The Spoilsmen: An Age of Cynicism

In the years from Appomattox to the end of the nineteenth century, the American people settled half their continental domain, laid down a vast railroad system, and grew mighty in the world on their great resources in coal, metals, oil, and land. There is no other period in the nation’s history when politics seems so completely dwarfed by economic changes, none in which the life of the country rests so completely in the hands of the industrial entrepreneur.

In business and politics the captains of industry did their work boldly, blandly, and cynically. Exploiting workers and milking farmers, bribing Congressmen, buying legislatures, spying upon competitors, hiring armed guards, dynamiting property, using threats and intrigue and force, they made a mockery of the ideals of the simple gentry who imagined that the nation’s development could take place with dignity and restraint under the regime of laissez-faire.

Richard Hofstadter