



The period following the Civil War through the turn of the century is often referred to as the "Gilded Age" thanks to writer Mark Twain (he co-authored a book of the same title with Charles Dudley Warner). Twain generated the concept that during the late 1800s, much of what was going on in America glittered while beneath all the luster, sadly, serious problems were festering. No better example exists to support Twain's thesis than big business. Commercial magnates steamrolled the United States during the late nineteenth century from a rural, agricultural country into an urban, industrial colossus. America's abundant natural resources, numerous technological advances, and generous pool of immigrant labor allowed industry to flourish. Big business moguls like Andrew Carnegie, John Davison Rockefeller, Leland Stanford, and Cornelius Vanderbilt accumulated tremendous fortunes in assorted industries such as steel, petroleum, and railroads. The powerful industrial aristocracy exerted increasing influence in politics and society. Many businessmen became substantial patrons to colleges, libraries, and museums, but ironically, much of the wealth being passed out in the name of philanthropy was attained through despicable means. Hence, one of the most perplexing dilemmas in all of United States history. On the one hand, these captains of industry were viewed as morally bankrupt "robber barons" because they preyed on society, amassing their vast wealth through ruthless treatment of employees, unethical dealings with customers, unprincipled practices toward competition, and downright dishonest behavior to avoid government regulations. On the other hand, many industrial tycoons became "caretakers of society" with the finances they accrued, the most notable being Andrew Carnegie. In his so-called *Gospel of Wealth*, the iron and steel champion defended extreme wealth such as his own, but also asserted that the industrial aristocracy carried a philanthropic responsibility to society. [True to his word, Carnegie donated some \\$350 million of his fortune to various charities, foundations, and universities. In 2017 money, Carnegie's generosity would be roughly equivalent to the astronomical figure of \\$80 billion! Although he distributed 90 percent of his wealth, Carnegie still died a multi-millionaire.](#)