

EIR Science & Technology

Medaris: the man who put America into space

At the Huntsville, Alabama celebrations of the Apollo 11 mission to put a man on the Moon, Marsha Freeman interviewed this pioneer of the space program.

On January 31, 1958 the United States orbited its first satellite, Explorer 1, three months after the Soviet Union launched Sputnik. On May 5, 1961 astronaut Alan Shepard became the first American to venture into space. And on July 20, 1969, Neil Armstrong took the first “giant leap” for mankind on the surface of the Moon.

All three of these “firsts” in the U.S. space program were made possible by the rockets developed by a team of scientists and engineers working in Huntsville, Alabama, under the leadership of Wernher von Braun. The German rocket team which came to this country at the end of the Second World War began its work on new missiles and rockets at the Army’s Redstone Arsenal in Huntsville, in 1950. During the crucial years of 1956-60, when the space age began, they worked under the guidance of Gen. John Bruce Medaris.

The von Braun team

From the beginning of their joint effort, Medaris recognized that he had a natural leader and visionary in von Braun, who could, along with his team, bring America into the leadership position in space technology and operations. At a time when the military blocs of East and West were forming in Europe, and intercontinental ballistic missiles were being deployed to deliver nuclear arsenals, Medaris and his rocket team built the Jupiter and Pershing intermediate-range nuclear missiles for Western Europe, to keep the Soviets at bay.

The von Braun team designed, built, and tested the Nike series of rockets, which were proven capable of “shooting a bullet with a bullet” to protect the United States and its allies from nuclear attack—the first anti-ballistic missile defense.

And Medaris considered at that time that active *defense*—and not retaliation, or what later became known as “assured destruction,”—would be crucial in the nuclear age.

Medaris believed that the combined resources of the Army, Air Force, and Navy could provide this nation with a forward-looking, first-rate space program—both military and civilian. However, in 1960, after the creation of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, the von Braun team was transferred to what later became the Marshall Space Flight Center, and the Army lost the talent that a space program would require.

After fighting tenaciously and winning permission to allow the von Braun group put America into space with the Explorer 1 launch, Medaris could not win the fight to keep the Army in the forefront of space exploration. In 1960, John B. Medaris retired from military service after 37 years. In that year he wrote his autobiography *Countdown for Decision*, where he detailed the work he did for four crucial years as leader of the Army Ballistic Missile Agency, and then as director of the Army Ordnance Command at the Redstone Arsenal, between 1956 and 1960.

In the interview below, Medaris mentions the “Horizon” program that was put together by the rocket team in late 1958. But even after his team launched the first successful satellite and finally put the United States into space in the early part of that year, the space work the Army had undertaken was challenged by the creation of a new civilian space agency.

It was first proposed that the German rocket team be split up, so some members could remain in the Army program,



The German rocket team at a reunion at the Alabama Space and Rocket Center in 1985. The Saturn V lunar rocket is behind them. In the front, Dr. Eberhard Rees and Konrad Dannenberg are holding a photo of Wernher von Braun.

while the others went to NASA. Both Medaris and von Braun recognized, however, that of primary importance was keeping the team intact, and two years later entire group was transferred to the new civilian agency, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration.

In order keep the momentum they had already created, Medaris and von Braun decided to put together their proposal for what should be done in space. Even before the team became part of NASA, von Braun was a member of the scientific groups which were designing the U.S. plans for space exploration.

In his autobiography, Medaris explains how this study was the result of putting a handful of the best men from the team "in a closed room to come up with a 12- or 15-year national space program. . . . By mid-December we had completed the job, but we didn't know what to do with the document. We had no space mission as such.

"The total cost for a 14-year program was estimated at approximately \$21 billion, or an average of \$1.5 billion per year." Some of the resources of the military were in the middle of being transferred to NASA when the report was completed; nonetheless, the plans were put on the shelf.

The broad outline of von Braun's 1958 space program looked like this:

1960: Place 2,000 pounds in orbit. Complete a soft, un-

manned landing on the Moon.

1961: Place a 5,000-pound satellite into orbit.

1962: Circumnavigate the Moon with *adequate* photographic coverage. Launch a two-man satellite.

1963: Place 20,000 pounds into Earth orbit. Send a manned expedition to circumnavigate the Moon and return to Earth.

1965: Operate a 20-man permanent space station.

1967: Launch a three-man lunar expedition.

1971: Launch a 50-man lunar expedition and permanent outpost on the Moon.

The Kennedy program

Although this plan was never implemented by the Army nor carried out under General Medaris, it became the foundation of recommendations that the fledgling NASA was developing, which would be later adopted by President John Kennedy. Wernher von Braun became the space program's most eloquent spokesman on the need for space exploration.

John Bruce Medaris was born on May 12, 1902. During his long military career, he served in both Argentina and Panama. After his retirement from the military, he acted as a consultant for industry. He later entered the clergy, and as Father Bruce Medaris, he is currently an arch-deacon emeritus in the Anglican Catholic Church and lives in North Carolina.