

“Elon Musk”

Presidential Lecture by Walter Isaacson

October 23, 2023

Mr. Isaacson painted a fascinating portrait of Elon Musk’s complex personality and achievements, calling him at times both *amazing* and *abhorrent*.

Growing up in South Africa, shaped by a highly critical father and schoolyard bullies, Musk developed a fierce intensity and appetite for risk. As an adult he sought breakthroughs that would have an *impact on the world*.

Mr. Musk centered his world changing pursuits around three missions:

- Make humans a spacefaring species.
- Develop sustainable energy.
- Steer artificial intelligence (AI) to help humanity.

Pertaining to the first mission, Musk founded the company SpaceX. Currently it is the only US entity putting payloads into space.

- SpaceX’s huge Starship vehicle under development aims to ultimately carry up to 100 passengers on missions to Mars.

Related to the second mission, Musk brought electric vehicles (EV) back to the fore. To get the results he wanted from his company, Tesla, he designed the factory for making the cars – that is, *the machine for making the machines*.

As a Twitter user, and flush with cash, Musk in late-2022 bought microblogging platform Twitter, later to be renamed X.com.

- Controversies over content reveal that Musk is a master at understanding *engineering* but not *human emotion*.

Regarding the third mission, Musk was one of the founding chairs of OpenAI, and went on to found his own firm, xAI.

- Like a number of other technologists, Musk is wary of AI escaping human control and getting out into the environment to cause harm.

In sum, Mr. Isaacson posited that it may take some craziness to drive innovators to do the seeming impossible.

- He said that other innovators such as Steve Jobs and Jeff Bezos shared this craziness, but that Musk was *10 times crazier*.

Paul F. Herman, Jr.