The Nature and Business of War

Drilling for Oil in Wartime Los Angeles

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In 1942, Seaboard Oil Company proposed to drill for oil beneath Elysian Park in Los Angeles, arguing that the wells would help supply the war effort. Although support for the war ran very high, protests erupted immediately. Oil had brought a great deal of wealth to Los Angeles, but the petroleum industry had also caused a lot of damage: well-landscaped neighborhoods had turned into industrial zones, derricks loomed over cemeteries, and drilling took place in streets. prospecting caused such destruction that Los Angeles outlawed oil wells near city parks almost as soon as the city's oil industry began production in the early 1890s, and by the 1940s zoning laws protected parks and residential neighborhoods from drilling and its related development. Seaboard's proposal should have had little hope of success.

But World War II created an unusual context for American industries. Many land-use, labor, and industrial regulations seemed counterproductive, even quaint, amid total war. Federal agencies relaxed regulations and environmental protections to help the military or increase supplies of vital materials, eventually permitting salt mining in Death Valley National Monument and tungsten mining in Yosemite National Park, and loggers almost gained a free hand in Olympic National Park. In changing national environmental regulations, World War II also undercut local resistance to industrial production, opening the way in Los Angeles for oil drilling even in its densest neighborhoods. This set the stage for a postwar rollback of the regulatory state and an increase in industry's dominance of the policy making at all levels of government.

Oil development had begun in Los Angeles in 1892, when Edward L. Doheny drilled a shallow well about a mile from Los Angeles's City Hall. Over the next eight years, more than a thousand wells were drilled in what became known as
the Los Angeles City Field. By 1909, California was the nation's leading oil producer, and Los Angeles oil fields were among the state's richest. While oil development brought incredible wealth to the city, it also caused a myriad of problems. New strikes brought stampedes for leases and drilling rights. Natural-gas explosions, runaway wells, noise, odor, and sprayed or spilled oil befouled the community and lowered residential property values. Fires raged out of control amongst tightly packed wooden derricks, open oil tanks, and spilled crude. One resident who stayed in Huntington Beach despite the bedlam there, complained: "These men have taken everything except the food in the icebox... My back yard is an oil well, a sump hole. My fence is gone and the inside of my house is a mess." "

To curb the worst excesses of oil development, in 1897 the Los Angeles City Council passed an ordinance that prohibited drilling within 800 feet of Elysian Park or Echo Park, or within 1,800 feet of Los Angeles's other city parks. Subsequent rules forced oil companies to reduce the danger, odors, noise, and other nuisances associated with production. By the late 1920s, zoning regulations limited where oil companies could drill in Los Angeles but, as soon became clear in Venice Beach, these regulations could not withstand the onslaught of a rich oil strike.

In 1929, oil was discovered at Venice Beach, which Los Angeles had annexed just three years earlier, ensuring that its industrial regulations applied there. But these were ignored in the rapid and chaotic drilling that followed. This was in part because locals fought against the implementation of those protective codes. In January 1930, some five thousand Del Mar and Venice residents attended mass meetings and public hearings to demand unrestricted drilling in the Venice-Del Mar oil field. Thousands more signed petitions urging the city planning commission to ignore rules which would have limited drilling in residential areas. Venice's former city attorney, who sought to lease his own land in the 1930s, claimed oil drilling was "possibly one of the most popular issues with the greatest unanimity of opinion in the area as has ever been heard of."

The Los Angeles City Council buckled under the pressure; according to the Los Angeles Times, "the desire to drill became so great in that district" that the city council could no longer refuse. Derricks, tanks, and pump houses quickly displaced homes. The remaining residents faced life in a noxious industrial zone. The consequences of almost unrestricted drilling quickly shifted public opinion.

When opposition to drilling in the Venice-Del Mar field did arise, objections focused more on the distribution of oil wealth than on drilling itself. Oil companies did not lease all properties in an oil field. Landowners who could not lease their property suffered all the costs of oil development but enjoyed none of its benefits. One proposed solution was the community lease, in which a group of homeowners leased their land as a block and shared royalties. In 1930, Venice's city council member B.M. Hansen proposed a system of community leases that would have allowed homeowners within Venice to approve or reject drilling city block by city block. This system, he argued, would protect property values within Venice, and give all residents a voice in oil development near their homes. In addition, by slowing the rate of oil pumping, community leases could increase total production from the Venice-Del Mar field by conserving the natural gas pressures necessary for extracting oil.

In November 1931, Ramsey Petroleum requested that the Los Angeles City Planning Committee rezone five acres of land so it could drill diagonally, or whipstock, from a neighborhood just north of Elysian Park into oil sands it believed lay underneath the city park. All but a few of the abutting property owners supported the request and in December 1931, the city planning committee voted to allow the company to drill. The Los Angeles Times criticized Ramsey Petroleum's test well as "adverse to the public interest and the welfare of the city, though pleasing to particular, though short-sighted, property-owners." A superior court judge soon joined the opposition, as did the city's playground and recreation commission, water and power commission and fire department, the League of Women Voters, the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce, the Los Angeles Municipal League, and a host of neighborhood improvement associations. They constantly referred to the "fiasco at Venice" as a key reason for opposing what the Los Angeles Times labeled an "abrupt wildcatting scheme."

