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THE MEN WHO BUILT AMERICA

Nothing is impossible and out of reach if only you are ambitious enough and willing to take risks to earn a place at the top of the game in any business. This is all proven indeed by five visionary men who actually built America to what it is today. How did they do it?

‘The Men Who Built America’ is an epic documentary focusing on the lives five renowned men: Cornelius Vanderbilt, John Rockefeller, Andrew Carnegie, J.P Morgan and Henry Ford who revolutionized America in ways that may have seemed impossible especially in the 19th century. They were self-made businessmen who grasped every opportunity they had to become the wealthiest and most influential men in America. They were an interesting small group linked in history by rivalry and lust to be more powerful than the other.



Cornelius Vanderbilt (King of the rail roads)

The one and only Cornelius Vanderbilt starts it all. An ambitious young lad who at only 16 years of age buys a small boat and starts a small shipping business which later on becomes the largest shipping empire in America. This is definitely a challenge to the youth of today as many think this type of success begins when one develops grey hair. Nobody is too young to start. The earlier the better. It takes time to perfect art and business is a craft. He did not stop there. He took an unimaginable risk because he saw a different and better vision of the future and that was in rail roads. He sold everything in his shipping business and heavily invested in railroads. The rail road business was booming fast and he saw his opportunity to gain from it. By the end of the civil war he became the richest man in America with a net worth of what would be considered today 75 billion dollars.

With time he was viewed as too old by his competitors in the rail business who underestimated his efficiency and continued zeal to always be in first place and he immediately took action. I do not agree with his methods. Even though he was able to take down his competition, many civilians not as lucky to own as much wealth as he did must have suffered due to the drop in the economy at the time of his revenge against his rivals. One must never underestimate their competition and especially in Vanderbilt’s case they lived to regret it.

This experience signifies the importance of holding your head held high even when others try to disgrace you at your own game. He soon becomes king of the rail road owning the highest percentage of them in America. He was tough in the business and that is what I think kept it going. Trouble sets in paradise when he lacks enough cargo to transport. He searches where no one did, the oil business. One that would soon become the biggest in America. Without knowing it he promotes his future rival, John Rockefeller. This just goes to show how great men know just when to take advantage of their opportunities as Rockefeller did.



Some of the rail roads owned by Cornelius Vanderbilt



John D. Rockefeller (founder of the Standard Oil Company)

John D. Rockefeller had similar character traits to Vanderbilt, ambitious, hardworking, strategic, innovative and ready to wipe out anyone who threatened his success. He was also a staunch Christian but I believe that the business world then had little room for Christian virtues based on his decisions and actions. What stood out for me was the way his mind worked. He always found a way to stay ahead of his competition especially through his innovations: transporting oil through pipes and finding use for gasoline which was considered a waste. He overtook Vanderbilt to be the richest man in America. He was flexible, not limiting himself to working with only some people or with only one product. I think this is very important for any business person. Some fight to cling to their original ideas ignoring the better ones that come their way. At one time he provoked chaos by closing some of his oil refineries and leaving thousands jobless just to spit his competition. This act led to a bigger rival, Andrew Carnegie.

Andrew Carnegie is perhaps my favourite in the group. He started to work at the age of twelve and became the protégé of one Tom Scott who was his biggest mentor. He never refused a challenge and this is maybe why he ended up contributing most to the development of cities. He took a task that he had no idea how to go about it, building the Mississippi Bridge. He wanted it to be grand but was advised that it was impossible to build a strong bridge with the design he desired and that is where construction using steel began. He did not allow anyone to tell him his ideas were impossible and proved that with a goal set in mind impossible is just another word. This was also a great risk as he was not sure if it could hold the bridge and at the same time it was draining him of money, but he did not give up.



Andrew Carnegie (the steel man)

He was also a critical thinker and decision maker. He understood his weaknesses and dealt with them such as having a good heart (ironically) and not being able to be brutal enough in the business industry. That is why he hired Henry Frick, a man who had no problem with being brutal, to do his dirty work. He became the biggest steel manufacturer and distributor with his steel being used to

erect buildings and resulting to the tallest skyscraper in Chicago, but still this was not enough and he wanted to be the richest man in America. Someone does make that happen years later, one who does not tire in the game, J.P. Morgan.

