

A
Excellent and
well-written

John D. Rockefeller

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Any attempt to fathom fully the character and motives of a man like John D. Rockefeller must carry with it a certain measure of futility, for he was a man shrouded in controversy from the moment his name first arose upon the national horizon. Throughout his life of ninety-seven years he continued to remain a controversial and paradoxical figure, subject to a scathing journalistic and public antipathy while at the same time being practically apotheosized by those who had received the benefits of his philanthropic endeavors. The real man has long remained hidden^N behind this "halo-effect" of contemporary nineteenth and twentieth century judgment. A close scrutiny should help to lift this veil of favorable and unfavorable prejudice. However, the terms, controversial and paradoxical, remain key words here, for they are used to describe not only the nature of Rockefeller's character and accomplishments, but also the nature of that age in which he lived and prospered, that era of "robber barons," or the "Guided Age," as Mark Twain so contemptuously called it.

To consider properly the character of John D. Rockefeller the historian must avoid the inviting, but dangerous tendency of applying present ethical standards to an era of American business activity which had no established precedents for those standards. In other words, what is considered unethical or downright illegal today could have been the norm, the accepted practices of another day. This, as we shall see, is quite true, and the knowledge of this fact is important for a sincere and unbiased evaluation of Rockefeller. Was he a "robber baron" or was he a saint? The truth of the matter lies, as it usually does in historical situations, somewhere between the extremes. Rockefeller was an honest man.¹ There is no doubt about that, but he was also a ruthless man who played rough in the game of business. Many Rockefeller critics have, when the obviously inconsistent element of his philanthropy appears, brushed the matter aside, saying that such generosity was the result of a troubled conscience, a desire to atone. Such could not be farther from the truth, for we know that as soon as he began to make money as a very young man, a part of his small pay check went to worthy causes.² This picture of opposites which so many people have held for so long is not without some foundation then, because Rockefeller has presented to the public two faces, two characters. This, of course, was not his intention. Both elements remain consistent facets within his character, and the only complication with this image came when these seemingly opposite character qualities

manifested themselves in overt acts subject to public misinterpretation. We are forced then to deal with each of these two characteristics separately by viewing each one at the height of its public manifestation.

John D. Rockefeller, the tenacious capitalist, the entrepreneur, the founder of the great Standard Oil Trust, presents us with much the picture that the Communists must have of the top-hatted capitalists of Wall Street. In this sense, the Communist view, though extreme, is not far from the truth. John Rockefeller was a man of vision who at the end of the Civil War took advantage of the special economic, fiscal and legal conditions of an infant industrial America to forge one of the greatest industrial complexes in the history of business.³ Did he do this illegally? The answer must be yes and no. We must say yes when looking back and judging his acts by our present standards. We must say, yes, again when we observe how Rockefeller succeeded, for though he was honest to the letter of the law as it was then written, the very magnitude of his organization made competition by smaller companies impossible. By 1879 Rockefeller had brought order to the chaotic United States oil industry, but it is not such a remarkable feat when we realize that by this date he controlled 90% to 95% of the total refining capacity of the country.⁴ Rockefeller was a realist, a visionary who possessed that long extolled American quality of pragmatism. He looked for cheaper ways to do things. One of these innovations was the oil tank car which so lessened the cost and waste of petroleum shipping that he could undersell any competitor. It has been maintained by at least one Rockefeller historian that the motive behind the formation of the entire Standard Oil Corporation was just to cheapen the cost of petroleum transportation.⁵ Once formed, the combination misused railroad rate discriminations, practiced spying, created phony independent companies, employed fighting brands and local price-slashing to defeat rivals and played reprehensibly with politics.⁶ Against these acts it was the consumer as well as the competitor who suffered.

