



Aggravated Edison

One of the nice things about working in a government lab is that there is usually a great amount of history associated with the labs. The older the lab, the better. I've had the real pleasure of working at the Army Labs at Redstone Arsenal (Alabama), the Army Night Vision Lab (Virginia), the Army Research Lab (Maryland), and most recently the Naval Research Lab (District of Columbia). One of the more interesting and ironic histories is related to Thomas Edison.

There is a bust of Thomas Edison at the entrance of the Naval Research Lab (NRL) and he looks really angry, or more appropriately, aggravated (which, judging from the Smithsonian light-bulb exhibit, was his most common demeanor). Edison was responsible for the creation of NRL as a result of an interview he did with the *New York Times Magazine* in 1915, where he urged the creation of a warfare laboratory. After reading the article, the secretary of the navy, Josephus Daniels, requested Edison's support as an advisor to the navy on science and technology. Congress allocated \$1.5 million to build the facility, and construction began in 1920. Edison cited the need for advanced technology to ensure the United States would maintain a capable military force and he suggested that the laboratory be located near his laboratory in Menlo Park. A congressional committee approved the establishment of NRL with the direction that the laboratory be located within sight of the U.S. Capitol on the Potomac River in Washington, D.C. Edison was aggravated; he never stepped foot on the NRL grounds, where it still

stands today. According to many NRL employees, that is why the bust of Edison looks away from the laboratory.

In an even more ironic twist, the term "Edisonian" is used at NRL in an unexpected way. The first time I heard this term was during proposal reviews at NRL. When a senior scientist reviews a proposal at NRL and states that a research proposal is "Edisonian," the proposal becomes dead on arrival (DOA). What this means is that the proposal has too many trials or experimental combinations without much thought behind the concepts (i.e., it is too experimental without theoretical treatment). This is obviously a reference to the huge number of light bulbs that Edison developed on the path to one that worked reasonably well without burning out (a brute force approach).

I don't think I would like the use of "Driggersonian" as a term to kill a research proposal (it might mean a total lack of commitment)! It reminds me of a friend who used to say that he can't be a complete zero because he can be used as a bad example. If Edison were still around, I am sure he would be aggravated about the term "Edisonian" too. Either way, it is certainly interesting how Edison influenced and continues to influence NRL.

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