

SCOUNDRELS

**WHO
MADE
AMERICA
GREAT**

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Introduction

On March 27, 1945 Ivy Millichamp had just begun to prepare afternoon tea when a German V-2 rocket dropped from the sky and detonated behind her house. It gouged out a crater 40 feet long and 20 feet deep. Sitting in their living room, her husband Eric recalled watching his wife put the teakettle on the stove seconds before the blast obliterated their kitchen. At age 34 Mrs. Millichamp suffered the unfortunate fate of being the last British civilian killed during World War II.

From 1944 through 1945, 3,000 German V-2 rockets spread terror and destruction among the populace of London, England, and Antwerp, Belgium. Travelling at the speed of sound, the V-2 carried a 2,200-pound warhead. Its unreliable guidance system made everyone in its range a potential victim. In late November 1944, a V-2 hit a Woolworth's department store in south London, killing 160 shoppers and injuring 108 others. There was no defense against the rocket, nor any way to alert civilians of its silent supersonic approach. During the final year of the war V-2s decimated large swathes of London, killing and maiming 9,277 men, women, and children. Citizens of Antwerp suffered a similar fate, with 6,236 casualties.

Construction of the deadly rockets took place in secret tunnels located in the Harz Mountains near Nordhausen, Germany. Slave laborers from the nearby Dora-Mittelbau concentration camp provided the workforce. The standard welcoming speech to new prisoners at Dora was: "You came in through that gate, and you'll leave through the chimney." German guards routinely forced half-naked workers to stand at attention in the bitter cold for hours.

Prisoners were beaten, tortured, and used as guinea pigs for medical experiments. Those who resisted were hanged. Twenty thousand prisoners died; the V-2 is the only weapon to kill more people in production than in warfare. The man in charge of the design and production of Hitler's last-gasp "vengeance weapon" was a tall, aristocratic SS officer from Prussia. His name was Wernher von Braun.

At the conclusion of the war, the United States and the Soviet Union engaged in a race to round up German scientists, technicians, and engineers. As a part of Operation Paperclip, von Braun and many of his colleagues were unobtrusively shipped to America. Once settled at White Sands Proving Ground in New Mexico, they took on the critical task of training military, industrial, and university personnel in the intricacies of rocket and guided missile design.

In 1950 von Braun resettled in Huntsville, Alabama. There his genius for rocketry and his lifelong commitment to space travel paved the way for an extraordinary career. A series of articles on space travel he wrote for *Collier's* magazine in 1952 put him in the national spotlight. Soon afterwards his enthusiastic presentations about rockets and space stations on the television show *Disneyland* enthralled a generation of postwar baby boomers. By the late 1950s the charismatic rocket engineer had become the media darling of the American space program. Stanley Kubrick featured von Braun's concept of a circular orbital space station in the film *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

In 1958 a Jupiter C rocket designed by von Braun and his team at the Development Operations Division of the U.S Army Ballistic Missile Agency in Huntsville launched the first American satellite, Explorer I, into orbit. A jubilant nation showered von Braun with accolades. Two years later he was elevated to the position of director of the newly formed Marshall Space Flight Center in Huntsville. On July 16, 1969, a Saturn V rocket designed by Marshall engineers

launched Apollo 11 on an eight-day flight to the moon. With the successful moon landing von Braun achieved his most cherished dream.

Many among his contemporaries considered von Braun the father of the American space program. In 1977 the Carter administration awarded the Medal of Science to the dying von Braun. About von Braun, his biographer Michael J. Neufeld said, "The sum total of his accomplishments makes von Braun the most influential rocket engineer and spaceflight advocate of the twentieth century."

Regarding his wartime activities von Braun said, "I have very deep and sincere regret for the victims of the V-2 rockets, but there were victims on both sides.... A war is a war, and when my country is at war, my duty is to help win that war." His aloof comments regarding the V-2 program inspired musical satirist Tom Lehrer to pen the following lyric:

Don't say he's hypocritical,
Say rather that he's apolitical.
"Once the rockets are up, who cares where they come down?
That's not my department," says Wernher von Braun.

Collective hero worship is a longstanding American motif. What is often lost in the reverence for historical figures are the flaws that marked them as real people before they were anointed icons. Historian Michal Jan Rozbicki observed that underlying the adulation is the assumption that the "hero is essentially great, while his shortcomings are only scratches in the marble." Historical perspective is shaped not so much by deeds as by point of view. It is a convenience of American history to overlook the fact that the leaders of the rebellion were British subjects who, if caught, would have been hanged as traitors.

What can be said about our heroes can also be said about our villains. One person's traitor is another's hero. There is no one objective history, but many versions woven from different angles. When I was a schoolboy Christopher Columbus and George Custer were American icons;

today their legacies are stained with the blood of indigenous peoples. Napoleon Bonaparte, who knew something about historical events, is reputed to have asked, "What is history but a fable agreed upon?" We like our heroes to wear white hats and our villains to wear black. Benedict Arnold is America's most infamous traitor. Yet the treachery of Charles Lee, Washington's second-in-command, earned him barely a footnote in American history. Unlike Lee, who was an arrogant underachiever, Arnold was one of the Revolution's most capable military leaders. In the cauldron of battle his courage and ingenuity were unparalleled. His accomplishments magnified his treachery.

Scoundrels Who Made America Great takes a fresh view on heroism. In this nonfiction narrative, I use a central event in the life of each "scoundrel" to dramatize how infamous labels can obscure heroic deeds. Each of the five Americans described in this historical narration demonstrated courage and conviction during desperate times—Anne Hutchinson at her trials for heresy, Benedict Arnold at the Battle of Valcour Island, John Brown at his execution, Iva Toguri in Tokyo during World War II, and four-time felon Clarence Gideon who changed the Constitution from his prison cell. I believe anyone who has an interest in American history will welcome a deeper understanding of how personal character and momentous events can converge to produce a scoundrel and a hero in one and the same person.