Most of these deeds did not violate the letter of the law and so we are forced to say that they were not, in the judiciary sense, illegal. If they were not illegal, then, they were attacked because they were primarily the public interest. This fact alone later made such practices against the law. As we have already noted, Rockefeller was a realist. To him the end justified the means, and business ethics simply presented an obstacle against that end. Besides, the business world in the 1870's and 80's was a dis-

organized, chaotic, dog-eat-dog kind of world. It was very much like a war in which business survival was planned like battle campaigns, and it is not unusual that Rockefeller and hundreds of other businessmen would erroneously apply Darwinian theory to their business rational. Out of this chaos Rockefeller was more than instrumental in achieving order. This is a major key to his business motives. Rockefeller critics say that it was greed which prompted his meteoric climb to financial success. This word, however, would have to be qualified, and by the time the term, greed, would have been defined properly, Rockefeller's motives would no longer be in terms of avarice, I think, but of power, a particular kind of power. Rockefeller referred euphemistically to his motives as "achievement or self-expression." ⁷ What he obviously needed for this achievement and self-expression, this desire to bring order out of chaos was one thing — power. This he established for himself and for his company.

The Standard Oil Trust, inspite of its many able leaders, was far greater than any one of those leaders, and this includes John D. Rockefeller. It became a living, organic sort of thing with a mind and will of its own, an organism whose growth would have been difficult to stop. The goal for the Standard Oil Corporation was set from the very moment of the company's inception, whether or not its founders had such a goal in mind. That end, in the contemporary Laissez-Faire economy, was naturally monopoly, for it is a vital tendency and need in capitalism to grow and grow and, if unchecked, to grow to monopolistic proportions.⁸ The Standard of Ohio did exactly this. Money was, after initial success, purely incidental, for Rockefeller himself admitted that there is a limit to what money can buy, that satisfaction must for the very wealthy come in different areas.⁹ We must conclude then with this brief discussion of Rockefeller as businessman by saying that the desire for money did not form the basis for his business activity, especially after initial financial success; it had to be something stronger, something greater in scope, something capable of driving Rockefeller beyond the bounds of reasonable satiety. The word, achievement, as nebulous and ratiocinated as it sounds, was for Rockefeller the co-habitual result of power. Both were his objectives.

John D. Rockefeller, the kindly old man, the philanthropist, the founder of so many charitable and humanistic institutions, certainly presents us with a different picture of the man. However, his philanthropy was entirely

consistent with his capitalist nature, for he approached his money-giving with the same stern, realistic, practical attitudes which he exhibited in his business. He was well aware of the fact that money was not easy to give away, to allocate properly. In his later years he firmly believed that his fortune was a God given right and that he was a trustee for it, the responsibility of which was an awesome burden both to him and to the able men whom he had appointed to administer it.¹⁰ Because of this constant sense of responsibility he paved the way for many innovations in the field of philanthropy, and his works have survived well and most likely will continue to survive far into the future when the issues which illuminated his life and made him such a controversial figure will have become unemotional incidents of historical scholasticism. Rockefeller, the man, the shy unintellectual, the always optimistic realist, contrasted with the equally true but more newsworthy qualities of vigor and tenacity of purpose which remained with him to the end — these other qualities, the softer, more gentle clues to his character have already been forgotten.

Footnotes

¹John T. Flynn, God's Gold, (Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1935)
p. 392

²Allan Nevins, John D. Rockefeller, (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1940)
vol. 2, p. 713.

³Allan Nevins, p. 713.

⁴"John D. Rockefeller, " Encyclopedia Americana, 1961 ed., vol. XXVII.

⁵Albert Z. Carr, John D. Rockefeller's Secret Weapon (McGraw-Hill
Book Company Inc. 1962) p. 26.

⁶Allan Nevins, p. 708.

⁷Allan Nevins, p. 711.

⁸Henry Demarest Lloyd, "The Old Self-Interest," Problems in American
Civilization series, John D. Rockefeller, Robber Baron or Industrial Statesman?
(D.C. Heath and Company, ed. by Earl Latham, 1949) p. 74.

⁹John D. Rockefeller, Random Reminiscences of Men and Events (Doubleday,
Doran and Company Inc. 1933) p. 740.

¹⁰Allan Nevins, p. 713.