

Was Tarbell correct about Rockefeller's unjust practices?

Examine the documents below. Then consider the question above, was Ida Tarbell correct that Rockefeller's Standard Oil was a corrupt monopoly? Before you read, consider, what do you believe makes someone rich? Does Rockefeller get rich the way you thought? Is the way he does it fair?

Document A: The History of the Standard Oil Company

The History of the Standard Oil Company was an expose written by a ground breaking female journalist, Ida Tarbell. Tarbell researched the company and it's practices and wrote this scathing report. Ida Tarbell grew up in oil country. Her father, Frank Tarbell, was an oil refiner himself. Rockefeller's practices cost her father his business.

Standard Oil Trust was ... one of the very few business organizations of the country whose growth could be traced in trustworthy documents... This has come about largely from the fact that almost constantly since its organization in 1870, the Standard Oil Company has been under investigation by the Congress of the United States and by the Legislatures of various states in which it has operated, on the suspicion that it was receiving rebates from the railroads and was practicing methods in restraint of free trade.

John D. Rockefeller... was but twenty-three years old when he first went into the oil business, but he had already got his feet firmly on the business ladder and had got them there by his own efforts... The firm grew as rapidly as the oil business of the town... Rockefeller was the head... Rockefeller combined all his companies into one – the Standard Oil Company.

Its chief competitors began to suspect something... They believed they bought, one the whole, almost as cheaply as he, and they knew they made as good oil and with as great, or nearly as great, economy (efficiency). He could sell at no better price than they. Where was his advantage? There was but one place where it could be, and that was in transportation. He must be getting better rates from the railroads than they were.

In 1868... a member of a rival firm long in the business, which had been prosperous from the start, and which prided itself on... its methods, its economy, and its energy... complained. "You are giving others better rates than you are us," said Mr. Alexander, the representative of the firm. "We cannot compete if you do that." The railroad agent did not attempt to deny it. He simply agreed to give Mr. Alexander a rebate also... The railroad took the position with him that if he could ship as much oil as the Standard he could have as low a rate, but not otherwise... (Standard Oil) was the



Figure 1: Harris & Ewing, photographer. TARBELL, IDA M., None. [Between 1905 and 1945] Photograph. <https://www.loc.gov/item/2016859909/>.



largest in the town, though it had some close competitors. Nevertheless on the strength of its large capacity it received the special favour.

Mr. Rockefeller was far from satisfied. He was a brooding, cautious, secretive man, seeing all the possible dangers... all the possible combinations which might imperil his supremacy. These twenty-five Cleveland rivals of his – how could he at once and forever put them out of the game? ... absorb the big refineries.

Tarbell, Ida M., and David Mark. Chalmers. The History of the Standard Oil Company. Mineola. New York: Dover Publications, 2003.

Source

1. Who is Ida Tarbell?

Document

2. According to her, how did Rockefeller become rich?

Analysis

3. Is it poor taste to have secret business dealings?

4. Is it poor taste to then buy out your competition?



Document Set B: Clash of Titans

Read the set of documents. Then answer the question below.

Tarbell

[Mr. Rockefeller] was no ordinary man. He had the powerful imagination to see what might be done with the oil business if it could be centered in his hands — the intelligence to analyze the problem into its elements and to find the key to control. He had the essential element to all great achievement, a steadfastness to a purpose once conceived which nothing can crush.

Mr. Rockefeller was "good." There was no more faithful Baptist in Cleveland than he. Every enterprise of that church he had supported liberally from his youth. He gave to its poor. He visited its sick. He wept for its suffering... Yet he was willing to strain every nerve to obtain for himself special and illegal privileges from the railroads which were bound to ruin every man in the oil business not sharing them with him. Religious emotion and sentiments of charity, propriety and self-denial seem to have taken the place in him of notions of justice and regard for the rights of others.

Tarbell, Ida. "The Rockefellers: Clash of Titans." American Experience. PBS. Last modified 2020. <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/rockefellers-clash/>.

Rockefeller

This sweetness that she tries to bring in, referring to these good qualities, and this praise that she brings in as to ability and perseverance and whatever traits which she concedes bring success, is simply covering up her wrath and her jealousy which were all the time present, but which she did not show all the time and which she thought she could bring out all the better by weaving this in as silken thread.

