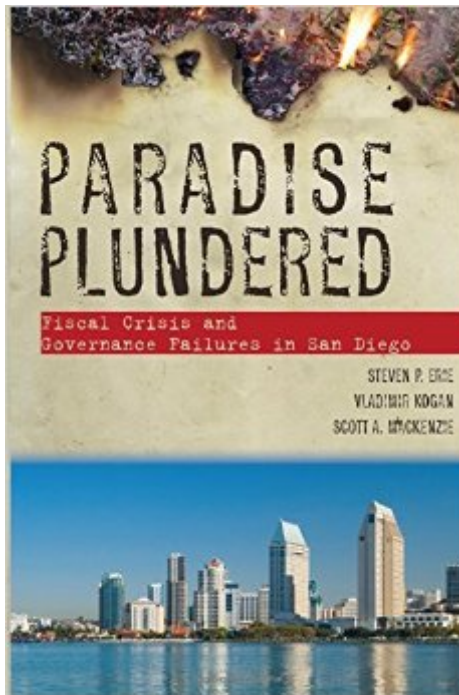


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# Paradise Plundered: Fiscal Crisis And Governance Failures In San Diego



## Synopsis

The early 21st century has not been kind to California's reputation for good government. But the Golden State's governance flaws reflect worrisome national trends with origins in the 1970s and 1980s. Growing voter distrust with government, a demand for services but not taxes to pay for them, a sharp decline in enlightened leadership and effective civic watchdogs, and dysfunctional political institutions have all contributed to the current governance malaise. Until recently, San Diego, California's 8th largest city, seemed immune to such systematic governance disorders. This sunny beach town entered the 1990s proclaiming to be "America's Finest City," but in a few short years its reputation went from "Futureville" to "Enron-by-the-Sea." In this eye-opening and telling narrative, Steven P. Erie, Vladimir Kogan, and Scott A. MacKenzie mix policy analysis, political theory, and history to explore and explain the unintended but largely predictable failures of governance in San Diego. Using untapped primary sources; interviews with key decision makers and public documents; and benchmarking San Diego with other leading California cities, *Paradise Plundered* examines critical dimensions of San Diego's governance failure: a multi-billion dollar pension deficit; a chronic budget deficit; inadequate city services and infrastructure; grandiose planning initiatives divorced from dire fiscal realities; an insulated downtown redevelopment program plagued by poorly-crafted public-private partnerships; and, for the metropolitan region, inadequate airport and port facilities, a severe underinvestment in firefighting capacity despite destructive wildfires, and heightened Mexican border security concerns. Far from a sunny story of paradise and prosperity, this account takes stock of an important but understudied city, its failed civic leadership, and poorly performing institutions, policymaking, and planning. Though the extent of these failures may place San Diego in a league of its own, other cities are experiencing similar challenges and political changes. As such, this tale of civic woe offers valuable lessons for urban scholars, practitioners, and general readers concerned about the future of their own cities.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Far from "liberal dogmatism" favoring the "corporate state", *Paradise Plundered* is in fact a carefully researched book on how San Diego got itself into its current mess. Every San Diego resident would be well-served by reading this detailed explanation of the city's fiscal crisis and governance challenges. Even people who do not live in San Diego would benefit from reading the book as a cautionary tale on what to avoid--public-private partnerships that serve the few at the expense of the many, politicians who encourage the public to think it can get something for nothing, and "blue-ribbon" committees that rubber stamp proposals benefiting elites without deliberation or public involvement. As someone who has lived and worked in San Diego for forty years, and been very involved in the public debates over governance restructure, I did not anticipate many surprises from the book. Yet I was pleasantly surprised by the book's readability. The narrative of San Diego's policy mistakes reads like the plot of a detective story rather than a dry policy analysis. The attempt by politicians and voters to run a city "on the cheap", and the deplorable results of this attempt, has the built-in drama of a true tragedy. This is why San Diego cancelled its fire helicopter program four days before the most destructive fire in the city's history. The book is replete with other such stories, and explains the city's present pension fiasco, as well its failure to invest in its crown jewels--the water and sewage system, public libraries, beaches and parks. The fact that a city so dependent upon tourism would constantly underfund sewage treatment so that it allows its beaches to be closed by sewage spills--and would then regularly petition the feds to allow loose enforcement of the laws that make beaches a safe place to recreate--is par for the course in San Diego. Although this book is meticulously researched, it is free of the jargon and ideology that plagues many books written by academics. At the same time, it explains WHY San Diego got into its current troubles, rather than just describing what those problems are. This book is essential reading for anyone who wants to understand how cities work, and fail to work, today.

