Was John D. Rockefeller A Robber Baron? Essay, Research Paper

PART ONE – Issue #2: Was John D. Rockefeller a Robber Baron?

A “robber baron” was someone who employed any means necessary to enrich themselves at the expense of their competitors. Did John D. Rockefeller fall into that category or was he one of the “captains of industry”, whose shrewd and innovative leadership brought order out of industrial chaos and generated great fortunes that enriched the public welfare through the workings of various philanthropic agencies that these leaders established? In the early 1860s Rockefeller was the founder of the Standard Oil Company, who came to epitomize both the success and excess of corporate capitalism. His company was based in northwestern Pennsylvania.

A major question historians have disagreed on has been whether or not John D. Rockefeller was a so-called “robber baron”. Matthew Josephson agreed that Rockefeller was indeed a “robber baron”. In the book Taking Sides, He claims that Rockefeller was a deceptive and conspiratorial businessman, whose fortune was built by secret agreements and wrung concessions from America’s leading railroad companies (Taking Sides 25).

When John D. Rockefeller merged with the railroad companies, he had gained control of a strategic transportation route that no other companies would be able to use. Rockefeller would then be able to force the hand on the railroads and was granted a rebate on his shipments of oil. This was a kind of secret agreement between the two industries. None of the competition knew what the rates were for the rebates or the rates that Rockefeller was paying the railroad. This made it hard for the competition to keep up with the Standard Oil Company. The consequences led to many oil companies getting bought out by Rockefeller secretly. All in all, 25 companies surrendered to Rockefeller’s relentless expansion, which was 20% of the oil industry in America.

John D. Rockefeller and his comrades had stolen a long march on their

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opponents, their tactics shaped themselves already as giant industrialists of the future conquering the pigmies. Josephson said, “Entrenched at the narrows of the mighty river of petroleum, they could no more be dislodged than those other barons, who had planted their castles along the Rhine”(Taking Sides 35).

Ralph W. Hidey and Muriel E. Hidey disagreed with Josephson. In the book Taking Sides, They believe that John D. Rockefeller and his associates created and applied a system for operating a large integrated industrial enterprise, which was one of the earliest representatives of Big Business. He contributed to the development of American petroleum industry and through it to the growth of the economy.

The Hidey’s believed that Rockefeller’s greatest contribution, beyond the concept of Standard Oil combination itself, was the persuasion of strong men to join the alliance and to work together effectively in its management.

Oil policies went deep into the personalities and early experiences of Rockefeller and his colleagues. They had heightened uncertainty and speculation about their activities by their secrecy in building the alliance and by their evasive and legal testimony on the witness stand. There tended to be aroused antagonism because the very newness and size dominance, and efficiency of the combination. The antagonism also ran as far as the absorption of Rockefeller’s competitors in adversity and its search for the lowest possible railroad rates. The Standard Oil Company has done great work in the sense that oil refining has been simply reduced to a business and transportation. The Standard Oil Company brought a measure of order to a formerly confused industry.

Anton Chaitkin agreed that John D. Rockefeller was indeed a robber baron of his time. In Treason of America, he disputes his argument by stating that in the 1860’s Rockefeller ruthlessly consolidated oil refineries and oil-carrying railroads so as to create a giant trust known as Standard Oil. This trust controlled nearly all the oil in America. The monopolization of oil was very difficult to maintain for Rockefeller because many reformists were making allegations to right the wrongs of Standard Oil. Twice, the company was taken to the Supreme Court and dissolved. Rockefeller was vilified in the press and in popular literature as perhaps no other figure in American history has been vilified (Chiatkin 327).

However, there appeared to be other reformers that came to his rescue by informing him about what he could do with his money to get the attackers of his back. These reformers were advisors to Rockefeller, so he could keep his money well invested and out of the publics grasp.

