



## Breaking the Chains of Gravity: The Story of Spaceflight Before NASA

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NASA's history is a familiar story, one that typically peaks with Neil Armstrong taking his small step on the Moon in 1969. But America's space agency - and in particular its Apollo lunar-landing program - wasn't created in a vacuum. It was assembled from pre-existing parts, drawing together some of the best minds the non-Soviet world had to offer. In the 1930s, rockets were all the rage in Germany, the focus both of scientists hoping to fly into space and of the Wehrmacht, seeking weapons with which to circumvent the restrictions of the Treaty of Versailles. These two strands came together in Wernher von Braun, an engineer who designed the rockets that became the devastating V-2. As the war came to its chaotic conclusion, von Braun orchestrated a daring escape from the ruins of Nazi Germany, and was taken to America where he began developing missiles for the US Army. Ten years later his Redstone rocket was the only one capable of launching a satellite into orbit. Just what that satellite would be was under the remit of the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics, the leading body in aeronautical research in the United States. While working out how to get a nuclear warhead through the atmosphere, NACA pioneered a round-bottomed capsule that could also keep men safe when returning from space. Meanwhile, the US Air Force was looking ahead to a time when men would fly in space; pilots were riding to the fringes of space in balloons to see how humans handled radiation at high altitude, while test pilots like Neil Armstrong flew cutting-edge, rocket-powered aircraft in the thin upper atmosphere. With a narrative featuring a number of key historical figures, *Breaking the Chains of Gravity* tells the story of America's nascent space program, its scientific advances, its personalities and the rivalries it caused between the various arms of the United States military, right up to the launch of Sputnik in 1957. At this point getting a man in space became a national imperative, leading to the creation by Dwight D. Eisenhower of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration.

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