultaneously commencing his studies at Berlin’s Charlottenburg Institute of Technology.\(^{42}\) When Oberth left Germany to return to teaching in Romania, von Braun and his coworkers – all members of the fledgling Society for Spaceship Travel – continued their experiments.\(^{43}\) In 1933, von Braun and his coworker Rudolf Nebel received an offer that would drastically impact their lives. To hear him tell it, three army men showed up to watch a rocket test launch – and that was the end of that. Next thing he knew, von Braun was working on the military’s dime.\(^{44}\) Some biographers recount the events slightly differently, recalling the army men arrived at von Braun’s home to hire him – likely a fancified story. Captain Dornberger, a key figure in his hiring and later a paternal figure in von Braun’s life, made him the head of these army-funded experiments. Dornberger additionally helped von Braun enroll in the University of Berlin, where, in 1934, he received a Ph. D. in physics for his rocketry research, though his thesis was kept classified for many years.\(^{45}\)

It was during this time that Adolf Hitler rose to power. While his father, Baron von Braun, retired from public office and distanced himself as completely as possible from the new


\(^{42}\) Ward, *Dr. Space*, Ch. 3.

\(^{43}\) Stuhlinger and Ordway, *Crusader for Space*, 18.

\(^{44}\) Bergaust, *Wernher von Braun*, 45.

\(^{45}\) Ward, *Dr. Space*, Ch. 3.
regime, in fact never joining the Nazi party, Wernher had no such qualms. Although von Braun did not immediately join the party, as many of his coworkers did, his work for the army – and thus, the Nazi regime – continued at a feverish pace until he defected to America over a decade later. There is significant debate on how loyal and supportive of Hitler and his government von Braun and the rest of the rocket team was. Some biographers, such as Ward and Bergaust, insist that the Peenemünde team was largely apolitical. Ward even mentions von Braun’s friend and associate, Willy Ley, who fled to America due to his Jewish ancestry. Yet, as other biographers such as Dennis Piszkiewicz point out, this does not erase the fact that von Braun did not have to join the Nazi Party – and in fact, his friendship with Ley may make it worse that he did. Nor does it erase the fact that von Braun joined and trained with the Luftwaffe after Hitler’s rise to power. He served as a reserve pilot throughout the war.\textsuperscript{46} It is regardless undeniable that von Braun reached his first real success under Hitler. Funding increased a hundredfold, and as war began to break out, von Braun became an essential figure to the victory efforts.

In 1937, several noteworthy events in Wernher von Braun’s life occurred. That year, his team made the move to Peenemünde, which would remain their base of operations throughout most of World War II. Here, work on what would later be known as the V-2 missile began. During wartime, this base became home to a forced-labor camp, a fact many of his biographers either gloss over or ignore this development completely. Ward and Piszkiewicz mention it as an afterthought at the end of a sentence while others such as Bergaust and Stuhlinger fail to mention it at all. Another significant event of 1937 was Wernher’s formal admission to the Nazi Party, yet another event that many biographers attempt to ignore or minimize. Ward simply says he was “commanded” to join, despite the absolute lack of evidence of this, while Bergaust tries to place

\textsuperscript{46} Ward, \textit{Dr. Space}, Ch. 4.
the date of admission as 1942, coinciding with when Himmler and Hitler had become directly involved in V-2 production. Stuhlinger and Ordway fail to mention it at all.

Despite the dedicated work of the Peenemünde team, it was not until 1942 that the first test launch of the A-4, later to be renamed the V-2 (for propaganda purposes - the ‘V’ stands for Vergeltungswaffe, or ‘Retribution Weapon’), occurred. On the third try, the missile successfully launched, and with it, von Braun wrote his name in the annals of history. After this success, the V-2s again became a priority for Hitler, and thus began the heavy use of POWs as forced labor with as many as 3,000 mainly Russian and Polish prisoners being used as disposable resources. These forced laborers made up most casualties when, in 1943, the British caught on to the true purpose of Peenemünde and bombed it. After this attack, at the command of the head of the Gestapo and SS, Heinrich Himmler, the production headquarters were moved underground to a plant known as Mittelwerk. The next year, Himmler attempted to place the V-2 production efforts – and von Braun – under Gestapo control. Here again, biographical accounts differ. Ward and Piszkiewicz both discuss an event where, after much consultation with Dornberger and other coworkers, von Braun agreed to join Himmler’s SS, making himself the head of an SS Unit at Peenemünde. However, even Ward’s accounts of this interaction differ, as in a later chapter he tells the better-known story, one Bergaust and Stuhlinger reiterate, that Himmler tried to take over production from the Army, and that, when von Braun resisted, he was arrested. How von Braun was released from prison three weeks later is heavily contested as well, with both biographers and von Braun alike seemingly evenly split between whether it was Dornberger or Hitler or a combination of both who intervened on his behalf.

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47 Stuhlinger and Ordway, Crusader for Space, 29.
48 Ward, Dr. Space, Ch. 5.
49 Ibid., Ch. 5.
As von Braun later told it, and as biographers recounted it, when the V-2s first were launched, first on Paris and then on London, von Braun was distraught.\textsuperscript{50} “We wanted our rockets to travel to the Moon and Mars, not to hit our own planet.” Ward and Piszkiewicz point out that this was not entirely the case, mentioning the often-ignored Manchester Guardian interview where von Braun recalls feeling little remorse for the attacks – “I felt satisfaction. I visited London twice, and I loved the place. But I loved Berlin, and the British were bombing the hell out of it.”\textsuperscript{51} However, Ward argues that this does not necessarily imply Nazi loyalty, as others have perceived. While the team may have “had champagne” when the first bombs hit London, they were, after all, at war, and had felt the wrath of Allied bombs and “still had a Fatherland to fight for.”\textsuperscript{52} With these successful attacks, Mittelwerk production went into full swing, producing the weapons for 26 more attacks on London over the next ten days. Here lies another source of contention. It is known now that thousands of forced laborers from concentration camps led the production at Mittelwerk. Many biographers overlook this completely, and those that do not largely decry any possible involvement by von Braun in these matters, as Bergaust does. Stuhlinger and Ordway take the denial of involvement a step further and attempt to paint the conditions of the workers as not truly that bad. Ward makes no claims on the extent of von Braun’s involvement, though he discusses in detail the regularity of von Braun’s visits, to check “on technical reliability issues – and occasional labor matters,” making it clear that von Braun at least knew of the conditions, though noting that his feelings on the matters can never be known. Piszkiewicz alone places at least some blame at von Braun’s feet. As the end of the war drew near, accounts of von Braun’s actions remain relatively consistent.

\textsuperscript{51} Ward, \textit{Dr. Space}, Ch. 6.
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., Ch. 6.
With conflicting orders telling his team to both stay and go, von Braun made the ultimate
decision to move the team into the path of the encroaching American troops to the South, with
the intent of surrendering the team and their knowledge to them.\textsuperscript{53} A short while later, Wernher
von Braun became one of the first Germans brought over as part of Operation Paperclip.

In mid-September 1945, Wernher von Braun and a small group of Germans landed in
Boston ahead of the 118 former Peenemünde scientists selected to come to the United States.
After weeks of questioning back in Germany, this crew was faced with even more interrogation
once in the States. The rest of the team flew into their new base at Fort Bliss in El Paso, Texas
over the next few months, joining von Braun and the original few.\textsuperscript{54} After spending some time in
the hospital recovering from hepatitis, von Braun and his team got to work teaching the
Americans about the V-2s. At this point, the Germans were considered “wards of the Army,”
their presence kept secret from the rest of the country, and it was not until a decade later that they
officially became American citizens.\textsuperscript{55} A year after arriving in the country, the Germans received
their first true indication that their stay would be permanent. Although still largely confined to
Fort Bliss and nearby White Sands Missile Range in New Mexico, their contracts were renewed
for five years, and with it came an increase in salary and permission for their family members to
join them in the United States.\textsuperscript{56} Around this time, von Braun returned to Germany to marry his
nineteen-year-old first cousin, Maria Louise von Quistorp. Ward insists that there was nothing
unusual about this for European aristocracy. Bergaust and others do not even mention the

\textsuperscript{53} Stuhlinger and Ordway, \textit{Crusader for Space}, 59-60.
\textsuperscript{54} Ward, \textit{Dr. Space}, Ch. 8.
\textsuperscript{55} Bergaust, \textit{Wernher von Braun}, 92.
\textsuperscript{56} Ward, \textit{Dr. Space}, Ch. 9.
couple’s blood relation. When he returned to Fort Bliss it was not just with his new wife, but with his parents as well.

In 1949, the Cold War was beginning to solidify, and with it, von Braun’s fortunes began to change. He and his team were moved to Huntsville, Alabama to begin their work at Redstone Arsenal, tasked with engineering a new long-range nuclear capable missile to rival those the Soviets were reportedly creating. Von Braun lived out most of the rest of his life in Huntsville. Here, the Germans were quick to get involved in the community, buying homes, joining organizations, and mingling with the locals. In 1953, tests began of the team’s newly developed Redstone missiles, designed to counter the Soviet’s arsenal. The first test was a failure, as were the next several, but by the mid-1950s, the team had perfected their product. The end of the Korean War in 1953 did not lessen the tensions between the US and the Soviets. In addition to the development of their Redstone missiles, von Braun and his team were tasked with the creation of what became known as the Jupiter intermediate-range ballistic missile, under the Army Ballistic Missile Agency. This came on the tail end of President Dwight Eisenhower’s rejection of von Braun’s proposal to launch a satellite using an altered Redstone rocket in favor of the Navy’s proposed Project Vanguard. Unsurprisingly to von Braun, who had proposed his own plan due to doubts about the likelihood of Vanguard success, early tests of the Vanguard were failures. And then, on October 4, 1967, the Soviets successfully placed the Sputnik I into orbit. The space race had begun, and America was already a step behind.

With a Soviet satellite now orbiting the earth, the country found itself at a loss for how to react to Sputnik. Response to the launching of Sputnik was divided between those avidly in favor

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57 Ward, *Dr. Space*, Ch. 9.
58 Stuhlinger and Ordway, *Crusader for Space*, 128.
of immediate retaliation, which von Braun insisted he and his team could accomplish in sixty
days, and those who shared President Eisenhower’s view that there was no need to match the
Soviets. It took the launch of Sputnik II a month later – this time with a live dog onboard – to
convince the Pentagon that the country truly had entered a space race. On November 8, the go-
ahead from the Defense Secretary was received, and the team at Redstone began work on
ensuring their Jupiter-C missile was ready for space.59 Less than three months later, ahead of his
90-day promise, the Jupiter-C launched from Cape Canaveral, Florida on January 31, 1958,
placing the satellite Explorer into orbit. America was officially in the space business. With this
monumental success, von Braun was catapulted into the public eye, an overnight American hero.
Throughout the following months, the Army continued to successfully launch their rockets,
placing Explorer III and IV into orbit – Explorer II failed, though Vanguard successfully placed
a satellite of their own into orbit in the interim.60

Spurred on by continued Soviet victories, Congress passed an act that created the
National Aeronautics and Space Administration, a move that finally convinced the US to go on
the offensive, rather than merely reacting to Soviet advances and put the country on the path to
ultimate victory. Attention soon turned to putting a human being into orbit and von Braun once
again took an active role in this endeavor. Beginning with the C-1 in 1960, the team, fresh off
their transfer to NASA, started on their next task of developing what would become known as
the Saturn rockets. Yet the Soviets remained one step ahead of them. On April 12, 1961, it was
announced that Yuri Gagarin had successfully orbited the earth, becoming the first person in
space. On May 5, the United States responded by putting their own man in space atop a Redstone

59 Ward, Dr. Space, Ch. 13.
60 Stuhlinger and Ordway, Crusader for Space, 141.
rocket. Although he did not complete an orbit, Alan Shephard became the first American in space, proving that the country was not as far behind the Soviets as many feared.