In the article, “Study in Power: John D. Rockefeller, Industrialist and Philanthropist”, Vincent P. Carosso believed that Rockefeller was not a robber baron. He goes on to say that Rockefeller lived in a time of constant and rapid change and worked in an industry, which in his day grew from insignificant to an indispensable element in the world economy. His capacity was laid in planning and organization. This played in the development of vertical integration when it was still a novelty in business. As a young bookkeeper, Rockefeller learned he had an infinite capacity for detail. Wisdom of seeing what lies ahead and the ability to choose competent and energetic subordinates were two characteristics of his foresight. The ability to integrate and exercise effective control over numerous and widespread functions of his enterprise classified Rockefeller as a rare business genius (The American Historical Review 158). Also, with all the profits he was seeking John D. Rockefeller still managed to donate a half billion dollars to good causes and established a model for all philanthropists who followed.

In the textbook, America Past and Present, the authors portrayed John D. Rockefeller as a robber baron. He imposed order on the industry and had an ambition to build. Competition was wasteful and small-scale enterprise was inefficient. Consolidation was the path of the future because it revolutionized the way of doing business all over the world.

Rockefeller was a man of religious beliefs, but he lacked charm, due to his distant and taciturn attitude. Anything that could increase profit Rockefeller would act on. Even if it was to reduce the number of drops of solder on kerosene by one penny could bring in more money at less cost. He always had the highest quality for the lowest price.

As a result Rockefeller’s success, the first of modern trusts were born. This innovation started a trust movement in the lead, whiskey, and sugar industries. Trusts were known to be associated more with monopoly. This angered the public and sparked protest among the reformers.

In the book The Rockefeller Files, by Gary Allen, Rockefeller is viewed as a robber baron. When John D. Rockefeller was coming close to monopolizing the oil industry, one of his most effective ploys was to capture a competitor from the inside. He would place his men inside a competitor’s office, or bribe employees of other firms to do his bidding( Allen 155). Today, John D.’s descendants now play the same game with our government. In 1894, Rockefeller’s corrupt influence started in the White House.

CRITIQUE SECTION

I disagreed with Matthew Josephson because I believe that the only way to get ahead in business is to buy out your competition. Rockefeller was trying to monopolize the oil industry and he was going about it the right way, by building a partnership with the railroad company.

I agreed with the Hidey’s points because Rockefeller was one of the main contributors to the big business boom. The alliances the Standard Oil Company made the competition disintegrate. Rockefeller revolutionized business by joining two businesses together that coincide with one another, which was oil and the railroad. Together they helped the economy flourish.

I agreed with Vincent P. Carosso because in the time Rockefeller was living there were rapid changes due to his success. He was a major factor in the world’s economy, which goes far beyond the barriers of the robber baron. The innovations Rockefeller was a part of still have foundation in today’s economy.

I disagreed with Anton Chiatkin because monopolization is what a businessman wants to ultimately achieve. That was the view of John D. Rockefeller. Chiatkin believed that monopolization was all that was wrong with American business. The jealousy of the public interfered with the overall monopolization of the oil-railroad industry, which made it impossible to accomplish.

I disagreed with the textbook; written by Divine, Breen, Fredrickson and Williams; because in big business every little penny counts when you are trying to monopolize it. Every advantage, no matter how slim it may be, means something. As long as the product appeals to the overwhelming majority the business will thrive a great deal.

I agreed with Gary Allen because I feel everyone can be bought with the right amount of money. This showed Rockefeller’s enormous power despite his absence from the political realm. Sometimes you have to take desperate measures in order to succeed. The way he bought out competitors may have been sneaky, but in the end it still got the job done.

In conclusion, I disagreed that John D. Rockefeller was a “robber baron”. He was more of an innovator of business. The doors to new ways of successful entrepreneurships and partnerships will be forever indebted to the ideas of John D. Rockefeller. In the 1870’ s the economy was booming because of the so-called robber baron’s ambitions to build. Today the economy has permanent scars of the great businessman. Whether or not the public thought he was ruthless and dispassionate, it did not justify his enormous accomplishments for the economy. Success and riches measured his ideas. Some of his tactics were conniving and deceitful, but that is what money can do to some people. The people that complain about his sneaky ways just do not understand because they were never and will never be exposed to probably one thousandth of his money. The fact that he had over 900 million dollars when he retired proved that he was probably one of the most prominent businessmen in American history, if not the most prominent.

PART TWO- Issue # 10: Was the New Deal an Effective Answer to the Great Depression?

