



CHARLES EDISON (August 3, 1890–July 31, 1969), New Jersey's forty-second governor, was the elder son of the inventor Thomas A. Edison by his second wife, Mina Miller. His maternal grandfather was Lewis Miller of Akron, Ohio, an inventor, industrialist, and philanthropist, and a cofounder of the first Chautauqua Assembly. Charles Edison grew up in the sheltered confines of Llewellyn Park in West Orange, and he attended the Dearborn-Morgan School in Orange, the Carteret Academy in West Orange, and the Hotchkiss School in Connecticut. He matriculated at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology because, as he said later, "Father wanted me to be able to read a blueprint." After three years, although his grades were satisfactory, he left MIT, and on the advice of his father he took a job as a fifteen-dollar-a-week helper at the Boston Electric Light Company to gain general administrative training. One year later he went to work for Thomas A. Edison, Inc.

After his return from Massachusetts, Edison became a familiar figure in the growing bohemian community of Greenwich Village. He became interested in folk dancing and folk music, wrote poetry, published a literary magazine called *Bruno's Weekly*, and helped finance a theater. He remained interested in the arts throughout his life and in 1967 published a volume of his poems, *Flotsam and Jetsam*. His artistic inclinations, however, were secondary to his involvement in Thomas A. Edison, Inc. His father had put him through a strenuous apprenticeship to school him for eventual leadership of the company. Charles exhibited nearly as much flair for management and capacity for hard work as his father, but none of the inventive genius. In 1926, he officially succeeded his aging father as president of the firm and

immediately began to revamp its structure, improve its financial position—his success enabled the company to weather the depression—and modify the paternalistic labor policies his father had instituted.

Edison first served in government during World War I, assisting his father, who was president of the Naval Consulting Board, an agency responsible for developing new naval weapons and manufacturing war materials. He also met and became a friend of Franklin D. Roosevelt, then assistant secretary of the navy. In March 1918 he married Carolyn Hawkins of Cambridge, Massachusetts. They had no children.

Although he voted for Woodrow Wilson in 1912 and 1916, Edison remained a Republican until the 1930s, when he became a strong advocate of the New Deal and the only Democrat in the Edison family. "I believe in the new experiments going on," he stated in response to fellow businessmen's criticisms. "It takes courage to try new things and it takes courage to stop them if they are not successful." His support of the Roosevelt administration and his reputation as an extremely able executive drew him into government work during the 1930s. Between 1933 and 1936 he was vice-chairman of the New Jersey State Recovery Board, state director of the National Emergency Council, compliance director for the National Recovery Administration, and a member of the Regional Labor Board and the National Industrial Recovery Board. He was also a consultant during the drafting of the Federal Housing Act, and he served as regional director of the Federal Housing Administration for New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Delaware; some have credited him with the original idea that led to the FHA.

Edison fulfilled one of his ambitions on November 17, 1936, when President Roosevelt nominated him for the post of assistant secretary of the navy following the death of Henry Latrobe Roosevelt. He was selected because he had a record as

an effective industrialist and government administrator and because he agreed with Roosevelt that the nation should build a navy second to none. Edison assumed his new position on January 18, 1937. His tenure was noteworthy in at least two respects. First, Claude A. Swanson, the secretary of the navy, was in poor health, and Edison was, in fact if not in name, the actual secretary of the navy for the next three years. Second, the president and Congress desired to increase the size of the American navy, and Edison's responsibility was to see that the ships were built on time and in conformity with the most recent advances in naval design and technology. He also supervised the naval neutrality patrols in the Atlantic Ocean. One of his major decisions prevented the sale of a group of obsolescent destroyers for junk. These vessels later made up a substantial part of the ships turned over to Britain in the "destroyer deal."

