

# BOOKS

## Rocket man

An even-handed biography captures the dangerous glamour of the inventor of the V-2 missile. By Andrew Robinson

**VON BRAUN:**  
**Dreamer of Space,**  
**Engineer of War**  
by Michael J. Neufeld  
Knopf \$35, 587 pages

A week before the official German capitulation in 1945 (though he later claimed it was just after) Hitler's favourite rocket engineer, Wernher von Braun, surrendered to the Americans with a charismatic display of brash self-confidence. He boasted to the Seventh Army's Beachhead News that, given two more years to increase the accuracy and production rate of the V-2 rocket he had invented in 1942, he could have won the war for Germany. He showed no sign of regret for the fate of the Dora concentration camp workers who had manufactured the rocket under appalling conditions. Nor, as Michael J. Neufeld notes in this insightful new biography, did von Braun show any remorse for his loyalty to Nazi Germany.

Von Braun guessed, correctly, that the American army would treat him as an honoured scientist rather than a war criminal. Dispatched along with many fellow engineers to the deserts of New Mexico, he was set to work firing captured V-2 rockets. His dubious wartime record (including reluctant officer status in Himmler's SS) was suppressed by the US authorities for nearly four decades.

In the 1950s, at the zenith of the cold war, von Braun became an American patriot. He was devoutly Christian and strongly anti-Communist. In 1958 he appeared on the cover of Time magazine after he managed the launch of the first US space satellite, Explorer 1.

Moving from army auspices to the newly formed Nasa, he



Wernher von Braun was welcomed by the US in spite of his Nazi past

designed the superbly reliable Saturn V rockets that launched the Apollo missions to the Moon in 1968-72. By the time of his death in 1977, he was, says Neufeld, "the most influential rocket engineer and spaceflight advocate of the 20th century". But he was also "a 20th-century Faust" – one of the models for Stanley Kubrick's mad scientist Dr Strangelove – whose passion for rocketry had been funded by "stoking the fires of hell". Neufeld's subtitle is well-judged.

Neufeld, a senior historian at the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum, did not know von Braun personally but has spent well over a decade studying his subject. He has delved into American and German archives, as his detailed, bilingual sources make clear. He is determined to give sufficient

space to his subject's German years, from 1912 to 1945, and his American career – unlike almost all von Braun's previous biographers, who have emphasised one period or the other. He also aims for even-handedness in a controversial field.

He lets us know that von Braun's widow, children and American relatives refused to be interviewed, while adding that they have declined even "friendly biographers". Von Braun's former German colleagues, he admits, will no longer speak to him following his 1995 book, *The Rocket and the Reich*. Even the US Space and Rocket Centre in Huntsville, Alabama, was reluctant to open its archives to the researchers of an objective scholar.

My own impression of von Braun has been influenced by

Tom Lehrer's satirical song about him from the mid-1960s, with its brilliant lines (performed with a German accent): "Once the rockets are up, who cares where they come down? / That's not my department", says Wernher von Braun." Lehrer depicts von Braun as an amoral careerist willing to sell his talents to anyone with money.

Neufeld's biography, with the advantage of fuller information, shows a far more complex man – both more admirable and more sinister. Von Braun was not in thrall to power or money. He avoided unnecessary contact with the Nazi hierarchy and turned down lucrative corporate offers to stay with Nasa.

Yet he was so bewitched by technology and space travel that he was able to turn an indifferent eye to evil during the Nazi regime – at least until his temporary arrest by the Gestapo in 1944.

As Norman Mailer observed at the launch of Apollo 11: "He has that variety of glamour usually described as fascinating, which is to say, the evocation of his name is attractive and repellent at once."

Neufeld frequently captures this glamour – whether it is von Braun's courage in refusing Himmler's offer to take over V-2 production, or his vanity in allowing Hollywood to depict him as a victim of Nazi persecution. *Von Braun* is Teutonically thorough, accessibly written and always fair-minded. But I suspect it will not be the last biography of a man who remains, like Robert Oppenheimer, too contradictory for a definitive study.

Andrew Robinson is the author of *"Einstein: A Hundred Years of Relativity"* (Palazzo Editions).