Induction of Dr. Wernher von Braun
Alabama Men's Hall of Fame
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By
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I am very pleased to be able to present to you today for induction into the Alabama Men's Hall of Fame a friend and colleague of many years, Dr. Wernher von Braun. Dr. von Braun was not a native of Alabama, but he adopted this state as his home in 1950 and worked here tirelessly for the next 20 years in one of the most remarkably productive careers in modern history. Dr. von Braun had the good fortune of being born into an accomplished family who encouraged and nurtured his extraordinary intellect and natural curiosity. In his early teens, he was reading technical literature far beyond his age and began then formulating his dreams of space travel, dreams that he would spend the remainder of his life making come true. By age 22, he had earned the Ph.D. degree in physics and was already involved in serious rocketry. He would later receive more than 20 honorary doctorates.

Dr. von Braun's accomplishments have been treated in at least 10 biographical books and hundreds of articles. So, in the short time today, we can refer only to a few highlights and a few intangibles of this uncommon man.

At Huntsville, he led his small core group of former Germans and many more Americans in the development of America's earliest rockets and space hardware: ~~for example~~ ~~(1)~~ the Redstone missile, this country's first large ballistic missile; ~~(2)~~ the Jupiter intermediate range ballistic missile; ~~(3)~~ the Pershing missile; ~~(4)~~ the Jupiter C rocket that, on Jan. 31, 1958, launched Explorer I, the free world's first artificial satellite; ~~(5)~~ the modified Redstone rocket that in May 1961, launched Alan Shepard, our first man in space; and ~~(6)~~ the Juno rocket that launched several satellites and space probes.

On July 1, 1960, von Braun became the founding director of the MSFC at Huntsville, the largest of the family of field centers making up the NASA. In this capacity he led the development of the Saturn family of launch vehicles for the sole purpose of space research. The largest of these, the Saturn V, launched our astronauts to the moon. When Neil Armstrong landed on the moon in 1969, the world learned that the hardware that placed him there had its genesis in Alabama.

Dr. von Braun's next major development was Skylab, the world's first space station. Then in 1970, the administrator of NASA transferred him from Huntsville to Washington to plan the future of NASA beyond the lunar program. Not as a surprise to his Huntsville colleagues, he proposed a space station and a manned Mars mission, both of which he had

described in considerable detail in a series of articles published in Collier's magazine in the early 1950's.

Wernher Von Braun was a multi-faceted man who cannot be described adequately in a few sentences. He was an engineer, a scientist, a scholar, a visionary leader, and a persuasive communicator and motivator. As an engineer/scientist, he had the faculty of converting into reality what some might refer to as wild dreams. He was intimately involved not only in developing the means of getting into space but he also had an intense interest in the science of exploration and in the application of new knowledge for the common good.

He constantly developed his own scholarship and also expected the advancement of those around him. Sensing a shortage of technically trained people for the future, he used his substantial influence and persuasive powers in the establishment of the University of Alabama in Huntsville and in boosting the research capabilities in the other Alabama universities. He was a tireless crusader for education because he saw knowledge as the nation's most vital resource. He was instrumental in persuading the state to provide initial funding for the Space and Rocket Center in Huntsville where, as he visualized, people could see and touch the hardware that made interplanetary space exploration possible. The museum today is second only to the Smithsonian Air & Space Museum in Washington, D. C. as a showcase of the space program. Dr. von Braun also had another dream that has materialized as a great Alabama institution. As he observed children going to various summer camps, baseball, basketball, etc., he raised the question, why not a Space Camp where children could learn about space exploration and be stimulated to a more serious study of mathematics and science as he had been in his early teen years. Today, the space camp program in Huntsville testifies to the merit of his idea. Since its beginning in 1982, approximately 270,000 boys and girls have attended that camp and most of them went home committed to being better students of math and science. From the Huntsville camp have grown similar camps in Florida, California, Japan, Canada, and Belgium and additional camps are under development in Italy, Germany and Turkey under license from the original Alabama unit.

Perhaps von Braun's greatest distinctive was his imagination and his unfaltering belief in the importance of space exploration long before it became reality. From the beginning, he could visualize the end as fact and had the incredible capacity to convince those on whom he depended that they could reduce to practice any ideas that he might have.

Wernher was a great communicator, which may be attributed in part to the ease with which he understood complex concepts. Often, this talent was brought to bear in helping his own specialists better understand each other. He was at ease talking to the presidents of our nation and equally at

ease discussing the exploration of space with the average citizen on the street. He had the ability of a great teacher to discuss very complicated engineering and scientific matters in terms that the layman could understand. It was this ability and his evangelistic fervor for the cause that enabled him to persuade the government and the people of the U. S. that our nation needed a program of space exploration. Truly, he was the voice of space exploration in his time.

To most of our citizens, the importance of space exploration is not the dramatic events that gain the headlines but the spin-offs of technology that have been applied to the advantage of virtually every citizen of our state and nation and that have enhanced our lives in ways that we may fail to associate with the source. Although we see results now, it may be centuries before the full benefits of the pioneering efforts of Wernher von Braun can be fully assessed.

To the people of Alabama, there is still another practical aspect of von Braun's achievements. He, more than any other person, is responsible for evolving Huntsville from a community of agriculture and textiles to a world-class center of technology and for directing the attention of the world to Alabama. In 1997 alone, NASA contributed more than one billion dollars directly into the economy of Alabama.

Within the intense activity of his profession, he still made time for his wife, Maria, and their three children, Iris, Margrit, & Peter. He also enjoyed hobbies such as flying airplanes and gliders, sailing, scuba diving, hunting and fishing.

It has been my privilege to have known some of the great men and women of the 20th century, but I have never met, nor read about, anyone with the combination of intellectual capacity, imagination, curiosity, appetite for work, intensity of commitment, communication skills, persuasive charm and personality as Wernher von Braun. Truly, he was a giant among men, a genius whose legacy as the prime mover of America as a space-faring nation will live forever. I shall always remember him not only as the Father of America's space program and as a boss and mentor, but also as a warm individual who was always solicitous of the welfare of his colleagues and others around him. I am confident that I speak for his family, for the more than 60 close friends and former colleagues in the room today, and for thousands of others across the nation and the world in expressing gratitude to Howard Sanderford who nominated him and to the board who selected Dr. Wernher von Braun for induction into the Alabama Men's Hall of Fame. He is certainly worthy of the honor. In the centuries ahead as often as the beginnings of the space age are discussed, the inevitable mention of his name will continue to affirm what you do here today. Thank you.

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