Now that America had succeeded in putting a person into space, the country needed a new mission – one that would decisively surpass their Soviet rivals. In a letter to Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson, von Braun argued that NASA should put a man on the moon “before the decade is out,” a phrase and mission von Braun would repeat time and time again as he continued to rise in prominence.\(^\text{61}\) The influence that von Braun ultimately had on President Kennedy’s decision is subject to debate, in part because von Braun himself often downplayed his role in the decision. It remains clear, however, that the points outlined by Johnson to President Kennedy closely followed those that von Braun suggested originally, and in fact the entire memo that Johnson presented to Kennedy, while making no mention of von Braun himself, does sound remarkably similar to articles written by von Braun.\(^\text{62}\) Regardless of his role, on May 25, 1961, the United States began their race to the moon with John F. Kennedy’s announcement of Project Apollo. The launch of astronaut Gus Grissom mimicked Alan Shephard’s suborbital flight, but on February 20, 1962, John Glenn successfully orbited the earth on the first of four Mercury missions.

The 1965-66 Gemini launches – using, once again, rockets of von Braun’s design – marked definite successes for the space program, with the first two-person launch of 1965 showing clear progress towards the ultimate moon goal. Throughout it all, the group, still largely from Peenemünde, continued to work as a well-oiled machine as they marked advance after

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\(^{61}\) Ward, \textit{Dr. Space}, Ch. 14.

advance as the decade wore on. In the run up to the lunar landing, von Braun fully entered his role as spokesperson for space, receiving a plethora of awards and medals along the way. He regularly gave speeches and wrote articles on why we needed to reach the moon, which helped keep morale high in the wake of tragedies such as the fatal Apollo I fire. As workloads increased and von Braun continued to spend weekends upon weekends away at events, he ultimately had to be limited in his role as unofficial spokesperson.

The successes of the Apollo Program marked the progress of the latter half of the 1960s. By the 1968 launches of Apollo VIII and Apollo IX that orbited the moon, the Saturn V rockets had been perfected by the team out of Marshall Space Flight Center. Von Braun was at the peak of his career, as launch after launch showed how close his dreams were to reality. The United States, with vital assistance from the men they had fought a war against mere fifteen years ago, was about to win the so-called space race. An estimated one million spectators populated Cape Kennedy, Florida (as it was then known) on July 16, 1969 to get an up-close view of the momentous launch, with former President Johnson and his First Lady among the attendees.

Wernher von Braun, biographers and he himself recount, remembers vividly sitting in Houston white-knuckled as the lunar lander touched down on July 20. When Neil Armstrong finally set foot on the moon, he not only won a great victory for the United States in the space race, he also marked, as he put it, “one giant leap for mankind” for von Braun himself.

As the Apollo Program completed its final missions, focus began to turn to the future – what came next? This was a question that Wernher von Braun and his team were left speculating about as much as the rest of the country was. The solution the team at Marshall came up with

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62 Ward, Dr. Space, Ch. 14.
64 Piszkiewicz, The Man Who Sold the Moon, 174.
was deemed the Apollo Applications Program, intended to utilize the technology that got man to
the moon for other purposes – and keep production of Saturn-Apollo rockets from stopping.\textsuperscript{65}
Shortly after this proposal was sent to the capital, von Braun was offered a job in Washington, as
NASA’s Deputy Associate Administrator for Planning. Although he took his time in making the
final decision, von Braun accepted, seeing a chance to further his mission from the capital, and in
the spring of 1970, he moved north to Washington DC.\textsuperscript{66} In Washington, von Braun’s job
centered on mapping out the future of the space program – and then finding a way to sell it to
Congress. No longer was he the spokesperson to the general public in the way he had been in
Huntsville. Now, he was the spokesperson on a Congressional level, tasked with sharing his
views to those that decided NASA’s budget.\textsuperscript{67} However, the decades-long Vietnam War had
reached a turning point with the disastrous Tet Offensive of 1968, and the subsequent drain on
the national budget required to fund the conflict resulted in deep cuts to the NASA program. As
the person tasked with increasing this funding, von Braun entered this job in an impossible
position. After their proposal was shot down by Congress, von Braun’s friend and ally Dr.
Thomas Paine stepped down as head of NASA, leaving von Braun alone in the political morass
of Washington.\textsuperscript{68} While the situation improved for him under Jim Fletcher’s run as NASA
Administrator, life in DC was certainly not what von Braun had hoped for, and on June 30, 1972,
he stepped down.

While his career with the space program had come to an end after twenty years, Wernher
von Braun was not unemployed for long. Shortly thereafter, he began working as a consultant for

\textsuperscript{65} Ward, \textit{Dr. Space}, Ch. 18.
\textsuperscript{66} Stuhlinger and Ordway, \textit{Crusade for Space}, 291.
\textsuperscript{67} Ward, \textit{Dr. Space}, Ch. 19.
\textsuperscript{68} Bergaust, \textit{Wernher von Braun}, 450.
Fairchild Industries in Maryland. Soon after, von Braun faced an obstacle he could not overcome. As early as 1970, doctors found masses in von Braun’s colon. These masses became cancerous, leading to a surgery to remove a cancerous kidney three years later and radiation treatment which, for a time, kept the cancer at bay. In 1975, he underwent surgery again, and from there his health continued to decline. His last press conference was given in February 1976 in Washington, and his last public appearance followed later that spring. It was not until January 1, 1977, well into the last months of his battle with cancer, that von Braun finally retired from Fairchild Industries. In the early morning hours of June 16, 1977, Wernher von Braun lost his battle with cancer. His death marked the end of an era, and he left a legacy of countless successes and American glory, though his life remains a controversial topic.

II. A Most Prolific Figure: von Braun and Everyone Else

If there is one trait that served von Braun best throughout his life, more than his intelligence and scientific skill, it is his charisma. A charming individual by all accounts, major figures fell for whatever came out of von Braun’s mouth with ease. He led a nation through an era, acting as the pinnacle of knowledge and a face for the people on the space race. This trait helped him befriend lawmakers and presidents, made him the darling of the media, and turned him into the peer of some of the most prominent figures in the country. As prolific as he was at crafting his own narrative, he was equally effective at convincing others to follow this tale. His personal view of his own life became the one agreed upon by the public, his own revisionism

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69 Ward, Dr. Space, Ch. 22.
willingly corroborated by the masses. The media presented von Braun as an American hero rather than a former bitter enemy, presidents included him in their story without afterthought, and figures such as Walt Disney considered him a personal friend. So how did von Braun use his talents to shape his own image, and how did others follow this lead?

Von Braun was a media darling. He was an interesting figure, offering a point of controversy when that would sell, and an idyllic American optimist when that was what was needed. The newspapers and magazines ate him up; he appeared everywhere from major publications like Life or Time or The New York Times to niche scientific publications. He even graced the cover of Time magazine on February 17, 1958, shortly after the successful first launch of Explorer I. This media presence began early, and only intensified after the launch of Sputnik I. An article of October 1957, mere days after the Soviet’s successful launch, a profile of von Braun (based on an interview) appeared in New York Times Magazine. In this article, author George Barrett refers to von Braun several times as ‘The Professor,’ a name apparently originating from “the special title of Research Professor awarded to him by Hitler.” While this appears to be a strange attempt to reclaim the moniker, the author continues on to refer to von Braun’s role during the war in frank terms, referring to him as “a man once bitterly hated by the free world for his genius in turning out Hitler’s V-2 rockets – the murderous ‘Vengeance Weapons’ of World War II. He reconciles this past with his present status with the idea that “fate… has now made him vital to this country’s security.” The implication that he is revered – or even defended – out of necessity, out of the essentiality of his brilliant mind, is perhaps the underlying theme of this whole paper. The US needed von Braun, and so they needed the country

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to like him, and von Braun was more than happy to oblige. Barrett compares his appearance to a “cherubic Mephistopheles,” again invoking von Braun’s German origin and less-than-forgiving roots by comparing him to a mythical German demonic figure. He also slips in the mention that von Braun is now officially an American citizen into discussions about ‘The Professor’ and ‘The Team’s’ anger over the Soviet Union beating them to space.

The Barrett article was written in the midst of policy debates over the creation of NASA. There was dissent between the Navy and Air Force over the topic, and von Braun voices the opinion that he “agrees cautiously” that a combined agency may streamline things. Shifting then back to a discussion of Germany, of the Peenemünde factory, Barrett says the location was chosen by von Braun personally, and compares the isolation of the Baltic factory to that of Cape Canaveral, Florida, where von Braun then found his base of operations. Von Braun and Barrett remember the preliminary launching of the V-2, fifteen years ago that month, and the joy many of the Peenemünde team felt. “Some of them thought of it not as an instrument of war but as a dream come true, the dream of man exploring the universe.” While this serves as a reasonable excuse for the engineers’ joy, it does not erase the fact that the launch was, in fact, an instrument and an act of war. In the narrative of this article, von Braun’s initial rocketry work came about under the Germany Army, who personally approached him at his home.

Barrett brings up a quote that most other articles failed to include, remembering that “von Braun has gone on record as having felt no moral scruples at that time” about the creation and use of what is, in essence, a terror bomb. He again quotes von Braun, who believes “that it is as fair to indict the scientist on ethical grounds because his devices are used for war as it is to

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72 Ibid., 87.
indict a U. S. O. girl because she hands out doughnuts to men who fight.” His victims might disagree. Von Braun’s classification in that regard is much more ambiguous. In the same breath, von Braun calls for humankind “to raise his ethical standards or perish.” This kind of hypocrisy is merely an early example of what would become a trend. In his mind, science controls the world around us, but ethics controls the “nature within us.” His meetings with Hitler are described in this vein – he describes the first time he met Hitler as meeting a Napoleonic figure “who had upset the world,” but upon later meetings, he realized he was actually meeting with “an unreligious man, a man who did not feel that he was answerable to anyone, that there was no God for him.” This, he implies, was the dictator’s fatal flaw. Such a negative view by the author and such an honest take on his past by von Braun himself is rare, characteristic primarily of the very earliest articles of his career.

An article by Frank Berger mirrors this early sentiment of acknowledging von Braun’s past while still praising his current work. In this article, author Frank Berger does not shy away from von Braun’s origins, as others often did. Instead, he mentions his past accomplishment bluntly, referring to von Braun as the figure “who developed the dreaded ‘V’ bomb with which Hitler sought to beat England to her knees.” This frank referral to exactly who von Braun worked for, and the damage that his work caused to England, is almost surprising to find, though perhaps it is simply because this was before the space race had truly begun. Likewise, von Braun does not hesitate to say that a solid portion of the motivation to get to space for the Americans was to beat the Soviets to it; such an outright divisive statement would become rare for him in the succeeding years. Surprisingly, he publicly discusses how he knows for fact that the Soviets are working on a space program already. Berger does, despite mentioning his origins, effectively

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73 Ibid., 87.
humanizes von Braun in a manner that is very telling of the scientist’s relationships with journalists both at this point and for the rest of his career. Berger talks of a “spearfishing jaunt” the two went on and slips in some anecdotes of von Braun with his family when the “jaunt” runs into bad weather.⁷⁴

Victor Riesel, a famed labor journalist and personal friend of von Braun, published articles on von Braun’s behalf and used him as a subject as he saw fit. An article of 1962 portrays him as a savior of the labor market, creating new jobs through his space program. Riesel’s article goes to show just how much the media bought into his rhetoric – Riesel is one of many prominent journalists knew him personally and conducted an extensive correspondence with him, even visited him at Marshall Space Flight Center to see his work in person. Published in local papers across the country, this article makes brief mention of Operation Paperclip – unique – but does not explain this mission other than to note that it is what brought von Braun to America, with the ‘from where’ left up to readers. As someone who famously spent his career reporting on labor issues before being blinded by acid, Riesel shifted the focus of the article to labor, to what the American people get out of the huge investment given to space flight. Von Braun points out “that space exploration, rocketry, and development have created a new industry of some 200,000 jobs. He quickly calculated that at least 10,000 other jobs were being created at the very minute we were talking.”⁷⁵ While 10,000 new jobs in a minute is clearly a huge overexaggeration, von Braun adeptly emphasizes just how much space flight is doing for the people, for the economy. In an article viewed by such a diverse populous, Riesel ensures that von

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⁷⁴ Frank Berger, "Famed Rocket Expert to Discuss Space Travel on WSUN-TV’s 'Disneyland',” Series 5, Wernher von Braun papers, U.S. Space and Rocket Center, Huntsville, Alabama.