The public hearing on the Ramsey Petroleum test well was raucous. Nine hundred people attended, hissing, booing, and breaking out in "wild cheering and dismal groans at every opportunity." The "hostile mob" even hooted down Charles H. Randall, the city council president whose district included the old Los Angeles City Field and Elysian Park, and who proposed rejecting the permits. A year earlier, those who insisted that land ownership included the freedom to drill for oil had won the debate; now, those neighbors who considered oil drilling an "invasion of property rights" and a threat to property values had triumphed. As opposition to the Elysian Park project grew, Randall and the Los Angeles Times proposed, but still could not pass, an outright ban on oil drilling in residential Los Angeles.

In the early 1930s, Angelinos disagreed about whether the right to drill for oil on private property trumped the rights to abutters to protect their property from the nuisances and dangers of oil drilling; about how to resolve the competing mineral rights of all property owners in an oil field; and about the relationship between individual property rights and the communal benefit from zoning and industrial regulation. Opponents of the Venice and Elysian Park projects also
emphasized the importance of real estate values and the community's prosperity. As the 1930s wore on, however, attention shifted from questions of property and community to the behavior and intentions of the oil companies themselves. Oil development on California's beaches put the industry at odds with the public. A series of scandals from the early 1920s through the late 1930s—Teapot Dome; the Julian Petroleum stock fraud; and two inquiries into price fixing and violations of the Sherman Anti-Trust Act—increased public antipathy toward oil companies. In all, the oil industry did not appear very trustworthy by the time World War II gave prospectors a new opportunity to look for oil in the heart of Los Angeles.

Yet the war created a state of emergency that opened the doors to unprecedented oil exploration. After all, the military's trucks, tanks, ships, and planes required unprecedented amounts of oil, just as hostilities cut the United States off from foreign supplies. The U.S. did not face a nationwide oil shortage during the war. Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes freely acknowledged that he had imposed gasoline rationing to save rubber, not fuel. Nevertheless, the Southern California oil fields were the primary source of fuel for the navy's Pacific fleet. The war sustained those calling for aggressive oil exploration in Los Angeles. The oil industry responded briskly to wartime calls for more oil. In just two months in 1942, California producers opened one hundred new wells and increased the state's oil flow by 6 percent. One company invested so much money in drilling and exploration that it could not pay its employees. Firms in Los Angeles renewed proposals for wells in protected residential sections of the city. Even though their support for the war would precipitate a reassessment of urban drilling, Angelenos remained skeptical of the oil companies' motives, and quite concerned about their city and their property values. The conflict between the need for oil and the desire to protect neighborhood integrity was central to debates over urban drilling in the 1940s, as Angelenos struggled to decide if drilling was truly necessary for the war effort or if oil companies were taking advantage of the emergency to gain access to oil that local regulations had placed off limits.

The first of the wartime urban drilling proposals came before the Los Angeles City Council a month after Pearl Harbor. In January 1942, J. E. Elliot and Shell Oil proposed a deep well in an unincorporated corner of land called the Gilmore Island, between the La Brea Tar Pits and West Hollywood. Even though Gilmore Island was unincorporated county land, the city of Los Angeles claimed the right to approve Shell’s project because the wells would affect residential neighborhoods within city limits. Under pressure from the city council, Shell developed a plan for Gilmore Island that would have made it a model urban oil well. To reduce noise and odors, Shell Oil promised to house all drilling and pumping equipment inside an attractive concrete structure; to eliminate dangerous storage tanks Shell intended to transport oil to the refinery in underground pipes. Los Angeles officials faced enormous pressure to approve the Gilmore Island well. Shell consistently defended the project as necessary for the war. The Secretary of the Navy, Frank Knox, and the federal Office of Production Management wrote to Los Angeles city officials urging them to approve new development of the Los Angeles city fields generally and the Gilmore Island project specifically. Residents of the neighborhoods around Gilmore Island, however, were “unimpressed” by Knox’s letter, and rejected the new wells as “nothing more . . . than a wildcat oil scheme.” Two hundred and fifty of its residents spoke against the oil wells at a public hearing in June 1942. Mayor Fletcher Bowron initially agreed with them, vetoing the ordinance that would have annexed Gilmore Island and permitted drilling there, on the grounds that Shell’s project threatened the rights of the city and the interests of nearby property owners.

