



During the inter-war years the military regularly staged mass flights and mock battles in host cities as both entertainment and propaganda. This photograph, ca. August 1922, shows much about the emerging metropolitan-military complex. As hundreds of planes swoop over the Marine Corps base in the background and naval ships in the bay toward the Naval Air Station on North Island, San Diego across the bay is both protected and prospering. *San Diego Historical Society Photograph Collection.*

San Diego, the U.S. Navy, and Urban Development:

West Coast City Building, 1912–1929

by Gregg R. Hennessey

When Alonzo Horton, a San Francisco furniture dealer, purchased 960 acres at the edge of San Diego's magnificent bay in 1867, he envisioned a southern California port city to rival his former home in the north. The nineteenth-century vision he promoted was the venerated one of an eastern railroad connection opening a vast hinterland in the Southwest and terminating at a bustling harbor next to his town. After witnessing more than four decades of fruitless urban rivalry between San Diego and San Francisco and Los Angeles, Horton died without ever seeing his town get a direct rail link with the East. Yet his death in 1909 came on the eve of San Diego's takeoff into cityhood. While the harbor would prove the key, it was as a naval base, rather than as a commercial port, that San Diego would become an important metropolitan area. In the early twentieth century, San Diego linked its fortunes to a new and powerful force for urban development—the military.

Historian Roger W. Lotchin has given form and definition to the idea of a "martial metropolis" in twentieth-century American urban history.¹ Just as a city is shaped by its association with commerce or industry, he argues, so "a martial metropolis is one molded by its alliance with the U. S. fighting services." Pointing out that the influence of the military in such cities touches all aspects of urban

life, from economics, politics, and environment to culture, health, and public welfare, Lotchin asserts that "it is warranted to hypothesize that the martial is a distinct form of city and . . . is new to the U. S. urban experience."² On the East Coast, cities such as Norfolk and Charleston were transformed by their linkage with the Navy in the early twentieth century from small provincial towns with weak and stagnant economies into growing and thriving urban areas. Through a potent localized combination of business lobbying, congressional advocacy, and service support, these towns established the strategy for turning the power of military spending into a new and crucial component of urban growth. San Diego is a prime example of this fusion of militarization and urbanization on the West Coast. In the years following World War I, when the U. S. Navy expanded into the Pacific Ocean to become a two-ocean fleet, cities competed fiercely with one another to capture the federal money that accompanied such military expansion. San Diego was a principal player in this contest and through it achieved the metropolitan status that had eluded it during the Horton era. Within a decade after World War I, military disbursements changed San Diego from a small coastal town to a growing city of consequence in the emerging martial metropolises of the nation.

For a half century after Horton began developing his land holdings, San Diego grew modestly, surviving boom and bust cycles and trying vainly to make the best natural harbor south of San Francisco into an important entrepôt. When the Panama Canal opened in 1915, the city, being the first possible American port of call for westward shipping, believed its economic future had been secured. To celebrate the canal's completion and introduce itself to the world, San Diego staged the Panama-California Exposition, which opened in 1915 and ran for two years. Immensely successful, the fair in the city's centrally located Balboa Park drew more than tourists, significant among them prominent military and political leaders, including two former presidents and more than one hundred senators and congressmen.³ What these visitors discovered in San Diego was a little-used harbor of vast potential, a climate of almost unparalleled moderation, and a citizenry anxious for growth, economic security, and the psychological satisfaction of the fulfillment of a destiny it believed was overdue.

Rather than igniting an economic takeoff based on increased shipping and trade through the canal, however, the fair's major result was to introduce San Diego to the United States Navy. Facing new, larger responsibilities for protecting the country's new empire in the Caribbean and the western Pacific and for countering growing Japanese and German naval power, the Navy, well before the completion of the Panama Canal, was moving toward division into two fleets and expansion into the Pacific. When San Diego opened its exposition in 1915, the mounting exigencies of empire and the war in Europe brought the city and the military together in a momentous way at a crucial time.⁴

San Diego's initial military development revolved around William Kettner. First as a congressman and later as chairman of the Chamber of Commerce's important Army and Navy Committee, he was responsible for convincing politicians and soldiers of the area's attributes and eagerness for martial development. Elected to Congress in 1912, Kettner was instrumental in establishing every major military installation that San Diego received prior to World War II. An insurance salesman by profession and a director of the Chamber of Commerce, he used his extraordinary salesmanship and connec-

tions with local business leaders to defeat challenges from rival urban areas for defense appropriations and to engineer local votes to secure various military installations.⁵

A Democrat in an overwhelmingly Republican area, Kettner had been drafted by local business interests when the Republicans split between party regulars and Bull Moose (Progressive) insurgents. The San Diego Chamber of Commerce led a vigorous campaign for Kettner, and, riding Woodrow Wilson's coattails, he won the election easily with a 3,500-vote margin. After the election, the chamber continued its close working relationship with Kettner, doing large amounts of research to provide the congressman with facts and information that he would use to persuade Congress of San Diego's advantages. That the Chamber of Commerce, which represented both large and small business interests, was the leading factor in Kettner's election and that it formed his principal base of support was no surprise. In early-twentieth-century San Diego, as in other California metropolises, the business community was paramount in formulating and executing urban policy. Indeed, Kettner was a prime example of this combining of private enterprise and public policy, in that he was a leader of the chamber and was induced by them to seek office, had his campaign run by the group, and advanced its growth-oriented agenda in Washington.⁶

Growth was the only issue that counted in San Diego. From 1900 to 1920, the local economy, while showing a steady modest gain, actually lost ground relative to Los Angeles and San Francisco, as well to the rest of the state. Indeed, even San Diego's respectable gain in population during this period lagged far behind the two metropolitan giants to the north.⁷ Yet, prior to the Navy's arrival, San Diego was not an entirely cohesive community rallying around a single, agreed-upon strategy for growth. The coming of the military provided a solid economic base and an agenda—national defense—around which everyone could rally, thus bringing cohesion to San Diego's often-divided business community. The town's leadership eagerly embraced the military, launching an era of community consensus regarding urban growth that lasted into the post-World-War-II period.

