

Editorial

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A few persons and a few events seem to influence the course of history. An interesting and debatable question is who would have the greatest and longest influence: political thinkers, political leaders, religious leaders, philosophers, artists, writers, engineers, and scientists. After some thought it appears that the founders of the three great religions, Gautam Buddha, Prophet Mohammed, and Jesus Christ, would top the list, perhaps closely followed by political leaders, for example, in the Indian context, Ashoka, Babar, Gandhi. Intellectuals and artists, although they enrich peoples' lives, do not seem to matter otherwise. If Newton had not propounded the laws of mechanics and gravitation, someone else would have propounded exactly the same laws and perhaps not too much later. Shakespeare's role in influencing history is probably miniscule. But the world today would be very different, perhaps less tumultuous, if Buddhism had spread westward into Persia, Arabia and Europe before the birth of Islam and Christianity. Among the engineers and inventors, James Watt had a profound impact in determining the course of history.



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The timing of James Watt's invention was important. His improved steam engine propelled the Industrial Revolution, and helped spread and consolidate British imperial power. The ease with which mechanical energy could be produced anywhere caused a revolution in manufacturing and transportation. The original steam engine has evolved into steam turbines that form the backbone of power generation in thermal and nuclear power plants.

The age of individuals from religion and politics making large and long-lasting impact is perhaps over. One cannot foresee the founding of a new religion; the constraining influence of media and democracy will not allow bold decisions, for good or bad, by political leaders. However, a James Watt today may still have a similar influence as the original with an invention of a highly efficient photosynthesis-based energy conversion device, and an 'Einsteinian' thought process may explain dark energy and dark matter.