Bowron was outraged that oil companies wanted to use the war emergency to circumvent hard-won regulations, and he was incensed that federal officials sided with the oil companies. He also wanted to replace the existing project-by-project review of oil well permit applications with standard regulations to protect property near oil wells. Bowron did not have enough support on the city council to implement these plans. Only one city council member consistently supported Bowron on the oil issue. Roy Hampton, whose district included Elysian Park, used every parliamentary procedure he could to block projects like Gilmore Island, and continued his campaign against urban drilling when he left office. Their early opposition was trumped when late in 1942 the council narrowly approved a drilling permit for a residential neighborhood near Los Angeles harbor and overrode Bowron’s previous Gilmore Island veto. Outvoted, Bowron reluctantly approved both projects, but he vowed to see to it that Shell fulfilled its promises to “eliminate noise and other nuisances” and that its wells did not “detract from the value of residents' property.” Shell found no oil at Gilmore Island, which saved its neighbors from ongoing operations.

The green light at Gilmore Island unleashed a small flood of applications for nine new oil projects, mostly in residential areas where the council had previously—sometimes repeatedly—refused to let oil companies drill. Seaboard Oil Company’s proposal for Elysian Park was typical. Its plans were almost identical to Ramsey Petroleum’s 1931 proposal, and Seaboard may have begun seeking oil leases for this project starting in 1937. Like Ramsey Petroleum before it, Seaboard sought permission to erect a test well on an eleven-acre site northwest of Elysian Park, near the intersection of Riverside Drive and Dallas Street, from which Seaboard hoped to
whipstock under the park. The company promised to pay the city 21 percent of the revenue from oil extracted out from under city property; additional sums would go to the property owners who leased their land to the company. Like Shell at Gilmore Island, Seaboard promised to enclose its derricks and machinery to protect nearby homes from noise and damage.29 Seaboard justified drilling under Elysian Park to help win the war, thus giving the project the same patriotic sheen that Shell had employed in its Gilmore Island bid. With these assurances, and hoping to profit from oil royalties, two thousand homeowners signed leases with Seaboard.30

Seaboard then brought the plan before the Los Angeles City Park Commission, which approved the Elysian Park well in late February 1943. Within a week, opponents organized a mass meeting with Mayor Bowron, the city planning commission, and council member Roy Hampton.31 The controversy over urban drilling became a major campaign issue in at least four city council races that March. Candidates Wilder W. Hartley, David Stannard, John Baumgartner, and Robert L. Burns faced constituents who held “indignation mass meetings” if their representatives endorsed a drilling project in their neighborhoods, as well as oil companies that “vowed vengeance” if a council member or candidate opposed oil wells. Hartley and Stannard both decided to take on the oil companies rather than the voters. Hartley declared himself opposed to new wells in the residential areas of his Wilmington district, while Stannard, of Venice, tried to ban new oil wells within a half mile of all the beaches in the city of Los Angeles and adjacent communities.32

The council elected that March included more opponents of city drilling than had sat on the previous council, but the newly elected representatives did not take office until July 1943. In the interim, the lame-duck city council continued to approve drilling permits. They insisted they would not let drilling “affect the rights of residential property,” but their votes on urban-drilling proposals seemed to place greater emphasis on the development of oil supplies. Mayor Bowron blocked their actions with his veto and began drafting a new uniform ordinance on urban drilling.33

The most controversial paragraph in Bowron’s May 1943 proposal required all new wells in residential areas to close six months after the end of the war, and gave the city’s zoning administrator power to prohibit oil operations that he or she judged would “cause grave harm to” or “diminish seriously the value or detract from the use” of adjacent property.34 Many public officials did not think Bowron’s draft went far enough. The city planning commission, for example, wanted to ban urban drilling outright, and yet accepted its spirit “because the Federal government had stated that the oil industry must produce great quantities of oil for war purposes at the earliest possible date.”35

Oil companies accepted regulations requiring them to reduce the impact of their wells on nearby property, but they adamantly opposed time limits on oil production. Accordingly, they pushed through amendments that extended their operating window first to three and then to seven years after the war ended. They insisted as well that they needed to operate wells for many years to recover construction costs, and that modern drilling technology made such strict limits unnecessary. The industry organ, Petroleum World, published articles that insisted that only initial well drilling caused any significant disruption, and public fears were entirely unfounded because modern drilling practices would never produce another oil field as chaotic and dangerous as Venice, or the even more notorious Signal Hill field.36

Angelenos who had experienced the bedlam of residential oil drilling in the 1920s and 1930s had ample reason for skepticism about these rosy predictions, but the oil industry had so much support in Washington that their critics had trouble implementing Bowron’s proposed regulations. In addition to Secretary of the Navy Knox, whose calls for more oil “to win the battle of the Pacific” gave the petroleum industry a critical military justification for expanded oil production, the industry enjoyed support from Harold Ickes and from the Petroleum Administration for the War (PAW). Ickes and PAW rejected Los Angeles’s proposed regulations, and PAW wanted to streamline the permitting process for new oil wells and decentralize regulatory oversight to increase oil production.37 Ickes had staffed the agency with petroleum-industry experts, three-quarters of whom came from oil companies, and then put the organization in the hands of a former vice president of Standard Oil of California. Industry influence was compounded by the PAW’s dependence upon a group of oil executives, the Petroleum Industry War Council, for policy recommendations.38 This type of industry-government collaboration was not unusual during World War II, and was seen as essential to secure industry cooperation with the federal government’s unprecedented intervention in the economy. But the integration of oil executives into the federal policy-making apparatus gave them far greater influence over Los Angeles’s oil regulations than their local opponents enjoyed.