Braun is seen as a creator, someone providing for the people. The space industry is offered as a replacement for the jobs lost with the end of wartime equipment industries such as the production of missiles and bombs.

Correspondence between von Braun and Victor Riesel shows that these two were friendly. Riesel was a people’s person, someone who it was good to have on your side, and notably for von Braun’s need to distance himself from the Nazi regime, Riesel was Jewish. As a writer for a lengthy list of publications, von Braun would sometimes send articles to Riesel for him to clean up and publish as he saw fit. This allowed von Braun to write when he had the time to do so, and still have his works reach the public. Often, von Braun would have to turn down requests for articles due to lack of time, but through Riesel he could avoid this. In one interesting example, von Braun penned an article for Riesel much in the same vein as the journalist’s usual labor topics. In it, he criticizes slave labor and the unequal distribution of wealth, effectively erasing his history with Peenemünde’s slave labor and as an aristocrat.\(^76\) Other letters between the two show exchanges of jokes which, while often rather tasteless by modern standards\(^77\), show the personal relationship between the two.\(^78\)

The NASA News article upon von Braun’s death is perhaps the epitome of the organization’s avoidance of discussion of von Braun’s involvement in Nazi era war crimes, and of the near-idolization condoned by the media. This memo is very, very personal and heartfelt. It truly shows the sense of a community grieving over this loss. “Many of you have personal knowledge of how great a loss this is.” “You know what his contributions to space were, and in a

\(^{76}\) Correspondence from Wernher von Braun to Victor Riesel. June 13, 1958, Series 4, Wernher von Braun papers, U.S. Space and Rocket Center, Huntsville, Alabama.

\(^{77}\) “Are they going to use any women in the moon program?” “Well, the Astronauts are all for it.”

\(^{78}\) Correspondence from Wernher Von Braun to Victor Riesel, April 30, 1962, Series 4, Wernher von Braun papers, U.S. Space and Rocket Center, Huntsville, Alabama.
larger sense, to humanity itself … and you know how immeasurable is the void he leaves.”

Von Braun’s lifelong work was to see his dream of space exploration realized. This “unfaltering belief” is one of his main contributions to the world. “With singleness of purpose he pursued that dream through many obstacles and adversities.” This is an allusion to Nazi Germany, amongst the other obstacles faced, and is a rather flippant one at that – on any occasion other than his death, this would probably be referred to a little less kindly. There are three men who we know as the pioneers who believed that humankind could reach space, but von Braun is the one who actually got us there – a very powerful image. His name “became synonymous” with the space program that he largely helped create and bring to greatness. His idolization effectively cements him in the annals of history. The skill with which von Braun was able to take complicated technical jargon and “rephrase and interpret it” so everyone could understand. Although he is commended for all he has accomplished, von Braun would say the following: “There can be no thought of finishing, for aiming at the stars – both literally and figuratively – is the work of generations, and no matter how much progress one makes, there is always the thrill of just beginning.” The image portrayed of von Braun is very idealized, as one thinks of an actor when they pass – which, especially to the audience, he truly was. This goes to show just how completely he had solidified his memory in the minds of those who knew of him. “He had the mind of a scientist, the hands of an engineer, the soul of a poet, and the vision of a prophet.” is lauded, and it is this very skill that made him such a commanding presence.

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81 Ibid., 4.
While the response to von Braun in domestic newspapers and magazines was overwhelmingly positive, the foreign response was a lot less willing to overlook his past in Nazi Germany. England, throughout von Braun’s life, was much less keen on forgetting about the damage von Braun had caused than the rest of the world. When a British film-maker, J. Lee Thompson, was signed onto the von Braun biopic, I Aim at the Stars, early drafts of the movie sparked huge dissent between the film-maker and the rocketeer. An 18-hour “marathon row” is recorded, in which von Braun accused the film as making “him appear ‘weak’ and a ‘traitor.’”

He continued to accuse the director of working under orders from the British Government to make the film hostile towards him. The director responded by letting him know that “in my eyes, you are a traitor.” In fact – in the eyes of many, he is. He did, in fact, betray his home country and the regime that he had sworn loyalty to, as soon as the going turned against them. In his defense of himself, von Braun in fact details how he disobeyed orders to sell his secrets – and himself – to the people who were meant to be his enemy. This does nothing to make him seem like less of a traitor. However, he claims he “owed no loyalty to anyone,” a dangerous sentiment to hold, let alone to express. The next issue he finds with the original script is the implication that he did not know the bombs would hit London. This implication, he believed, made him appear weak and delusional – “who do you think was making the calculations?” While the practical reasons for taking credit are clear – von Braun wanted nothing more than to preserve his image – this statement almost goes against it, as von Braun takes countless strides to remove himself from the mass destruction he caused during the war. British media often gives a more realistic

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82 Peter Evans, "V2 Man von Braun Puts the Film Men Straight: 'I Was No Traitor and I Knew the Target...'." Daily Express, September 16, 1958, Series 5, Wernher von Braun papers, U.S. Space and Rocket Center, Huntsville, Alabama
view of von Braun, in all his morally grey glory. Unlike the American media, desperate to create an idyllic figure, they refuse to pull punches.

In the early 1950s, before Sputnik and before NASA, von Braun became a prominent figure of Walt Disney’s “Tomorrowland” saga on space. After the conclusion of Disneyland’s “Tomorrowland” episodes, von Braun and Walt Disney’s relationship did not fade away. It is well documented that Disney remained very interested in the space program. It appears the two remained in contact over the years, but in 1965 von Braun and those at the Marshall Space Flight Center chose to use this relationship to their advantage by inviting Disney and close associates on a trip through the main NASA centers. This garnered new public interest in the centers, as where Disney went, the media followed. The language used in the letters between von Braun and the Disney team suggest this ulterior motive, but they also show the relationship between the two figures in the decade after von Braun’s “Tomorrowland” appearances.

In his letter to writer and animator William Bosche, he refers to the many friends he made at Disney Studios, insinuating that Bosche was one of these. The tone of the letter makes clear that the two have maintained at least minimal contact. Interestingly, he tells Bosche that “there are no ulterior motives,” while still insinuating that Disney may perhaps bring Bosche along with him if he speaks on von Braun’s behalf. In his subsequent letter to Disney himself, von Braun utilizes much of the same warm, familiar language. He tells Disney not to worry about a thing, that all aspects of the trip will be managed on his end, and that von Braun will accompany him along his stops. In one paragraph, von Braun mentions that Disney wanted to

attend a speech he was giving to the Huntsville Rotary Club.\textsuperscript{84} This speaks to not only the pair’s fondness of each other, but also likely of von Braun’s charismatic reputation. Overall, this example proves how adept von Braun was at utilizing his connections and friendships for the betterment of his program and his image. In tying himself, once again, to Disney, von Braun tied himself to the legacy the name beheld. Much like with Disney, von Braun kept an extensive list of famous friends. He regularly went scuba diving with the television journalist Walter Cronkite and appears to have been more than passing acquaintances with a wide variety of entertainment industry figures. Connie Ryan, the editor of Colliers at the time of von Braun’s landmark series of articles, counted herself as another of von Braun’s influential friends.

Bob Ward\textsuperscript{85}, journalist and for more than 40 years editor-in-chief of The Huntsville Times, had a close working and personal relationship with von Braun, and in fact went on to write an acclaimed (though ‘unofficial’) biography of him. This relationship enabled von Braun

\textsuperscript{84} Correspondence Wernher von Braun to Walt Disney, February 4, 1965, Series 4, Wernher von Braun papers, U.S. Space and Rocket Center, Huntsville, Alabama.

\textsuperscript{85} Bob Ward passed away the day this section was being written (3/21) and his work is hugely influential to mine. RIP.
to ease any tensions he may have had with his own community, and ensured he always remained in the public eye at least locally. Ward even has his own theory about von Braun’s rise to prominence and constant media activity – controversy sells. People are interested in controversy, and von Braun’s radical ideas and goals that he was always happy to speak on were hugely provocative at their time, especially early on, but more than that, von Braun himself was a contentious figure.\textsuperscript{86} It appears von Braun knew just how to remain savvy and utilize this controversy, and he ensured he had the friends in high places to help him. Even in death these friendships served him well. Frederick Ordway and Ernst Stuhlinger, both longtime coworkers of von Braun, went on to write what is likely the most highly regarded biography of the life of Wernher von Braun. This biography is commonly regarded as painting von Braun in an overwhelmingly positive and uncritical light, and while this must in part be due to the authors’ own involvement in von Braun’s early years in Germany. The authors themselves admit that their relationship with Wernher influenced their portrayal of him. Likely, none of this was intended to be overtly malicious or was even necessarily intentional at all.

More than just friendships that furthered his media presence and public figure, von Braun’s friends in high places extended far beyond popular culture. President Lyndon B Johnson was a close ally, though as his diary indicates, the two were friendly but not friends. As a strong proponent of the space program from the very beginning, Johnson’s career often brought him in contact with von Braun, a fact corroborated by the regularity in which von Braun is mentioned in his archives – admittedly primarily as a topic in oral history interviews with others who had worked on the space program, but in personal documents as well. He is mentioned in Johnson’s diary during his time as president, vice president, and former president, and his wife Lady Bird

\textsuperscript{86} Ward, Dr. Space, Ch. 10.
Johnson writes about encounters with von Braun as well, referring to him as the “papacita of the space center.” The von Braun family was even invited out to the Johnson’s home, where they were each gifted with a Stetson. That these two formed a certain level of friendship is unsurprising; the paths of the two were very much tied together from an early time. Johnson, as president, heavily pushed the glory of the space program and von Braun was the one who would get them to where they wanted to go.

Other presidents during von Braun’s American years certainly knew his name, though none except Johnson appear to have shared a personal relationship. John F. Kennedy’s archives are the most telling. While no personal documents, speeches, or memos mention von Braun save a “contributor” line on a NASA status report, several pictures of him at noteworthy events, with significant figures such as Kennedy himself, are included in the presidential record. This casual, almost passing mention of von Braun shows that he needed no explanation – he was a well-known figure, who regularly came into contact with similarly well-known figures. Photographs like the one above emphasizes that von Braun was not merely a prominent figure to the public,


88 Stetsons are currently in the possession of the US Space and Rocket Center.
he was an important figure for the country in a broader sense. Of note is an oral history transcript from an interview with von Braun, given March 31, 1964 – four months after Kennedy’s assassination. In it, he discusses his first meeting with Kennedy back in the early 1950s – less than a decade after the war. The two had a long discussion, wherein Kennedy discussed his oldest brother, Joseph, who had been killed during World War II in an incident “closely related to [von Braun’s] fledgling missile technology.” Interestingly, von Braun’s recollection of the event has Kennedy using his brother’s death to discuss how much missile technology has improved since then. The two, it appears from this interview, were in contact almost solely when Kennedy visited Marshall Space Center, though here von Braun does mention a much more personal relationship with at-the-time Vice President Johnson.

Although von Braun’s presence has been much more popularly memorialized through his published books and various articles, it is only through his speeches that one can see one of the most important contributors to von Braun’s efforts to shape memory. A teacher may not read his column in Popular Science, but they were likely aware of how education-oriented he was, how strongly he believed teachers shape the children who will make America superior, and it was these aspects that he emphasized in his speech to such educators. French scientific society may know little about von Braun’s books, but they do know how much he desires international cooperation and world peace, as he told them in his speech. This medium gave von Braun the ability to tell certain demographics what they wanted in order to hear to gain support for him and his work. No consequences could be faced when conflicting ideas were presented. In this way,

we see how much of a master manipulator von Braun was, and how he was able to shape his image into whatever he needed at the time.

Wernher von Braun took to the literary world as easily as he appeared to take to everything. In giving the full, extended details of the topics that von Braun knew best – and loved best – there was no better medium than books. Publications mainly came into being towards the end of von Braun’s career and life, as he sought new ways to keep the public invested in outer space. Several of these publications deal with autobiographical aspects, as the history of rocketry and space travel became common topics for him. Von Braun was quick to emphasize his role in the modern history of rocketry, and through this he was able to manipulate how he was remembered in what may be the more authoritative ways. The von Braun that appears in the pages of these works shows his official perspective on his own history. Likewise, he was able to instill his own version of the history of rocketry, emphasizing the details he saw key. Even those works intended for the scientific community are fraught with von Braun’s thoughts and perceptions, and all serve as examples of the ways in which von Braun crafted his memory.

