Although von Braun and his band of engineering brothers, having done their due diligence for Hitler with the V2, may still have been *mondsüchtig* in 1945, hope abounded among their new masters that with some tweaking such a gadget might be able to reach new enemies, whether cold or hot, with unimaginable speed. The prospect of killing your enemy quickly at a distance has always been exhilarating.

Hence for the Americans the V2 was neither too soon nor too late, but right on schedule, vaulting them to the forefront of weapons technology. Glimmering on the developmental horizon was the prospect of an eventual mating with the “rapid rupture” device being crafted at Los Alamos.

Von Braun and his reassembled team spent five years mostly twiddling their technological thumbs at Fort Bliss, Texas. Coinciding with the outbreak of the Korean war von Braun became head of the rocket development team for the army in Huntsville Alabama. When the insufferable Russians induced *Sputnikschock* around the world in 1957, the US suffered a scientific panic attack and Ike’s administration came under intense pressure to launch a satellite in response. The navy got their chance first, but their Vanguard rocket became known as *Kaputnik* after exploding on the launch pad.

Then von Braun’s Juno I rocket (a descendent of the V2) lifted the Explorer I satellite into orbit on Jan 31st 1958. This was the beginning of his mega celebrity. Huntsville gave him a parade. Time put him on its cover, calling him the Missile Man. A movie was made about him in Munich, starring Curd Jürgens, sponsored by the US Army.

In the sixties space history accelerated. The Russians put the first man into space. Kennedy set the goal of going to the moon. Von Braun, now at NASA, proceeded with the development of his gigantic Saturn V, a multi stage great-great grand child of the V2, capable of powering the requisite payload into orbit. He was back at the center of the action, closing in on his dream. In July of 1969, they once again counted down from ten to zero and von Braun was yet again a great hero.

He died in 1977, and for the last time his timing proved to be propitious, accustomed as he was to giving history big shoves rather than having Clio shove back. His colleague Arthur Rudolph was to learn that timing was just as important with exits as with entrances. There were some loose ends to be tidied up, according to diligent lawyers in the Office of Special Investigations. Rudolph, a naturalized citizen for nearly thirty years, left America under legal duress in 1984, his welcome having expired.

Perhaps the same type of treatment would have been accorded to von Braun if he had lived longer. We will never know, although such retroactively retributive justice will likely be popular as long as there are wars. And was he a Great Man? Assuming those fascinatingly futile debates about history will continue ad infinitum, the current verdict on Wernher von Braun can only be that he was a rocket man.

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In the early thirties, the German army, ever eager for cutting edge weaponry, not to mention creative ways of circumventing the restrictions of the Versailles Treaty, was on the lookout for promising developments in the pioneering field of rocketry. Among other groups, they were keeping tabs on the slightly outré Verein für Raumschifffahrt in Berlin. Ultimately, the achievements of this eclectic assemblage of tinkerers and dreamers left them singularly unimpressed, but one member of the group, apparently the youngest, stood out for his talent, energy and remarkable knowledge.

Thus was Wernher von Braun brought into the orbit of the military when he was only twenty. Along with getting his doctorate on their dime, von Braun and the team he came to lead by the age of twenty-five spent the next decade developing and improving a series of rockets which would culminate in the Aggregat 4 (rebaptized by Goebbels as the Vergeltungswaffen Zwei or V2).

In a few fleeting years (a mere five according to Michael Neufeld, von Braun’s leading biographer) von Braun and his team developed or radically improved the methodologies and technologies that laid the foundation of the space age. Propulsion, aerodynamics, supersonic wind tunnels, guidance and control, analog/digital computing, precision measurement — the terms just roll off the tongue (probably a bit easier than in German: Antriebstechnologie, Aerodynamik, Überschallwindkanal, Steuerung und Lenkung, Rechentechnologie, Messtechnologie).