

WINNING ESSAY 2

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Every American schoolchild learns the name Thomas Edison. On the other hand, far fewer learn George Westinghouse, even though it was Westinghouse, working out of Pittsburgh, who won the argument that decided how the modern world would be powered. His story deserves a place in our national memory, not because he was a genius, though he was, but because his life shows the greatness America produces when real talent meets a country willing to reward it. His combination of mechanical brilliance with a sense of obligation to the fellow citizens around him flourished in a country of opportunity such as that prevalent in the United States of America.

Westinghouse arrived in Pittsburgh following the Civil War, a young veteran who had served in both the Union Army and Navy. He carried no Ivy League pedigree and no inherited fortune. What he did have was a restless mechanical mind and a willingness to bet everything on his own judgment. At just twenty-two, he patented the railway air brake, a device that let an engineer stop an entire train at once rather than relying on brakemen scrambling between cars. The invention not only saved countless lives, but turned railroads from a dangerous form of transportation into the dependable network that carried and continues to carry a growing nation's people and goods. Such an invention also made him a man with the capital to think bigger.

And thinking bigger is exactly what he did. In the 1880s, when a major dispute broke out over the future of electricity, Westinghouse decided to throw himself into the center of it. While Edison had staked his reputation on direct current, a source of energy offering limited range, he was opposed by Westinghouse, who believed alternating current, a source of energy offering a greater range and power, was the answer. Ultimately, the conclusion of the controversy would be one to determine whether electricity stayed a luxury confined to a few wealthy city blocks or became something available to nearly every home in the country.

Over time, the fight escalated. Edison ran a public effort to frighten Americans away from the technology, arranging disturbing demonstrations meant to paint alternating current as deadly. Westinghouse answered not with theatrics but with results. He recognized the brilliance of an eccentric immigrant inventor named Nikola Tesla, bought his patents, and gave him the freedom to perfect the alternating-current motor. Where Edison offered fear, Westinghouse offered proof, and he let the better system speak for itself.

The verdict came in 1893, when Westinghouse won the contract to illuminate the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. Before an audience of millions, he switched on a hundred thousand lamps at once, and the fair blazed with a light no city had ever seen. Two years later his company harnessed Niagara Falls, sending its power all the way to Buffalo and proving that the force of a river could run the

machinery of an entire economy. Nearly every outlet in America today traces its lineage to a decision made in Pittsburgh by a man who trusted the evidence over the noise.

Yet the wattage is not what makes Westinghouse worth remembering. It is the character behind it. He treated his workers with a decency rare for his era, granting them a half-day off on Saturdays, building housing and pension plans, and sharing the rewards of the enterprise with the people who built it. When the panic of 1907 stripped him of control of the company he had founded, he did not retreat into bitterness. He kept inventing until the end of his life, holding over three hundred patents. Ultimately, his life reveals what America is capable of at its best. Here was a nation that let a self-taught veteran with no advantages rise on the strength of his ideas alone, then rewarded him for backing an immigrant genius whom nearly everyone else had written off. The country asked no permission of any ministry or court before a private citizen remade the daily life of the entire world. The lightbulb over a farmhouse in Kansas and the current that today powers a data center racing to keep America ahead in the race for technological supremacy both owe a debt to Westinghouse's stubborn confidence in a better system.

While we tend to celebrate the loudest inventors, truthfully, it was people like Westinghouse, a determined Pennsylvanian, who got it right. He built things that lasted while treating people fairly, expanding what ordinary Americans could expect from their lives. In an age when many wonder whether the country's best days are behind it, his story reminds us that renewal has always been our national habit. America has produced individuals like him before, and if it stays true to the conditions that made him possible, it will produce them again.