

What We Learned from the Von Braun Case Study

The Von Braun case is extremely difficult to evaluate because of all its ethical components and the issues of national security/national defense. When we meet Friday we will try to summarize what we learned from the study. Some suggested items are listed below. Note that these items are not specific judgments of Von Braun or U.S. actions, but rather are larger, more general conclusions.

- 1) An engineer's work can have a very significant impact on society.
- 2) It is unethical for an engineer to develop a product (or technology) not caring about how it will be used or about its impact on society. An engineer cannot divorce himself or herself from the societal impact of his or her work. An engineer also has a responsibility not to work for the support of immoral or evil causes.
- 3) It is unethical for an engineer to exploit unfair labor conditions to develop a product or technology.
- 4) Society and history will often credit an engineer for his or her technical accomplishments without holding the engineer responsible for his or her behavior. Such "hero-making" is wrong.
- 5) Governments can behave unethically. This does not excuse unethical behavior on the part of the engineer.
- 6) Ethical mistakes can compound. You can start with a small error in judgement which will later precipitate a larger error in judgement, etc. The way to avoid the "slippery slope" is to make proper ethical judgements in the first place.