After Swanson died in July 1939, Edison became acting secretary of the navy, and he was appointed secretary on December 30, 1939. While in the department he was an innovator. Against the advice of the admirals, he insisted on developing high-pressure steam systems for propulsion, which resulted in higher speeds and greater efficiency for all naval vessels. He was also impressed by the threat the dive-bomber posed to capital ships, and he encouraged the building of small torpedo boats, torpedo bombers, and fast destroyers. His major naval accomplishment was to supervise the most ambitious naval building program in American history during a critical period.

Edison was secretary of the navy for only half a year. On March 30, 1940, he surprised his friends and acquaintances by announcing his candidacy for governor of New Jersey, and on June 24 he resigned from the cabinet. This was Edison's first campaign for elective office. It was undertaken with Roosevelt's encouragement. Roosevelt faced a reelection campaign later in the year, and he believed that with Edison running for governor he could carry New Jersey. In addition, in view of

America's deteriorating relations with Germany and Japan, Roosevelt wanted to broaden his administration by including a few Republicans in the cabinet. Edison's successor as secretary of the navy was Frank Knox, a Republican newspaper publisher from Chicago. The immediate reaction of New Jersey Republicans to Edison's announcement was negative; they argued that the naval post was next to the presidency in importance and that the threat of war made it Edison's patriotic duty to remain in Washington.

The Republican candidate for governor, state Senator Robert C. Hendrickson of Gloucester County, called Edison a tool of Frank Hague, the notorious mayor of Jersey City and boss of Hudson County. Edison could not have been nominated without Hague's support, but during the campaign he projected an independent image, emphasizing his experience in government and business, which would enable him to bring modern, efficient, and economical management to the operations of the New Jersey government. Edison went out of his way to separate himself from Hague. He attacked the recent burning of the poll books in Hudson County as well as Hague's political use of the courts. In his first campaign speech, delivered in August at Sea Girt, Edison declared in Hague's presence his independence of all bosses. "If you elect me," he told the voters, "you will have elected a governor who has made no promises to any man." Edison's stance did not disturb Hague, who assumed that it was mere campaign rhetoric. Edison won the election by nearly 64,000 votes, but he carried only seven of the state's twenty-one counties, losing even his home county of Essex. Without the 108,000-vote plurality Hague had piled up for him in Hudson County, Edison would have lost.

Edison's term in office was not particularly successful. Effective administration was almost impossible for several reasons. The state constitution was outmoded and furthermore the governor, lacking politi-

cal skill, failed to establish good relations with the state's political leaders. His partial deafness further impaired his leadership. In addition, the opposing party solidly controlled the legislature; in 1942, for example, the Republicans had majorities of seventeen to four in the senate and forty-four to sixteen in the assembly. Finally, Edison kept his word about resisting Hague, and thereby made an enemy of the state's most powerful political figure.

The struggle with Hague brought Edison national attention. Before becoming governor Edison had published a song entitled "Don't Ask Nothin' of Me." This could have served as the theme song of his administration, at least as far as Frank Hague was concerned. From the beginning Edison showed that he had meant what he said at Sea Girt. In one of his first official acts, he ripped out the direct phone line connecting the governor's office with Hague's in the Jersey City city hall. The irrevocable break came on January 21, 1941, less than two weeks after the inauguration. Edison nominated Frederic R. Colie of Millburn to the New Jersey Supreme Court, the second highest court in the state. Colie, a Republican, had led the opposition to the 1939 appointment of Hague's son, Frank, Jr., to the state's highest court, the Court of Errors and Appeals.

Edison then attempted to rid the highway department of its pro-Hague head. It took the state senate a full year to vote on Edison's nominee, and the governor won confirmation only after instituting an investigation of the activities of the department, which was a rich source of patronage for the state's political chieftains. The feud with Hague broke into the open over taxation of railroad property. During the depression the bankrupt railroads had failed to pay \$34 million in taxes. With the return of prosperity Hague argued that the railroads should pay the taxes, with interest. Edison instead worked out a compromise whereby the railroads would pay back the \$34 million over a twenty-year period and the state would

waive the accumulated interest. Hague accused the governor of showing favoritism to the railroads, and Edison charged Hague with using the issue to retaliate for the Colie appointment.