That is why Bowron and his two main allies against urban drilling, city council member Roy Hampton and attorney Marshall Stimson, found the oil industry’s influence in Washington and military and strategic justifications for oil-production drilling equally impervious to their opposition. Hampton and Bowron agreed that approving oil wells in residential neighborhoods, even to win the war, set a dangerous precedent that threatened to turn the whole city into an oil field.39 When Hampton said this, he was recalling what happened in Venice in the 1930s, but
Bowron was also thinking of Oklahoma City, a city he visited in 1943 and where oil wells had spread rapidly from unincorporated territory on the outskirts of town through poor neighborhoods then into rich residential districts, and finally onto the grounds of the state capitol itself. Bowron and Hampton also concurred that oil companies should not drill in residential areas unless absolutely necessary, and that the federal government had neither fully exploited alternatives nor proven that the Navy really needed Los Angeles's oil.

Marshall Stimson took an even harder line against urban drilling. He owed his prominence in Los Angeles to his role in breaking the Southern Pacific Railroad's monopoly over Los Angeles harbor. He shared with his allies an acute sense that oil drilling initiated an "endless damaging chain" that allowed drilling to spread, with devastating consequences for the community. But Stimson also challenged the prodripping side's property-rights arguments, repeatedly citing cases of absentee landowners who profited from oil from afar, damaging resident landowners' property and investments with impunity. Stimson clearly sympathized with the actual residents of oil-producing neighborhoods, and implied that their wishes had far more legitimacy than those of absentee landowners.

He also argued that oil wells caused damage "to the city as a whole [that] would far outweigh any possible gain that might arise from drilling in certain limited areas," and demanded that before the Los Angeles oil fields were tapped the U.S. Navy should open the Elk Hills Naval Petroleum Reserve; finally, Stimson believed that the PAW should ease production restrictions in rural areas.

"The Government will get quicker profit and more of it by removing these restrictions than by drilling in the City of Los Angeles," he argued, "and any citizen of Los Angeles has a right to demand that that be done first." The fact that the Department of the Interior and the Petroleum Administration for the War had refused to do this, was evidence, Stimson believed, that major oil companies just wanted to use the war to gain access to oil that had been off-limits during peacetime; and that the nation's largest oil firms controlled federal oil policy, to the detriment of small oil producers, Los Angeles, and the public interest.

Even with articulate and aggressive critics like Hampton and Stimson speaking out against urban drilling, Mayor Bowron had to walk a fine line when challenging the oil industry and PAW; he moved cautiously, often delaying and moderating his position until he had a clear sense of public opinion and of the real options open to the city. In addition, he and the city council jockeyed for political influence, which prompted the mayor to veto ordinances that he had sponsored and to convene multiple public hearings on urban drilling while claiming to have no fixed opinion on the question. Bowron needed public opinion behind him if he was to take on PAW. His actions in the summer of 1943 reflect the delicate balance he struck to marshal public opinion against new drilling in residential Los Angeles.

In late June, the lame-duck city council passed Bowron's model ordinance and linked it to a drilling proposal for an abandoned golf course in Westwood, and the mayor then held a series of public hearings on drilling that July and August. Many opponents of drilling warned that city-sanctioned oil wells would start the city down a slippery slope; they disputed the Navy's claims that it needed oil from residential areas; they complained that oil production would devastate property values; and questioned the oil industry's motives, insisting that oil production end when peace returned. The Angelenos who spoke at these hearings regarded the oil industry as a selfish type of enterprise, and called upon city officials to protect their real estate investments. Others, such as the spokesperson for residents of Elysian Heights, drew a sharp line between the public good and the interests of the oil companies. Urban drilling, he declared, would "set up a monopoly by the oil companies not in the best interests of the majority of the citizens." He raised the specter of political corruption, too, reasoning that if the city controlled oil drilling through a political process, the oil companies would have no choice but to enter politics as the railroads had decades earlier. Perhaps the most damaging sentiment was voiced by the secretary-manager of the Beverly Hills Chamber of Commerce who feared "that there is a group hiding behind the American flag, working for a selfish interest."