Kettner's garnering of military facilities for San Diego actually began in December 1912, when the City Council sent him and Rufus Choate, secretary of the Chamber of Commerce, to Washington to seek appropriations from the House Rivers and Harbors Committee to widen and deepen the harbor entrance as an encouragement to commercial shipping. Working with U. S. Senator John D. Works of California, they overcame congressional opposition and secured an appropriation of \$249,000. The victory turned on a letter Kettner had secured from Admiral of the Navy George Dewey regarding the military importance of San Diego Bay,

not its commercial potential. Significantly, Kettner's first effort to advance the dream of a great commercial port was decided on martial considerations, and the lesson was not lost on him. During his first congressional term, Kettner accumulated nearly one million dollars in military monies for San Diego. He would effectively use these early commitments to capture greater prizes over the next six years.⁸

After Kettner's first-term victories for his district, a combination of forces soon made San Diego the leading metropolitan-military complex on the West Coast. With prodding from the Marine Corps and the Navy, the congressman and his business



The Naval Training Station, located on reclaimed bay front land, shows the military's willingness to blend in with the community. This facility, like others in San Diego, was designed in a Spanish Colonial fashion, which reflected the city's emerging architectural motif. *San Diego Historical Society Photograph Collection.*



San Diegans not only gave up precious bay-front acres for the military but also turned over their park lands. The Naval Hospital, seen in the distance in 1928, took a substantial part of the southeastern section of the city's centrally located Balboa Park. *San Diego Historical Society Photograph Collection.*

allies developed a strategy of giving thousands of public and private acres at the edge of the bay and elsewhere to the services to construct bases that would accommodate their expansion into the Pacific. Though couched in patriotic terms of national defense, San Diegans viewed the loss of their precious waterfront as an investment for the town's growth. It was, as Lotchin has pointed out in similar circumstances, a form of municipal socialism, with city government actively working to stimulate the local economy to improve the fortunes of the community at large and the business sector in particular.⁹

Beginning in 1916 with the West Coast's first Marine Corps Advance Base and proceeding through 1921 with the establishment of the Eleventh Naval District, San Diegans deeded and leased thousands of acres of tidelands and pueblo lands to secure a military presence. While Kettner was hard at work in Washington getting the necessary legislation to create new facilities, the business

community, in league with local military commanders, orchestrated vigorous campaigns to convince voters of the necessity and desirability of giving ever-increasing portions of the bay front and other lands to the military. Kettner secured his colleagues' support by emphasizing the city's gifts of land, the military's support, and Congress's previous expenditures for harbor improvements and for large and small military installations. Locally, voters were told that they had to reciprocate for the expected benefits each new facility would bring and that favorable votes would ensure future naval commitments on a gigantic scale. The electorate responded each time with positive margins that matched the scale of the Navy's promises. These affirmative votes, always in the ninetieth percentile, repeatedly demonstrated San Diegans' desire for a solid and reliable economic base in their town.¹⁰

In addition to the new Marine base, Kettner purloined the Naval Training Station located in San Francisco Bay and supported creation of a naval

station and repair facility to handle submarines and decommissioned destroyers. To support the expanding naval presence, he helped to upgrade the local Navy Dispensary to a full-fledged hospital and to establish the Eleventh Naval District and its attendant Naval Supply Depot. During the war itself, Kettner led the effort to create the Naval Air Station on North Island in San Diego Bay and directed a successful and bitter fight against Los Angeles and San Francisco to capture the Army's new west-coast training center.¹¹

Military and world events also aided Kettner. After the United States entered World War I, the Navy immediately proposed spending \$500,000 in San Diego for a flight-training center. The war greatly accelerated the accumulation of many new installations where, only a few months before, the lone new Marine base seemed the pinnacle of achievement. Following the war, the Navy abandoned Admiral Alfred T. Mahan's one-fleet theory, while the Paris Peace Conference and the 1921 Washington Conference on the Limitation of Armament further altered the service's mission, policy, and strategy. Denied any tonnage increases and upgrading of its western Pacific bases, the Navy, believing Japan would be its next wartime adversary, determined to move the major portion of the fleet to the Pacific Coast and began a massive base-building program. The West Coast, which previously had only small squadrons of cruisers and destroyers, would receive half of the fleet. The change would assign more than 180 additional fighting ships to a region with only minimal port and support facilities and ignite an intense battle among Pacific coastal cities for military appropriations.¹²

A post-war naval commission studying future west-coast operations finalized San Diego's surge in militarization. Rear Admiral John S. McKean, head of the new commission that which arrived in San Diego on August 3, 1919, declared that existing Pacific coast naval facilities would have to be enlarged and new ones added to accommodate the new naval strategy. It was up to San Diegans, McKean told a business luncheon, "to furnish us with the materials to maintain that standard" and help make their town "the third naval base on the coast," after Bremerton and San Francisco.¹³

The commission's visit coincided with the arrival of the Pacific Fleet and a west-coast inspection tour by Navy Secretary Josephus Daniels. Nearly overwhelmed by the flood of attention and promises of undreamed good fortunes, the citizens decorated from downtown to the waterfront, organized dances, lunches, and dinners, and planned a fleet banquet and ball. The *Union* reminded San Diegans of the economic importance of the fleet's visit to the town's future and that their reception must equal the event.¹⁴

On the day Daniels arrived to the cheers of several thousand people, the *Union* let out a full range of pent-up hopes and frustrations. The fleet, it said, would discover a beautiful city with good citizens "only awaiting the immediate fruition of a hope long deferred to develop a thousand possibilities of natural advantage and civic ambition." The Navy was welcomed as a "harbinger of a prosperous destiny," giving the city confidence in its future. The paper assured the Navy that San Diego was "fully alive to [its] responsibilities" in the relationship and would "fulfill them competently, satisfactorily, and entirely."¹⁵ The secretary did not disappoint San Diegans, declaring at a public meeting that he would not be satisfied until Congress created sufficient funds "to make San Diego one of the greatest harbors in the world." And then, instead of promises about future good fortune, the Navy announced that effective immediately the city would be home port for a destroyer division with all of the money and permanent investments that followed the fleet.¹⁶ Salvation itself must have seemed at hand for beleaguered San Diegans.