Roosevelt gave Edison no support in the struggle with Hague. In fact, he continued to funnel state patronage through Hague. He even nominated Thomas F. Meaney, a Hague crony, to fill a vacancy on the federal district court bench in New Jersey without paying Edison the customary courtesy of consultation beforehand. Roosevelt's lack of support noticeably cooled relations between the two men.

Edison made no secret of the fact that he was out "to separate as many Hague Democrats as possible from the state payroll and to try to keep any new ones from catching on." He also struck at the financial basis of Hague's power in 1942 by ousting the entire five-man Hudson County Tax Board from office and replacing it with a board of his choosing. The original board had taxed businesses in the county heavily, and their revenues had provided much of the money that enabled the Hague machine to function. Hague responded by having some of Edison's supporters arrested and prosecuted, and by blocking a number of the governor's appointments.

Edison was determined that the Democrats should nominate an anti-Hague candidate for governor in 1943. In February 1943, in preparation for the primary, he announced the formation of the "United Democracy," a statewide anti-Hague organization. He also denounced Hague over the radio, calling him corrupt and dictatorial. Despite Edison's strenuous efforts to destroy Hague, however, Hague controlled the convention, and the "United Democracy" quietly expired. The Democratic gubernatorial candidate, Vincent J. Murphy, mayor of Newark, drew closer and closer to Hague during the campaign; by election day, in response, Edison had adopted a stance of virtual neutrality. Murphy lost the election to Walter E. Edge by approximately 130,000 votes.

Edison's most notable activity as governor was his promotion of constitutional revision. New Jersey had been operating under the constitution of 1844, an archaic document that severely circumscribed the governor's powers and made it exceedingly difficult for him to function as a true chief executive. The constitution limited the governor's appointive power, permitted a simple majority of the assembly and senate to override his veto, restricted his term to three years and prevented him from succeeding himself. It also forced him to share his power with more than eighty boards and commissions, which had overlapping functions. The government was a bureaucratic nightmare. Moreover, the antiquated judicial structure consisted of seventeen different court systems. The need for constitutional revision was recognized throughout the state even before Edison became governor. Both Edison and Hendrickson came out in support of it during the 1940 gubernatorial race, Edison proposing a constitutional convention and Hendrickson claiming that Edison, as a tool of Hague's, could not effect the necessary changes. Edison's inaugural address made constitutional revision the first priority of his administration. Opposition was especially strong among rural Republicans, who viewed revision as a threat to their power, particularly in the state senate. When in his inaugural address Edison coupled revision with a plea for restructuring the state senate to reflect the state's population more equitably, he destroyed the possibility of a constitutional convention during his term. He also alienated Hague from the drive by describing revision as a means of curbing Hague's power.

After leaving office, Edison supported the movement for revision actively. He would witness the movement's triumph when the state adopted a new constitution in 1947. Although his maladroit political approach aborted revision during his governorship, he deserves credit for focusing public attention on the question and whipping up support for revision.

After his term ended on January 18, 1944, Edison resumed his position as president of Thomas A. Edison, Inc. The company prospered under his direction, and in 1957 it merged with the McGraw Electric Company to form the McGraw-Edison Company. Edison was board chairman of the merged firm until he retired in 1961. Meanwhile he remained active in politics, supporting John V. Kenny's overthrow of Hague in 1949. He also vigorously promoted the China lobby and Douglas A. MacArthur. Disturbed by the growth of federal power under both Democratic and Republican presidents, and opposed to the foreign policies of both major political parties, Edison officially joined the New York Conservative party in 1963.

Edison's wife died in 1963, and he spent his last years at the Waldorf Towers in New York City. He died on July 31, 1969, leaving an estate of approximately \$10 million. The vast bulk of it went to the Charles Edison Fund, which he had established to promote "various charities, scientific, literary, and religious education projects."

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