The catastrophe that occurred, in 1929, because of the Wall Street debacle crippled the American economy, deflated the optimistic future most Americans assumed to be their birthright and ripped apart the values by which the country’s businesses, farms, and governments were run. In the 1920s the whirlwind of the boom economy was no longer present. During the next decade the inertia effect of the Great Depression stifled Americans attempts to make ends meet. By 1932 over 9 million people would be unemployed, but Franklin D. Roosevelt was the newly elected president and had a plan to give Americans some relief from this Great Depression, by issuing the New Deal.

A major question that historians have disagreed on has been whether or not the New Deal was an effective answer to the Great Depression. Roger Biles of Taking Sides, agreed that Roosevelt’s proposal was effective. It did not get America out of depression, but it implanted many stabilizers to avert another such depression(Taking Sides 221). Although many New Deal programs were temporary emergencies; like the Glass-Steagull Act, which forced the separation of commercial and investment banking; others lingered long after the return to prosperity. The New Deal was impressive in relief and social welfare programs, but they never went as far as demanded or recommended. It achieved much that was good, but left much undone. Frequently path breaking in their delivery of federal resources, outside normal channels also retained a strong commitment to local government and community control, while promising only temporary disruptions prior to the return of economic stability.

Gary Dean Beast disagreed with Briles on the issue. He feels as though the New Deal was a tragic failure to recover from the depression during the eight peace time years. There were certainly positive contributions under the New Deal, but they may not have outweighed the negative. This does not fall squarely on the shoulders of Roosevelt. The actions of Congress and the Supreme Court in nullifying, modifying and rejecting many proposals of the New Deal are good examples of how the President was not entirely at fault(Taking Sides 237). If Congress and the Supreme Court implemented these actions, maybe the depression would not have lasted so long.

In the book, A People’s History of the United States, Howard Zinn disagreed that the New Deal had an impact that led America out of depression. When the New Deal was over, capitalism remained intact. The rich still controlled the nation’s wealth as well as its laws, courts, police, etc. This made Roosevelt look like a hero to millions, but the same system that brought depression and crisis remained (Zinn 395).

John A. Garrity, who wrote “The New Deal, National Socialism, and the Great Depression”, did not believe that the New Deal was effective to the depression. It was marked by vacillation, confusion, and contradictions; by in frightening within the administration, bureaucracies, by an absence of any consistently held theory about either the causes of depression or how to end it. The New Dealers failed to arrive at any real consensus about the origins and nature of the economic concentration. Roosevelt’s inconsistency was apolitical asset rather than a liability. He masterfully disguised the inadequacies and internal disagreements in his entourage and to a remarkable extent succeeded in convincing the Americans of their own personal wisdom (Garrity 920).

In the textbook, America Past and Present, there is a strong sense that Roosevelt was successful with the New Deal proposals. After winning the election in 1932, he pledged to the American people a New Deal. In the first hundred days in office F.D.Roosevelt sent 15 major requests to Congress and received 15 pieces of legislation. Most of them were temporary though.

The New Deal was more successful in meeting the most immediate problems-relief for millions of unemployed and destitute citizens. Congress was requested to distribute 500 million dollars to the families in need. The Work Progress Administration was established to put the unemployed on a federal payroll, so they could stimulate the stagnant economy. This helped ease the burden of unemployment, but it failed to overcome the depression. Despite his limitations as a reformer Roosevelt was the president the American people needed because of the psychological lift that helped them endure the Great Depression.

CRITIQUE SECTION

I disagreed with Roger Biles, who believed the New Deal was effective in getting America out of depression. The fact that most of the programs never went as far as needed really does not seem like America was coming out of the depression. If the requests employed by Roosevelt were met only halfway then I would say it is unsuccessful in bringing the country back to stability.

I agreed with Gary Dean Best because he says that the New Deal was a complete and tragic failure. I do not think that Roosevelt was at fault for not recovering from the depression, rather the other two branches of the government, who would not settle on terms with the President in most cases.