While these books stood the test of time likely better than the other modes through which Wernher von Braun worked, they never reached the popularity of the articles of similar subjects. The 1950s Colliers articles or 1960s Popular Science weekly column that directly correlated with his rise to prominence reached thousands of interested experts and the average person alike, as they were easy to access and comparatively inexpensive. However, these books turned von Braun into an expert, the leading figure for space history in addition to a spokesperson for the current efforts, introducing an additional level to his idealized public image. Co-authored works allowed for von Braun to make up for any shortcomings in his own knowledge. By working with
the person who would go on to become his biographer, von Braun was able to use personal connections to enhance his area of expertise and lasting legacy. Although some publications were merely repurposed works from earlier in von Braun’s life, they served as a bolster in popularity when it was needed, for him, for the space program, or for NASA as a whole. The shortcomings here are echoed throughout his other works, though his charisma, passion, and expertise shine clear throughout every literary publication.

Von Braun was a newspaper and magazine editor’s dream. He was always ready and willing to provide an article sharing his insights, regardless of the topic. His articles appear to be as widely varied as his speeches, covering a wide range of issues across a wider range of publications. If anyone asked for an article, regardless of how big or small the publication, von Braun would pen their request so long as time allowed. His works appear in the pages of obscure university magazines and Life or Time magazine alike. While, much like his speeches, each article is expertly tailored to its intended audience, von Braun was much less prone to contradictions through this medium. Many of his articles reached a wide audience, and instead they served as a type of propaganda for the space program. Von Braun made himself the print media’s poster boy for space expertise. Rather than portraying himself and his beliefs, his primary task was to bring the space program to the attention of the masses, from those who were experts in science themselves to those who merely looked to the sky in awe. In writing these, von Braun was able to craft his memory, yes, but he was also able to orchestrate his importance. By appearing so broadly, he became synonymous with rocketry, with advancements for the country, and as such his negative past could be overlooked for the success he spearheaded.
III. Welcome to America: von Braun Through the 1950s

The 1950s were a time of recovery and change in the United States and around the world. The country had asserted itself as a world superpower, rivaled only by the growing Soviet menace. With an economy booming during the post-war era, America welcomed a dramatic rise in population amongst growing political turmoil. This century included landmark civil rights movements, with such monumental events including the Brown v. Board of Education decision mandating the desegregation of public schools. As much as this was the era of Rosa Parks, of growing fights for and against segregation, this was also the era of Joseph Stalin, of Joseph McCarthy, of the growing red threat as the new menace for the United States to defend the world against. The Korean War began and ended in the early days of the decade, the first in a series of proxy wars with Russia. This is the world in which Wernher von Braun came into his own in America, for this decade also marked the beginning of the Space Race. With the 1957 launch of Sputnik I, von Braun was thrust into the public eye as he led the program that was ultimately successful in matching the Russians. Even before this, though, von Braun had emerged as an expert on space, a harbinger of what was to come. Von Braun embraced a media presence with open arms, utilizing newspapers, magazines, speeches, books – anything that would place him in the public eye. Through this, he was able to take an active role in creating his memory and image from the very beginning.

Although only made publicly available in English in 1991, fourteen years after his death, The Mars Project was originally published in German in 1952, making it the earliest of von Braun’s published books, and was published to limited audiences in America shortly thereafter. As such, it marks a clear progression between his earlier works, for a professional audience, and his later ones, where he knew the world was watching. Unlike his history of rocketry, The
Rocket’s Red Glare, this book is completely lacking the accessible language that made such complex topics easily understandable. Page upon page is filled with physics equations and other problems that require an expert’s knowledge to understand. Rather than holding this against him, however, one must look at this as almost a “before.” Compiled based on calculations and research from 1948, this shows von Braun where his true passions lie. Although we know he is an outstanding public speaker, a charismatic figure capable of making the country by and large forget his questionable past, one cannot forget that he is a rocket engineer, a scientist with a doctorate in physics, first and foremost. The Mars Project reminds us of that, and likewise reminds its readers. Even the introduction is nearly incomprehensible to someone only somewhat familiar with physics, and from there the text only grows more technical. The very first page of the first chapter is a data table which, while helpful, can be confusing to someone not involved in science. As a result, it would be hard pressed to consider this as a means through which von Braun presented himself to the public, as a means through which he crafted his own memory. While this was published a few times throughout his life in English, this was available only to smaller, scholarly circles. This is how von Braun presented himself to his peers, instead, peers who cared little for his actions, so long as his calculations were correct.90

Although uncommon, Wernher von Braun penned two articles in which he told his life story, six years apart. Interestingly, several details of these autobiographical pieces are strikingly different one to the other. The first article, entitled “Why I Chose America,” was published in the American in 1952. Less than a decade after the war, and before the space race had begun, the rocket team from Peenemünde’s presence had only recently been made public. Their fame, while notable, was still low. This is perhaps the first instance of von Braun trying to appeal himself to

the American public, by telling his much-watered down life story as a sort of practice in shaping his memory. In penning this, von Braun made a public first impression and cemented himself in the back of the peoples’ minds as the country slowly moved away from the second World War and into the Cold War period, in which von Braun would be instrumental.

Early in the article, von Braun begins with strong declarations of American loyalty, saying “never for a minute have I regretted my decision to cast my lot with democracy rather than authoritarianism,” and that, for he and his colleagues after five years in America, “today we prefer hominy grits to sauerkraut and whisky to schnapps.” The Germans have intermarried with the local community, von Braun says, suggesting that even those less loyal will be devoted now, due to their American wives and families. Before they defected at the end of the war, Peenemünde had been in the direct path of the dreaded Russian troops, and von Braun’s orders were contradictory. This, he mentions with a hint of smugness, meant he could choose where he wanted his team to end up. “To anyone but a fanatic it was clear that Germany was finished” by this point; he had personally seen Hitler’s regression from bombastic Fuhrer to scared old man as the war began its crawl to the end. Knowing his country of origin would soon be defeated, von Braun realized remaining in Germany after the war was not an option as he was determined to continue his work. This rationale is given for his defection, but it ignores the reason that was likely in the back of his mind – as a scientist, von Braun would either be requisitioned by someone for his mind, but it was certainly possible that he would be placed on trial for the harm caused by his inventions.
As to why he did not defect to the Soviets, von Braun does admit that “personally, I had fared relatively rather well under totalitarianism.”91 No such claim appears anywhere else in von Braun’s works, and in fact it is shocking that he included this even in such an early work. Perhaps he thought, if he did not mention his comfortable life under the Third Reich, someone else would use it against him. Regardless, alluding to the privileged lifestyle he carried on during the regime that ruined countless people is a callous oversight. He follows this point by saying that he had issues with dictatorships, a vague concept that does not really take away from the previous statement. Later, he claims his work for the army began during the final days of the Weimar Republic, before the Nazis took power and that he simply remained once Hitler took over. Biographers have conclusively determined that this was not true. It is implied the V-2s were created before Hitler even considered using missiles and thus had no dangerous intentions until the dictator commandeered them. His brief arrest is cited as a primary reason for defecting to America, with no real explanation, and likely was mentioned solely to show that the Nazi regime was not his friend. In his efforts to prove that he did not do anything wrong, he interestingly says that he was in fact loyal to the regime. In this iteration of his arrest, von Braun states that Hitler directly intervened to get him out of jail. Throughout this first section, von Braun plays heavily off anti-Russian Cold War sentiments as an underlying theme. While he does admit he stayed in Germany until the war ended, von Braun maintains the anecdote of sending his brother Magnus across enemy lines on a bike. Unsurprisingly, he casually fails to mention the slave labor used at Mittelwerk, or in fact the Mittelwerk factory at all. The tale of how von Braun grew up on translated Westerns and expected to see the same setting in El Paso, his first station. Instead he found himself impressed by “America’s tremendous vitality”; “in

America you don’t seem to carry grudges” he says, about his warm reception in Texas despite being an “ex-enemy.”

In the second section, Wernher von Braun mentions that his parents were a Baron and Baroness who were driven from their home by the Communists. The passage implies shock and horror at these actions, suggesting that self-preservation regarding status may be a cause for von Braun’s choice in allegiance – something in direct contradiction to his freedom narrative. He marvels at the openness of America, from the size to the layouts of the offices to supermarkets and argues that it is unrivaled. However, von Braun criticizes Americans for being “too emotional in their approach to the world situation,” and this hot and cold tendency of the American people forces the government to react in turn, “severely taxing the US economy” and hurting those who look to America for leadership; instead, consistency is needed. An early and blatant example of von Braun’s opportunist nature, this is another area in which von Braun learned it was better not to voice his true opinions. This can be seen as a bid to keep the government from cutting his funds whenever the wind blows. He warns the country to be humble about their achievements, for “as soon as any people becomes too proud of what … [they] have achieved, the desire to meet new challenges ceases.”92 In a clear appeal towards his target audience, von Braun applauds how strong the churches are and how alive Christianity is in America. While by all accounts a devout Lutheran, in a time where civic religion was at an all-time high, the inclusion of this topic alludes more towards a knowledge of popular sentiment than a personal religious ideology. He proceeds to discuss the church and faith, then shifts to talking about how he still looks at the heavens, but now believes science does not hold all the

answers on it. He claims he chose America because they prize individuality, and this is what the fledgling space program needs to be successful.

One realm in which von Braun regularly contradicts later articles stems from a seeming inability to place himself in the wrong – in any situation. Most commonly throughout his publications, this aversion to personal guilt appears when he denies any true Nazi allegiance. In the case of this article, however, it extends to his brief imprisonment at the hands of Hitler’s regime. This imprisonment, he claims, was entirely born from Himmler’s machinations and personal dislike of him. In fact, he insists, he did nothing wrong to merit imprisonment – or, he did nothing that could have been perceived as a betrayal of the Nazi regime. In fact, as he boasts, Hitler himself stepped in to end his show trial and set him free. This story contradicts his usual rhetoric of distaste for Nazism, as if he did what he had to do to survive and nothing more. Likewise, this calls into question the line that many supporters use, that von Braun could not have subscribed to Nazi ideology when he was arrested by that very regime.93

In the early 1950s, von Braun cowrote a column in Colliers magazine on what a space program could look like. These articles, written by experts in their fields, caught the attention of none other than Walt Disney. Already a prominent public figure himself, Disney chose to use his platform to promote the space program, by filming a series of episodes of his Disneyland series on the fledgling space program and the scientists who knew most about it – including von Braun. The first episode of the Tomorrowland series, “Man in Space,” was released in March of 1955. In director Ward Kimball’s opening section, Kimball cites Chinese fire arrows as the birth of rocketry. Wernher von Braun regularly states the same in speeches, though notably denies this

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93 This commonly argued perception is already flawed, as Nazis did turn on each other on several occasions. The SS very famously turned on the SA, to name a prominent example, and Hitler’s mercurial favor resulted in the regime turning against their own as well.
claim in his later book, *The Rocket's Red Glare*. The V-2 is brought into the film’s conversation and described as the beginning of an era, a precursor of things to come. Various mishaps and failures during testing are mentioned, though the success found in the perfecting of these missiles at the end of World War II is declared with a sense of triumph. For all intents and purposes, Disney portrays the V-2 as merely an early rocket, with no mention of the devastating London bombings, rather than the indiscriminately killing missile created by America’s greatest enemy that it was. This segues into an explanation of the beginnings of our own rocket program, of which captured V-2s were the key component. At this point, von Braun still has not been mentioned despite such lengthy coverage of his work. When he does appear, it is as the last of the series of guests for the episode. Like his cohosts Willy Ley and Heinz Haber, von Braun speaks heavily accented English. That someone so clearly unamerican would become the face of the American dream is rather shocking – perhaps it has to do with von Braun’s higher pitched, more agreeable voice. Although clearly speaking from a script, von Braun is young and attractive, an easy figure to idealize. His portion of the show paints an image of the research underway to get a person to space, and after Ley and Heinz’s more technical descriptions of the various aspects of space travel, he nicely summarizes and explains the more practical elements of it.  

