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# From the Perspective of Thomas Edison: His Views on Science, Technology, War, Human Rights and Philosophy

I am Thomas Edison. You probably know me best for developing the phonograph and electric light bulb, but I innovated and invented much more. I held 1,093 U.S. patents, and am credited with creating the first industrial research laboratory<sup>1</sup>.

## Science and Technology

With the kind of reputation I have, you should expect me to be a huge proponent of the advancement of science and technology. I was homeschooled by my mother, who was one of the great inspirations in my life. She inspired me to work hard, if only not to disappoint her, and she is where much of my motivation early in life came from.

When I was 19, in 1866, I became a telegraph operator, working for Western Union on the news wire. I asked for the night shift, so I could have extra time during the slow news hours to read and experiment. I might have experimented a little too much, though, since it cost me the job a year after I took it. I spilled sulfuric acid one night, and it ran through the floor – to my boss' desk underneath, and was fired the next morning<sup>2</sup>. Inspired by my work as a telegrapher, I worked on several inventions, like a stock ticker, but my first patent came on June 1, 1869, for an electric vote recorder. Another telegrapher bought a \$100 interest in it, and brought it to Washington, D.C. to show to a Congressional committee. The chairman was unimpressed, not liking the improved speed the recorder gave to counting votes. The slow method of voting allowed filibusters and motivating others to change their votes<sup>3</sup>. Many more patents came throughout my lifetime, always inspiring me to revise them and advance my different inventions.

I moved to New York City where I improved my telegraph inventions. I was fairly successful after working at selling them to the telegraph companies, and my big break came when I sold a stock ticker for \$40,000. With the profits I made, I started a laboratory in Newark, New Jersey, and after a few years moved to Menlo Park, developing the first industrial research lab<sup>4</sup>. I created the first phonograph, the first of hundreds of new inventions and innovations here. One of them, possibly my most famous, was the incandescent electric light bulb. Light bulbs had already been invented, or at least proposed, but it was me who made it practical for general use. Others burned out quickly or were too expensive<sup>5</sup>.

My other large contribution to popular culture was the “kinetograph,” or movie camera. I built a “kinetoscope,” a simple machine that enabled people to watch moving pictures through a small hole. Within a few years, kinetoscopes sold well in Europe, helping me to fund my new laboratory in West Orange, New Jersey. I continued inventing, helping the United States during World War I, and becoming the fourth most prolific inventor in history.

Much of my success in the business world came from being able to create mass-production systems, much like my friend Henry Ford did.

Human Rights and Self Determination

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I patented much of my work to protect it from others who wanted to profit off of it. I am a strong believer in the system of patents, and an extension of that, capitalism. If someone has an idea, they should be able to protect it and profit from it.

Critics of mine like to point to an incident involving my technicians copying and distributing a French film and profiting off of its showings in America. In 1902, my workers acquired a copy of filmmaker Georges Méliès' new work, *A Trip to the Moon*. They allegedly bribed a theater technician in order to get it, but I have no knowledge of money exchanging hands. I made copies and held showings of it in the United States. Méliès did not receive compensation, as he did not protect his film here in the U.S., or invest in the copying or distribution of it. Reports state that he was planning on refunding the movie's high cost with showings here, but there was not much interest when he did bring it over<sup>6</sup>. He became effectively bankrupt. Whether or not it was my fault, indirectly or not, I do not know.

## **Politics and Government**

### **War and Revolution**

War is only acceptable when it is necessary for the betterment of humankind – which is why I helped the United States when it entered World War One. I agreed to only help with defensive weapons, following a path of nonviolence. The Secretary of the Navy turned to me and made me the president of the new Naval Consulting Board. I brought on many fellow scientists to help work towards a counter-measure to the German submarines, and together we developed various methods for detecting submarines by sound, improved torpedoes, and underwater lights<sup>7</sup>. My laboratory also worked on finding substitutes for goods that were imported from Germany, like chemicals and dyes.

### **Philosophy**

I have been categorized as a “freethinker,” and an atheist by some, thanks to comments I made on religion and God that made their way to the *New York Times*. I said that “nature is what we know. We do not know the the gods of religions... Nature made us, ... not the gods of the religions.<sup>8</sup>” By this I did not mean to denounce the existence of a god – what some call God I call Nature. It is observable that we are nothing more than clusters of cells, so I rely on scientific fact to base my opinion on. Because of that, I believed in no afterlife or the concept of us humans having what some call a soul. Regarding afterlife, when asked about it, I answered that it does not matter, since no one knows.

In regards to religion, I did have another problem, one that directly affected my work and the public's perception of it. The World's Columbian Exposition took place in Chicago I 1893. Millions of people visited, intrigued and amazed by new technology and wanting to listen to presenters' speeches on many different subjects. However, the fair might not have been open as much as I, and many others, would have liked. The managers of the fair debated keeping the fair open on Sundays. Puritan blue laws stated that no businesses were to be open on Sunday, but for hard-working Americans who only had Sunday off, they would then not be able to visit. If the fair was to remain open on the extra day, it would open a world art, education, and appreciation. I was so upset about the fair not staying open that I signed a petition, subtitled “Religious Toleration is Christian Civilization,” arguing for the opening on Sundays. Many of my

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laboratory

workers also signed their names<sup>9</sup>. Even though the petition may have put me in a negative light to some, it was important for me to express my views that as many people as possible should be able to come to the fair, and in turn, witness the inventions and innovations of myself and others.

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