The commission's final report recommended spending \$27.79 million for shore installations in San Diego over the next five years, which represented a serious long-term commitment by the service to the struggling border town. This was the moment when San Diego and the Navy fully embraced each other. New installations and expansion of existing facilities would require more gifts of public and private lands, to which the city immediately acceded. The payback of this partnership, quickly and thoroughly understood, was spelled out in a *Union* editorial. The editors viewed a large naval presence in San Diego as a major boost to city growth that would make "the



William Kettner was the primary mover behind San Diego's militarization. As a congressman (1912–1920) and as head of the city's Chamber of Commerce's Army-Navy Committee (1920–1930), Kettner engineered the establishment and growth of all the major military installations in San Diego prior to World War II. *San Diego Historical Society Photograph Collection.*



As the Navy's presence grew in San Diego, local hopes for a great commercial port were once again revived. This 1924 photograph shows a new pier being built north of the old Broadway Pier. The billboard in the center captures the attitude of San Diegans of the twenties. *San Diego Historical Society Photograph Collection.*

foundations of our future development more firm and assured . . . [and] bring us more speedily to a place of metropolitanism." With a permanent naval base, they concluded, "San Diego [was] certain to achieve its highest aspirations."¹⁷

William Kettner declined to seek reelection in 1920, citing health reasons and his deteriorating insurance business. His involvement with the town and the military did not end with his retirement, however. The Chamber of Commerce made him chairman of its important Army-Navy Committee, and he made several trips to Washington to lobby on behalf of San Diego, particularly for military appropriations, and continued to influence congressional and military decision-making through the 1920s.¹⁸ Backed by the business community, Kettner had been the crucial element in San Diego's spectacular initial success in establishing a metropolitan-military partnership. Kettner and the city also had the luck of good timing. Ten years earlier the Navy would not have been moving into a new strategic position on the West Coast; ten years later the fierce competition from other Pacific coast ports may very well have defeated many of their efforts. And, of course, as a Democrat Kettner was once again lucky to come into office with his party in control of Congress and the White House, which clearly aided his work. As the point man for the business community that shaped policy in San Diego, Kettner's victories were triumphs for those interests, a fact he readily acknowledged. While he was the representative and personification of those interests, however, without his tireless work or perhaps with the less gifted efforts of some other congressman, the business community's hopes for San Diego would likely have fallen far short of the mark that was achieved.¹⁹

Republican Phil D. Swing, from Imperial County east of San Diego, filled Kettner's seat in 1921, despite the backing of San Diego's business establishment for a home-town candidate. Swing was initially given a seat on the Naval Affairs Committee, but he did not seek to take up where Kettner had left off. While the new congressman did protect San Diego's relationship with the military, his most

SAN DIEGO MAGAZINE
November 1927



BUILD LINDBERGH FIELD

Lindbergh Field

San Diego stands at the Crossroads of Destiny!
 On November 22, she will vote to build Lindbergh Field and take a long step toward her goal of "The Air Capital of the West," or, refusing to build it, drive opportunity from her door, and fall hopelessly behind in the race for industries, payrolls and population.

Lindbergh Field offers San Diego the greatest bargain she has ever had.

BUILD LINDBERGH FIELD—and San Diego will get a municipal airport at less than half cost; the United States Navy will do the rest:

BUILD LINDBERGH FIELD—and you keep aviation industries with a payroll already equal to 76% of the city's investment:

BUILD LINDBERGH FIELD—in so doing, you dredge a much-needed turning basin in your harbor; the Federal Government will do more dredging:

BUILD LINDBERGH FIELD—that dredging will make San Diego harbor the home port of a naval airplane carrier with a monthly payroll of \$136,000:

BUILD LINDBERGH FIELD—to tell Uncle Sam, the nation and the world that San Diego, "the Cradle of Aviation" is to be the "Capital of Aviation".

**Facts About
LINDBERGH FIELD**

Size, 287 acres, of which municipal-owned land is 108 acres.
 1.4 miles from U. S. Post-office.
 First field in U. S. to get Triple-A rating from Dept. of Commerce.
 Accessible in 3 directions by auto, one block from trans-continental railway, 2 blocks from street car and business.
 Approachable from all directions by air without flying over congested parts of city.
 3000-foot take-off in every direction, with added 4250-foot take-off into prevailing wind.
 Available to sea and land planes day and night.
 Will be managed by Harbor Commission.

**How the \$650,000
Is To Be Spent!**

Filling of 105 acres and construction of bulk-head, \$225,000.
 Surfacing and draining, \$100,000.
 Lighting and hangars, \$225,000.

Vote—

FOR THE AIRPORT

November 22nd
PROPOSITION NO. 1 ON THE BALLOT

National Aeronautic Association

This political ad in the San Diego Chamber of Commerce's magazine urged voters to approve a bond proposition to build a municipal airport. Typical of its day, the proposal was heavily tied into future military developments. *San Diego Historical Society Photograph Collection.*

important work was on the Colorado River Compact. To advance this mammoth irrigation project, Swing left the Naval Affairs Committee after two terms to accept committee assignments that dealt directly with irrigation and flood control. Thus, from 1925 until Swing left office in 1931, San Diego had no official link with congressional decision-making regarding naval policy and appropriations. While the existing naval establishment grew and expanded during Swing's tenure, thanks in part to Kettner's lobbying, no new installations came to San Diego and a large Navy dirigible base was



San Diego Bay, looking north in 1928, clearly shows the extension of bay front land from dredging, including the beginning of Lindbergh Field at the upper curve of the shore line. The Marine Corps Base is directly behind the airport, and the Naval Training Station stands alone on the far left. *San Diego Historical Society Photograph Collection.*

lost in a bitter fight with San Francisco during the early days of the Depression.²⁰ Nevertheless, the Navy's presence and the influence it had on San Diego's development transformed the town into a city and ultimately a major metropolitan center.

