

LETTER FROM JOSEPHUS DANIELS TO THOMAS ALVA EDISON, JULY 7, 1915, INVITING HIM TO HEAD  
A NEW DEPARTMENT OF INVENTION AND DEVELOPMENT WITHIN THE U.S. NAVY

*The passages highlighted in yellow are from the May 31 draft in the Josephus Daniels Papers, Library of Congress, and were probably written by Edison's chief engineer, Miller Reese Hutchison. The passages highlighted in blue are from an undated draft in the Daniels Papers and were probably written by Louis Howe, private secretary to Assistant Secretary of the Navy Franklin D. Roosevelt. The passages without highlighting were added by Daniels to the final version of the letter. Italicized text indicates additions and revisions by Daniels to the two drafts. Passages in brackets were either canceled out by Daniels in the drafts (these appear as canceled text) or omitted in the final version.*

*Transcriptions of the May 31 draft and the undated draft follow this transcription of the final version.*

THE SECRETARY OF THE NAVY.  
WASHINGTON.

Personal and  
Confidential.

July 7, 1915

Hon. Thomas A. Edison,  
East Orange, N.J.

Dear Mr. Edison:

I have been intending for some time to write you expressing my admiration at the splendid and patriotic attitude you have taken, as reported in the public press, in refusing to devote your great inventive genius to warlike subjects except at the call of your own country. Such an attitude, in these all too commercial times, is one that should be an inspiration to our young men and a lesson in the preeminent right of one's own country to the best that its citizens have that will be of tremendous benefit to us all. I have deferred writing you, however, because, at the same time, I wanted to take up with you another matter to which I have given a great deal of thought—a matter in which I think your ideas and mine coincide, if an interview with you recently published in the New York Times was correct. There is a very great service that you can render the Navy and the country at large and which I am encouraged to believe, from a paragraph in Mr. Marshall's interview [with you as published in the New York Times], you will consent to undertake as it seems to be in line with your own [ideas] *thoughts*.

One of the imperative needs of the Navy, in my judgment, is [~~proper~~] machinery and facilities for utilizing the natural inventive genius of Americans to meet the new conditions of

warfare as shown abroad, and it is my intention, *if a practical way can be worked out as I think it can be*, to establish, at the earliest moment, a [Bureau of Invention and Development] *department of invention and development*, to which all ideas and suggestions, either from the service or from civilian inventors, can be referred for determination as to whether they contain practical suggestions for us to take up and perfect. We, of course, receive many suggestions, but our only way of handling them at present is to leave them to various bureaus already overcrowded with routine work, and it is [~~practically impossible to pay serious~~] *not always possible to give the necessary attention to [any proposition that is] propositions that are not so definitely worked out as to make them immediately available for the service. Ideas which contain the germ of improvement cannot always be given the attention they deserve, as there is at present no adequately equipped department to which to send them for the careful study required. In addition, our naval officers, particularly those at sea, are in a position to note where improvements are needed and to [even] devise ways in which these improvements can be made. They have, however, neither the time nor the special training nor, in many cases, the natural inventive turn of mind needed to put these ideas into definite shape. Were there a place where they could be sent to be worked out and perfected, I am sure we would get many noteworthy improvements from this source alone. We have, of course, in the Navy Department energetic and wideawake bureaus, headed by experts in their particular lines of work who [of course] devote all the time they possibly can to a study of this problem. They have made important contributions to the improvements in the implements of naval warfare and are doing all that is possible with their other large duties. There are, unfortunately, no officers now detailed who can take time from the mass of work which they are called upon to do in order to devote it fully to studying new suggestions and inventions. [revision of "There is, unfortunately, very little time to spare, however, from the mass of work they are called upon to do in order to keep the Navy that we already have efficient and always ready, nor have we any"] The Department is also unprovided with the best facilities for work of pure experimentation and investigation, with the exception of our testing station at Annapolis, which is, as yet, a [comparatively] small affair. Most*

of all, *as I have said*, there is no particular place or particular body of men, relieved of other work, [~~and~~] charged solely with the duty of either devising new things themselves or perfecting the crude ideas that are submitted to the Department by *our* naturally inventive people.

