

Invention and Progress

By Samuel L. Blumenfeld

Have you ever wondered how it is that the United States became the most advanced nation in all of history--in the very short period of 200 years? The United States Constitution created a limited national government that gave individuals the freedom to make of their lives whatever they wished. The result has been the creation of wealth beyond measure and a standard of living that even the most opulent French king would have envied.

Indeed, it was this unbounded freedom that unleashed the inventive genius of the American people driven by the desire to make life better by making things better in a way unmatched in history. All one has to do is read the various official reports of the United States Patent Office to recognize the truth in all of this.

But along with this freedom of invention was the need to respect and preserve private property. And that is why we have a Patent Office to begin with: to protect the property rights of the inventor.

Recently, I had the wonderful experience of examining an Official Gazette of the United States Patent Office, Volume 58, to be specific. It contained inventions patented from January 5 to March 29, 1892, three short months. This huge volume of almost 2000 pages contained more than that number of inventions, beautifully illustrated in detailed technical drawings.

There were patents for Saw-Sharpening Machines, Ball Bearings, Electric Arc Lamps, Washing Machines, Pencils, Motor Cars, Ice Cream Freezers, Submarine Boats, Concrete Mixing Machines, Methods of Preserving Corpses, Book Sewing Machines, Wrenches, Seed Planters, Type-Writing Machines, Paper Bag Machines, and just about anything else you could dream of. And this volume covered only three months in one year!

Indeed, this mammoth tome is full of great American dreams, based on inventions that made many an inventor rich and lifted the country up from its primitive agrarian roots to a full blown hi-tech industrial society. Everything we see around us is the product of that inventive spirit that lifted the human race from the material poverty of pre-industrial civilization to the wealth and comfort of twenty-first century life.

But of course, as so many television sit-coms demonstrate, all of this inventive genius has not spared many human beings the misery they bring upon themselves. Material possessions have replaced God in many lives, and that is why our great progress has not eliminated drug addiction, crime, child abuse, and all of the other ills rampant in our society.

That is why belief in God is as essential today as it was when the country was first founded. The Ten Commandments are as relevant today in hi-tech America as they were in ancient Israel.

In any case, one of the most pleasant ways to study economic development is to peruse these reports of the United States Patent Office. You may be able to find some of them in antiquarian bookstores. But you can also find them on Abebooks, or being auctioned on eBay. You may want to become a collector of such reports, which will increase in value with age.

As for all the new inventions in this digital age of computers and the Internet, you will have to consult more recent reports of the Patent Office. In fact, the United States Patent and Trademark Office is now an agency of the Department of Commerce, and it has quite an elaborate website. And if you are wondering if the number of inventors has grown, here are some statistics that might amaze you:

In 1963 there were 90,982 applications for patents, of which 48,971 were granted. In 2008, there were 485,312 applications for patents, of which 185,224 were granted.

So there are more inventors than ever. Just about everyone has had an idea about improving something to make life easier. And that may include you the homeschooler, who has the freedom to dream and who may have an idea for an invention that you believe can make you rich or famous. The Patent Office website will tell you how to go about getting a patent for your invention.

Indeed, maybe this article will inspire you to start thinking like an inventor. Just look around you. What can you make better?