In the next episode in Disneyland’s Tomorrowland saga, titled “Man and the Moon” and released in December of the same year, Wernher von Braun is much more heavily featured than in the multi-field “Man in Space” episode. Of course, this is very understandable, as this was where von Braun’s passion so clearly lay, if not his expertise as well. The opening sequence

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details the history of humankind and the moon, fraught of course with 1950s-typical racism and nationalism, and discusses and disproves the many myths surrounding the moon. Von Braun is then brought in to discuss the logistics of a lunar voyage – at a time when the world had not yet so much as placed a satellite into orbit. In his explanation, a two-stage voyage is proposed, with a refueling venture once the rocket entered the earth’s orbit. This refueling would occur at a manned space station, remarkably similar in concept to the International Space Station currently orbiting the planet.

This episode, much more so than the previous one, shows just how truly ahead of his time von Braun was. Especially when viewing the episode with a retrospective view, as so many of von Braun’s predictions have since happened in a very similar manner to how he foretold it, it is astoundingly apparent that this is a charismatic man with a dream. Paired with Ward Kimball’s amusing animations, von Braun’s descriptions of various technical aspects are anything but boring or tedious and manage to convey the main points effectively to the layperson. In fact, this script is clearly similar in wording, manner, and topic to many of von Braun’s speeches, showing just how prominent a role he had in the creation of this episode. He was an incredible promoter, and knew he needed to sell space in order to achieve his goals, and perhaps nowhere else is the effectiveness of these efforts seen. One notable difference between the rhetoric of this episode and his later speeches is the purpose of a journey to the moon. In his speeches, von Braun is far more poetic in his dreams for embracing the final frontier, for exploration for the glory of humankind. To Disney’s audience, he instead paints the journey in a purely scientific light, as a mission to answer the secrets of the moon itself. Once again, in this episode von Braun’s German origins are abundantly clear, between his heavy accent and fair-haired, blue-eyed looks, and once
again his charisma makes it understandable why a foreigner and enemy became so prominent in
the public eye less than a decade after the war.

An article entitled “Where Are We Going?” published in the summer of 1957 in the
publication Space Journal caught von Braun on the brink of notoriety. Just months before the
Sputnik I launch and the subsequent beginning of the American space program, von Braun
combines personal details with scientific predictions. This made him a relatable narrator and
made him a more personable figure. To begin the article, von Braun discusses his first friend
once in America, a corporal just returned from the Pacific theater who he met while hospitalized
for hepatitis. He mentions skepticism that he could ever call such a barren place as El Paso,
Texas home, and ensures that his corporal friend felt quite the opposite – “I want to see where I
am going.”95 These words were especially profound to von Braun as a rocket engineer, as those
in his field rarely are able ‘to see where they are going.’ He declares that they will soon claim the
moon for humankind as they trudge blindly forwards with the intent to follow this wounded
corporal’s words. By beginning with an anecdote, von Braun presents himself as any other
person to his readers, and places himself secondary to an American hero.

He segues from here into talk about space and his ultimate goals. Astronomy, von Braun
says, has been around as long as humanity has, but it has scarcely been a profitable profession.
Rocketry changed this idea of astronomy as the “poor science.” With this new field, astronomy
could be used practically, as astronomical laws are necessary for the use of artificial satellites.
“Today’s teenagers will be the space pilots of tomorrow, and youngsters have always had that
keen sense for the essential that grownups so frequently lack.” This poetic outlook of the future

95 Wernher Von Braun, “Where Are We Going?” Space Journal 1, no. 1, Summer 1957, Series 2, Wernher von Braun
papers, U.S. Space and Rocket Center, Huntsville, Alabama: 10.
was enticing to a public still recovering from a world war, on the brink of a whole slew of scientific discoveries. It shows how skilled of a writer von Braun was, by effectively relating to the people and illustrating his point in a way that drew people in. Such talents made him an indispensable figure not just to NASA but to the general public.

A few months later in February of 1958, shortly after America’s triumphant Explorer I launch, von Braun penned an article for Current Science magazine. Riding the high, this article is entitled “All Aboard for Outer Space!” and approaches some practicalities of future space travel. The first part of this article discusses what von Braun claims is a primary issue, that every country is working on a different aspect of rocketry, and no one knows what the other countries are working on or how much they have accomplished. This viewpoint comes and goes for von Braun apparently depending on his target audience, sometimes advocating for a unified, international space programs and at other times calling for American superiority. The bulk of this article covers how a space program will help the earth and the country, and names a few key areas. First, he looks at the money issue. Many people cannot fathom the amount of funds required to send someone to space and ask what we will get in return. The answer to if we will get everything back is “yes – or at least, we hope so” – not a reassuring line. “The costs may be tremendous at first, but later benefits to mankind should more than outweigh them.” This section is a trip-up for the normally so surefooted von Braun; tasked with presenting the astronomically high cost of the space program, he is unable to do so. The next reason given is as a means to establish military bases. This goes against his earlier call for unity, and instead calls in Cold War fear of the other – “we must get to the moon before an unfriendly power does.” It must be done to preserve the American way of life, for the moon has a bird’s-eye view of the earth, “for the
sake of world peace, we must not allow a lawless power to seize this advantage.” These constant shifts in opinion may be von Braun throwing out a range of ideas to see which garners the most popularity.

This section calls heavily on anti-Russian sentiment and propaganda to raise support. In a similar vein, he then suggests that we must get to space first to mine the minerals we can expect to find in asteroids. Satellites are his next point and are treated shockingly neutrally; while in some speeches he calls for satellites as a way to spread American sentiment, he avoids doing so in this article. He points out that satellites could allow for television and telephone communication across oceans and could allow radio signals to reach ships and aid in navigation worldwide. Ironically, this is one of von Braun’s few predictions to actually prove true, and this section is notably shorter and uses less definite language, implying a lack of surety in these predictions. He follows this with emphasizing the weather aspects of satellites. His last point is that further exploration is needed due to eminent overpopulation. To fix this, he cites a theory that we may be able to move Mars and Venus closer. It is interesting that his discussion of the theory seems to imply that he believes this theory is possible, and more so seems to expect his audience to do so as well, leading to interesting questions on what influenced him to include this.

Another article from the spring of 1958 covers the topic of education, something von Braun appears to have felt strongly about and a profitable subject in the midst of concerns over the education sap with the Soviets. From a propaganda/indoctrination standpoint, targeting the youth tends to be an effective move in influencing the next generation and thus, the future. Likewise, it gives the much less sinister impression that von Braun cared about the youth and,

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given his three children, he likely did. The article appears in Science Newsletter and was written to warn children not to attempt rocket experiments without the assistance and guidance of a knowledgeable adult. This sentiment is rather hypocritical of von Braun, who performed such experiences as a child despite similar warnings. It appears one unforeseen consequence of von Braun’s publicity and active stance on education was that children attempted to replicate rocket launches and ended up injuring themselves. While he says that “properly guided by competent, adult instructors, these exploits stimulate interest in science and technology which will benefit student, teacher, and eventually the nation,” this is not always the situation. Teachers, with the support of parents and administrators, can fix this. National security is again slid into the conversation as the obvious reason why we need more scientists. Von Braun advocates for increased teacher salaries, improved facilities, and heightened recognition “at least equal to that accorded the athlete.” Increased focus on the hard sciences, which he views as more useful than the social sciences, is suggested – interesting as, in modern day, there is such a disproportionate focus on these topics he deems under covered. Preceding the article is a short biographical overview in which the following appears: “Later he directed the development of the V-2 which so troubled England near the close of WW2.” This is a huge and gross understatement of the terror bomb that took countless lives across Europe, and likewise does nothing to mention the regime that created the V-2. It is unclear whether von Braun himself wrote this section.97

A second autobiographical article six years after the first followed mainly in the same vein as its predecessor. However, this 1958 American Weekly article differed in some key details, as well as in the focus of several sections. At this point, von Braun was not announcing himself

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to the world by presenting what was often the first look into his life. He had gained notoriety in the past six years, as his Explorer I satellite was successfully launched as the American response to the Sputnik launchings of the previous year. Early on, von Braun refers to both his former Nazi allegiance and the forced labor used to build the V-2s by saying “despite the dubious distinction of heading the team of scientists that developed the V-2 rocket.” This is perhaps one of the first times von Braun publicly acknowledged that he did work for the bad guy, that it is shocking that he was chosen to develop missiles for another country. Likely, this was done as, with his growing popularity, it was growing harder to escape this former allegiance, and so he took the opportunity to shape it as he chose. Like his supporters, he uses his brief Nazi arrest as proof that he had no malicious intent, that his aims were always “scientific rather than militaristic,” though he does not mention the circumstances of his release from prison here. Of the loss of life his inventions caused, he merely says “although we didn’t say it out loud, many of my colleagues felt, as I did, that we were using our rockets to hit the wrong planet.”98 A callous and flippant a response to the mass loss of life he almost takes responsibility for earlier in the passage, this becomes a significant quote that both he and others speaking of him parrot out regularly. He dispels the myth that most of the V-2 developers went over to the dreaded Soviets, asserting that those who mattered had come to America with him, assuaging some fears regarding defections to the Communist bloc. In fact, he claims, everyone who went over to the Soviets were manipulated and tricked into doing so, calling upon the ‘evil communists’ narrative.

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The following page goes into further detail of how the Soviets tricked the Germans into working for them. Although the truth of this story is certainly dubious and is not mentioned by von Braun anywhere else, it serves the propaganda-like purpose of painting the Soviets into a negative light. It was through their treachery entirely, von Braun asserted, that the Soviets had received their start in rocketry. In this way, von Braun managed to still take credit for Soviet success – as he had trained the people the Soviets ‘tricked’ – despite essentially having nothing to do with it. When it became clear that the war was lost, von Braun asserted that he is the one who convinced the team to go over to the United States. “We have never stopped believing in interplanetary travel,” he supposedly told his team, and believed that the United States was the best place to further this dream; this is easy to say now that the German team had established themselves in the country. In moving headquarters from Peenemünde – for which no reason is given save the end of the war – von Braun details how him and his men defied orders, broke commands, to place themselves into the paths of the Americans. There is brief mention of his at-the-time future wife, Maria, who he would later briefly return to Germany to marry, of how he had watched his cousin grow up over the course of the war. It is a very brief interruption in his narrative, though, and he continues to detail his daring escape. Here is the only hint at the slave labor used at his plants that von Braun ever makes: when discussing his new commander, “a scared SS general,” he mentions that “several concentration camps were under his command”\(^99\) – and then nothing else on the subject.

The final half of the article covers von Braun’s interpretation of his team’s escape from Germany and their first years after repatriation. Of their last days in the Reich, he states that SS officers took him and 500 of his most trusted team members hostage, to prevent their knowledge

from falling into allied hands unless it was through his direct intervention. Von Braun claims to have heard one of his guards say that they “were being held for extermination.” The use of such language, in this context usually used to refer to the mass murders of the prisoners in concentration camps, is a strange and harrowing appropriation of language by von Braun. Once again, von Braun takes credit for relieving them of their dire circumstances and bargaining with his superior to get his team dispersed among the local villages for their own safety. This story of his daring, quick-thinking rescue appears several times, both from von Braun himself and in others’ biographical works; however, this article takes a more dramatic tone of the events. In this section, he shares the credit with Dornberger, the figure who was his boss for several years with the army and who is portrayed as a father figure. He claims that Dornberger convinced doctors to let him leave the hospital where he was recovering from a severely broken arm in an area under constant bombardment, only after von Braun had succeeded in securing his team’s relocation. He takes the time to give credit to Dornberger for his earlier release from jail at the hands of the Nazis, something he claimed Hitler himself had directly intervened in his 1952 article. He discusses Dornberger in a paternal, adoring sense, as he does many other places. Von Braun speaks matter-of-factly about Hitler’s death, about Germany’s surrender, and about sending Magnus to establish the team’s surrender. On the final page, as he does earlier in the article, he weaves in brief mentions of Maria, in what was likely an attempt to establish a hint of romance and deflect away from the atrocities he committed during the war years. Of course, this is dampened by repeatedly acknowledging that she was both his cousin and notably younger than

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100 Ibid, 104.
him. Overall, the focus of this article is notably different from the previous one and is meant to portray a different sense of self.