The most noticeable and immediate influence of the Navy's presence was, naturally, in the bay itself. San Diegans still clung to the dream of a great commercial port serving the Southwest and reaching out to the Orient. Even the Navy, as it prepared to take over more waterfront acreage, encouraged the

idea of a merchant shipping and commerce center. Yet during the euphoria of Secretary Daniels's 1919 visit, the *Union*, in a brief moment of unguarded realism, conceded that the Navy "will control practically the entire harbor in the future."²¹ Such heretical views did not become part of the civic discussion about the city's future, however.

San Diegans' dream of creating the great port of the Southwest had initially foundered in the nineteenth century, when eastern railroads chose Los Angeles as their southern California terminus. In

the twentieth century, even with the Navy's initial endorsement, San Diego continued to lose ground to the overshadowing metropolis to the north. Lacking a natural harbor, Los Angeles expanded the port at San Pedro that had been under construction since the 1860s, and by 1920 nearly all major waterborne trade entering and leaving the region passed through the new artificial harbor.²² Still, following the war, San Diego's port did experience a brief increase in shipping, ninety percent of it imports stimulated in large part by the growing

military presence. Nevertheless, even on the eve of World War II, San Diego would still rank next to last of twenty-four ports on the Pacific Coast in the amount of cargo it handled.²³

In the 1920s, however, before the disheartening performance of the commercial port was fully recognized, San Diegans focused an intense amount of concern and effort on their harbor. Believing the Navy's growing presence would spur a commercial boom for the port, voters approved nearly \$1.25 million in bonds to upgrade their harbor with two



The decade's housing boom is reflected in this 1929 view of the Kensington subdivision. Located at the end of the streetcar line, nearly ten miles northeast of downtown, Kensington represented in design the newly emerging romantic Spanish style sweeping southern California, and in size and layout the crucial role of developers in city building. *San Diego Historical Society, Ticor Collection.*

piers, a bulkhead, and a warehouse. They followed this substantial commitment by voting for a \$650,000 bond issue to build the first phase of an airport on the tidelands next to the Marine Corps base. The airport issue was sold to the public primarily by linking the development with the Navy's desire to increase harbor dredging to accommodate aircraft carriers. In 1928, the year after the airport vote, the Harbor Commission drafted a ten-year, three-

million-dollar improvement plan, and San Diegans overwhelmingly approved a property tax levy to help pay for it. Three years later, despite worsening economic conditions, San Diegans locked the subsidy into place by guaranteeing an annual sum of \$150,000.²⁴

The impact of the Navy's promise to make San Diego the third major port on the Pacific Coast quickly spread from the waterfront to the town itself



The growth of suburbs east from the downtown core during the 1920s is graphically displayed in this photograph of University Avenue in 1930. Street paving and the rapid rise in private automobile ownership quickened the expansion of the city, just as streetcars had done in earlier decades. *San Diego Historical Society Photograph Collection.*

The growing relationship between the city and the sword is seen in this well-attended 1924 military parade (west on Broadway, toward the harbor). Such regular martial displays, including mass air flights over the city and naval maneuvers off the coast, reinforced the military's important role in the city's life. *San Diego Historical Society Photograph Collection.*



and ignited a decade of powerful urban growth. The general economy of the West expanded throughout the 1920s, as waves of migrants flowed into the region in automobiles on newly completed all-weather highways and settled in urban centers, especially along the West Coast.²⁵ In San Diego the combination of large annual military appropriations and an expanding population created a booming economy that particularly excelled in real estate, construction, manufacturing, and service industries. The town's population in 1920 was 74,683—an increase of 89 percent over 1910. By 1930 San Diego's population again had nearly doubled to 147,995. San Diego's growth in the twentieth

century out-paced both the state and the nation, and the period from 1900 to 1930 saw the most spectacular gains of all for both city (310.5 percent) and county (224.7 percent).²⁶

Real estate had always been the driving force behind San Diego's boom times, and so it seemed again in the twenties. At the end of World War I there had been 3,500 vacant houses and apartments in town, three hundred empty stores downtown, thousands of lots with unpaid taxes, and a severely depressed property sales market. In response the Chamber of Commerce organized the San Diego-California Club in 1919. The group sent out advertisements aimed at middle-class retirees and

businessmen in the Midwest and Southwest as the new westward migration began, and within a year there were virtually no empty houses or apartments in town. Suddenly, the home construction industry was swamped with new work, values of existing homes doubled, and real estate prices began a sharp climb. Oscar W. Cotton, a prominent realtor and father of the San Diego-California Club, recalled that this "was the beginning of the boom that transformed . . . San Diego from a small town to a city."²⁷

From 1920 to 1930, developers filed 153 subdivision maps for San Diego and outlying areas that created 13,151 lots. During the same period, building permits for nearly twenty thousand single family homes were issued, the excess representing unused lots from the 1909 to 1912 boom. Whereas population increases outpaced construction from 1920 to 1924, the opposite was true during the second half of the decade. By 1930, the Chamber of Commerce estimated that more than 23,000 housing units had been erected, compared to a calculated need of 22,500.²⁸ The majority of new construction each year was for housing of all types, with a preponderance of the work in moderately-priced single-family homes, usually in subdivision tracts.²⁹ In the record year of 1926 when the value of building permits peaked at \$20 million, sixty-five percent of the permits, or \$13 million, was for housing of all types, including hotels, with \$10.2 million slated for single-family homes. A survey at the end of 1928 showed that two major hotels had been built, along with fifteen schools and nine churches.³⁰