One of the great challenges in the study of urban politics is the tendency to overly focus on America's Big Three New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles. In Erie, Kogan and Mackenzie's analysis reminds us that there are critical issues in urban politics arising in "second tier" cities that may be very different than those present in the largest of American cities. It also, like the best of social science books, opens up critical new lines of inquiry to both those interested in political processes in urban settings as well as urban policy - particularly as it concerns economic development and infrastructure. At the core of the book is a paradox. San Diego is an urban setting blessed by nature and geography. Through a combination of chutzpa and serendipity it figurative and literally set sail with the US Navy for more than 100 years, ensuring that some base level of economic activity would always accrue to the region. Circumstances smiled again on the city when the UC Regents bestowed upon the city a UC campus, lead by physical scientists, just as Sputnik and the 1960s would see a massive inflow of research dollars for scientific R&D. The result has been one of the nation's more reliant and prosperous economies and the "envy" of many an economic developer searching for a magic elixir. Yet San Diego has been "cursed", according to the authors, in its politics with some of the same tendencies ones sees in declining cities. Hundreds of millions of dollars have been spent in developing a downtown "entertainment" district, with the obligatory subsidized convention center, eateries, and stadium(s). As in other places, the result has been significant increases in the rate of growth for lower wage jobs and limited positive impact on other professions and industries. Quality of life investments, particularly in the older suburban neighborhoods where the majority of citizens live, are infrequent and limited. Up until recent crises raised public awareness and altered the political calculus, city leaders and public employee unions cooperatively worked to shift the costs of benefits onto the backs of future taxpayers in exchange for electoral support and labor peace. Erie et. al. chronicle all this and more, including the region's chronic under investment in trade infrastructure, the sad state of long-term urban planning at the City, and the "it would be funny if not so sad" inability to find a long-term solution to preserving arguably one of the nation's great jewels of urban green space - Balboa Park. The dedication of the book to Clarence Stone lets readers know up front that the book takes as its starting point regime theory in explaining this paradox. The distribution and exertion of power matters a great deal in their narrative- much of it driven by self-interested economic goals. As the authors are quick to point out, however, they depart from regime models by including both the impact of institutions and the political culture of a community. It thus represents an important extension of urban politics - believing that power, rules, AND common narrative all matter in shaping outcomes. As such it will provide much fodder for debate - both in respect to the "proto-model" the authors build and their

elegance in keeping that three-legged model working adequately as a guidestone to their narrative. Empirical chapters include discussion of urban redevelopment, infrastructure, planning, pensions, and basic city services. Where the book may, perhaps, fall short is completing its argument that San Diego is somehow uniquely dysfunctional in its politics. A glance through a list of new NFL stadium and their costs will see equally "blessed" sunbelt cities (Phoenix, Denver, Dallas, Atlanta spending hundreds of millions of dollars to subsidize an industry that has, at best, minimal impact of regional economic growth. San Jose, at the writing of this review, faces a mounting public employee pension crisis that dwarfs that of San Diego. The arms race in convention center expansion activity is not limited to Sunny San Diego. Finding neighborhoods complaining about overinvestment in downtown is ubiquitous - from big cities to the smallest municipality. The question raised by *Paradise Plundered* is what does San Diego have to tell us about other places and our broader understanding of the forces shaping the second tier of American cities. If plundering is commonplace than it may reflect a tension between the institutions of urban governance and the challenges American cities face in the 21st century - with San Diego a canary in the coal mine and a preview of coming attraction to many a "successful" American city. On the other hand, if plundering is not commonplace, than this raises the question of how these cities done to find escorts through the rocky shoals of downtown edifices, deferred liabilities and voters who want caviar services at McDonald prices. That quibble aside, readers interested in urban politics would be wise to pick up this book. It is clear that we are entering a period of austerity and hard choices. *Paradise Plundered* is stark reminder of how natural blessing can be (potentially) squandered by polities unwilling to make them.

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