Even in this early period, we see a von Braun who openly embraces a public role, who places himself into the public eye with regularity and gusto. Throughout these examples, there can be found a clear progression over the first decade of von Braun’s fame. In the beginning of the decade, von Braun’s primary audience was his peers, and his earliest book reflects this. Shortly thereafter, as the Germans began to become nationally recognized and as the country began to have use of him, von Braun penned one of few autobiographical articles, in which he embraces some of the controversies that he later would avoid mentioning. The autobiographical article of 1958 most clearly shows this progression, as we saw a much more masterful crafting of his history and the controversies surrounding him. From the very beginning, von Braun shows a willingness to expel his knowledge on most any subject to most any audience. The idea of sticking to strictly mainstream popular publications was not in the cards for von Braun; instead, he embraced the media wholeheartedly.

IV. In the Heat of It: von Braun in the 1960s

The 1960s marked the height of von Braun’s career. With President John F. Kennedy’s triumphant declaration that the United States would set foot on the moon by the decade’s end, the space race was more popular than ever. This decade was not all glorious, though; unrest

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101 Maria was 19 when she married Wernher in 1947, making her 11 when the war began and a young teenager during the time von Braun is trying to imply a kindling romance.
became a common theme. The election of the young and charismatic John F Kennedy was dampened by his assassination shortly thereafter. The 1960s was a decade of chaos as much as one of triumph. With the Race Riots at their peaks during these years, as well as the Cuban Missile Crisis and failing Vietnam War, relations were tense. The Space Race served as a beacon of pride within this, something the public could rally around regardless of the feelings of the era. Success after success boosted the morale of the American people, and the lunar landing marked a peak of positive American sentiment, and von Braun was there to ensure the world never forgot these accomplishments. He coasted on the program’s fame and used his expertise to make himself indispensable not only to the technical aspects of the Space Race, but on the media front as well.

In January of 1960, starting off the year strong, von Braun penned an article for This Week entitled “Immortality.” While he managed to tackle this unusual topic while still relating it back to his space program, this shows the breadth of topics of which von Braun was willing to present himself as an expert on. This article begins with an emphasis on the need for “our adherence to ethical principles,” something that determines if our world will end in a nuclear winter or benefit from nuclear technology. As a publicly religious person, von Braun spoke on this topic with some regularity. However, he outright ignores the hypocrisy of this sentiment when applied to his own life’s work. This example is one of the more obvious contradictions between the public image of von Braun as a devout, peaceful American rather than as someone apathetic of personal allegiance and callous about the consequences of his inventions as his actions indicate. Our sense of ethics comes entirely from religion, he believes – from a “belief in the Last Judgement” and “belief in the immortal soul.” Ironically, many would argue von Braun would measure rather poorly on an ethical scale based on religious values. Belief in God gives
people “the moral strength and the ethical guidance we need for virtually every action in our daily lives.” While this is certainly a noble idea, and surely made the majority religious populace happy, it separates von Braun from the responsibility his actions, instead making them as ‘God’s responsibility.’ Science, von Braun believes, does more to support religious ideals than to deny them, asking readers to think on how “nothing in nature… can disappear without a trace,”\textsuperscript{102} and that a true understanding of this concept will change one’s worldview. While religion is a common topic for von Braun, a staunch Lutheran, this is a strong example of how well he can use the topic to change the way he is perceived and establish the code through which he claims to perceive himself.

In the second half of 1960, von Braun was named one of the key speakers at the 11\textsuperscript{th} International Astronautical Conference in Stockholm, Sweden. In this context, he is speaking to space scientists and other related professionals. Von Braun discussed how astonishing it was that the world had gone from missiles to people in orbit in only three short years, emphasizing the amazing accomplishments of humankind as a united front.\textsuperscript{103} Rocketry as a united front is the primary narrative used in this speech, not entirely due to his international audience. Those present undoubtedly knew of his former Nazi affiliations, and by presenting his goals as universal, he swept this under the rug with an unspoken feeling of ‘it does not matter who you are working for, so long as you are making progress.’ A big theme of this speech is the future. The accomplishments leading up to 1960 are described as “primitive, comparatively speaking, as the first hot air balloon” – though he maintains that, despite this, “mankind, as a whole, can be

\textsuperscript{102} Wernher von Braun, "Immortality," \textit{This Week Magazine}, January 24, 1960, Series 2, Wernher von Braun papers, U.S. Space and Rocket Center, Huntsville, Alabama.
\textsuperscript{103} Transcript of United States Space Carrier Vehicle Program Lecture to 11\textsuperscript{th} International Astronautical Conference, August 16, 1960, Series 1, Wernher von Braun papers, U.S. Space and Rocket Center, Huntsville, Alabama: 1.
proud.” He urges the audience to think towards the “revealing discoveries” of the future, and the knowledge the world will gain if those present keep on in this manner.

This urging towards a quest for new information forms the segue into talks of his own program. Nothing if not at least a little arrogant, von Braun’s work is presented in an idealized and highly optimistic perspective as the solution to this endeavor. Detailed scientific descriptions follow, appropriate for this audience. To wind down and finish his speech, he discusses some practicalities of just why space exploration is necessary, using issues such as overpopulation – and an aversion to a fear of the unknown – as rationale, both goading his audience into further work and providing logical reasons for it. Open questions, expertly and poetically phrased, are asked to leave the audience thinking. In conclusion, the concept of space exploration “for the benefit not of one nation but of all mankind” is reiterated, and he ensures that he is proud to be a part of it, again a subtle implication that it should not matter under whom he worked. Overall, his passion for the field is very clear, and this is likely what made him such a prominent spokesperson.

In several instances, von Braun used a narrative style to discuss certain events. Rather than simply give details of the event in question, he would weave the details into a personal story of his own experiences. By doing so, he could craft his image while making often highly scientific details exciting to the general public. From the very beginning of his career as a head of NASA’s space program, examples can be found of this. One such article, published in Popular Mechanics in September of 1960, served as a way to remind the country about their

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105 “After all, man has been struggling, more or less successfully, to survive on this semi hostile planet for about a million years. Why, then, should we confine him to this globe?” and “Everything is not a bed of roses here. Why should we expect it to be elsewhere?” for example.
magnificent victory with the Explorer I satellite. Details of von Braun’s experience during the night of the launch, what he deems in the article title to be “[His] Most Exciting Memory,” kept interest alive in the continuing space program despite Russian advances. Likewise, it made von Braun into the person who could keep the dream of space alive, an ideal placed on him throughout his time in America. Von Braun describes the uncertainty he – and the country – felt during the launching of Explorer 1. His story tells how he watched from the Communications Center of the Pentagon, with three other experts, who were primed to meet with the press immediately after – but only if the launch went well. If it did not, he “had a pair of dark glasses with [him] and was determined to sneak away to a still darker movie theater”106 in the case of a disaster. There was a last-minute issue detected, but those in command chose to overlook it. The article continues in this vein of second-by-second updates of the well-remembered event, from the launch itself to the wait to hear from the West Coast if they had been successful. Von Braun manages to capture the anticipation well and tells a very fast paced story of how exciting this first launch was.

A mere three months after his Stockholm speech, von Braun gave a radically different speech to the Missouri State Teacher’s Union in Kansas City. Gone were his cries for an international crusade for space, in its place a nationalistic message geared exclusively towards educators. Early in his speech, von Braun addresses how bizarre it may seem that a rocket scientist is speaking on education. While some may say that he is not equipped to speak on education, he reasons that it is a citizen’s duty to speak on such topics. This section both sets up, then destroys a strawman argument, and asserts himself as a reasonable speaker to his audience.

Likewise, this appeals to a common union theme of public involvement, and the ideal that education should matter to everyone. The competition of the space race is presented in a positive light, with von Braun saying that “peaceful disagreement is the healthiest thing on earth.” Disagreement is “to be expected” in any and all situations, he says, and that neither education nor space travel is or should be exempt. This supposedly healthy conflict will only further knowledge.\(^\text{107}\)

Later, he addresses the Russian issue directly with views that ring clearly of popular American sentiment and propaganda. Despite the fact that, at that point, the Soviet Union had far surpassed the United States in the Space Race, von Braun insists that their progress had been exclusively limited “to objectives related to the spread of communism at whatever cost to the Russian people.” This calls to the common fears that the Soviets were trying to establish a communist empire of sorts, and reinforced American Cold War rhetoric. As a government employee, it is likely such views were expected of him, and they are in fact repeated regularly. Again, he creates a strawman and tears it down – he states that critics do not know what they are talking about, that educators are essential. While the amount of people who believe educators are unnecessary is, at best, minimal, it is a way of instilling pride in the audience and showing von Braun as a friendly figure. In the end of his speech, he makes the point that even engineering students should learn the humanities, in order to “be a better citizen, thus making a greater contribution to society.” In a country that values STEM subjects so highly, this tells educators of other subjects that even they are important in the great endeavor of space. This example shows

\(^{107}\) Transcript of Missouri State Teacher's Union Speech, November 3, 1960), Series 1, Wernher von Braun papers, U.S. Space and Rocket Center, Huntsville, Alabama, 3.
just how effectively von Braun can manipulate his message, to make him an everyman figure that all demographics can relate to and look up to.

Examples such as the Immortality article make it clear that von Braun took whatever opportunities he possibly could to write articles. Even university newspapers were not off the table for him – if they asked, he would do what he could to fulfill the request despite an often-overwhelming schedule. This publicity made sure that people remembered his name; there was no such thing as bad press for von Braun, especially if he could orchestrate it himself. For someone as prolific as von Braun, one would think that something as lowly as an article for Southern Illinois University’s campus magazine would be a matter of low importance. Yet somehow, in 1962, von Braun made time to share one of his common messages of how space could help bring about world peace – interestingly, lacking the imperialistic tones in a way he more commonly left for foreign audiences. This article, entitled “Peace Through Space,” is exactly as idyllic and poetic as one could generally expect from von Braun. “Ever since 1232 AD, when the Chinese sent “arrows of flying fire” against the Mongols, rocketry has been synonymous with warfare.”

Von Braun goes onto say that the association of rockets with war is unjustified, as throughout most of their history, rockets were surpassed in effectiveness by other contemporary weapons. Instead, rockets were more commonly used for entertainment, for spectacle, as they still are today. He then proceeds to wax poetic about all the progress that has been made, then turns his focus to the unintended consequences. When he discusses the fringe benefits brought about as “the “fallout” of our space projects,” from slimmer television sets, to new medicines, to better hearing aids, he shows the finesse of an expert salesman. Next up in the “peaceful exploration of space” is the advantages brought by satellites, as we will soon be able to predict
weather, broadcast television across oceans, and make international phone calls with ease.

“Developments in new materials and improvements in old ones will improve our living standards and give us a richer life.” By framing even the unexpected side effects of the space program as beneficial to society, he negates naysayers’ arguments about how there is so much we did not expect. “The greatest potential benefit of all,” von Braun says hopefully, “is that of a peaceful world, united in its efforts to explore and benefit from space.” With increased international communication comes increased international understanding, and thus through satellites “international distrust will be dispelled, and with it – war.” This is clearly a highly idyllic dream, but it also serves another purpose – if, in some way, this becomes the reality, von Braun is taking his share of the credit for it. As one of the primary creators of the satellites, von Braun is saying that he is paving the way for world peace – a rather lofty claim.