The boom not only greatly increased housing in San Diego but also represented a major expansion in the central business district. This was the period when San Diego took on a metropolitan look that would not significantly change until the 1950s.³¹ Several new imposing business buildings were constructed at the center of the commercial area, especially north of Broadway. Before the decade was over, 24 new office buildings and 107 new stores had been built.³² As naval base construction and training activities increased along the harbor, the business district also expanded west toward the waterfront. One of the major new buildings near the bay was the \$744,000 Army-Navy YMCA. The national YMCA had selected the city for this

important facility over other Pacific coast sites because of San Diego's rapid militarization.³³ In this period, San Diegans also established some significant cultural landmarks—including an art museum, history museum, zoological gardens, and palatial theatres—that reflected a growing sophistication.³⁴

With real estate leading the way, several other factors also demonstrated that San Diego's economy was in the midst of a broad-based and prolonged upward surge. General business activity, as reflected in the annual number of new business incorporations in the county, grew more than 140 percent from 1919 to 1927, after which the number dropped off until 1930 and then plummeted during the Great Depression.³⁵ Manufacturing also realized impressive, if temporary, gains during the 1920s. The federal Census of Manufacturing showed San Diego with 266 establishments employing 4,950 people in 1919 and creating more than \$20 million in products. This reflected a steady upward trend from the 1909 census figures.³⁶ Locally, the Chamber of Commerce reported steady gains during the decade in all industrial categories. Yet, the final federal figures for 1929 showed the number of plants and workers had fallen below the 1919 figures to 253 establishments (down 5 percent) with 4,644 employees (down 6.5 percent). Despite the decreases, however, the value of 1929 products increased a healthy 69 percent from a decade earlier to more than \$34 million, while salaries and wages during the same period also increased to more than \$6.9 million, a 41-percent rise.³⁷

The city's willingness to accommodate the Navy and the prosperity it was activating was reflected on several fronts during the decade. As population and business grew, the city struggled to improve its infrastructure as well, producing more public works projects during the twenties than ever before. San Diegans voted for nearly \$13.5 million in bonds in the twenties, increasing the city's bonded indebtedness by more than 50 percent. Over the same period, the municipal budget doubled from \$2.2 million in 1920 to \$4.6 million in 1929–30.³⁸ As new immigrants and tourists flooded into the area, they came primarily in automobiles, putting tremendous pressure on the increasingly inadequate city and county roads. The number of registered



Looking east up Broadway from the harbor in 1928, the Bank of America building (background, right) and the San Diego Trust and Savings across the street attested to a decade of rapid urban growth. Horton Plaza (right foreground) is a legacy of Alonzo Horton, pioneer promoter of San Diego. *San Diego Historical Society Photograph Collection.*

cars and trucks in the county increased by more than 400 percent during the decade, from 18,000 to nearly 75,000. Working hard to improve streets, extend roads into new subdivisions, and improve older outlying routes, the city could boast of 460 miles of paved streets by decade's end. For their part, county voters approved nearly \$3 million for highways, creating one of the best systems in California.³⁹ Utility services also kept pace with the region's growth. Gas and electric service was extended throughout the county, with some 2,300 miles of lines and a 270-percent increase in customers, while new city water and sewer

lines increased 400 percent. New telephone customers increased by 18,287 during the decade, an augmentation of 88 percent.⁴⁰

While realtor Cotton and others credited this phenomenal boom to their advertising and salesmanship skills, the power of federal spending was the new driving force in the local economy. Military appropriations flooded San Diego in the 1920s, far outpacing the construction industry's large expenditures. Real estate, which indeed had led previous economic upswings, now became an adjunct of the military industry in San Diego. In the early stages of the boom, the *Union* directly



San Diego (ca. 1911) on the eve of its martial development. Seen during a modest boom period preceding the 1915 exposition, the town had an unpretentious skyline and an underdeveloped bay front and harbor. Coronado lies across the bay. *San Diego Historical Society, Tigor Collection.*

ties the “many million[s]” in government spending for permanent installations, monthly payrolls, and supplies to the welcomed economic surge. When the boom peaked in 1926, the paper again linked the city’s good fortunes to the continued and growing presence of the military. Further insisting upon the Navy’s pivotal role in the local prosperity, former congressman Kettner reminded San Diegans that current naval construction contracts for the 1927 fiscal year, worth \$2 million, exceeded the local annual value of building permits for 1916 through 1918.⁴¹

Precise figures for local military spending are difficult to establish. Official and unofficial published sources, however, provide a reliable sense of the enormous financial influence the services exerted on the San Diego economy. During America’s brief involvement in World War I, the government committed itself to spend \$19 million in San Diego for the war effort. Though less than half of this was expended, it was a significant harbinger of the town’s future involvement with military appropriations. Following the McKean Commission’s post-war recommendations for spending \$27 mil-



By the end of the twenties, downtown San Diego had a more metropolitan look. The Navy boom had not only built up the central city but also greatly extended the suburbs to the east and north. The El Cortez Hotel (center, background) became a beacon for Navy ships at sea. At lower left is the new Eleventh Naval District Headquarters and Supply Depot. *San Diego Historical Society Photograph Collection.*

lion in San Diego, Congress began appropriating funds for facilities construction. In November 1920, a joint congressional committee meeting in San Diego determined that more than \$7.6 million in construction on seven facilities was completed or in progress. During the visit, naval officials, supported by local business and political leaders, recommended an additional \$7.4 million in work. By the end of the 1921 fiscal year, the Navy reported that \$5.2 million had also been spent on San Diego shore stations for improvements, machinery, maintenance, and repairs.⁴²

During the early twenties, the military establishment grew rapidly as new facilities were added, existing ones expanded, and soldiers and sailors

and their families surged into the town. At the start of 1923, San Diego was the home port of the Pacific Destroyer Force, the Pacific air squadrons, and a Marine Corps expeditionary force. In addition, the military was building a large shore establishment that included the Naval Training Station, Marine Corps Recruit Base, Navy Hospital, Naval Radio Station, Eleventh Naval District and Supply Base, Fleet Fuel Depot, Naval Air Station, U. S. Coast Guard Base, the Army's Rockwell Field, and Fort Rosecrans Coast Artillery. The estimated local annual military payroll was \$15 million, while a survey reported that more than 1,800 Navy families had purchased or rented homes in San Diego.⁴³