I agreed with Howard Zinn because the only people the New Deal managed to help out of depression were the rich folks. The lower classes did not have the luxuries of the upper class, so they suffered through the depression. Blacks and women were two groups that remained fairly stagnant during the Roosevelt era. The country as a whole then, was not out of depression as the New Deal had planned,

I agreed with John Garrity because the New Deal era was a time of mass confusion between government and the people. There was no solution to ending the depression. Roosevelt seemed to always be working around the problem, giving the people false hopes because of his masterfully disguised inadequacies.

I disagreed with the textbook because I do not think the first hundred days were productive at all. The majority of the requests passed were only temporary. Being that it was only the first hundred days of office for Roosevelt, the temporary requests would not last long enough to effectively bring America back to prosperity.

In conclusion, I disagreed that Roosevelt’s New Deal was an effective answer to the Great Depression. There were really no long-term affects that the plan had guaranteed. Some of the acts passed were helpful in trying to become economically stable again, but were short-lived and faded out of the picture fast. The reason for Roosevelt’s failure was his idea to restore the economy and not to change it ( Divine Breen Fredrickson Williams 810). Obviously there was no way of ever going back to the way the economy used to be. I think Roosevelt’s lack of radicalism was his failure in reforming the economy. He was not totally at fault says Gary Dean Best because the other branches of government were not being any more radical than the president. The New Deal was a reform and recovery movement, which should have been a radical one. There were no extreme measures taken by Roosevelt to get America out of the Great Depression. The various acts that were passed were insignificant to the overall well being of the nation’s economy. The only thing that saved the nation’s economy was the Second World War. The war boom sparked industry and jobs and soon enough brought America back into the realm of prosperity.

PART THREE- Issue #16: Will History Forgive Richard Nixon?

During the years from 1968-1973, Richard Nixon became an icon in American history. His reign as President will go down as one of the most controversial terms in the twentieth century. He was the only president to ever resign from office because of corruption and conspiracy. The scandals that involved the Nixon campaign are the most publicly known out of all the other presidents.

A major question historians have disagreed on has been whether history will forgive the former President Nixon. Joan Hoff-Wilson agreed that Richard M. Nixon had paid his debt to society and should be forgiven by history. The real importance of Nixon’s presidency may well come to rest on his attempts to restructure the executive branch along functional lines, to bring order to the federal bureaucracy, and to achieve lasting domestic reform. The degree to which those Nixonian tactics that were legal and ethical became consciously or unconsciously the model for his successors in the Oval Office will determine his final place in history.

Although Nixon’s corporate presidency remains publicly discredited, much of it has been privately preserved. Nixon’s ability to survive disaster may make up for his lack of charisma and honesty in the long run. His management style and substantive foreign and domestic achievements look better and better when compared with the presidents to follow.

Stanley I Kutler disagreed with Joan Hoff-Wilson. He said that Nixon should not be forgiven by history. His ruthless and corrupt scandals, throughout his presidency, give him no grounds to which he should be looked upon as a respectable president. The quote, “I am not a crook”, is one of the most ironic statements in presidential history. His first four years as President was just the beginning of the scandals to come. Kutler described how Nixon gradually reached his own demise through the presidency. Each year he would get a little more scandalous. His neglect for his wife while in office also showed the people that he was so caught up in conspiring that he did not even have time to celebrate his wife’s own birthday. The Haldeman tapes gave the public a side of the President never seen before. What was shown beyond dispute was that the Nixon of the Watergate years-furtive, manipulative and petty; often weak, and above all dishonest-was consistent with the behavior patterns of the earlier years. There was only one Nixon (Taking Sides 377).

In the book, Conspiracies, Cover-Ups, and Crimes by Jonathan Vankin agreed that Nixon was not to be forgiven by American history. It is no coincidence that most of Watergate’s shadow players dwell in the same conspiratorial world that led the Bay of Pigs (Vankin 157). Nixon instigated the Bay of Pigs during the Eisenhower administration, so one can see Nixon was scandalous before he even became president. Nixon also had mob ties, which led to his pardons of a certain Teamster boss, by the name of Jimmy Hoffa. Vankin showed a mob affiliated President who has no reason to be forgiven by history.