The first of several works undertaken alongside the person who, after von Braun’s death would become his leading biographer, History of Rocketry and Space Travel is the first of Wernher von Braun’s books – cowritten by Frederick Ordway – to be published to a wide audience. This massive, textbook sized book is fundamentally a survey of space travel, from the Chinese fire rockets of the thirteenth century to the book’s present. Essentially, this 1966 work is a far more detailed version of his later The Rocket’s Red Glare, using photographs to draw the reader in and illustrate the topics covered.\footnote{\textit{History of Rocketry and Space Travel} was reprinted in 1969 to include an additional 30 pages on the Apollo Program and other advances that had occurred after the original publication. Little else was changed.} This book is thorough enough to be useful to academics and remain palatable to the average reader with a mere passing interest in rocketry. Despite its harrowing length, the constant images make this much easier to get through than another book of such length might be. Von Braun successfully paints the history of space as if it
were a story, while still maintaining the integrity of the work as a survey rather than a memoir. Of course, it would take a much longer book to adequately cover one thousand years of rocket history and all its nuances, though von Braun makes a valiant effort. While the length alone makes this a harder read than his subsequent brief history, the balance of details in this work likewise makes it more difficult to get through than the shorter history. In trying to find the middle ground between enough and too many details, the text can come across as awkward. The parts of this history that von Braun believes are most important here are, however, slightly less obvious than in his later work, where a clearly disproportionate amount of the book is spent on von Braun himself. As he was still under NASA’s payroll, and in fact this work was published during the busiest period of von Braun’s career, the more ambiguous nature of this work is understandable. Through this book, von Braun makes himself a simple, unbiased narrator of space history, a reliable expert to a field with a growing amount of interest. This undoubtedly helped his image, and it is notable that he continued to uphold the commonly accepted notions that he would later question in *The Rocket’s Red Glare*, such as whether the Chinese invented gunpowder.109

As an expert on space history, well researched by all accounts, it is likely the bulk of this work was completed by Ordway, though the book itself does not specify. Why, then, tie von Braun to it at all, when Ordway was the history expert? While it is likely von Braun penned the sections directly pertaining to his life and his history, if nothing else, as Ordway’s later biographies show, he was more than capable of handling such an undertaking alone. From these biographical works, we see how unwaveringly loyal to von Braun’s legacy Ordway was. In adding von Braun’s name and assistance to this work, Ordway helped him rehabilitate his

109 Wernher von Braun and Frederick I. Ordway, *History of Rocketry and Space Travel*, New
already whitewashed image through his own expertise. On the other hand, von Braun was the leading face of modern rocketry; by enlisting his assistance on this work, and thus tying a far better-known name to it, this book was able to reach a much wider audience than it otherwise may have. In this work, the V-2 is not ignored, though it is essentially disregarded as being an ineffective weapon despite killing a considerable number of people. Several significant organizations and events are glossed over or ignored, and cause is not given for the sudden rise in interest for space travel.

The next year found Wernher von Braun speaking to an international audience once more. At this point, the Apollo program was well on its way towards placing a man on the moon. In March of 1967, after months of planning, von Braun accepted the Galbert International Astronautical Prize in Paris, France. This speech was originally given in French, and as a result stuck very directly to the given script – ad libbing French was outside of his comfort zone, von Braun joked. In his acceptance speech, von Braun comes across as very gracious, expressing how honored he is, how thankful, even though Galbert was at the time operating outside of generally excepted French scientific society. This award was shared with two French Diamont scientists, whom von Braun congratulates, genuinely seeming to encourage people to study rocketry everywhere. He congratulates Galbert for creating the award out of personal interest rather than expertise and applauds “his foresight that made him recognize earlier than many of our contemporaries the dynamic and revolutionary force of space research.”110 In this statement, von Braun praised both Galbert and himself, placing them above the rest as two of the few people ahead of their time enough to predict the popularity of space travel. In discussing the

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international audience of the award, von Braun believes it “serves as a link between the protagonists of space flight who see in the exploration of space an effort surpassing national border lines and involving our entire planet.” As he himself “surpassed national border lines” with his efforts, it makes sense why von Braun might encourage others to look past such ties, and likewise puts him and his counterparts on a pedestal. These calls for international cooperation appear throughout the rest of his speech, mirroring earlier speeches abroad. Once again, he has portrayed himself and his mission far differently than he would to an American audience, where his words contained the typical Cold War nationalist sentiment that created an “us” and a “them.”

A few months after his Galbert acceptance, von Braun spoke in Dallas, Texas to the Texas Medical Association. Quite different in audience than the previously mentioned speeches, this shows how diverse von Braun’s targeted demographics were. In any given year, he would give monthly – sometimes even weekly – speeches or lectures to whoever may think to request his presence. The speech to the Texas Medical Association ties the future of space travel to medicine and medical progress, and in fact medicine was a strong point of interest for von Braun and his work. Risks and benefits, or even just effects, of outer space on the human body were virtually unknown, primarily only theories and hypotheses based on the limited subject base of astronauts. While this is mentioned, von Braun also notably ties the pasts of the two fields together. This shared history of sorts begins early – while there is evidence that ancient civilizations used medicine, “I also like to believe that he sometimes looked at the shining moon above and wished he could go there,” von Braun mused. Medicine was a reality to a “Neolithic
man,” but space was a dream – bot no longer. The frontier narrative is invoked in his discussion of space exploration, painting it as the next wonderful place for humankind to explore and settle. Invoking such commonly understood narratives is a common tool in creating memory; such easily called upon rhetoric make the subject matter likewise easily recalled.

Unusually, von Braun calls for space travel “in the name of peace for the benefit of all mankind.” Why here, in this context and to this audience, does he say this? There is no apparent reason – no evidence or other sentences suggest such international sentiments were popular with this demographic. However, it seems reasonable to believe that medical doctors, whose profession relies on advances made worldwide, may be more open to sharing information across national borders. The end of this speech uses very colorful and evocative phrasing to paint a picture of how amazing and useful space travel is and will be. Overall, this speech is one of his more expertly crafted ones. Initially, he establishes a present common link between himself and his audience, which he then extends into the past. With the two successfully linked together in the minds of the audience, he can slowly move away from the similarities and shift the focus to the future of rocketry, since it has been established that it must, in some way, be tied with the future of medicine.

A mere ten days later, Wernher von Braun gave a speech much closer to home, to the Alabama Broadcasters Association in Huntsville. Perhaps more than most of his other domestic speeches, this audience is an understandable choice based on von Braun’s personal relationships. Friendships with such prolific media figures as Walter Cronkite meant mass media laid within his interests. However, several elements of this speech ring quite different from many of his
others. Like his speech in Texas, von Braun immediately establishes a tie between the communications industry and the missile and rocket program, as the former has been the most successful in implementing the technological advances of the latter. With radio and television the forerunners of the communication revolution, they have successfully used communications satellites to bring people around the world together. Using these and other global satellites, “mistrust can be dissipated, and understanding and sympathy can increase.” The actual implementation of this is very easy and could be used to expand “the American way of life,” an idea reminiscent of both Cold War era ‘expansion of freedom’ ideals and the earlier Manifest Destiny. 112

While not inherently sinister, this line of thought – that is, the idea that we need global satellites to watch over the rest of the world and expand our ideals – toes a line that many villainized leaders crossed. This technology, as von Braun goes on to suggest, could start a social revolution in Africa. We should use “the world’s most advanced communications system” effectively, as Britain and ancient Rome used their advantages to establish massive empires. These thinly veiled imperialistic tones suddenly cease to discuss how the lunar landing will be one of few “events and achievements that arouse wonder and pride among all men.” As he draws to the end of his speech, he reiterates the ties between communications and rocketry, insisting it is “no coincidence” that the countries with the most communication technology and the most advanced countries are one and the same. The imperialistic framework returns when von Braun discusses how American global satellites could help the UN achieve world peace, or how they could be used for educational television so that “millions of people could be trained

simultaneously.” This speech and imagery evoked bears more resemblance to speeches of Mussolini than to von Braun’s speeches of international equality and cooperation. Such a shocking change calls to mind just what von Braun truly believed, or even intended. Likely, this is just what he intended to do – by presenting so many images of himself, it was never clear just who von Braun was or just what he truly stood for, allowing people to remember him however they pleased.

Another ten days later, von Braun delivered a graduation speech to a local school on Huntsville. Here, the differences between this speech and the previous one are perhaps the most evident. After the customary introduction, von Braun offers vehement praise of education and academia, though he says that the most important aspect of a school is academic freedom – that is, “the freedom to inquire” or, most importantly, “the freedom to be wrong.” A student who fears making mistakes “is receiving training but is not being educated. We must not confuse skills with knowledge.”\textsuperscript{113} The idea that students must be able to forge their own paths and learn for themselves what is right and wrong is in direct contrast with his previous speech declaring the need to share our knowledge and morals with the world. Nationalistic messages are still present, of course (he says “our civilization is the most advanced in history”), though in a much more understandable and patriotic way. Again, it must be noted that the country he consistently refers to as his own is not the one he was born into – and at this point, had spent most of his life in. By including himself in the “us” group in the “us” versus “them” of the Cold War and Space Race, he helped erase his past from public focus.

\textsuperscript{113} Transcript of Graduation Speech, June 5, 1967, Series 1, Wernher von Braun papers, U.S. Space and Rocket Center, Huntsville, Alabama, 2.
The students of the generation to which he spoke were of the utmost importance, regardless of the passing fads he deemed necessary to finding oneself. These youths were on track to solve a full range of “humanitarian and religious questions,” and by doing so were “underwriting a better future for mankind.” Of course, von Braun felt the need to shift the focus to space exploration to close out his speech – though, it must be said, this is why he was asked to speak in the first place. “No area of human activity has escaped” the impact of space exploration, he begins. “The development of manned space travel to the moon and other planets” is the greatest undertaking of humankind, and solutions to all the constraints are being found due to the bright young minds like those before him.114 After all, he concludes, the human aspect of this endeavor is the most important one. These uplifting, optimistic views expressed during this Graduation Speech surely left the audience with an appreciative air. It is likely that, had this audience heard his speech to the Broadcasters Association, they would have been shocked that such a person could encourage such ideas. This master craftsmanship of unique memorial identities as it suited him is what makes von Braun such an elusive figure.

In what appears to be a quick and easy grab for money or popularity, Wernher von Braun’s 1967 book Space Frontier is nothing more than a bound copy of his acclaimed Popular Science articles on the same subject. This follows the limited trend of publishing already-completed works during lulls in activity or in downward spikes in popularity, another example of which is von Braun’s The Mars Project, published in English in scholarly circles around this time. While these articles were certainly hugely popular in their own right, they were also already widely available, and the topics of this weekly column are extensively covered in any number of other articles penned by von Braun. That being said, once again von Braun’s skills at

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putting difficult scientific concepts into layman’s terms are exemplified in these articles, making it clear exactly why he was such an effective spokesperson during his lifetime. Interestingly, one of the main conclusions to be drawn from this book/collection of articles is that much of what is proposed here is still many, many years away. This criticism followed von Braun throughout his career, as he pushed for a lunar landing that others said was still decades away. To see him parrot this sentiment appears to be a product of his employers, who recognized that Mars missions and interstellar space travel could not be accomplished on the same timeline as the lunar missions and wanted von Braun to curve his idealism in the face of the general public. Another likely product of his employers is von Braun’s failure to discuss any related policy issues or debates. He merely suggests that we roll full steam ahead towards his proposed goals of space exploration, with no insight onto how to practically go about such a thing.

In addition to his speeches gaining popularity when delivered, some of von Braun’s speeches were entered into the Congressional Record. These examples were largely used to bolster the arguments for continuing the space program. The first instance of this is the inclusion of a Sacramento, California speech from September of 1967 entitled “No Other Course but to Continue Space Program.” In his speech, von Braun asserts that our motivation to pursue space exploration comes from our progress in missile technology leading up to the 1950s. Besides serving as an underhanded way of giving credit to himself, this more effectively distances the Space Race from the Soviet Union. By ignoring the true Cold War motivations of proving our superiority, von Braun places this into an interesting rhetorical narrative that America chose to pursue space of our own accord, and just happened to be more successful than anyone else. This shift shows a changing propaganda topic, by removing any credit from the rivaling Soviets. In fact, von Braun’s discussion of Sputnik earlier in the speech is not tinged with the disdain one
might imagine. He compares the Apollo program to Charles Lindbergh’s famous New York to Paris transoceanic flight, stating that “the moon is our Paris.” This ties the goal to a commonly known event and ensures ‘reaching the moon in a decade’ is a clear and familiar goal for every person in America – “the fellow next door knows what a man is, where the moon is, and he knows when this decade is out.” The successes of the space program have erased skepticism, but von Braun fears this will instead breed apathy born of smugness. This is dangerous – “earnest pursuit of difficult and worthwhile objectives is necessary to lift an individual or nation from mediocrity to greatness.”