Two years later, in 1925, an average of 15,000 servicemen were based in San Diego and drew an annual payroll of between \$18 and \$21 million, while local expenditures for naval food and supplies were approximately \$18 million. The Eleventh Naval District's public works office reported that \$17.9 million had been spent on shore facilities and that it was requesting \$5.9 million for the 1926 fiscal year. The office itself had the second highest expenditures in the Navy's system and spent more money than the other two district offices on the Pacific Coast.⁴⁴ Between July 1923 and July 1927, construction spending on the shore establishment rose more than 50 percent, from \$13.2 million to \$20.7 million. During the 1927 fiscal year, the Navy's local public works commander reported that 23 percent of *all* construction contracts by the Navy (not including ships) were for work in San Diego. This was accomplished despite "a period of enforced and rigid economy," the officer wrote, crediting the town's new importance to naval strategy.⁴⁵

As the 1920s came to a close, naval spending in San Diego began to slow down. This was partly because of continuing budget constrictions in Washington, as well as in San Diego, where most shore facilities had been completed, some in a reduced fashion. Nevertheless, officials reminded local residents that the Navy and its operations were "increasingly vital factors in the life of the community." The payroll and supply statistics for 1929 supported this contention. The Navy spent more than \$14 million on military and civilian wages and another \$5.5 million for supplies and services. During the same period, the service completed \$1.1 million in public works and had \$608,000 of work in progress.⁴⁶

During this extraordinary decade of growth, the military became the leading economic factor in San Diego. By 1930, the Navy reported that its shore facilities were valued at \$24 million and that over the decade they had spent \$42 million for improvements, machinery, maintenance, and repairs at the bases. These represented increases during the decade of 200 percent and 700 percent.⁴⁷ Wages of military personnel over the ten-year period totaled an estimated \$150 to \$165 million. Supply expenditures ranging from food and hospital stores

to concrete and lumber also had a major impact on the local economy. Local spending for supplies rose and fell with the movement of personnel, the rate of construction, and budget politics in Washington, making precise calculations difficult. A conservative estimate for the 1920s puts the local Navy supply figure at \$115 million.⁴⁸ Totalling \$331 to \$346 million, these figures vividly suggest the massive influence naval spending had on San Diego's economy. While not all of this money was spent directly in San Diego, a high proportion of it was. Additionally, when a multiplier effect of four civilian dollars spent for every military dollar expended is factored in, the power of Navy spending is even more evident.⁴⁹ Finally, San Diego's booming civilian economy followed the rise and fall of military spending. Real estate and manufacturing—the major local economic indicators—rose, peaked, and declined behind military spending by twelve to twenty-four months.⁵⁰

For their part, local commanders were never reticent about the interlock between military spending and San Diego's boom times. Indeed, this was part of a larger self-promotion campaign in response to rising anti-naval sentiments at the national level over the Navy's continued growth in several areas not covered by the post-war naval limitation treaties. Altering its emphasis over time to meet changing national conditions, the service argued in the 1920s that a strong Navy was an integral part of prosperity, in the 1930s that it was a sure road to recovery, and as war approached at the end of the decade that it was both a deterrent to international involvements and an essential to national defense.⁵¹ In San Diego this campaign began early and never ceased. In 1923 a group of admirals, passing through town with members of the naval affairs committees, instructed San Diegans on the new economic realities. Citizens were variously chastised for missed opportunities, urged to spend more money, entreated to work with other cities for continued appropriations, promised more money, praised for their generosity, and promised "everything you want within . . . the limitations of the budget."⁵² Following the admirals' visit, which came just four years to the week after the *Union* praised the Navy as the town's salvation and harbinger of "metropolitanism," the newspaper

advised its readers to be cautious about the promises of future good fortunes. "The Navy never built a great city," the editors wrote. Development based solely on Navy installations was not a firm base for permanent steady growth. Navy expenditures, the editorial urged, should spur San Diego to develop a broad-based economy and thus a great city.⁵³ The euphoria of economic salvation in 1919 had given way to the realities of city-building in 1923.

Despite this concern, the Navy continued to dominate the urban economy, and the service fostered the linkage. Officers overseeing public works and supply wrote articles for the Chamber of Commerce's magazine instructing local businessmen on "How to Get Navy Business." In an accompanying article in February 1930, the assistant commandant, Eleventh Naval District, detailed the enormous "peace-time advantages of the naval establishments" to San Diego. Lkening the service to big business—indeed "San Diego's largest business"—the author put the annual payroll, materials, and supply disbursements for shore facilities at \$19.3 million. Probably the author sensed it was unnecessary to make the obvious "business" comparison that this expenditure was nearly three times greater than the local industrial payroll. These articles appeared as the city was ending its third year of non-military economic decline. An editor's note attempted to reassure San Diegans, who might have been having second thoughts about their city's ties with the military and its growing dominance of the local economy, that the naval articles would give them an "appreciation of the peace-time returns on their investment" of one-third of their waterfront, now conservatively estimated at \$10 million.⁵⁴

The commander of the destroyer base was less subtle in a November 1927 article. Rear Admiral Luke McNamee reminded San Diegans that the six thousand men in his command spent their money throughout the community "and in many ways add to the local prosperity." In addition, during the eight months the destroyers were in port, most of their food was obtained in San Diego. In a thinly veiled threat, McNamee added that the absence of the squadrons "could be quite convincingly described by the trades-people of the town." The admiral directly linked improvements in the harbor with naval requirements, asserting that "San Diego