In the article “ Presidential Manipulation of Polls and Public Opinion: The Nixon Administration and the Pollsters”, by Lawrence R. Jacobs and Robert Y. Shapiro, there is strong disagreement that former President Nixon should be forgiven by American history. His influence on the manipulation of the public pollsters, Luis Harris and the Gallup organization was very negative. The public was very favorable to the pollsters, who did not favor Nixon, so he decided to corrupt the polls. The democratic ties that Harris had enraged Nixon even more. This started an investigation of pollsters issued by Nixon to slow Harris and the Gallup organization down. By doing this Nixon took his unpopularity out of the public eye (Jacobs Shapiro 521).

The textbook did not agree that President Nixon should be forgiven for all his acts of deceit while holding office. The text takes a good look at Nixon’s blunder during the Vietnam War campaign. It was one foreign policy challenge he could not overcome. His tactics were hard-line bombing and gradual withdrawal of troops. This did not serve to be effective because people back on the home front were demonstrating and protesting because of the massive attacks in Cambodia that Nixon had called for. This led to the Kent State massacre. Nixon’s failure to show sympathy during the aftermath outraged the public. He had to devise another tactic that would put an end to the war and preserve peace back home as well. Finally the North Vietnamese and the US came to an agreement. It was really a disguised surrender and made the country look like the quagmire of Southeast Asia ( Divine Breen Fredrickson Williams 979).

In the book by John Osborne, The Fifth Year of the Nixon Watch, there is disagreement with the fact that Nixon should be forgiven by American history. The book states that in his fifth year of presidency, he was looked upon by the public and the political realm, to resign, because it would be for his own country’s good. This was right after the Watergate scandal had blown up in the Republicans face. The scandal of Watergate was members of Nixon’s cabinet and associates were to spy on the Democratic Party in their headquarters. There were several tapes and other scandalous information, which led to the eventual leakage of the whole thing. The public now viewed Nixon as a shoddy type and not worthy of the presidency (Osborne 187).

CRITIQUE SECTION

I disagreed with Joan Hoff-Wilson because I do not believe President Nixon did anything to promote a positive example in running the government. He lacked charisma and honesty (Taking Sides 369), which is vital when you are leading a country. If you cannot trust the President of the United States, whom can you trust?

I agreed with Stanley I. Kutler because Nixon was overly consumed by public relations. He was so caught up with trying to spin stories around so he would look good, protecting his image and denying any truths that would tarnish that image (Taking Sides 370). Nixon behaved in the same manner all five years he was President, feeling no remorse for his deceiving acts.

I agreed with Jonathan Vankin because Nixon’s involvement in the mob was not commendable by any means. His schemes that he put together with teamsters did not show any class of a true President. The pardon of Nixon, after he resigned, was a sign of just how sorry of a President he really was. The feeling of discontent would haunt him for the rest of his life. The public’s strong and harsh criticisms would remain until the day he died.

I agreed with Jacobs and Shapiro because manipulation was one of the many corrupt attributes of Richard Nixon, and to be forgiven with so many of them is highly doubtful by the majority of the public. Manipulative leadership appeals to momentary popular emotions and is motivated by the drive to augment personal power. Nixon’s relations with the pollsters illustrate the model of manipulative leadership the authors described.

I agreed with the textbook because Nixon’s lack of effort towards ending the Vietnam War showed how much he cared for himself and not the country. All the American casualties of the War and the demonstrations on the home front magnified his failure. Also the disguised surrender was not covert enough to where the people did not know what was going on. The morale of the country after that was not good.

I agreed with John Osborne because the resignation of Richard Nixon was inevitable or he would have been impeached. Nixon resigned because he had no more secrets to hide. All the scandalous events that had taken place during his presidency were exposed. The press had a field day with Nixon after the resignation and up to the day he died.

In conclusion, I disagreed that Richard Nixon should be forgiven by American history for his ruthless reign in the Oval Office. His corrupt and scheming ways are the ways of the devil. I think he showed no leadership for a country, which was in the midst of many controversies. President Nixon only added to those controversies and made them more complicated. I think Nixon should go down in history as the worst President to ever hold office at the White House. He had set an awful example of the Republican Party and it would not recover from his disgraces for quite some time.

I think for the crimes that Nixon committed, he should have gone to prison for because he did not commit crimes against one person, he committed crimes against one country.

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