She makes a pretence of fairness, of the judicial attitude, and beneath that pretence she slips into her 'history' all sorts of evil and prejudicial stuff, calling it 'the record of the court,' where it is only a statement by a party at interest, and she hides the other side. She is very adroit and cunning; but even she has defeated herself. She has over-reached herself, and anyone who reads her book with care can see that she is dishonest, prejudiced, untruthful.

Poor woman! How she has degraded herself and failed of accomplishing her object to injure, to smirch, to overthrow the Standard Oil Company, to satisfy the petty spite against it because forsooth her father and brother could not compete in the oil business.

Rockefeller, John D. "The Rockefellers: Clash of Titans." American Experience. PBS. Last modified 2020. <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/rockefellers-clash/>.

Sourcing

5. What do these sources have against each other?



Document Set C: The Cleveland Massacre

Read the set of documents. Then answer the question below.

Ida Tarbell

There were at the time some 26 refineries in [Cleveland], some of them very large plants. All of them were feeling more or less the discouraging effects of the last three or four years of railroad discriminations in favor of the Standard Oil Company. To the owners [of the 26 refineries] Mr. Rockefeller went one by one, and explained the South Improvement Company. "You see," he told them, "this scheme is bound to work. It means absolute control by us of the oil business... But we are going to give everybody a chance to come in. You are to turn over your refinery... and I will give you Standard Oil Company stock or cash."... It was useless to resist, he told the hesitating: they would certainly be crushed if they did not accept his offer, and he pointed out in detail, and with gentleness, how beneficent the scheme really was.

Tarbell, Ida. "The Rockefellers: Clash of Titans." *American Experience*. PBS. Last modified 2020. <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/rockefellers-clash/>.

Rockefeller

I do not remember just how many [refineries] there were [in Cleveland] -- say 25 or 30, more or less. Some of them were very little. ... More than 75, and probably more than 80 per cent -- certainly a great number -- of the refiners at Cleveland were already crushed by the competition which had been steadily increasing up to this time. ... They didn't collapse. They had collapsed before. That's the reason they were so glad to combine their interest if they so wished it ... [They were] mighty glad to get somebody to come and find a way out. We were taking all the risks, putting up our good money. They were putting in their old junk. ... When it was found how much of stock or money would be given in exchange for their plants we found no difficulty in proceeding rapidly with the negotiations, and nearly all came in...

What I did say [to them] was: "We here [in Cleveland] are at a disadvantage. Something should be done for our mutual protection. We think this is a good scheme. Think it over. We would be glad to consider it with you if you are so inclined."

There was no compulsion, no pressure, no 'crushing'. How could our company succeed if its members had been forced to join it and were working under the dash?

Rockefeller, John D. "The Rockefellers: Clash of Titans." *American Experience*. PBS. Last modified 2020. <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/rockefellers-clash/>.

Document

6. What happened in Cleveland?

Analysis

7. Would you characterize it as a massacre?



Document Set D: Legacy of Standard Oil

Read the set of documents. Then answer the question below.

Rockefeller

The Standard Oil Co. has been one of the greatest, if not the greatest, of upbuilders we ever had in this country — or in any country. All of which has inured to the benefit of the towns and cities the country over; not only in our country but the world over. And that is a very pleasant reflection now as I look back. I knew it at the time, though I realize it more keenly now.

We had vision, saw the vast possibilities of the oil industry, stood at the center of it, and brought our knowledge and imagination and business experience to bear in a dozen — 20, 30 directions. There was no branch of the business in which we did not make money.

It will be said: "Here was a force that reorganized business, and everything else followed it — all business, even the Government itself, which legislated against it."

Rockefeller, John D. "The Rockefellers: Clash of Titans." American Experience. PBS. Last modified 2020. <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/rockefellers-clash/>.

Tarbell

Mr. Rockefeller is a hypocrite. This man has for 40 years lent all the power of his great ability to perpetuating and elaborating a system of illegal and unjust discrimination by common carriers. He has done more than any other person to fasten on this country the most serious interference with free individual development which it suffers, an interference which, today, the whole country is struggling vainly to strike off, which it is doubtful will be cured, so deep-seated and so subtle is it, except by revolutionary methods.

It does not pay. Our national life is on every side distinctly poorer, uglier, meaner, for the kind of influence he exercises.

Tarbell, Ida. "The Rockefellers: Clash of Titans." American Experience. PBS. Last modified 2020. <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/rockefellers-clash/>.

Questions for Analysis

8. Do you think Rockefellers tactics were unjust? Why or why not?

