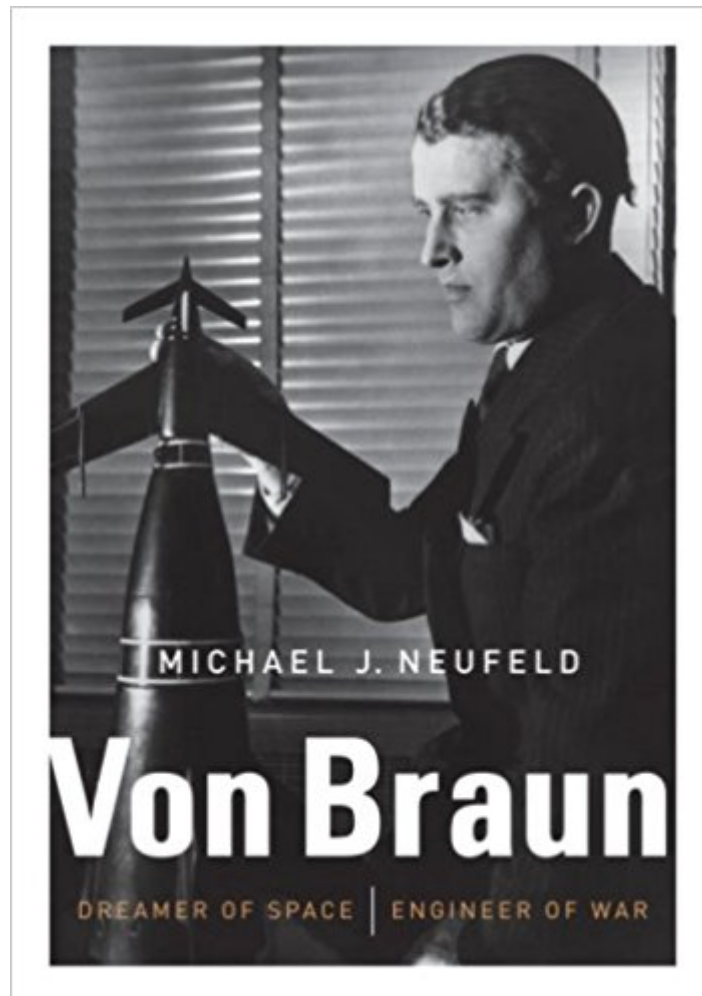




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Von Braun: Dreamer Of Space, Engineer Of War



Synopsis

The first authoritative biography of Wernher von Braun, chief rocket engineer of the Third Reich – creator of the infamous V-2 rocket – who became one of the fathers of the U.S. space program. In this meticulously researched and vividly written life, Michael J. Neufeld gives us a man of profound moral complexities, glorified as a visionary and vilified as a war criminal, a man whose brilliance and charisma were coupled with an enormous and, some would say, blinding ambition. As one of the leading developers of rocket technology for the German army, von Braun yielded to pressure to join the Nazi Party in 1937 and reluctantly became an SS officer in 1940. During the war, he supervised work on the V-2s, which were assembled by starving slave laborers in a secret underground plant and then fired against London and Antwerp. Thousands of prisoners died – a fact he well knew and kept silent about for as long as possible. When the Allies overran Germany, von Braun and his team surrendered to the Americans. The U.S. Army immediately recognized his skills and brought him and his colleagues to America to work on the development of guided missiles, in a covert operation that became known as Project Paperclip. He helped launch the first American satellite in 1958 and headed NASA's launch-vehicle development for the Apollo Moon landing. Handsome and likable, von Braun dedicated himself to selling the American public on interplanetary travel and became a household name in the 1950s, appearing on Disney TV shows and writing for popular magazines. But he never fully escaped his past, and in later years he faced increasing questions as his wartime actions slowly came to light. Based on new sources, Von Braun is a brilliantly nuanced portrait of a man caught between morality and progress, between his dreams of the heavens and the earthbound realities of his life.

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Customer Reviews

Neufeld, chair of the Space History Division at the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum, offers what is likely to be the definitive biography of Wernher von Braun (1912–1977), the man behind both Nazi Germany's V-1 and V-2 rockets and America's postwar rocket program. Spearheading America's first satellite launch in 1958, which brought the U.S. up to par with the Soviet Union in space, von Braun was celebrated on the covers of *Time* and *Life*. Neufeld has a deep understanding of the technical and human challenges von Braun faced in leading the U.S. space program and lucidly explains his role in navigating the personal and public politics, management challenges and engineering problems that had to be solved before landing men on the moon. Neufeld doesn't discount von Braun's past as an SS member and Nazi scientist (which was downplayed by NASA), but concludes nonjudgmentally that von Braun's lifelong obsession with becoming the Columbus of space, not Nazi sympathies, led him to his Faustian bargain to accept resources to build rockets regardless of their source or purpose. A wide range of readers (not only science and space buffs) will find this illuminating and rewarding. 16 pages of photos. (Sept. 26)