Ironically, in the summer of 1943 Bowron vetoed his own model ordinance to pursue regulations that would force the oil companies to close oil wells at the end of the war. Harold Ickes rejected Bowron's proposals, and Herbert R. Gallagher, director of the Los Angeles office of PAW told the city council that he wanted "every field and pool in the state, including those within the city of Los Angeles" developed as swiftly as possible. Under pressure from Ickes and Gallagher, Bowron reluctantly changed his position and approved Seaboard's Elysian Park well. The city council approved the Elysian Park well a few months later, but not before Seaboard Oil's attorney accused one council member of threatening to "impose conditions so stringent that no private enterprise could undertake drilling at any time." Residents of the neighborhood were deeply disappointed; some four hundred property owners had demanded that the city limit oil operations to the duration of public hearings on the Elysian Park well. Bowron's hopes for a uniform oil ordinance were frustrated, but oil executives were convinced that the Elysian Park well would be so "unobjectionable" that opposition to urban drilling would soon "dissipate." They reassured the Los Angeles public that "The company recognizes its responsibility to the public and will conform with the provisions of farsighted city planning."
After Bowron signed the Elysian Park ordinance, approval of additional oil wells soon followed, but the long delays from repeated public hearings and careful manipulation of parliamentary procedure allowed a sense of urgency to settle around the oil-drilling issue. In November 1943, council member John Baumgartner’s frustration erupted: “Oil that geologists are certain is underlying the Fox Hills area might well be on the way right now to our boys fighting the Japs in the Pacific if it were not for these kind [sic] of tactics.” Council member Carl Rasmusen joined him, calling his colleagues “dilatory.”

Apparently, the California State Assembly agreed; a special assembly interim committee convened hearings on Los Angeles’s oil policies in mid-November 1943. The Citizen News, one of Los Angeles’s smaller newspapers, blamed Bowron and quoted city council member Ira J. McDonald excoriating Bowron for “using the oil issue as a political football.” Meanwhile, Seaboard began drilling the Elysian Park well in May 1944, despite a lawsuit that former city council member Roy Hampton had filed.

In mid-June, Seaboard discovered that it had sunk hundreds of thousands of dollars, and a lot of political capital, on a “duster” that would produce no more oil than the so-called model well at Gilmore Island.

Bowron claimed to have signed the Elysian Park ordinance only because of “a conviction, based upon indisputable evidence, that there is a shortage of oil for war purposes, particularly on the West Coast,” but his correspondence with the city council reflected his continued opposition to urban drilling on principle, and his belief that the companies applying for urban drilling permits were “not actuated by purely patriotic motives but by expectation of profit,” because no company yet had offered to limit production to the duration. He never really believed that the oil shortage was as desperate as the Paw claimed; supporting this contention was Paw’s decision to limit production from some California oil wells in November 1943.

He also thought that the Department of the Interior and the navy should have reduced the fuel sent to surplus butadiene and aluminum production rather than permit the oil industry to ruin his city. Not long after Seaboard received final permission to drill at Elysian Park, Bowron announced that he would oppose any further urban oil wells until the question of urban drilling was submitted to voters for their approval.

It is unclear which way a referendum on urban oil drilling would have gone. Strong opposition to oil wells continued in most affected neighborhoods, but commitment to the war effort tempered that opposition. Some Angelinos remained adamant that sacrificing everything, including their homes and communities, to defeat the Axis was not worth it; others who opposed drilling in residential areas in principal expressed some willingness to accept oil wells if oil companies also sacrificed. These comments by homeowners were typical: “If the government really needs the oil, I will let them drill in my front yard and turn the proceeds over to the Red Cross, if they will agree to stop when the war is over.” Another fumed: “The Government took my son and can take my oil—but why should I ruin my home to make an oil company richer?”

In this, Angelinos merely carried the oil companies’ and the Paw’s claims of a war emergency to their logical conclusion. Even those willing to accept oil wells as an emergency measure could not countenance “wrapping the flag” around urban drilling for profit, and as long as the oil companies fought all time limits on production from urban wells, these Angelinos could not accept urban drilling.

Others believed that the war justified expanded oil production. This position was clearly demonstrated by a series of letters printed in the Los Angeles Times in February 1944, which the newspaper had solicited to gauge public opinion. In an editorial introducing the letters, the Times reported that 90 percent of correspondents favored urban drilling for the war effort, but also noted that a local oil company had published a circular urging Angelinos to show their support for oil wells.

The letters were, if anything, enthusiastic about the war, but less sanguine about the oil wells. In the most poignant of these, Ora R. Knight argued: “There are so many things we have had to put up with and endure because of the war effort that it seems positively infantile nonsense to make such a fuss over aesthetics. If I could have a seat on the bus every day, for instance, I would be happy to sit in the shadow of an oil well. If I could only have my friends and relatives back from the service an oil well even within a few hundred yards would not make me unhappy.”

She was probably not the only one to feel this way.

Debate over urban drilling dragged on for several more years. The city council did not pass uniform rules governing drilling within the city limits until February 1945. In the meantime, the Westwood golf course was rejected again in August 1944. Seaboard sought and received permission to drill what turned out to be a modestly productive well in Chavez Ravine, a far poorer and politically weaker community than Westwood, in September 1944.

The Wilmington wells, which Bowron had vetoed in 1942, received necessary zoning variances in February 1945. A few months later, the Dumm Brothers Petroleum Corporation secured permission to drill in the Lincoln Heights neighborhood, about two miles east of Chavez Ravine.

Oil companies continued to press for oil development of residential neighborhoods after the war. They could no longer cite the war, so they argued for new wells near the airport and in Boyle Heights on the grounds that the city’s and state’s future depended upon “oil, oil and more oil.”