I have in mind a general plan of organizing such a department which is still very hazy as to details but which, in a general way, meets, so far as the Navy is concerned, with your [~~idea for~~] *ideas of* such a department for the Government in general. I want to use such facilities for experimental and investigation work as we have, under the direction of men particularly selected for ability shown in this direction, to whom would be referred all suggestions [~~for~~] *of* new devices sent in to the Department and who would work out such ideas to a practical point. Such a department will, of course, have to be eventually supported by Congress, with sufficient appropriations made for its proper development, although I feel that we can make a start with the means at hand. To get this support, Congress must be made to feel that the idea is supported by the people, and I feel that our chances of getting the public interested and back of this project will be enormously increased if we can have, at the start, some man whose inventive genius is recognized by the whole world to assist us in consultation from time to time on matters of sufficient importance to bring to his attention. You are recognized by all of us as the one man *above all others* who can turn dreams into realities and who has at his command, in addition to [~~your~~] *his* own wonderful mind, the finest facilities in the world for such work.

What I want to ask is if you would be willing, as a service to your country, to act as an adviser to this board, to take such things as seem to you *to be* of value, but which we are not, at present, equipped to investigate, and to use your own magnificent facilities in such investigation *if you feel it worth while*. For our part, we will endeavor not to bother you with trivial matters as we will probably have sufficient facilities to handle *such* small [~~things that~~] *matters as they* come up. This is a great deal to ask and I, unfortunately, have nothing but the thanks of the Navy and, I think, of the country at large, [~~and a~~] *together with the* feeling of service to your country that you will have, to offer you by way of recompense; yet, so clearly have you shown your patriotism and

your unselfish loyalty to your country's interests, that I feel justified in making this request.

We are confronted with a new and terrible engine of warfare in the submarine, to consider only one of the big things which I have in mind, and I feel sure *that*, with the practical knowledge of the officers of the Navy, with a [Bureau] *Department* composed of the keenest and most inventive minds that we can gather together, and with your own wonderful brain to aid us, the United States will be able, as in the past, to meet this new danger with new devices that will assure peace to our country by their effectiveness.

If you feel that you would be willing to do this, I would like, a little later, when my plans are somewhat more matured, to consult *with* you as to the details of the organization [I propose] *proposed* so that I can make it as effective as possible for the purpose intended.

With you, it might be well to associate a few men prominent in special lines of inventive research, and I would like also to consult with you as to who these men should be. *It is, of course, your aid that I rely [most on and without which] upon most and if you are not able, for any reason, to do this, I will frankly* hesitate to undertake the matter at all. Should you feel like accepting the task, however, I know the relief which the country would feel in these trying times at the announcement that you are aiding us in this all important matter.

If you could let me know as early as you may how you feel about this, I would appreciate it, as everything waits upon your answer, and I think we cannot be too expeditious if we are going to take this matter up at all.

Sincerely yours,

Josephus Daniels

DRAFT, MAY 31, 1915, OF THE LETTER FROM JOSEPHUS DANIELS TO THOMAS ALVA EDISON

*This draft was probably composed by Edison's chief engineer, Miller Reese Hutchison, on a phonograph cylinder and transcribed by personnel in the Navy Department. The highlighted passages appear in the final version signed by Daniels and sent to Edison on July 7, 1915. Revisions and additions by Daniels are noted in italics with the original text in brackets. Discrepancies between the two transcriptions, one beginning on Navy Department letterhead and the other on plain paper, are noted in italicized brackets.*

Personal [&] and Confidential

May 31, 1915

*Hon. Thomas A. Edison,  
East Orange, N.J.*

[My] dear Mr. Edison:

There is a very great service that you can render the Navy and the country at large which I am encouraged to believe, from a paragraph in Mr. Marshall's interview with you as published in the New York Times, you will consent to undertake as it seems to be in line with your own [ideas] *thoughts*. One of the imperative needs of the Navy, in my judgment, is proper machinery and facilities for utilizing the natural inventive genius of Americans to meet the new conditions of warfare as shown abroad, and it is my intention, *if a practical way can be worked out as I think it can be*, to establish, at the earliest moment a [Bureau of Invention and Development] *department of invention and development*] to which all ideas and suggestions either from the service or from civilian inventors can be referred for determination as to whether they contain practical suggestions for us to take up and perfect. We, of course, receive many suggestions, but our only way of handling them at present is to leave them to various bureaus already over-crowded with routine work and it is [practically impossible to pay serious] *not always possible to give the necessary attention to [any proposition that is] propositions that are not so definitely worked out as to make [it] them immediately available for the service*. Ideas which contain the germ of improvement cannot *always* be given the attention they deserve, as there is at present no adequately equipped department to which to send them for the careful study required. In addition, our naval officers, particularly those at sea, are in a position to note where improvements are needed and to [even] devise ways in which these improvements can be made. They have, however, neither the time nor

the special training nor, in many cases, the natural inventive turn of mind needed to put these ideas into definite shape. Were there a place where they could be sent to be worked out and perfected, I am sure we would get many noteworthy improvements from this source *alone*.

I propose to put at the head of this bureau men who have proven themselves especially fitted for the work and who understand the needs of the service thoroughly from practical experience. It is also my intention to put our Annapolis Experiment Station under the control of this department for the purpose of working out the problems presented so far as possible. Unfortunately, we have no funds for the creation of a bureau of experimentation and development, which will eventually be needed; nor have we any means of paying for the expert advice required from time to time. The need of such a department, however, is urgent, and while I hope that Congress will aid us in the matter, I do not want to wait until then to begin.

You are recognized by all of us as the one man *above all others* who can turn dreams into realities and who has at his command, in addition to [your] *his* own wonderful mind, the finest facilities in the world for such work. What I want to ask is if you would be willing as a service to your country to act as an adviser to this board, to take such things as seem to you *to be* of value, but which we are not at present, equipped to investigate, and to use your own magnificent facilities in such investigation *if you feel it worth while*. For our part, we will endeavor not to bother you with trivial matters as we will probably have sufficient facilities to handle *such* small [things that come up] *matters as they come up*. This is a great deal to ask and I, unfortunately, have nothing but the thanks of the Navy and, I think, of the country at large, [and a] *together with the* feeling of service to your country that you will have, to offer you, by way of recompense. Yet, so clearly have you shown your patriotism and your unselfish loyalty to your country's interests, that I feel justified in making [*asking*] *in the plain paper draft*] this request. We are confronted with a new and terrible engine of warfare in the submarine, to consider only one of the big things which I have in mind, and I feel sure that, with the practical knowledge of the officers of the Navy [*at your disposal*] *follows in the letterhead draft*], with a [Bureau] *Department* [*Bureau*] *is mistranscribed as "view" in the letterhead*

*draft*] composed of the keenest and most inventive minds that we can gather together [*"at your disposal" follows in the letterhead draft*], and with your own wonderful brain to aid us, the United States will be able as in the past to meet this new danger with new devices [*"a new device" in the letterhead draft*] that will assure peace to our country by their [*"its" in the letterhead draft*] effectiveness. I would like, if you are willing to aid us, to make the announcement of my purpose as soon as practicable, and I am going to ask some of our great manufacturers, who have already established experimental bureaus, if they will assist us in this work. It is, of course, your aid that I rely [most on and without which] upon most and if you are not able, for any reason, to do this, I will frankly hesitate to undertake the matter at all. Should you feel like accepting the task, however, I know the relief which the country would feel in these trying times at the announcement that you are aiding us in this all important matter. The main question whether or not you feel like undertaking this work being determined, I would like very much a little later to consult with you as to the best organization of the Bureau I have in mind.

[Very] sincerely yours, [*"Yours very sincerely," in the letterhead draft*]

Thomas A. Edison, Esq.,  
Orange,  
New Jersey.