Von Braun insists that we must continue our space exploration, for it is not yet known what answers to our burning questions will be found out there – we may perhaps find the origins of life itself out in the cosmos. The two most important goals of the future of the space program, he supposes, are increases in weather satellite technology and, contingently, a manned space station which could increase the effectiveness of weather satellites and other research, as well as help combat starvation. By including this in the Congressional Record, it not only literally secures von Braun’s name a spot in history, it also uses him as a propaganda tool in an official manner.

Wernher von Braun was exactly who the space program needed to take on the tumultuous 1960s. The trends of actively embracing every available media outlet of his early career continue wholeheartedly throughout this decade. This public image reached a peak during these years, as the Apollo Program dominated the country. Von Braun was able to adeptly tie himself and his legacy to the countless successes of the program, making himself as much at credit for the moon landing as the country itself. During this time, von Braun became so prolific a figure that his workload began to slip, as he spent weekend after weekend travelling for speeches and penned

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dozens of articles for dozens of publications. Marked by the first entry of his work into the congressional record, von Braun officially secured his spot in the history of the space program and the country itself.

V. Now What?: von Braun at the End of His Life

The early 1970s was marked by outrage against the expensive Vietnam War. Antiwar protests shifted the attention away from the glory of the Space Age and to a new era. This war caused a drain on the budget that ultimately resulted in severe budget cuts for NASA and the space program, essentially causing it to fade into oblivion, never to return to the prolificity of the Apollo Program and lunar landing. For Wernher von Braun, this was a personal issue; the beginning of the decade showed his efforts to preserve his work, followed by a transfer to the headquarters of NASA. Here, he fought against impossible odds to convince Congress to continue funding for space exploration where no budget was to be found. The political morass of Washington caused von Braun to retire from the agency he had spent so many decades serving in the early 1970s. Failing health caused him to retreat from the public eye, turning largely to books as a means to preserve his popularity and legacy.

Three years after the groundbreaking, revolutionizing feats of the lunar landings, another of von Braun’s speeches is included in the congressional record. The speech given at the 1972 Goddard Memorial Symposium, at which von Braun appeared as the keynote speaker, is used as context for the Aeronautical and Space Sciences Committee’s impending decision on space program applications in the wake of the Apollo Program. To introduce the speech, Senator Carl Curtis of Nebraska says, “Dr. von Braun has the rare ability to mix practical points with
philosophical issues in a way that leaves his listeners entertained but, more importantly, enlightened.” Von Braun’s speech is then listed, in which he talks about how difficult it is to measure the direct impact of the aerospace industry on the population, and how it is “even harder to measure precisely the intangible gains from space activities in terms of national prestige, spirit, and life concepts,” which he claims are the most important. “The benefits to be derived,” he says, “are largely in the future, whereas the public is more sensitive to the here and now.” An unforeseen consequence of the Apollo missions was that it “arouse[d] a new, more utopian concept of what government can do to improve the quality of life here and now on Earth.” Far from being rewarded for this, NASA instead faced budget cuts. Americans, it seemed, lived much more in the moment, and were not as geared towards long-term plans as increased scientific endeavors would require. This inclusion in the congressional record makes it clear that von Braun is many things – the leading spokesperson for continuing the space program, the leading spokesperson for the space program in general, and the leading expert on both matters.

In his 1976 book The Rocket’s Red Glare, von Braun and co-author/personal friend Frederick Ordway give a brief, concise history of rocketry. The initial chapters of the book, detailing early rocket history, present a rather brief yet sufficient view of the science’s beginnings. Although it has clear Western-centric undertones, the only obvious instance in which this creates conflict with history is in the chapter entitled ‘The Rocket in Asia,’ in which the authors go to great lengths to contest the commonly held consensus that the Chinese invented gunpowder. In fact, the almost out of place insistence that gunpowder – and, more specifically, rockets – emerged from Western innovation goes against a popular line in many of von Braun’s

earlier speeches, which cites thirteenth century Chinese fire arrows as the first use of rockets in history. Many parts of the book cover scientific advances very briefly, often in merely a paragraph, before jumping onto the next, causing some confusion and glossing over details. Nonetheless, the science of rocketry is presented very effectively into laymen’s terms, allowing a complex science to be at least basically and contextually understood by anyone with a basic knowledge of science. When the book reaches the discussion of modern rocketry, the switch between two rocket experts discussing the important milestones and a rocket expert discussing his own work is immediately evident. In the chapter Pioneering Modern Rocketry, the works and astronomical advances of scientists such as Goddard – often regarded as the father of rocketry – and his contemporaries are reduced to a brief, one-page description in order to center the focus on von Braun’s work. Although the successes and progress made possible through von Braun’s work are absolutely of the utmost importance to rocketry, it appears to be nothing more than his own ego that calls for a three-page description of an early experiment, only to conclude with the statement that others had beat them to this innovation.

The final of Wernher von Braun’s literary collaborations with Frederick Ordway was published posthumously. New Worlds: Discoveries from our Solar System was published only in 1979, two years after von Braun’s death, and takes a slightly different approach to space history than his other works. Rather than exploring the history of rocketry as von Braun was so skilled at doing, him and Ordway take readers on a tour of the cosmos. Hints of the circumstances surrounding the writing of this textbook-sized book can be found in the often-clunky text. While von Braun is known for being such a profound storyteller, this book is much harder to read (due as much to the length as to the writing itself, though like his other book of this size, it is filled with pictures). As it was written during the final years of von Braun’s battle with cancer, this
lapse in writing style can be ignored, though it can be seen as a slip in his talent as he fought to remain relevant and maintain public interest in space while also struggling simply to remain alive. The content of this book covers the popular theories of the cosmos of von Braun’s time, exploring the facts we know and what we think we know about the stars, about the sun, about everything beyond our earth. While von Braun covers diligently the new discoveries in the years leading up to the book’s conception, it is clear that his expertise did not necessarily lie in this field. Likewise, whereas his other books are made by and large so that any person can read and understand them, this subject appeared to be harder for von Braun to convey in lay terms. Here is an example of von Braun’s struggle to remain a public figure during his final years, and one of many instances of him placing himself in an expert’s position whereas there were many others better suited to the subject matter at hand. It also marks the last major contribution von Braun made to space history.

The foreword of von Braun’s The Mars Project, written for its wider public release of the book after von Braun’s death, shows the ways in which other figures could adopt his voice in his absence. Written by Thomas O. Paine, former Director of NASA during von Braun’s time in Washington D.C., Paine takes over von Braun’s role of crafting his memory in the absence of von Braun himself. In this section, von Braun is painted as someone ahead of his time, dreaming of interplanetary voyages when no one else was. The calculations presented, detailing the data of what would be required to reach Mars, was completed before anyone had so much as placed a satellite in orbit – and would in fact be a basis for doing so. Paine glosses over von Braun’s work in Germany, portraying him as a heroic patriot aiding his country, ignoring the looming figure of Adolf Hitler. He even gives von Braun the role of the creator of the space age, saying it began “with the flight of von Braun’s first A4 missile.” Somehow, Paine manages to make the Russians
the true ‘bad guy’ of the series of events, rather than von Braun’s native Germany, in a rather Cold War era-esque manner. This narrative is used again in his coverage of the next decades of the Space Race. Overall, Paine’s foreword contains the optimism for continued space exploration – and the declaration that this will lead to world peace within our lifetimes – that so characterized so many of von Braun’s speeches and articles. This hopefulness and clear passion that was present in Paine was present in von Braun, too, and can be seen throughout the rest of the book as von Braun sought to explain the cosmos and the paths to his dreams. Such traits mixed with a clear natural charisma played an unimaginable role in von Braun’s popularity throughout his career.117

The end of von Braun’s life shows a far more muted media presence, as he instead chose to suffer out his illness in relative peace. He continued his work up until the last years of his life, and even in death he remained a monumental figure. When the space program fell in glory, he resisted it as strongly as he was able, but eventually even he had to take a step back. Instead, he focused on preserving the history of rocketry and on presenting the cosmos to the world. Failing health could not stop him from spreading his knowledge as far and wide as he was able, even if during these last years it took a different form.
Conclusion

To ignore the impact Wernher von Braun had on the Space Race is to ignore one of the most triumphant events of American history. The role von Braun played not just in the physical creation of rockets in space, but in gaining public support for these endeavors is immeasurable. Was such a feat as the lunar landing impossible without the aid of German war criminals? This is doubtful, but it does not erase the fact that without the brilliance and skill of the rocket team from Peenemünde, the history of American space flight may be quite different. So, it becomes a balancing game, of how much praise von Braun deserves for his incredible legacy of work and how much condemnation he merits for his actions in Germany. A dynamic figure in every way, von Braun worked his hardest to make the formation of an opinion on his actions as difficult as possible. By presenting himself to the world as a spokesperson for America’s greatness, he was able to mold how he was remembered into the most positive light, acknowledging his past just enough to appear as if he is telling the truth.

Throughout the seemingly endless wealth of works in which von Braun appears, several themes occur. In regard to his past, there is a clear trend of alteration. In works from early on in his time in America, von Braun avoided sensitive subjects a little less, coming across more as someone with a darker past enthusiastically embracing a new future than as someone intending to manipulate facts. As time progressed, though, it became clear that von Braun’s main priority after space travel was himself. While early on his public discussions of the Nazi regime showed some of the sympathies that could be expected after his wartime career, later ones work to distance himself not only from the Nazis but from totalitarianism as a whole. This worked just as well for the message he was working to sell, as public enemy number one in America at the time was the Soviet Union.
A clear theme of using his Nazi past to fit the narrative of the Cold War appears, though this sentiment is found throughout his domestic articles. The calls to unite the country towards one common goal – outright defeating their enemy, the Soviets, in some, simply reaching the stars in others. Von Braun shows clear mastery of how best to shape this narrative for his audience. In many instances, he avoids all mentions of a competition or a rival, instead pushing for space exploration as a means to establish American greatness, American superiority. In others, though, his words do ring clearly of anti-communist propaganda. These reiterations of popular sentiment can be attributed to the government position which von Braun held; while von Braun was the representative for the space efforts to the public, he was also a NASA employee, and he had to do what was best for them as much as what was best for himself. It is true that such a prolific figure was good press for the space program; by appealing to the masses, he could raise public awareness for proposed budget increases, and improve morale for a program with no obvious benefits other than prestige. By using propaganda to do this, von Braun could make himself the voice for the masses and remove the attention away from his own past.

Foreign audiences faced a much different treatment from this Spokesman of the Space Age. Rather than such divisive calls for an American victory, he turned to a narrative of international cooperation and peace. This echoed a more immediately pre-war framework of coming together to rebuild, rather than the more exclusive Cold War rhetoric. Speeches at foreign conferences and when receiving foreign awards preached the inclusivity of space. The sharing of knowledge, which would most directly benefit him, was portrayed as a way to bring about world peace. These goals of him were eventually realized in the form of the International Space Station, in which astronauts from multiple countries can come together to collaborate. The dissonance between the ideas of a united space effort to foster world peace and the necessity of
an American victory show the importance of knowing one’s audience. Von Braun was clearly a master of playing the field; what he truly believed was unclear, though as long as he had the support to continue his work he appeared to be content.

It is this contentment that represents the most overarching theme in von Braun’s efforts to actively mold his image and memory. While never overt about it, never saying that he would follow the space race wherever it led him, von Braun was an opportunist. He served his home country as well as he could, until he had a better option. His ability to play upon each and every audience’s sensibilities and concerns showcases this opportunism. After an overview of his speeches, books, articles, and more, it becomes increasingly likely that the biographers who insisted von Braun was apolitical, were likely right. Von Braun was loyal to his work, to space, and this led him to commit terrible atrocities and lead a country to international glory within one lifetime. Such a charismatic personality was an immeasurable benefit to someone as narrowly driven as von Braun, and he used this effectively to his advantage day after day. This ability to gauge an audience so well led directly to his rise to fame; the country wanted someone who spoke for them, and von Braun found a way to speak for everyone.
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