World War II changed oil politics in Los Angeles and the nation by introducing patriotism into what had been a conflict over property rights, zoning, and urban...
environmental regulations. Between 1942 and 1945, in speeches, public hearings, and newspaper articles, the oil companies and their opponents each tried to depict themselves as more patriotic than other stakeholders. The oil companies clearly had the upper hand in this rhetorical conflict; they simply had to describe their plans as necessary for the war effort to make their case; the navy, Ickes, andawn all supported these claims. This consigned Bowron, Stimson, and their allies to questioning the oil companies’ motives, or attempting to redefine patriotism to include protecting the community from uncontrolled industrial development. Thus, in a 1943 letter to Ickes, Stimson declared, “I know there is no patriotism in their efforts to open up the City of Los Angeles” for oil drilling. Likewise, Bowron used the oil companies’ objections to his model ordinance against them, arguing that if Los Angeles residents had to sacrifice their homes to fuel the navy, the oil industry should be willing to risk economic loss to win the war. That they worked so hard to protect their profits, Bowron insisted, proved that they were motivated by greed and not patriotism. City council president Rensden D. Bird acknowledged a different use of patriotism in these debates when he complained that the oil companies’ and federal officials’ constant references to the war put him “in the position of being unpatriotic” if he sought to restrict drilling.

The attempts to connect urban drilling and its regulation to patriotism cast local resource policy issues in terms which qualified opposition and undermined industrial regulations. World War II not only allowed the oil industry to gain access to areas that Los Angeles had placed off-limits to it, but wartime policy changes and institutions also allowed American businesses to redefine national policy goals. During and after the war, a new emphasis on economic growth overshadowed prewar policies designed to mitigate corporate influences. In Los Angeles, this policy realignment extended far beyond oil, as city and county officials instituted air-pollution control policies that rigidly controlled household pollution but emphasized technological change and cooperation with industries, and flood-control structures that sacrificed recreation and small-scale agriculture to protect industry. Given the explosive growth of industry, industrial jobs, and population in Los Angeles during World War II, elected officials’ attention to industrial prosperity is understandable. However, the story of urban drilling in Los Angeles also reveals the ways in which a national emergency can undermine legal protections that communities establish to limit powerful interests, protect minorities and civil rights, or shape their environment. This was true during World War II, it was true during the Cold War anti-Communist campaigns, and it is equally true now.


4. The Los Angeles Times (hereafter LAT) contains many descriptions of the chaos and filth that accompanied oil development. Los Angeles city leaders repeatedly sought to curb the impact of oil development. See for example “Measures to Stop the Oil Nuisance,” LAT, 3 May 1921; “War to Bar Oil Leaks in Sea Starts,” LAT, 9 Nov. 1926; “Oil Pollution Evil Banished,” LAT, 21 March 1929; Proquest. For residents’ reactions to Huntington Beach drilling, see Jim Combi, “Another Oil Boom Brings Chaos to Huntington Beach,” Fortnight 186 (16 Mar 1953), 11–13. Although this resident protested oil development, according to Combi, most Huntington Beach residents were so money-struck that they welcomed oil in spite of the chaos and
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few if it brought to their neighborhoods. Even the oil company acknowledged the impact of drilling on property values, particularly when it affected oil company-sponsored residential real estate development or the value of oil executives' homes. See for example, "Obsequies of Oil's Oozers," LAT, 19 Nov. 1905, and "Oil Spills Country Places," The Oil Age 83 (March 1917): 17. See also Yering, The Prize, 219–20.


6. Mrs. R. Blum to Los Angeles City Council, 5 Feb. 1930, City Archives Box A435, Communication #1310. Bertha S. Edwards to Los Angeles City Council and Planning Commission, 10 Feb. 1930, City Archives Box A435, Communication #1307. George Acet, "Summary of the Venice Oil Situation," City Archives Box A434, Communication #879. Spencer H. Horner to Councilman E. Webster, "Resolution" 8 Feb. 1930, City Archives Box A435, Communication #1308.


8. B. M. Hansen to Los Angeles City Council, 6 Feb. 1930, City Archives Box A434, Communication #1167. For complaints by property owners denied leases, see Mrs. R. Blum to Los Angeles City Council, 5 Feb. 1930, City Archives Box A435, Communication #1310; Bertha S. Edwards to Los Angeles City Council and Planning Commission, 10 Feb. 1930, City Archives Box A435, Communication #1307.

9. "New Municipal Oil Hunt Pends," LAT, 26 Jan. 1931, from Proquest. For some years, geologists had postulated that "rich oil stratum" that might out produce the legendary Signal Hill field lay under the park. In 1933, a crevasse opened up the bluff of Elysian Park that looms over Riverside Drive. The city engineers blamed the impending landslide on seepage from the nearby Elysian Park reservoir, but the Los Angeles Times reported a theory that high gas pressures associated with oil deposits under the park had caused the problem. See "Landslide Peril Nearers," LAT, 30 Nov. 1933, Proquest.