DRAFT, UNDATED, OF THE LETTER FROM JOSEPHUS DANIELS TO THOMAS ALVA EDISON

*This draft was probably composed by Louis Howe, private secretary to Assistant Secretary of the Navy Franklin D. Roosevelt. The highlighted passages appear in the final version signed by Daniels and sent to Edison on July 7, 1915. Revisions and additions by Daniels are noted in italics with the original text in brackets.*

I have been intending for some time to write you expressing my admiration at the splend and patriotic attitude you have taken, as reported in the public press, in refusing to devote your great inventive genius to warlike subjects except at the call of your own country. Such an attitude in these all too commercial times is one that should be an inspiration to our young men and a lesson in the [pre-eminent] *preeminent* right of one's own country to the best that its citizens have that will be of tremendous benefit to us all. I have deferred writing you, however, because at the same time I wanted to take up with you another matter to which I have given a great deal of thought -- a matter in which I think your ideas and mine coincide, if an interview with you recently published in the New York Times was correct.

I feel that we are faced with new conditions, in naval warfare particularly, and must meet them by devising new things for the protection of our country against [*word blotted out by Daniels*] *novel implements of warfare* which have [arisen] *been developed*. We have, of course in the Navy Department energetic and wideawake bureaus, headed by experts in their particular lines of work who[, of course,] devote all the time they possibly can to a study of this problem. *They have made important contributions to the improvements in the implements of naval warfare and are doing all that is possible with their other large duties.* [There is, unfortunately, very little time to spare, however, from the mass of work they are called upon to do in order to keep the Navy that we already have efficient and always ready,] *There are, unfortunately, no officers now detailed who can take time from the mass of work which they are called upon to do in order to devote it fully to studying new suggestions and inventions.* [nor have we any] *The Department is also unprovided with the best facilities for work of pure experimentation and investigation, with the exception of our testing station at Annapolis, which is, as yet, a [comparatively] small affair. Most of all, as I have said,*

there is no particular place or particular body of men relieved of other work [and] charged solely with the duty of either devising new things themselves or perfecting the crude ideas that are submitted to the Department by *our* naturally inventive people.

I have in mind a general plan of organizing such a department which is still very hazy as to details but which, in a general way, meets, so far as the Navy is concerned, [with your idea for] *your ideas of* such a department for the Government in general. I want to use such facilities for experimental and investigation work as we have under the direction of men particularly selected for ability shown in this direction, to whom would be referred all suggestions [for] *of* new devices sent in to the Department and who would work out such ideas to a practical point. I feel, however, that such a project will not be successful unless, at the start at least, we can find a few men whose inventive genius and whose ability to create dreams into realities is recognized by the whole world [and] who will, from a love of their country, assist [us] *such a body* in consultation from time to time on matters of sufficient importance to bring to their attention. Frankly, I doubt if I would feel like undertaking this project unless you would be willing to allow us to place before you, [from time to time] *as occasion arises*, such things as we find incapable of handling ourselves. We would, of course, not bother you with little things or trivial matters, but if I could feel that we would have your wonderful brain to help us on the big problems, I think I would feel like going ahead with the project. Of course, there are no appropriations for this sort of work and I am obliged to call upon your sense of patriotism without being able to offer any other reward for the trouble to you this would involve.

If you feel that you would be willing to do this, I would like, a little later when my plans are somewhat more matured, to consult *with* you as to the details of the organization [I propose] *proposed* so that I can make it as effective as possible for the purpose intended.

My present thought, put briefly, is to create [a bureau or] *a* department, or board, or body of men of some kind to whom [all] [*"important"* inserted and then crossed out] suggestions from naval officers or from outsiders for the improvement of the Navy in a material way shall be

referred and who shall be given such facilities as we have or can secure for development through experiment and manufacture and who shall be at all times in close touch with those officers of the Navy who understand, from the practical standpoint, what can and cannot be used at sea, and what I am asking of you is to consent to the use of your name as the principal adviser of this board, together with three or four specialists in different lines of work, to whom we can refer big ideas and to whom we can go for help in solving big problems. I do not, of course, ask this for myself, for the Administration or for the Navy. To expect you to agree to this would be presumptuous *[sic]* but to me it seems as if I had the right to ask it for the whole country. As we live in critical times, we must rely upon our native inventive genius to keep our shores secure.

[Very] sincerely yours,