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Starred Review A historian of German rocket technology (*The Rocket and the Reich*, 1994), Neufeld enters the populated field of von Braun biographies with, it is safe to say, the most comprehensively researched one. Only von Braun's relatives, it seems, have denied their stories to the author, whose documentary synthesis covers the qualities that vaulted von Braun into technological leadership. Neufeld argues that von Braun's true distinction lay in organizational management. He could spot talent, motivate it with charisma, and persuade national leaders to fund his futuristic visions. That these leaders were initially those of Nazi Germany is the fulcrum of von Braun's life: Neufeld's account and assessment of von Braun's enmeshment in the Nazi system illustrates a progression arriving at party and SS membership, and involvement with forced labor. Letting readers mull the war-criminal question, Neufeld proceeds to the von Braun team's capture and transportation to the U.S. in 1945, von Braun's Christian conversion experience, and his fame in the 1950s and beyond as a space-flight proselytizer. Cautious in tone, Neufeld's judicious portrait of von Braun's outstanding qualities and his moral compromises promises to become a space-history mainstay. Taylor, Gilbert

This biography is extremely well researched, and is surely a staple of the available literature on von Braun. It goes in-depth regarding all of von Braun's exploits, from childhood to Nazi Germany to Apollo and beyond. The author is also objective and non-opinionated when dealing with von Braun's Nazi past. This is an important quality of the book, one that many other authors fail to achieve or else ignore altogether. I was also impressed with the author's notes in the back of the book, which demonstrate how carefully researched this book is. The bibliography is also very handy, and it introduced me to some other books on the topics of Apollo and von Braun's rocket team that I plan to read in the future. I have two complaints: first, the author tends to get opinionated in regards to politics in some places. I'd rather not provide specific examples, but suffice it to say that the author seems to have felt compelled to blame all of America's issues in the 1960s and 70s on certain political groups. There is no place for this in a balanced biography. Second, I felt that this book could have been more readable. At times the text seemed stuffy and long-winded. Otherwise, this is the first biography of von Braun I recommend to anyone.

It is a biography of an exceptional man, astonishingly gifted and hardworking, whole life pursuing his space dream to become reality. He was very active, working as an engineer, manager, novel writer, pilot, also with lot of off-time activities including horse riding, sailing, scuba diving, hunting. Hence the book is quite long, but very well written. The controversial Nazi period, including von Braun SS membership and his involvement in employment of prisoners of death camps, is described in neutral manner. It is focused on facts, giving reader opportunity to make his own opinion. The story is not just about one person, it is also nice description of history of the 20 century. Starting in Germany economically devastated by WWI, fragile democracy of Weimar republic, its failure followed by Nazi dictatorship and WWII. All these events are seen from the point of view of Prussian aristocracy. Subsequent part of the book about the post WWII period US is a bit less readable, obscured by lot of names and acronyms. Then the story accelerates again by the spectacular Apollo project and landing on the Moon. At the end, there is also surprisingly strong message for the 21 century. Should our civilization continue in space exploration and ultimately colonize solar system or just fight for bare survival on overcrowded Earth? My only negative point is about the book typography. Reading the book mainly in the commuter train on the way to work, I would prefer footnotes instead of endnotes. I did not bother with finding endnotes, moreover when endnote counter is reset for each chapter. Also it makes the end section of the book very long, with the list of abbreviations hidden somewhere in the middle.

I grew up during the space race and followed its development closely. Consequently, I thought this book was terrific. Others might find it a little too detailed.

"Von Braun: Dreamer of Space, Engineer of War" was a very interesting and informative book. I have only now discovered how controversial von Braun's life was from these reviews as well as from this book. While this may be sad commentary on my narrow view as an engineer, I always admired von Braun despite knowing that he worked for the wrong side during the war. Before I really get into the fray let me just say that this book appeared scholarly, well written and should be read by admirers and critics of von Braun. I felt this book contained almost too much detail, and often found myself "speed reading" over certain details of his family life but never those concerning his controversial life. I believe this fine book was the result of a fairly unbiased point of view and find myself agreeing with the book's closing remarks. I was also very saddened to read that great efforts were made by his influential friends to convince federal authorities to award his life's work with some grand gesture. It was further saddening to learn that several figures in government circles having the power to influence this decision refused to do so because of his early work in Germany. It is only clear to me now that von Braun was never completely forgiven for developing the V-2, and only permitted to use his talent for our side during the cold war. Perhaps he should have been grateful for that alone, but I believe he wished for much more. When he was finally awarded a great civilian medal for his technical and managerial accomplishments (by President Carter), the man who received this hard won gesture was a fragment of his former self. He was described by friends as a "skelton wrapped in skin" while enduring relentless pain under the equivalent of hospice care. Of course, camp workers were denied anything like hospital care, but I really feel he paid the ultimate price we all must, and with what I believe was a heavy heart. He must have understood full well that he was never forgiven for his early work and probably never would be. He ultimately suffered a painful and protracted death of cancer. As an individual inspired by von Braun's accomplishments I think he made as great an impact on the history of space and rocket research as one person could possibly accomplish. He had a grand vision of man's future in space, and shared that vision with all of us brilliantly. We were made a part of his dream and I believe the country remembers how special those days were as we closed in on the moon. The price he was willing to pay to accomplish his personal goals for that future supported war efforts in two countries and pushed the barriers of technology. That, in part, is the reason the author calls him the Faust of 20th century. He is acknowledged by everyone to have been a compelling public speaker, a talented engineer and an

excellent manager, but I think he was also a very great American.

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