

Electrocuting Dogs

Nobody asked but ...

“If the facts are against you, argue the law. If the law is against you, argue the facts. If the law and the facts are against you, pound the table and yell like hell,” wrote Carl Sandburg. Although this is specific advice for lawyers, it can be general advice for us all. Unfortunately, the less beneficial aspects of this advice are often explored.

I am in the middle of a good book right now. The novel is *The Last Days of Night* by Graham Moore. It is about the competition between George Westinghouse and Thomas Edison, with the involvement of Nicola Tesla, for the electrification of America. I am fascinated by this kind of stuff, as I come from a line of engineers, started college as an electrical engineering student, and have stayed in college, learning and teaching, as a software engineer for the rest of my life, so far. As a voluntarist, I am even more fascinated by the human dynamic of the open market which resulted in the current (no pun intended) worldwide dependence on the infrastructure of electricity.

The time period in question, the mid-19th century, was an early beneficiary of the scientific method, propounded by giants like Newton and DesCartes. But many of the people involved were not Newton or DesCartes. Like the first attempts at illumination, the era often generated more heat than light. Charlatanism had also been handed down by phrenologists and alchemists. Getting something for nothing proved to be the same siren song for humans as it always had. Wishful thinking, magical thinking, and confirmation bias abounded.

Insincere spokespersons advocated making the architectural choice between AC or DC by making theatrical presentations involving first shocking then electrocuting dogs and horses. Eventually the stakes were raised to Edison’s film about the electrocution of an elephant, and further a doctored film of human electrocution (where the state intervened in the argument). None of these shows were dispositive of careful scientific principle, but the presenters made sure that lots of reporters were there.

How many humans and other animals have died since, based on the choice? One would hope, when decisions with such a long tail are made, it is done with less show biz but more careful consideration of principle.

— Kilgore Forelle