16. Howard Kegley, "California Oil News," LAT, 21 Feb. 1941; "Gilmore Island Oil Drilling Plea Supported by Knox," LAT, 27 May 1942; "Gilmore Area Addition Seen," LAT, 9 Oct. 1942, all in Proquest. The A. F. Gilmore Company was part of a local business empire that included a dairy farm, oil company, real estate, and sports facilities including the city's first baseball arena. The A. F. Gilmore Company survives today as the owner and operator of an upscale shopping mall and what it bills as "the original Farmer's Market" at Fairfax Boulevard and Third Street. For Shell oil's involvement at Gilmore Island, see "Oil Drilling Vote Deferred," LAT, 27 June 1942.


18. Proposed Gilmore Strip Oil Drilling Debated," LAT, 18 June 1942, Proquest. The Los Angeles Times listed the Wilshire District Civic League, the Miracle Mile Association, and an "oil man" named Byron D. Seaver among the opposition. For federal support for Gilmore Island drilling, see "Gilmore Island Oil Drilling Plea Supported by Knox," LAT, 27 May 1942; O. P. M. Uges Permit to Drill for Oil on Gilmore Island," LAT, 28 May 1942, both in Proquest.


22. Howard Kegley, “California Oil News,” LAT, 5 Nov. 1942, Proquest. In the aftermath of the approval of Gilmore Island, oil companies came forward with proposals to drill in the Salt Lake Field, the Sherman field, Fox Hills Country Club, the Westwood Hills Golf Course, on La Cienega at Third Street, near the Chatsworth Reservoir on Woodlake Avenue, west of LAX airport, and at Soto and Valley Blvd near the site of the Ascot Speedway. See “Oil Drilling Interest Soars,” LAT, 15 Dec. 1942; “Oil Drilling Vote Deferred,” LAT, 27 June 1942, Proquest.


29. Ibid.


35. “Lone Bid Submitted in Park Oil Project,” LAT, 16 March 1943, Proquest.


40. "Notes Taken at Public hearing on the Oil Drilling Ordinance, Thursday Afternoon, July 1, 1943," 3-4, in Box 36, Bowron Papers. See specifically comments by Mr. Leland Reeder, Immediate Past President of California Real Estate Association, Mrs. Gold, and Bruce Murchison.


43. As quoted in "Every Field and Pool Must Be Drilled,"—PAW, Petroleum World 40:8 (August 1943): 31. See also "Mayor Asks Council's Views on Oil Drilling," LAT, 7 July 1943.


47. "Mayor Signs Oil Measure," LAT, 28 Nov. 1943. "Delay on Oil Issue Ends," LAT, 17 Nov. 1943, Proquest. After Elysian Park, the city council gave the Huntington Land & Improvement Company permission to drill Los Angeles's next urban oil well next to the Ascot Speedway at the corner of Soto Street and Valley Boulevard. Bowron vetoed the Ascot project, arguing that the city council should wait until it saw whether the Elysian Park well proved as problem-free as promised, but the council overrode his veto the next day. On the council's initial vote on Ascot, see "Council Approves New Drilling Site," LAT, 2 Dec. 1943. For Bowron's veto and the council's override, see "Nullify Veto on Ascot Oil Drilling," Los Angeles Herald, 25 Jan. 1944; and "Council Votes Oil District," Los Angeles Examiner, 26 Jan. 1944, both in clippings files, Bowron Collection.


50. Bowron to the city council, 31 January 1944, 5, Box 36; "Oilmen Denounce Ickes Outcut in Gas Crisis," LAT, 17 Nov. 1943; "Mayor Urges Special Ballot on Oil Drilling," LAT, 1 Feb. 1944; "Mayor Urges Special Ballot on Oil Drilling," LAT, 1 Feb. 1944, all in Clippings, Bowron Collection. See also, "Mayor Signs Oil Measure," LAT, 28 Nov. 1943, Proquest.


52. D. G. Springer (Save Your Homes Association) to Stimson, 8 March 1943, Box 1, Marshall Stimson Collection, REH.

53. "Oil Drilling in City Backed," LAT, 14 Feb. 1944; Ora E. Knight, "Nonsense to ... Pass," LAT, 14 Feb. 1944, in Clippings, Bowron collection. The Los Angeles Times filled the editorial page of the February 14 issue with letters on the oil question; only two of the dozen or so letters opposed urban drilling. Marshall Stimson wrote one of these.

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40. "Notes Taken at Public hearing on the Oil Drilling Ordinance, Thursday Afternoon, July 1, 1943," 3-4, in Box 56, Bowron Papers. See specifically comments by Mr. Leland Reeder, Immediate Past President of California Real Estate Association, Mrs. Gold, and Bruce Murchison.


