Tarbell’s devastating work provides a vivid account of the rough-and-tumble nature of business around the turn of the century. This excerpt highlights struggles involving John D. Rockefeller’s Standard Oil Company, independent oil men, and railroads. Note in particular that during the late 19th century, government at all levels, rather than being an instrument to control big business, was instead used by big businesses as a tool with which to bludgeon their opponents. It is worth noting that Standard Oil, not feeling they were doing anything wrong, opened their records to Tarbell’s investigation, a decision they no doubt came to regret. The Company was broken up in 1911, though its descendants are alive and well today as the Exxon Corporation.

With Congress in such a temper the oil men felt that there might be some hope of securing the regulation of interstate commerce they had asked for in 1872. The agitation resulted in the presentation in the House of Representatives of the first Interstate Commerce Bill which promised to be effective. The bill was presented by James H. Hopkins of Pittsburgh. In aid of his bill a House investigation was asked. It was soon evident that the Standard was an enemy of this investigation. Now what Mr. Hopkins wanted was to compel the railroads to present their contracts with the Standard Oil Company. The Committee summoned the proper railroad officers and the treasurer of the Standard Oil Company. Of the railroad men, only one appeared, and he refused to answer the questions asked or to furnish the documents demanded. The Standard treasurer refused also to furnish the committee with information. The two principal witnesses of the oil men were E. G. Patterson of Titusville and Frank Rockefeller of Cleveland, a brother of John D. Rockefeller. Mr. Patterson sketched the history of the oil business since the South Improvement Company identified the Standard Oil Company with that organization, and framed the specific complaint of the oil men, as follows: “The railroad companies have combined with an organization of individuals known as the Standard Ring; they give to that party the sole and entire control of all the petroleum refining interest and petroleum shipping interest in the United States, and consequently place the whole producing interest entirely at their mercy. If they succeed they place the price of refined oil as high as they please. It is simply optional with them how much to give us for what we produce.”

Frank Rockefeller gave a pretty complete story of the trials of an independent refiner. He declared that at the moment, his concern, the Pioneer Oil Company, was unable to get the same rates as the Standard; the freight agent frankly told him that unless he could give the road the same amount of oil to transport that the Standard did, he could not give the rate the Standard enjoyed. Mr. Rockefeller said that in his belief there was a pooling arrangement between the railroads and the Standard and that the rebate given was “divided up between the Standard Oil Company and the railroad officials.” He repeatedly declared to the committee that he did not know this to be a positive fact, that he had no
proof, but that he believed such was the truth. …

Of course after this controversy the railroads were more obdurate than ever. The railroad men were active in securing the suppression of the investigations, and they soon succeeded not only in doing that but in pigeon-holing for the time Mr. Hopkins's Interstate Commerce Bill…

…In the meantime the Pennsylvania Transportation Company made the most strenuous efforts to secure the right of way. A large number of men were sent out to talk over the farmers into signing the leases. Hand bills were distributed with an appeal to be generous and to free the oil business from a monopoly that was crushing it. These same circulars told the farmers that a monopoly had hired agents all along the route misrepresenting the facts about their intentions. Mr. Harley, under the excitement of the enterprise and the opposition it aroused, became a public figure, and in October the New York Graphic gave a long interview with him. In this interview Mr. Harley claimed that the pipe-line scheme was gotten up to escape the Standard Oil monopoly. Litigation, he declared, was all his scheme had to fear. “John D. Rockefeller, president of the Standard monopoly,” he said, “is working against us in the country newspapers, prejudicing the farmers and raising issues in the courts, and seeking also to embroil us with other carrying lines.”. 

http://www.academicamerican.com/progressive/docs/tarbellSO.html