J.P. Morgan was a banker who all his life had been taught by his father accounting and how to earn from other people's money. He was not very satisfied with his father's rules and felt underachieved. He wanted to be in the big league with the likes of Rockefeller and Carnegie. He liaised with Thomas Edison, a famous inventor, and sponsored his latest invention at the time, the electric bulb. This was ground breaking for America and also threatening to Rockefeller's kerosene business. J.P. Morgan went against his father's rules and took risks that could either break him or make him. This just shows how one should never let others limit their ideas and visions. In later years he went on to buy Carnegie's steel business making Carnegie achieve his long time goal to become the richest man in America.



J.P. Morgan (the banking titan)

These three extraordinary men knew how to plan and strategize to keep themselves in business. Most of the time they did it through the 'back door' method and it was mainly for their own gain. They created monopolies which just widened the gap between the rich and the poor. Many people today still do this and it is sad and wrong. Wealth is not everything and eventually one gets tired of always being part of a never ending feud just as Rockefeller and Carnegie got exhausted and made a twist in their lives by becoming the biggest philanthropists ever. They realized that soon they would be ashes once more and their wealth will not matter being stocked up in banks. They built monuments such as schools, libraries and founded charities that aided the common man. I do believe that by doing this they died happy and peacefully having made a great impact on the world.



Henry Ford (founder of Ford Motors)

A new age of businessmen had dawned and Henry Ford would emerge one at the top. He was very different from the others as his vision was not that of acquiring power or wealth, but he was driven by the cries of the common people just like himself. He built the Ford automobile which was affordable. He got opposition from various sides but did not waver in his goals. Ford Motors went on to manufacture thousands of cars. He also brought change in the manufacturing business as his assembly line is adopted by many different industries. Workers began earning better wages and mass production became easier and faster.

Businessmen were now producing products for the masses that up to date are still in use and continue to be made better. Without Rockefeller's gasoline to fuel engines, Carnegie's steel build the cars and electricity to power factories, Henry Ford and many other businessmen would not have succeeded in their businesses. America would not be a super power in the eyes of the world. There is a lot to be learned from them on what do's and don'ts in business.

Today there are still many great innovators such as Steve jobs, Diane Green and Mark Zuckerberg who are changing the world but these five men are the fathers of them all. A breakdown of what I have learnt from their history is:

1. Aim for the highest and never let others govern my visions. I have always had people telling me what they think I should do in future and giving me facts why I should listen to them and having others talk to me with the hope of changing my mind because they simply do not understand why a girl like me would want to do mechanical engineering but I still stand with my choice and if I have to change it will be because I myself choose to. As much as they would also like me to study here in Kenya, I believe I can make more use of my potential out there.
2. Always be flexible and ready to adapt in any situation. I have always been an introvert type of person but this is no excuse for me not to engage in social activities like extroverts when I need to or meet different types of people.
3. Never to let an opportunity slip by. Right now I have the opportunity of being a part of the AKAD Group and meeting great people who I want to interact with in future. I have the opportunity of practicing my essay writing skills and getting good feedback which is a step to achieving my goal of joining a top university in the world like MIT.
4. Always aim to make a positive impact on people's lives. Just like Carnegie was mentored by Tom Scott I also wish to be a mentor to those with aspirations that they want to be a reality in future.
5. Share my success and fortune with the less fortunate. Following the example of Rockefeller and Carnegie as philanthropists and others like Bill Gates, I will also not store away my fortune especially in future. Now I can and am doing this through community service and also advising others to do so themselves.
6. Always be a visionary. I have learnt to always be forward minded and think of solutions that will be of benefit to future lives. Nowadays it seems like everything has been done but I believe that everything can still be improved and especially in the area of technology. Improved in that it is easily accessible to nearly everybody.
7. Never be afraid to take necessary risks and follow my instincts. In past times I have been too afraid of looking like a complete idiot in front of people just to support an idea or explain my thoughts but maybe if I had, I would have won and opened more doors in my life and I never wish for that to happen again.

The men who built America have enlightened and inspired me greatly and will forever have a positive impact on my life and goals through the lessons I have learnt.