43. As quoted in "Every Field and Pool Must Be Drilled,"—PARO, Petroleum World 400 (August 1942); 21. See also "Mayor Aids Council's Views on Oil Drilling," LAT, 7 July 1943; "Mayor Proposes Safeguards for City Oil Drilling," LAT, 15 July 1943; both in Proquest; Ikes to Bowron, 19 Jan. 1943, 3, in Box 56, Bowron collection.


47. "Mayor Signs Oil Measure," LAT, 28 Nov. 1943; "Delay on Oil Issue Ends," LAT, 17 Nov. 1943, Proquest. After Elysian Park, the city council gave the Huntington Land & Improvement Company permission to drill Los Angeles's next urban oil well next to the Ascot Speedway at the corner of Soto Street and Valley Boulevard. Bowron vetoed the project, arguing that the city council should wait until it saw whether the Elysian Park well proved as problem-free as promised, but the council overrode his veto the next day. On the council's initial vote on Ascot, see "Council Approves New Drilling Site," LAT, 2 Dec. 1943. For Bowron's veto and the council's override, see "Nullify Veto on Ascot Oil Drilling," Los Angeles Herald, 25 Jan. 1944; and "Council Votes Oil District," Los Angeles Examiner, 26 Jan. 1944. Both in clippings, Bowron collection.


49. "Elysian Park Test Oil Well Proves 'Duster,' LAT, 23 June 1944, Proquest.

50. Bowron to the city council, 31 January 1944, 3, Box 56; "Oilmen Denounce Ikes Outcut in Gas Crisis," LAT, 17 Nov. 1943; "Mayor Urges Special Ballot on Oil Drilling," LAT, 1 Feb. 1944; "Mayor Urges Special Ballot on Oil Drilling," LAT, 1 Feb. 1944, all in Clippings, Bowron Collection. See also, "Mayor Signs Oil Measure," LAT, 28 Nov. 1943, Proquest.


52. D. G. Springer (Save Your Homes Association) to Stimson, 8 March 1943, Box 1, Marshall Stimson Collection, HSH.

53. "Oil Drilling in City Banned," LAT, 13 Feb. 1943. Ora E. Knight, "Nonsense to . . . Fuss," LAT, 14 Feb. 1944, in Clippings, Bowron collection. The Los Angeles Times filled the editorial page of the February 14 issue with letters on the oil question; only two of the dozen or so letters opposed urban drilling, Marshall Stimson wrote one of these.

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(Howard Kegley, "California Oil News," 26 Sept. 1945, Proquest.) By February 1946, Seaboard had abandoned this "small pumper of heavy oil" and its other Chavez Ravine leases (Howard Kegley, "California Oil News," 8 Feb. 1946).

55. "Oil Drilling Sanctioned in Wilmington Area," LAT, 11 Feb. 1945; "Amended Application to Drill Oil Granted," LAT, 10 July 1945, both in Proquest.


57. Stimson to Ike, 19 June 1943, Box 1, "Oil Drilling in the City of Los Angeles," in Marshall Stimson Collection, HEN.

58. See, for example, "Mayor Vetoes Ordinance for Westwood Oil Drilling," LAT, 8 July 1943; "Mayor Proposes Safeguards for City Oil Drilling," LAT, 15 July 1943; "Mayor Vetoes Oil Ordinance," 22 Sept. 1943, all in Proquest. For Reasen Bird's reactions, see "City Planners Adopt Oil Well Time Extension," LAT, 19 June 1943, in Proquest.

Stand by Your Brand

Vail, Colorado, and the Consumer Roots of Popular Environmentalism

WILLIAM PHILPOTT

Vail, Colorado, is an environmental disaster. At least, that is how many people see it today. An overgrown corporate megaresort, it has turned a scenic alpine glen into an ugly jumble of towers and condominium blocks, crowding the valley floor and clawing up the slopes on either side. It has metastasized westward down the Eagle River, spawning several more urban tumors, cluttering once-glorious expanses of ranchland with golf courses, gated subdivisions, box stores, and trailer parks. It now sprawls more than twenty miles from end to end—nearly forty if you count the growth still farther down valley, around Gypsum and Eagle—and stretching longer each year; a giant waste of scenery, energy, water, and habitat. And along the interstate highway that forms its spine, traffic roars incessantly, dirtying the air, shattering the mountain quiet, exacting a murderous toll on wildlife, and clogging rivers with sandy, oily runoff. Vail is, in the words of one recent documentary, "the epitome of mountain development run amok."

But there was a time, back in the 1960s and early 1970s, when many saw Vail as just the opposite: an environmental ideal. Attractively designed, Vail kept development to a human scale and complemented the high country's alpine beauty. Carefully planned, Vail integrated transportation and recreation, efficiently accommodating masses of vacationers in a compact space. As a full-service resort amidst one of America's most scenic landscapes, Vail made it easy for people to escape the city and get back to nature. And as a highly profitable enterprise in the "clean" industry of recreation, Vail showed that there was economic value to outdoor beauty, creating an incentive for Coloradans to take better care of their mountain landscapes. Far from reviling Vail, many people thought the best thing that could happen to the mountains would be to have more places just like it.