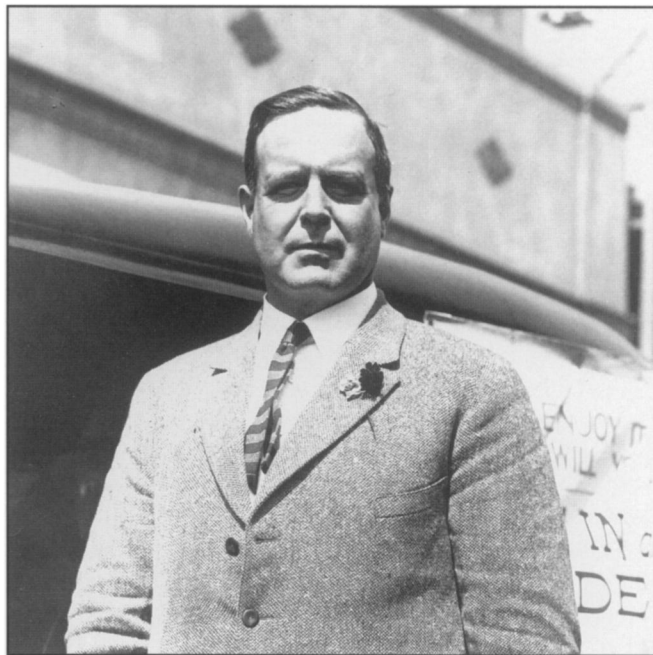
Rear Admiral Luke McNamee, commander of the destroyer base in San Diego, exemplified the "real-politik" side of the metropolitan-military relationship. In unvarnished terms he reminded citizens that what was good for the Navy was good for San Diego. *San Diego Historical Society Photograph Collection.*

is bound to profit commercially." Tying the Navy and the city together with a grand sweep, the admiral declared that "the community of interests of San Diego and the Battle Fleet destroyers should need no further proof. What helps the destroyers helps San Diego." To make certain he was clearly understood, McNamee ended with the stark and rather threatening point that as long as a "balance of interest is maintained" the destroyer squadrons would stay in San Diego.⁵⁵

Spectacular as it was, San Diego's boom after World War I nevertheless demonstrated the basic structural weakness of the local government. The city grew during the twenties by competing with other California metropolises, not only for military installations, but also for immigrants, business, state road funds, and other tangible and quantifiable entities that would attest to the city's vitality and growth.⁵⁶ The decade's rapid growth overwhelmed a creaking, patchwork administrative fabric and produced a major political failure that led to a complete modernization of the local government.

The first major political change of the twenties, generated in large measure by the economic growth that came with the Navy, was the achievement of stable and progressive leadership in the mayor's office. The electorate placed its confidence in two capable mayors during the period, compared with four in each of the previous two decades. The men, John L. Bacon (1921–1927) and Harry C. Clark (1927–1931), actively supported city planning, water development, business expansion, and infrastructure improvements to encourage continued growth—especially by the military—and to compete effectively with other metropolitan areas. Despite their strong leadership, however, Bacon and Clark could not overcome the continuing structural weaknesses of city government. City planning and water development were two political issues during their tenures that demonstrated both the deficiency of local government and the local power of the Navy. Service backing of city planning, but lack of involvement in water development, was a major factor in the respective success and failure of resolving these issues.

During the 1920s, city leaders successfully instituted several planning measures that during the previous decade had failed because of concerns over slow urban growth. The Navy-generated boom, however, relieved civic anxieties, and encouraged reforms and improvements in city governance. San Diegans, with naval participation and backing, embraced planning with the fervor of the converted. In 1921 Mayor Bacon set about restoring the neglected City Planning, Harbor, and Park commissions. He secured the passage of a zoning



San Diego Mayor John L. Bacon (1920–1926) was instrumental in reinvigorating progressive planning reforms for the city and the harbor in order to accommodate the era's military and municipal expansion. *San Diego Historical Society Photograph Collection.*

ordinance in 1923 and an official Harbor Plan in 1924. That same year, the mayor engineered a ten-thousand-dollar contract for planner John Nolen from the revitalized City Planning Commission for a new comprehensive city plan. Cooperation for city planning now fairly abounded. The Chamber of Commerce again led the way, backing the mayor and rallying support from many sectors, including organized labor, the County Board of Supervisors, the Realty Board, and civic clubs. Nolen's proposal was easily adopted as the official city plan in 1926 and guided San Diego's development into the post-World War II era.⁵⁷

The widespread cooperation fashioned for urban planning failed to develop around another crucial issue of the period—developing reliable water resources. Competing interests, political meddling, and massive amounts of conflicting advice from professional and layman alike defeated meaningful

city action during the decade. From 1914 to 1930, the city was involved in litigation with the Cuyamaca Water Company regarding ownership of the San Diego River. In 1922, the city Board of Water Commissioners, appointed by Mayor Bacon, issued a report recommending several steps that conflicted with the mayor's ideas, and he quickly sacked the board. Two years later, voters rejected a bond measure for a dam favored by Bacon, but two months later they approved \$4.5 million for a different dam site farther up the river. In 1926, voters approved \$2 million more in water bonds to develop a newly acquired system north of the city, only to see the project halted two years and \$1.4 million later, the victim of inept engineering and construction, threatened litigation, and the revival of a previously rejected water development plan and its engineer. Mayor Bacon declined to seek reelection in 1927, mostly because the public was disgruntled at slow water development. Frustrated voters, seeking a solution to the vexing water problems, elected Harry C. Clark as mayor and voted in a new council majority. In 1928, however, with cessation of work on the recently purchased water system, the new mayor and city council lost their remaining political credibility, and within a year, a complete overhaul of the city charter was underway.⁵⁸

Both city planning and water development were affected by numerous independent variables that led to their different resolutions. Yet local politics and government, explosive economic and physical growth, and the U. S. Navy were major dependent variables throughout the decade that greatly influenced the outcomes. Service support for urban planning made it a non-threatening item on the local political agenda. For San Diego, planning became an immediate necessity from the beginning of the military boom, and once it was accepted for the harbor, planning for the city itself was an easily agreed upon goal. Additionally, the monetary and political costs of planning were low, making it easy for all factions to support it. At the same time, while the issue required consensus, it did not necessarily require a sound, efficient government since the mechanics of implementation were small, piecemeal, and long-term.

