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Junkers, Nazis, and Rockets: Wayne Biddle's *Dark Side of the Moon*

Pulitzer Prize winning journalist Wayne Biddle chose to reference a famous Pink Floyd album title in his book about Wernher von Braun. He won the prestigious prize based upon his reporting on the Star Wars program, another serious subject with a name influenced by popular culture. Using one of the best selling albums of all time to draw a potential customer's eye in a crowded bookstore is not a bad tactic. However, he chose the wrong title. Biddle no doubt meant to convey the sinister notion of a former Nazi responsible for the V2 rocket transforming himself into an American celebrity and leading the U.S. space program when he titled his book *Dark Side of the Moon: Wernher Von Braun, the Third Reich, and the Space Race*. A more appropriate Pink Floyd album to borrow the title from would have been *Wish You Were Here*, since von Braun plays a shockingly insignificant role throughout much of this book that is supposed to focus on him. In fact for the first five chapters of the book he is a relatively minor character. The question that Biddle asks is a fascinating one; How does a former Nazi who helps to design the weapon which terrorized England become America's favorite rocket scientist not to mention beloved Disney spokesperson? Unfortunately, Biddle's question is much more intriguing than the answers he supplies.

Biddle begins to make his case against von Braun quite convincingly in the preface to his book. He starts off lamenting the idea that scientists are still often given a free pass by historians concerning the results of their work; “Yet the convention that scientists as a group exist in a stratum detached from and untainted by common sociopolitical forces, and are thus somehow above reproach, has proved remarkably durable, albeit weakened by the past half-century of disasters clearly traceable to their activity.”¹ He wants to hold the scientists who worked for the Third Reich accountable for the havoc that their efforts wreaked upon innocent people. Biddle also desires to clear up the record that he maintains has been grievously altered over the decades following the end of World War II. He writes, “As the archives opened up and the cold war restrictions on traveling in eastern Germany relaxed, a few journalists and historians performed the investigate toil of straightening out a record that had been warped by public relations men and pervasive sycophancy.”² This preface lays out what he hopes to achieve in his book with remarkable clarity and leaves the reader ready for an unflinching look at the forces responsible for the revisionist tale of Wehrner von Braun. Subsequently he writes five chapters where his main character almost disappears, the reader gets to learn about the privileges of the Prussian Junker class and it seems as though the train of his argument has gone completely off the rails. Biddle loses all the momentum gained in his promising preface and the reader is left to wonder why the author has taken such a detour.

Biddle does not entirely abandon the subject of the enigmatic von Braun, but he is prominently featured only in quick asides during much of the first half of the book. He pauses

¹ Biddle, Wayne. *Dark Side of the Moon: Wernher Von Braun, the Third Reich, and the Space Race*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2009. p. x

² Ibid, p. ix

occasionally from his rather tedious and simplified explanation of how Germany came into such dire straits as to allow the Nazis to take over. These lapses serve to remind the reader why the book seemed intriguing in the first place. However, these reminders also underscore how far from the point Biddle has wandered. When he explains, “Anti-Communist hysteria in the United States after World War II helped to whitewash the past of men who could have been prosecuted under the Nuremberg Code if they had not been enlisted in the technological race against the Soviet Union”³ the reader is encouraged that perhaps he is ready to engage in this aspect of the tale. But Biddle leaves this assertion to stand alone, with no follow up to expose how or why this occurred. His failure to follow through with these points is frustrating and quite difficult to understand. The preceding accusation is inflammatory and the moral questions it raises are fascinating, yet Biddle chooses to let it stand on its own.

Fortunately the middle section of this book, dealing with the proof that von Braun was not simply a scientist locked away in an ivory tower with no knowledge of the machinations of the Third Reich, is an improvement. For the reader unfamiliar with this part of the celebrated rocketeer’s career Biddle goes to great lengths to document this reality. He also takes on the notion that the German rocket scientists were primarily concerned with space travel; “The men who lived to tell about it after 1945... insisted self-defensively that space travel was their ultimate dream. But there was never a day when their work was not focused on building weapons for the Hitler regime...”⁴ The most damning evidence by far is accomplished with his revelation of the details of the Dora prison camp that supplied workers for the V2 project and von Braun’s interaction with these prisoners. Biddle gives examples of first person accounts of survivors of

³ Ibid, p. 38

⁴ Ibid, p. 85-86

this camp, which was a sub camp of the larger and more infamous Nordhausen camp. The reader is left with the distinct impression that regardless of von Braun's politics or thoughts about the conflict that had overtaken Europe, he was a willing participant in exploiting these prisoners as a means to achieve his ends. Biddle concludes by simply stating; "The underlying truth, finally, is that an atrocity called Mittelbau-Dora existed and that von Braun had extensive first-hand experience of it as an overlord."⁵

The final part of his book deals with the transformation of von Braun from Nazi hero to Walt Disney celebrity. It may be the most intriguing part of the tale, but is ultimately the part which leaves the reader feeling the most cheated. Biddle resurrects his concerns from earlier in the book over the way von Braun is treated by history. He puzzles over the dichotomy of this man; "...it is also mystifying how von Braun could have been a serial hero in two societies that had recently fought each other to the death. Scientists and engineers, in a kind of theological construct, evidently lay outside the sphere to which moral judgments applied."⁶ Here the reader hopes that Biddle is going to tackle some of the burning questions that are raised by the almost unprecedented transformation von Braun has made from enemy to hero: How could a revered Nazi scientist be welcomed into the homes of millions of Americans via their televisions and touted as a champion for the U.S.? Who was responsible for this being allowed to happen? Were the American people lied to? Why did the British not protest more vociferously to the creator of the V2 being feted in the U.S.? Did the end result justify the means? The reader is left without satisfying answers to any of these inquiries. Biddle does attempt to answer the question of why von Braun's American persona was such a winning one; he explains "It would prove to be a

⁵ Ibid, p. 126

⁶ Ibid, p. 128

remarkably impervious construct of convivial innocence for the rest of his life, supported by the ignorance, wishful thinking, and indifference of his audience...”⁷ That seems to lay much of the blame on the American public but he does little to convince the reader that this is the case.

It is difficult to fault Biddle for his research or his choice of subjects. All told he has sixty-seven pages of notes in addition to an extensive bibliography and index. However the reader is left with the distinct impression that Biddle would have been much better served to have made the final third of his book into a series of newspaper articles. The first part of the story he tells is tiresome and fails to add much to the understanding of von Braun’s incredible tale. The later parts of the book detail his problem with von Braun’s efforts to reshape his own narrative; “...his attempts later in life to universalize his role as an armorer, to compare himself to the Wright brothers or the Manhattan Project scientists, so long after the singular crimes of the Third Reich had become widely known, stand as the starkest measure of the quality of his moral thinking.”⁸ These criticisms seem justified but Biddle fails time and again to follow through with these critiques. The overall impression left by *Dark Side of the Moon* is one of a missed opportunity. Biddle has chosen a fascinating subject and provides some illumination on a unique character of the twentieth century. His failure to take full advantage of these choices leaves the reader wanting more. That may be a great tactic for a journalist who is attempting to keep a readership interested in a series of articles to be published over the course of weeks, but as a nonfiction text it simply does not get off the launch pad.

⁷ Ibid, p. 130

⁸ Ibid, p. 97