Progress in water development, on the other hand, was complicated by the existence of several

competing constituencies, a long history of political contentiousness, and, in the twenties, protracted legal battles. Multiple ownership of water supplies, both public and private, also complicated the issue, as did the very high political and financial stakes that swirled around it. Water policies, thus, produced neither a strong political consensus nor a sound governmental structure to move them forward successfully. Despite being the major economic power in San Diego and the city's largest single water user, the Navy chose not to become involved in resolving this intractable local problem. All these factors helped to prolong the political and legal wrangling over water in San Diego.

The debacle over water development, along with other issues, moved the city toward major reform of its antiquated governmental structure. As cities competed with one another for growth and economic rewards, they sought to enhance their chances in several ways, including various reforms. Governmental restructuring, in many ways an extension of the pre-war Progressive movement, carried a stronger efficiency and economic growth rationale than the earlier attempts. As with city planning, the movement for a new city charter was another reform San Diego assumed to enhance its urban competitiveness and assure the Navy of its ability to meet the demands of rapid urban growth. Such reforms were as important in drawing and keeping the military as were the city's economic commitments.⁵⁹

Historically, San Diegans had not hesitated to revamp outmoded city charters. Following San Diego's other great boom period, 1886 to 1888, brought about by railway construction, the citizens wrote a new charter in 1889 to guide their greatly changed town. For the next four decades the city operated under the increasingly inadequate charter, changing it 125 times in fourteen separate votes. A major change in 1915 established a strong council-weak mayor government (replacing the 1909-instituted commissioner form), with the additional confusing element of a manager of operations. With the elimination of political party involvement in local elections as well during the Progressive era, the mayor, council, and manager struggled among themselves to control the city's affairs. At the same time, city government came

under increasing pressure from special interest groups, particularly developers and municipal employees.⁶⁰ The explosive growth in the twenties embroiled competing interests at city hall in endless controversies, with an inevitable decline in political effectiveness.

The first attempt at a new charter in 1929 proposed a very strong city manager form of government, with the manager in control over all municipal departments, and mandated an unsalaried mayor and council. Although the proposed charter reflected the high frustration of some voters over inept government and self-serving politicians, it proved too radical for most of the electorate and was roundly defeated. Following the defeat, a new charter commission immediately began building a broader base of support for a compromise charter. All dissenting groups were represented in the new commission, with the result that major objections to the defeated charter were satisfactorily settled. Voters approved the 1931 charter by more than four to one, with all interests and areas of the city supporting it. The new document created a strong city manager type of government with a salaried mayor and council elected for four years. The charter institutionalized various departmental reforms of the past fifteen years, prescribed a new accounting system for the water department, and guaranteed the independence of the Harbor Commission, which the earlier proposal had not.⁶¹

Beyond the tremendous economic and physical growth and the important governmental changes wrought by the naval presence in San Diego, the military also changed the social character of the city. Many servicemen chose to live in the area after retirement or discharge and could be found at all levels of the social structure. Former officers served the community as elected or appointed officials, were employed by important local businesses and significant organizations such as the Chamber of Commerce, and served on charity and arts boards. The *Union*, a reflection of much of the city, reported military events and news in great detail and devoted a full page daily to the professional and social activities of current and former San Diego-based personnel. The town and the military produced brochures and souvenir

booklets for both the Panama-California Exposition of 1915 and the California Pacific International Exposition of 1935 and for nearly every fleet visit or important issue. By the end of the twenties, San Diego had certainly become a Navy town.⁶²

The social impact of the Navy-generated boom also had a darker side. While the population doubled during the twenties, criminal arrests tripled. A large proportion of these arrests was for prohibition violations, gambling, and prostitution. Many of these activities were concentrated in an area between downtown and the harbor. As arrests for prostitution rose, so did the local number of Navy-reported cases of venereal diseases and AWOL sailors and marines.⁶³ Chronic unemployment was also a problem, as more people converged on the boom town than there were jobs to accommodate them. Despite the staggering placement of nearly 60,000 people by the state employment office between 1924 and 1928, mostly in menial jobs, vagrancy arrests remained high. This brought on a concomitant rise in various welfare programs, mostly for military and migrant families in which the breadwinner had deserted or was failing to provide adequate financial support. As a recent study has made clear, this period, of necessity, also produced a more sophisticated and mainstream welfare system in San Diego.⁶⁴

The U. S. military transformed San Diego politically, economically, and socially within a decade after World War I, and in the process elevated a small, struggling town in a remote location with precious few natural assets to cityhood and ultimately to metropolitanism. With political determination and a civic generosity that awed even the Navy, San Diego became perhaps the leading martial metropolis on the West Coast in the 1920s. The citizens not only paid with their harbor and park and pueblo lands but also eagerly joined the services as an ally in Congress, lobbying for more money, bases, and weapons, all in the name of national defense. Driving the demand for national security was the equally compelling desire for urban security as measured in annual rates of growth.

When William Kettner, writing in the late twenties about "The Army and Navy's Conquest of San Diego," reviewed the multi-million-dollar military "industry" and the nearly seven thousand acres



San Diegans' foresight in 1927 in dredging the harbor to create a bayside airport had a military payoff in 1931 when the aircraft carrier *Saratoga*, with 2,000 sailors, dropped anchor off the Broadway Pier. North Island, in the middle of the bay, was home for both Army and Navy air operations, and Navy facilities are clearly seen etched into the Point Loma hillside across the bay. *San Diego Historical Society Photograph Collection.*

of donated and leased land given to the services, he reminded San Diegans they had the largest naval base on the Pacific Coast and the second largest in the nation. The military presence, he declared, was largely responsible for the tremendous urban growth of the twenties. Historians half a century hence, Kettner predicted, would cite the current era "as the starting point of San Diego's real permanent growth and stabilized prosperity." When he entered office in 1912, the congressman could not have foreseen the vast impact the Navy would have in so short a time after he made San Diego an early partner in the newly emerging metropolitan-military complex. It was with evident

satisfaction and justifiable pride, therefore, that he concluded in his report that San Diego could "look forward to many new developments" by the military industry.⁶⁵

[CHS]

See notes beginning on page 209.

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